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# ACHIEVING OPTIMAL LIVING

*Duke Professional and Personal Development Program (PPDP) E-Newsletter*  
*Duke Occupational Mental Health Programs*

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## STOP TO SMELL THE ROSES

Our brains are wired to habituate to things; when we are exposed to a stimulus over and over again, we stop responding to it. This tendency has some helpful, adaptive, and necessary outcomes – it not only helps us get used to uncomfortable environments, but, more importantly, it frees our brains to concentrate on new and possibly dangerous situations. The down side of habituation is that it makes it very easy to stop noticing positive things in our lives. We need to make a conscious effort to stop and see the good that is right in front of us, whether it is the faces of our loved ones, a beautiful tree we pass daily on our way to work, or a kind word from another person.



## GRATITUDE JOURNAL

A gratitude journal can increase our sense of well being. A simple way to keep a gratitude journal is to select a weekly engagement calendar that provides two pages for each week: a beautiful picture on the left side pages, and days of the week listed down the right hand pages. Once a day, we can elicit a sense of gratitude by reflecting on and jotting down three things we enjoyed, appreciated or were pleased with that day. The beautiful picture helps put us in a positive frame of mind and the limited writing space makes it clear that we don't need to write an essay to benefit from this exercise. Reviewing the page at the end of each week reinforces our intention to focus on positive things. Finally, at the end of the year we have a compact record of positive events that we can easily refer to when we need something to lift our spirits.



## DON'T CONFUSE GUILT WITH GRATITUDE

Sometimes people confuse guilt with gratitude, as in when we are told as children to “clean your plate – there are starving children in other parts of the world who would be GRATEFUL to have that to eat”. When gratitude becomes a “should” it is no longer gratitude. It is the experience of genuinely feeling grateful that brings us positive benefits. It is counterproductive to suggest that “if I were a better person I would feel grateful.” Instead we want to remember that when we actually do feel grateful, we feel better.

## Gratitude

There are times in all of our lives when we feel anxious and stressed because of circumstances over which we have limited control. These may be personal stressors, such as illness, divorce, or job loss, or more communal stressors, such as economic downturn and global uncertainty.

We may not have control over these circumstances, but we can choose whether to direct our attention only to the negative things in our life, or to take the time to notice and appreciate the positive things. Research has shown that something as simple as listing three positive things that happened each day can decrease symptoms of depression and increase happiness.

When we genuinely feel more grateful and positive about our lives, other people experience us more positively, which makes us more attractive to them. By being more positive, we can draw other positive people into our lives, which in turn will create more positive experiences for which to be grateful.

When we feel more positive, we tend to use more positive filters when interpreting events, which again leads to more positive feelings. For example, if a co-worker goes by in the hallway without speaking to us, a negative interpretation might be “she’s mad at me”, “she thinks she’s better than me”, or “she’s a snob”. More positive interpretations include “she was concentrating on something else and didn’t notice me”, “she was late to a meeting and didn’t have time to stop”, or “she has a lot on her plate right now and is too overwhelmed to be thinking of someone else”. The negative interpretation leaves us feeling hurt or angry; the positive interpretation allows us to feel compassion and caring, which in turn leaves us feeling more at peace within ourselves.



Finally, memory is mood dependent; when we are in a good mood we are likely to remember good things, and when we are in a bad mood, we more easily remember bad things. If we increase the amount of time we are in a good mood by being grateful, we will remember more things for which to be grateful.

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