

THE SCIENCE OF

gratitude

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What if I told you there is a tool so powerful it can change your perception of the world around you? It works even on the hectic, challenging days of practicing veterinary medicine. It isn't some mystical stone from a Marvel movie—it's gratitude. Gratitude is being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen and taking the time to express thanks.¹ It is not only a spiritual principle passed on through generations and cultures. It is an evidence-based intervention that is proven to improve our well-being.

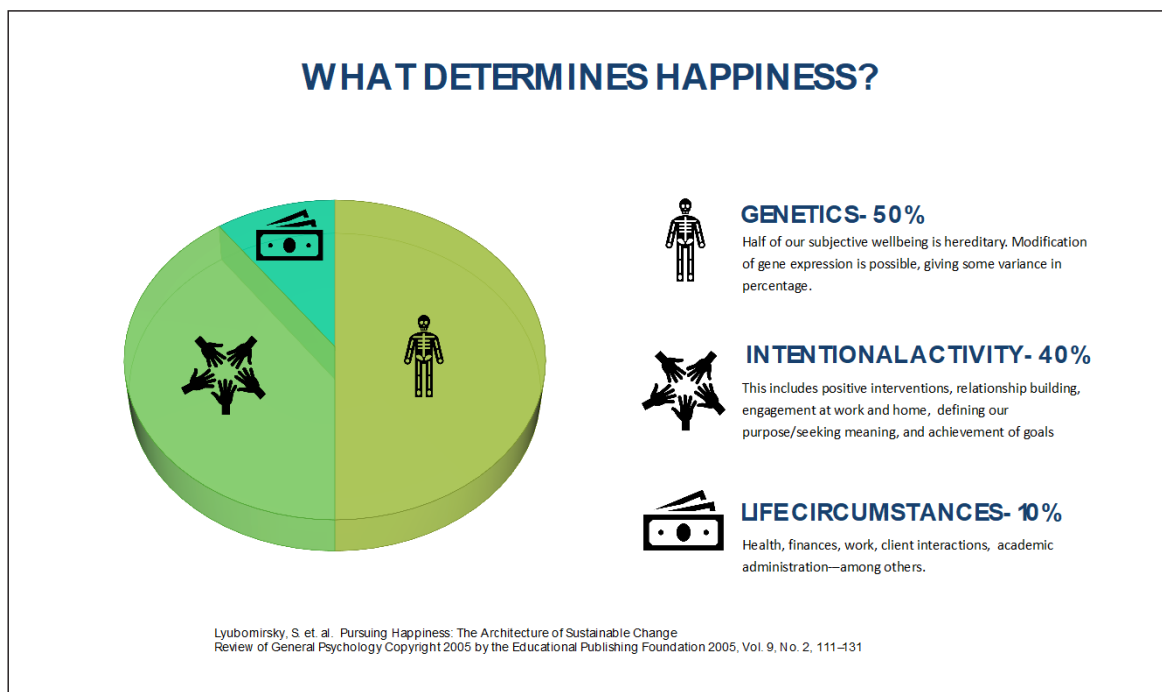
Martin Seligman's widely taught PERMA theory of well-being is an acronym for (P)ositive emotion, (E)ngagement, (R)elationships, (M)eaning and (A)chievement. Gratitude falls under the "P" in PERMA. Positive emotions are an important aspect of our overall happiness or subjective well-being. We have a significant opportunity to increase well-being by increasing positive emotion.

