

# The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

## The Power of Gratitude as Attitude

By: Amanda Gee and Virginia Jahyu

This has been a challenging year, in so many ways with ongoing pandemic issues, violent conflict between nations, ecological crisis, racial inequities, and social tensions; amidst all of this, we have survived and showed our resilience in many ways. We are so grateful to be granted this opportunity to share with you practical and thoughtful guidance on the practice of gratitude, so we can move from surviving to thriving by reframing our lived experience and focusing on the things that bring us joy. This article reflects our understanding as mental health creative therapists of the beneficial practice of adopting an attitude of gratitude in hopes of continuing to build our collective strength for the long road ahead toward a sustainable, healthy practice as direct support professionals (DSPs).

### What is gratitude? What do we mean by that?

The word gratitude comes from the Latin word gratia, which means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness. In many ways, gratitude includes all these meanings. Gratitude is a powerful feeling; it is a thankful appreciation for what an individual experiences or receives. Gratitude is saying thank you; gratitude is being grateful for the people and things in our lives; gratitude is acknowledging the things we take for granted, but it is more than that. It can involve words, action(s), creative practice(s), self-care, and boundary setting. People feel and express gratitude in many different ways. They can apply it to the past by recalling positive memories and being thankful for aspects of their lived experiences, to the present by not taking things for granted as it occurs, and to the future by maintaining a hopeful and optimistic attitude.

### Benefits of a gratitude practice

There has been a lot of research conducted on the practice of gratitude in recent years, and they have found many benefits to both mental and physical health. Some of these benefits are:

- Improve resilience
- Improve emotional regulation
- Foster hope for the future
- Reduce burnout and stress
- Increase feelings of happiness and positive mood
- Improve relationships

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Gratitude plays a big role in forming relationships and can help strengthen existing ones. Saying “thank you” can motivate and affirm individuals. We know that acknowledgement and encouragement in our workplaces can really impact our commitment to our work. This can be from staff to staff, staff to clients, clients to staff, clients to clients. A little can go a long way and helps anchor appreciation within relationships.

*“Blessings all pon mi life and*

*Mi thank God fi di journey, di earnings a jus fi di plus (Yeah)*

*And gratitude is a must (Yeah)*

*Mi see blessings fall by mi right hand*

*Buss a toast fi di friends weh tek off heavy load*

...

*Toast (Yeah), Toast (Yeah), Toast (Yeah)*

*We haffi give thanks like we really supposed to, be thankful”*

— Koffee, Jamaican Reggae Singer

### **Challenges with gratitude**

For some, gratitude practices seem intuitive and are viewed as an easy concept; however, we recognize the challenges of practicing gratitude at different moments in our lives, specifically at times where it would serve us best.

Life is hard – we can all acknowledge this. Work can be challenging, there are personal and family issues, bills need to be paid, the cost of everything seems to be increasing and, on top of that, we all feel overworked and underpaid. Add to that the global pandemic that we have been dealing with for two years, as well as the conflict and uncertainty in the world, and things can seem pretty terrible some days. Mental health issues are at an all-time high globally; we push through because we must in order to survive.

When things get tough and gratitude feels inaccessible, we recognize that is when it is needed the most. Perhaps this resistance comes from a place that fears the lack of validation of the tough things that are happening or have happened in our lives. We wonder why it must be either or? If you also experience this, perhaps a question to reflect on: “Am I not allowed to recognize my struggles while also remembering the “good” in my life?” When we are able to remember the good during the bad, it can help with reframing our lived experience and give us the power to move through whatever challenges we are facing. A great example of reframing is when French writer, Alphonse Karr said “Some people grumble that roses have thorns, I am grateful that thorns have roses.”

It can be so easy to focus on what we’re lacking or what is not working – it clouds everything with negativity. One bad thing happens, big or small, and it’s hard not to focus on that and become stuck in that negativity, resulting in circular and intrusive thoughts. It is important to acknowledge that this cycle happens to all of us.

With gratitude, people are able to recognize the existence of goodness in their lives. Within that process, people usually recognize that the source of that goodness is both internal and external.

This realization helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals, placing an emphasis on the connection between self, other people, nature, and beyond.

Motivational speaker Tony Robbins reminds us that the way to conquer fear is through practicing gratitude: the two emotions cannot coexist. One emotion drives out the other. Moving through the world with gratitude helps us notice things that otherwise are easily overlooked or deemed as insignificant; interaction with people can begin to feel warmer and more open.

Life can be stressful; practicing gratitude can help us to manage the stress and to remember the good in the day to day. When we are grateful, we are giving ourselves permission to focus on what is going well, as well as to acknowledge our appreciation of all the good instead of focusing on problems, issues, and things outside of our control. Remember that a heart filled with gratitude will always find something to be thankful for. That gratefulness can support us to make better decisions, build stronger relationships, and give us a sense of peace along the way.

