

Count your blessings

SOME PEOPLE JUST DON'T SEEM TO appreciate what they've got. There's the guy who takes his family for granted, the kids who feel entitled to expensive toys and a life of privilege. On the other hand, there are people who appreciate even the smallest good fortune. Almost by definition, appreciative people seem more satisfied with their lives. But are they really happier?

They are indeed, according to recent research published in the *Journal of Personality* by psychologists Mitchel Adler and Nancy Fagley. The authors define appreciation as "acknowledging the value and meaning of something—an event, a person, a behavior, an object—and feeling a positive emotional connection to it." In an initial small-scale study, Adler and Fagley obtained concrete examples of times their subjects felt appreciative. This enabled them to identify and measure eight distinct aspects of appreciation in a larger study, and then correlate subjects' appreciation levels with their psychological well-being. They found that appreciation improves a person's mood and makes her feel more connected to whatever it was she appreciated in the first place, whether it's appreciation for friends and family or a sense of awe and wonderment at the nature of existence.

But is being appreciative a state, which can be cultivated, or a trait, which you are more or less born with? As with most emotions, Adler and Fagley believe that appreciation has both state and trait qualities. That means that while feeling appreciative may come more naturally to some people, others can learn to be more appreciative.

Indeed, Adler and Fagley found that people who focused on, and felt thankful for, what they had rather than what they did not were the ones most likely to feel positive emotions and life satisfaction. You'll be a happier person, suggest Adler and Fagley, if you make an effort every day to appreciate all you have, instead of all you want.

—Christine Carter McLaughlin

Social security benefits

IT'S BEEN DECADES SINCE JOHN BOWLBY and Mary Ainsworth developed "attachment theory" to help explain infants' distress when separated from their parents. The theory holds that infants strive for closeness with adults who can protect them in times of need, and they form a sense of security if these relationships prove reassuring to them.

Attachment theory has been used to predict many aspects of adult life, such as the ability to form and keep close relationships. Now psychologists Mario Mikulincer and Phillip Shaver have made a link between attachment and one's capacity for compassion and altruism.

Mikulincer and Shaver induced feelings of attachment security in laboratory studies—for example, by reminding people of an important, caring attachment figure in their lives—and tested whether people made to feel more secure were more likely than others to show compassion and altruism, regardless of the social attachments they formed earlier in life.



Jonathan Payne

Repeatedly, they found that fostering even a temporary sense of attachment security led to compassionate behavior. For example, research participants who recalled a personal memory of supportive care were more willing to switch places with a person in distress.

Mikulincer and Shaver's research suggests that our sense of security—and by extension, our capacity for altruism and compassion—can be enhanced later in life, rather than being rigidly fixed by our early childhood experiences. In their conclusion to a recent article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, they propose further investigation into the practical applications of their research—for instance, how certain experiences, such as family therapy and participating in religious or charitable organizations, might bolster a person's sense of security and thereby foster compassion and altruism.

—Linda George

The biology of happiness

ACCORDING TO NEW RESEARCH, happiness isn't just a state of mind. It affects your heart rate, your body chemistry, and it could contribute to substantial physical health benefits over time.

British researchers Andrew Steptoe, Jane Wardle, and Michael Marmot asked 228 volunteers, ages 45-59, to rate their levels of happiness over a workday and a leisure day, and monitored their blood pressure and heart rate regularly. Volunteers also gave saliva samples and completed a mental stress test. Study results showed that people with higher happiness ratings not only had a lower heart rate, but also had lower levels in their saliva of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, and less concentration in their blood of a plasma that's connected to heart disease.

While some of the differences between happier individuals and their less happy counterparts were small, the researchers point out the potential impact of these seemingly minor variations over an extended period of time. "If differences of this magnitude are elicited in everyday life when people are exposed to daily hassles and challenges," they write, "the result could be a marked difference in cardiovascular disease risk." They also note that lower levels of cortisol are related to reduced long-term risk of abdominal obesity, type II diabetes, hypertension, and immune system problems.

For years, research has shown that reducing depression, stress, anxiety, and other negative states decreases the risk of heart disease and other maladies. This study has gone a step further by linking a positive emotional state to physical health benefits. Indeed, when the researchers measured their participants' levels of psychological distress, they found that the physical health benefits of happiness occurred independent of whether or not participants showed any signs of depression or another negative state. This suggests that there may be a distinct biology of happiness that carries its own set of health benefits, beyond the benefits of simply not being depressed.

—Michelle Flythe