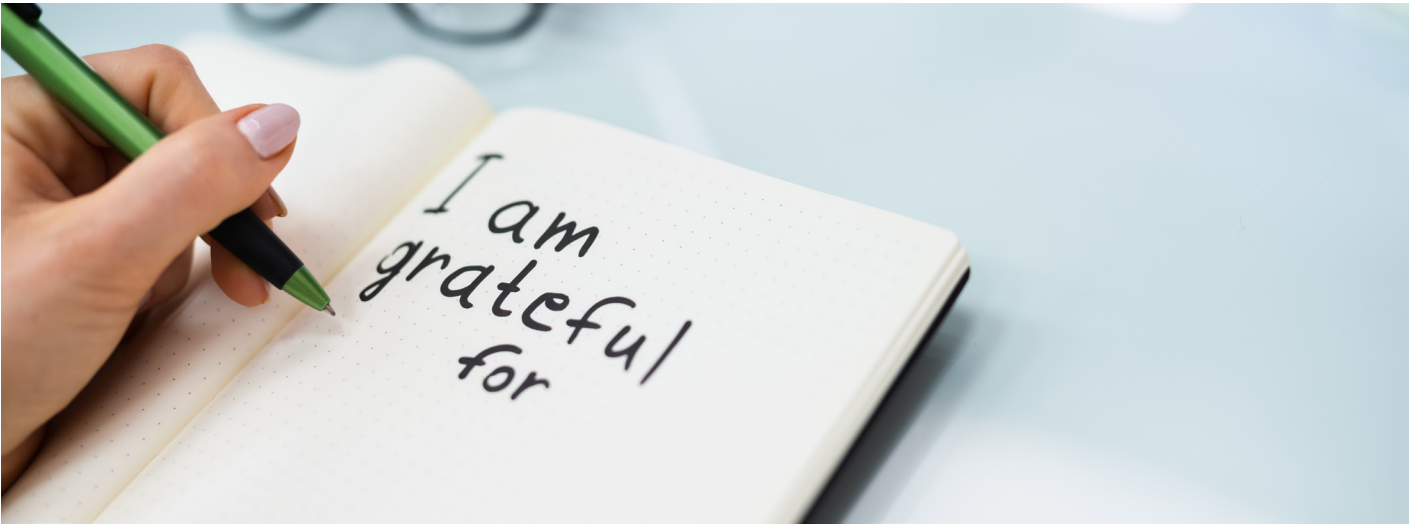
A landmark study of roughly 1,300 sets of twins demonstrated that our happiness has a genetic component and, generally speaking, we have a happiness set-point.² Sonja Lyubomirsky, a world-renown happiness researcher, has expanded on the set-point

theory and shown that overall happiness is determined by three factors: genetics, intentional activity and life circumstances.² Our set-point can be temporarily or permanently increased by the work we do fostering these intentional activities. The opposite is true as well. If we neglect investing time into our well-being or engage in maladaptive behaviors, our happiness level can shift in a negative direction. Examples of these positive, intentional activities include gratitude practices, mindfulness exercises, working on forgiveness and committing acts of kindness.³

Why Is Positive Emotion Important to Veterinary Professionals?

In a study of positive emotion and its effects on physician reasoning, 44 internists were randomized to one of three groups.⁴ The physicians were placed in a control group or one of two affect-induction groups (induced positive or negative emotion). How were the doctors placed into a positive state? The group was given a bag of candy with a bow on it—that's all. They weren't allowed to actually eat the candy, because the sugar could have affected dopamine levels. This is a validated tool in positive psychology





research: receiving a small, unexpected gift induces positive emotion in all of us.

After the emotion was induced or control activity completed, the participants were given a standardized case study. The positive affect group initially considered liver disease, which was the diagnosis, significantly earlier than the control and negative groups. The positive group also showed considerably less “anchoring”—distortion or inflexibility in thinking. The result was 20% faster and more accurate diagnoses. This is a benefit we all want for ourselves, our clients and our patients.

“Ratings of the grateful disposition were correlated with measures of positive emotionality and well-being, including vitality, happiness, satisfaction with life, lack of depressive and anxious symptoms, hope, and optimism.”

Correlation between Gratitude, Traits and Behaviors

Robert Emmons examined the effect on, and behavior correlations of, people who scored high on gratitude.⁵ They demonstrated more satisfaction with life. People showed more pro-social and other-centered behavior (service and cooperation). There was significantly less “maladaptive self-preoccupation.” This is a kinder, more clinical way of saying being less selfish and self-centered. Finally, those scoring high also showed overall better health and an increased sense of optimism.

Why Does Gratitude Work?

Gratitude is effective at increasing our well-being in numerous ways. It increases our overall level of positivity. It feeds positive emotions and allows for an “upward spiral.” Gratitude primes us to be able to recognize the good in the world and the gifts and intentions of our fellows. Our daily experiences are enhanced by gratitude. For example, if you are mindful in the moment of how grateful you are for the opportunity to work in veterinary medicine, the surgical procedure you are about to perform may have a different meaning to you. Gratitude sets the stage to enable savoring. Savoring is fully feeling, living and extending our positive experiences.

