



The why, what and how of gratitude

Dr Rebecca Stafford © 27th November 2022

The link between gratitude and self-control

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There's a lot of talk of gratitude with thanksgiving and Christmas approaching. Gratitude is a good thing! There's plenty of scientific and spiritual support for the benefits of gratitude.

However, I'm going to take a slightly unusual approach and talk about the relationship between gratitude and self-control.

Self-control is also timely, with New Year's resolution around the corner. We'll talk a little more about self-control before explaining how gratitude influences self-control.

But before we do *that* – a little thought exercise.

Can you get a pen and paper. Write down four emotions: **stress, shame, content, and joy.**

And when you've done that, can you please rate how you are feeling now for each emotion from 0 – 10. Zero being no emotion and 10 being max. Don't overthink – the less thinking the better for this thought exercise.

Back to self-control. I love New Year's eve, because I love asking people if they've made New Year's resolutions.

And that's because I'm obsessed with habits – and most resolutions are do with breaking unhealthy habits and making healthy ones: quit smoking, eat more healthily, get fit, etc.

Not enough self-control!

But I found something funny. Most people tell me they've stopped making New Year's resolutions. Note they don't say they *never* make New Year's resolutions. They say they've *stopped* making them

And they always say they've stopped making New Year's resolutions because they can't make habit change stick. And they say they can't make habit change stick because they don't have enough self-control.

This is not true. But it is a really common myth. Many of us think self-control is some kind of fixed, genetic characteristic that we either have or don't have – and we don't have it!

However, the truth is that we all have access to self-control. We just need to know how to access it.

This can be seen in the famous Stanford University 'marshmallow/self-control tests'.

What marshmallows reveal about self-control

In his book *The Marshmallow Test*, researcher Walter Mischel describes the basic self-control test. Children were offered a choice of marshmallow rewards, and they could choose between eating a single marshmallow now (a smaller, immediate reward aka immediate gratification) or wait for two marshmallows later (a larger, delayed reward).

Children who chose the single marshmallow in front of them, and missed out on the larger delayed reward of two marshmallows, were deemed to have low self-control. Conversely, children who ignored the lone marshmallow and waited for the two marshmallows were deemed to have high self-control.

But (fortunately) the self-control story isn't that simple

High and low self-control children behave differently

Researchers noted that the two groups of children behaved quite differently.

The low self-control children were 'marshmallow-starers;' meaning they tended to stare at the single marshmallow until they succumbed.

'High-self-control' behavior

In contrast the 'high self-control' children did almost everything *except* stare at the single marshmallow – using many creative tactics to ignore the tempting marshmallow.

Some distracted themselves. They composed songs, pulled funny faces, played with their hands and feet, picked their nose and ear cavities—and played with the findings. Some tried to sleep, and at least one little girl actually did.

Some changed how they thought about the single marshmallow, such as imagining the treats were something non-edible—such as fluffy clouds.

Self-control tactics – genetic or taught?

So, here's the million-dollar question; were these self-control-boosting tactics genetic – or could they be taught?

The researchers found that not only can self-control tactics be taught; they can be taught quickly and easily.

The children's self-control could be rapidly increased (or decreased) with astonishingly simple instructions.

Some instructions involved asking the children to change the way they thought about the marshmallow.

For example, asking the children to focus on the tastiness of the single marshmallow decreased their self-control—making them more likely to eat the lone marshmallow and miss out on the two marshmallows.

Conversely, instructing them to think of the lone marshmallow as something non-edible—such as a fluffy white cloud, increased their self-control.

How feeling sad affected self-control

But there was another, extremely important, self-control modifying strategy. And that was using emotions.

When the children were asked to think about upsetting things (such as feeling sad and alone), their self-control dropped to the same low level as when they thought about the deliciousness of the marshmallow.

Fortunately, the emotional impact on self-control worked both ways. When children were asked to think about fun things – unrelated to marshmallows – their self-control sky-rocketed.

This is a critical finding. It suggests that boosting our mood – simply by changing our thoughts - can boost our self-control. And anything that boosts self-control will likely make habit change easier.

BUT: how feeling happy affected self-control

Back to our thought experiment, I'm going to ask you to think of something.

I'd like you to think about that thing you did, that thing you did that you hope no one ever finds out about. (If that's too intense, please think about something less intense).

Don't worry almost everyone has at least several of these things, often many.

Now, please dwell briefly on that thing you did that you don't want anyone to find out about.

Now, please rate the four emotions again from zero to 10; **stress, shame, content, and joy.**

Have they changed?

Now, if there's a big emotional charge around this thing that you did (and there probably is) – that's a sign it hasn't healed, the emotions are stuck and haven't been released.

And it's important that it is healed. It's important because repressed emotions predict PTSD, they degrade our mental and physical health, degrade our immunity and, you guessed it, our self-control.

This problem is – most of us aren't taught constructive ways of handling our more difficult emotions.

However gratitude is one way of healing and releasing these emotions.

I'll give you a very personal example.

I've been writing a book on habit change – it's been over 4 years. This is longer than my PhD! And it's REALLY embarrassing, I'm struggling with all the things I'm so good at helping others with, the procrastination, shame, feeling powerless. It's been really, really frustrating.

I know what's going on. Procrastination is a form of self-sabotage. There's a part of us - often a wounded child part – that is just trying to keep us safe. My one is telling me: "Don't finish the book – don't publish it, it won't be good enough, it'll be criticized *and* you'll be ridiculed"

However knowing what was causing my problem wasn't enough to overcome it.