Here is a quote/story from the late, great Maya Angelou on the attitude of gratitude:

*“There was a time when I was in a state of utter despair, immersed in guilt over promises made on which I had not delivered. I went to my vocal coach, Fred Wilkerson, weeping copiously. He asked what was the matter. I responded, ‘I’m going crazy. I am almost at the brink of suicide.’ He offered me a legal-size, lined yellow pad and a pen. He said, ‘Write down your blessings!’ Furious that he didn’t understand my condition, I shouted, ‘Don’t talk nonsense, I’m telling you I am going crazy.’ He said, ‘Write down that you could hear me say ‘write down’ and think of the millions who cannot hear the cries of their babies, or the sweet words of their beloveds, or the alarm that could help them seek safety. Write down that you can see this yellow pad and think of the millions on this planet who cannot see the smiles of their growing children or the delight in the faces of their beloveds, or the colors of the sunrise and the softness of the twilight. Write down that you know how to write. Write down that you know how to read.’ Wilkie, as he was known, gave me that lesson in 1955. Fifty-five years later, I have written 31 books, essays, plays, and lyrics for songs — all on yellow pads. I remain in an attitude of gratitude.”*

— Maya Angelou, American Poet

### Ways to cultivate gratitude

Here are some ideas and suggestions on how to cultivate gratitude in your world, and how you could bring it into your workplace, as well as to the people to whom you provide service. It is important to remember that we call it a *gratitude practice* because it takes ‘practice.’ Building a gratitude practice takes intentionality, commitment, and thoughtfulness. With practice, you can make gratitude a part of your day to day, a part of your self-care, and a part of your ‘attitude.’

- **Verbal expression** - You may start by adding the statement ‘I am grateful for...’ into your day. For example, I am very grateful that my husband cleaned off my car after our most recent snowstorm. I was complaining to someone about the snow and the drive, but I stopped myself and said, ‘I am grateful that my husband cleaned off my car, that was really helpful.’ That simple statement helped me to reframe my crankiness about the weather. You could bring this practice to your workplace to demonstrate gratitude to your coworkers and to the people you support. Introduce this practice to your coworkers and clients by explaining that you are working on your gratitude practice, and you want to invite them to start their own as well. Verbally express your gratitude to them if you are feeling it.

- **Journaling** - Start a gratitude journal, or sketch book, as a place to write down, or draw, your gratitude. Try to do this at a set time every day to make it a habit and a daily practice. It could be during your morning coffee, on your bus ride to work, or keep it beside your bed to write in right before you go to sleep to clear your mind. On tough days, you can look back at the words or images to remind yourself of things you were grateful for in the moment.
- **Gratitude jar** - Leave out a mason jar, some small pieces of paper, and something to write with. Every time you are feeling grateful about something or someone, write it down and add it to the jar. Or make a habit to add something every day and, when you need a reminder, take a paper from the jar to read and reflect. This could be done at home, but it could also happen in your workplace to allow a space for people to express gratitude.
- **Gratitude board** - Create a bulletin board or poster in your living space and add photos and images of people and things for which you are grateful. You could collage this, add drawings, and even incorporate life goals. This could also be an activity to do with clients you support in residential or day program settings. Support them to make gratitude boards or collages of their own.
- **Sticky note wall** - This could be done in your own space or in your workplace. Get sticky notes of different colours, write different things you are grateful for on them, and stick them up. You could make a sign that says GRATITUDE, or 'Things I'm Grateful For...' and place it above your sticky note collage, continuing to add to it over time. At work, this could be placed in a common area and supplies left out for everyone to participate when they feel moved to. During COVID, these sticky note walls popped up all over testing and vaccine clinics to show appreciation for the health care workers.
- **Art making** - Draw it, paint it, sculpt it, or collage it. Think of the theme of gratitude and make art about it. This could be very literal – a drawing or collage of the things and people you are grateful for, or it could be interpretive – what colour is your gratitude? This is another activity that you could do with the clients you support – gather a bunch of art materials and get creative. Allow individuals to make and create whatever feels right for them.
- **Write letters** - This is another way to make your gratitude concrete. If there is someone in your life whom you are grateful for, write them a letter expressing this. Sometimes it is hard to use words to express how much someone really means, sometimes it is easier to write it out. This is also a way to express gratitude to someone who has passed away or you are not in contact with anymore.
- **Meditation and prayer** – Recently, I did a staff training on gratitude at my workplace and, afterwards, someone came up to me and said, 'You know prayer is expressing gratitude if you are doing it right.' Prayer and meditation can be powerful ways to express gratitude in daily practice.
- **Mealtime practice** - Once a year at thanksgiving, people go around the table saying what they are grateful for. This doesn't have to be associated with a holiday but could be a daily practice for yourself, for your family, and as an invitation at your workplace. When you sit down to eat, think of something you are grateful for, if you are with others, it should be an invitation, not a requirement, but it could encourage others to think about what they are grateful for as well.

- **Make it a daily ritual** - Whether you work on one of the above suggestions, or something of your own, try to make it a daily practice, so that it can work its way into an attitude, a way of being.

## Conclusion

*“Today, let us swim wildly, joyously in gratitude.”*

— Rumi, Persian Poet

Daily practices of gratitude can be beneficial for both physical and mental health; they can help us foster positive feelings and encourage us to focus on appreciating what one has, rather than what one lacks, this way of thinking grows stronger with use and practice. Gratitude also offers benefits for building and repairing relationships with the people we support and can lead us to a better sense of being grounded in our busy lives as DSP's.

We can take creative approaches for gratitude practice through, journaling, artmaking, verbal expression, or simply noticing the small things in our lives that bring us joy. With regular practice, gratitude will likely sustain positive effects to our mental health and overall wellbeing.

May the attitude of gratitude empower you.

## About the authors

Amanda Gee, BFA, RCAT, RCT (she/her) has been working with individuals with intellectual disabilities and dual diagnosis for the past 22 years in many different capacities. Amanda is an artist and an art therapist, and she lives and works in Mi'kma'ki, also known as Nova Scotia, Canada. She is the client support and education specialist at DASC (Dartmouth Adult Services Center), a registered counseling therapist at Lifemark Physiotherapy Sackville Sports Stadium, a registered Canadian art therapist, a registered counseling therapist, and also specializes in helping people through grief and loss through the lifespan. Amanda believes in a holistic approach to therapy, incorporating many different modalities into her work, and considering the whole person and system in treatment.

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