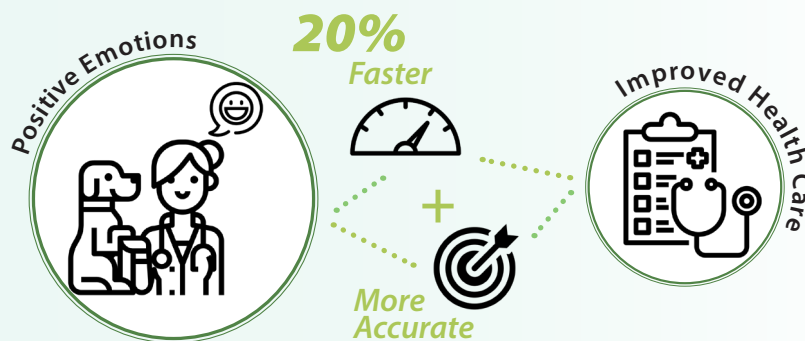
It counters hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation, or the “hedonic treadmill,” can be best explained like this. You buy a new phone. For a couple weeks, it’s great. After that though, it’s just a phone, right? Gratitude can permit us to be grateful for our home, our car, our job or our phone for the entire time they are in our lives. *Feelings of thankfulness counter materialism.* We become grateful for what we have, feeling we lack little. Our desire to seek shiny objects, or keep up with the Joneses, is minimized.

How Can We Implement Gratitude in Our Daily Lives?

There are a number of evidence-based interventions and exercises to increase our feelings of gratefulness. Here are six practices to increase our level of gratitude:

1. **Three Good Things:** Name three good things that happened today/this week and what part you played in it. This is the most researched gratitude intervention.⁶
2. **Hunt the Good Stuff:** Look around you for things to be grateful for in the moment: a client’s “thank you,” having a vehicle to get you to work, air conditioning, a moment of hilarity during lunchtime. Widen and sharpen your attention to take in the good around you.

“ *Induction of positive emotions in physicians allowed for 20% faster and more accurate diagnoses.* ”



3. **Gratitude Visit:** Think of someone who has done something that you are grateful for. Write a letter for them in 300 words or less. Tell them exactly what they did and how it made you feel. Meet with them, call or Zoom. Send them the letter a week after your talk so they can relive the experience. This has been shown to have a positive effect for up to a month after the visit.⁶
 4. **Gratitude Apps:** Utilize apps such as Gratitude, Grateful or Grateful Chip.
 5. **Gratitude List:** Start writing 10 things you are grateful for. You can also write things down until you can feel a change in yourself.
 6. **Gratitude Ping-Pong/Circle:** With another team member/friend (ping-pong) or with the whole team (circle), each person shares something they are grateful for. Listen to what is important to others.
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*The University of California-Berkeley Greater Good Science Center’s website (ggia.berkeley.edu) is a great resource and has a list of these practices and more.

Gratitude is a readily accessible tool that increases our level of positive emotion. Regularly practicing thankfulness opens our view to the good in the world around us. Gratitude’s ability to change the lens through which we view the world makes it a powerful tool for veterinary professionals.

References

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Dr. Philip Richmond is a graduate of the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine (UFCVM) and practices in New Port Richey, Florida. He currently serves as the chair of both the Florida Veterinary Medical Association’s Outreach and Professional Wellness & Well-being committees. He is a member of the UFCVM well-being curriculum

committee. This committee was formed with the intention to teach wellness and well-being to veterinary students and to create a model for veterinary wellness education in North America. He has also served on the board of directors of the Florida Medical Professionals Group, an organization that supports medical professionals in recovery in the state.

Dr. Richmond is a published writer and speaker and is certified in applied positive psychology. He is a certified resilience trainer, certified health coach-behavioral change specialist, certified compassion fatigue professional and a certified QPR suicide prevention gatekeeper instructor. He has earned the Penn Foundations in Positive Psychology Specialization certificate, the BerkeleyX Science of Happiness at Work professional certificate and the AVMA Workplace Wellness certificate. In 2019, Dr. Richmond received an FVMA Gold Star Award for his service.

He is married to Dr. Carla Channell, who is also a veterinarian. They have two children, three dogs (an Aussie, a Beagle/Dachshund, and a Maltese/Affenpinscher), a bevy of cats and turtles, a sulcata tortoise, a ball python, and a corn snake. He is a Krav Maga practitioner and enjoys weightlifting and functional training.