However, I've only recently realized the bigger picture. My procrastination really WAS keeping me safe!!!! I've realized that while my book was ready to be published a few years ago – I wasn't ready.

If I had published earlier, I would have been devastated by the criticism – I may never have published another book again. But, arguably worse, I would have fumbled the bouquets - my insufficiently healed ego wouldn't have handled the praise well.

A psychic friend of mine, who's been right about everything so far, said I would be on the Oprah

show. But if I had been on the Oprah show even as recently as a few months ago, I would likely have fluffed it, been a frozen robot.

And I know this from a session I had with a high profile, wealthy client only a few months ago. This is really embarrassing, but my ego got all excited at the prospect of working with her. I imagined me 'fixing' her issues where all the other therapists couldn't. I imagined her referring all her wealthy friends to me.

Even at the time I felt a bit uneasy about these thoughts. That's a lot of pressure to put on a therapy session. But the thoughts were there.

In the event, while our coaching session seemed to go well, I got some 'less-than-impressed' feedback from the client and she declined another session with me. I was devastated. I sunk right into "I'm a bad therapist" mode. I felt oppressed by that very heavy psychological weight of 'not good enough.'

Funnily enough, I later found out that the session went much better than I realized. It actually went a bit too well for the client, as she wasn't ready to change. BUT the experience showed me how vulnerable I still was to less than perfect external feedback, and I needed to do more healing of my self-worth.

And that involved accepting myself – *all* of my self. Including the procrastination with the book, and all the feelings: the frustration, the shame, anger at myself, all of it ...

We are more than our emotions, but they are a part of us. When we stop denying, suppressing, ignoring parts of us and start accepting- *all* of ourselves, there is no need to feel lonely. As Brené Brown explains...

"Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance."

I'll say that again: *our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.*

Now, I'll ask you to do the thought exercise again, with a difference.

Can you please think of that thing you did again – last time, I promise.

The difference this time is we'll tend to those emotions: **stress, shame, content, and joy.**

Let's start with shame. Can you feel it in your body? Not everyone can, but if so, where? Is there a colour? If the emotion could speak, what would it say? Are there any physical sensations? Tightness? Pain? Openness? Anything else? ...

If you feel nothing, or numbness, you can try applying the same questions: e.g. where in your body is the 'nothing-ness,' the numbness, etc. Alternatively, if you *could* feel the emotion in your body, where might it be?

I've included accepting contentment and joy as we often deny these feelings. In a workaholic culture, where our self-worth is conditional on being busy and stressed, contentment and joy often don't feel safe. When trying to feel these emotions, you may feel numbness, or fear. That's okay. As above, try applying the questions to the numbness or fear.

Now, I invite you to be *grateful* to these feelings – and the parts of you that generated them.

Thank them. Say I love you, if that is possible. Be with them.

Now for the last time, can you please rate the four emotions again:

Have they changed?

It doesn't really matter if the intensity of your emotions has changed or not. The main thing is that you are attending to them.

Just a warning – beware spiritual bypassing. I am grateful for the experience with the wealthy client. It was rough, but showed me where I still needed to heal.

BUT I needed to tend to my feelings of failure and shame (with love and gratitude), before I got to gratitude for the rough *experience*.

What we resist persists. What we feel we can heal.

So, a call to action. When things are going badly, practice noticing the feelings that are triggered, get mindful, pause for a few minutes, tend to the feelings, and if possible offer them love and gratitude.

We practice compassion – and gratitude - to ourselves, not to feel better, but because we are feeling bad. This is a subtle but vital difference. We are not trying to get rid of the 'bad' feelings, as tempting as it is. And to be fair to ourselves, aside from cultural conditioning, our brains are wired to direct us away from aversive stimuli.

I'll admit, accepting my painful emotions rather than trying to ignore or numb them is a really hard habit to change. I'm much better than I used to be, but I still catch myself trying to get rid of anxiety and shame. It doesn't work. What does work is accepting our emotions, just as they are. Simultaneously, we are doing the work of accepting ourselves, just as we are.

It's worth it. When we switch from denying, suppressing, and rejecting parts of ourselves – when we change our habitual response to our emotions - we relieve stress as well as boosting our health along with our self-control. And this all makes our New Year's resolutions much *much* easier.

Happy New Year!

Meditation / Conversation starter

What situations or people in your life, which were unwanted at the time, are you now grateful for?

How did they help your life?

What lessons did you learn?

Links for further reading:-

<https://www.dailyom.com/journal/how-to-practice-gratitude-when-life-is-hard/> In this article, both a psychologist and spiritual teacher discuss their personal experiences, as well as the science, of gratitude. They also describe a range of gratitude practices. For the record, I believe the *best* gratitude practice is the one you actually do! So I suggest trying one that looks easy and fun!

<https://rebecca-stafford.org/boost-immunity/> - aka 'My ugly-crying & the simple, proven tactic to boost your immunity.' In this article I explain the simple psychology tactic that probably helped me the most to survive my PhD – conveniently, the tactic has been clinically proven to boost immunity.

<https://www.amazon.com/Mindful-Self-Compassion-Workbook-Yourself-Strength/dp/1462526780> If you would like to further explore mindful self-compassion, you probably can't go past this book by Dr Kristen Neff.