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## Gratitude and subjective well-being in early adolescence: Examining gender differences

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### Abstract

Gratitude was examined among 154 students to identify benefits from its experience and expression. Students completed measures of subjective well-being, social support, prosocial behavior, and physical symptoms. Positive associations were found between gratitude and positive affect, global and domain specific life satisfaction, optimism, social support, and prosocial behavior; most relations remained even after controlling for positive affect. Gratitude demonstrated a negative relation with physical symptoms, but not with negative affect. Relational fulfillment mediated the relation between gratitude and physical symptoms. Gratitude demonstrated strong relations with the following positive affects: proud, hopeful, inspired, forgiving, and excited. The relation between gratitude and family support was moderated by gender, indicating that boys, compared with girls, appear to derive more social benefits from gratitude. Strengths, limitations, and implications are discussed.

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The goodness of the fairy tale was not affected by the fact that there might be more dragons than princesses; it was good to be in a fairy tale. The test of all happiness is gratitude.  
G.K. Chesterton

If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is “Thank you,” it will be enough.  
Meister Eckhardt

Psychologists have recently emphasized the need for promoting adolescent well-being, beyond the existing focus on symptom reduction. Mitigating pathology is important, but its absence is different from mental health (Keyes, 2007). The traditional approach—identifying and fixing weaknesses—may be limited in fostering the “good life” (Sheldon & King, 2001). Therefore, psychologists should consider complementing existing practices by identifying and augmenting strengths, like gratitude.

There are two useful theories in studying gratitude. The first is Fredrickson’s (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. Negative emotions narrow our focus and restrict our behavioral range. Positive emotions, however, yield nonspecific action tendencies beyond physical action. The theory asserts that positive emotions generate broad thought-action repertoires that ultimately build durable physical, intellectual, and social resources. A meta-analysis by Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005), aggregating over 300 studies, suggests that success engenders positive emotions—but also that positive emotions engender success. Indeed, happy people tend to live longer, make more money, and enjoy enduring loving relationships. One reason positive emotions (e.g., happiness) might cause success could be because of the durable resources—physical, intellectual, and social—built over time. These resources can then be tapped into during times of adversity, as well as in times of growth.

The second theory describes gratitude as a moral emotion with three essential functions (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). As a *moral barometer*, gratitude signals the beneficiary that a benefactor has bestowed a gift upon him. As a *moral motive*, gratitude encourages prosocial behavior in the beneficiary either directly toward the benefactor or others. Finally, as a *moral reinforcer*, gratitude increases the probability that the benefactor will act prosocially toward the beneficiary in the future. According to this conceptualization, by experiencing gratitude, a person is motivated to carry out prosocial behavior, energized to sustain moral behaviors, and inhibited from committing destructive interpersonal behaviors.

### The psychological benefits of gratitude

Gratitude stems from the perception that one has experienced a positive outcome intentionally provided by another person or “moral agent,” often but not necessarily a person (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). The object of gratitude is other-directed to persons, or to impersonal (nature) or non-human sources (God, fate, the cosmos). Gratitude may be defined as “a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty” (Emmons, 2004, p. 554). As an emotion, grateful states result from recognizing that (a) one has obtained a positive outcome; and (b) there is an external source for this positive outcome. Recognizing that the benefactor has expended effort to give them a gift further amplifies grateful feelings; for this reason, gratitude is considered an empathic emotion (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). Because children develop

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