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PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

# Mindfulness 101: Deepening Gratitude

By Scott L. Rogers

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Mindfulness is practiced for many reasons. While not commonly regarded as a traditional mindfulness practice, gratitude is looked to as an important means of self-care and wellness. Moreover, in ways not always obvious, gratitude can awaken greater mindful awareness, and practicing mindfulness can enliven a sense of gratitude. In today's column, we'll look at the relationship between gratitude and mindfulness and explore ways of practicing both amid the busyness of the day.

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## About Gratitude

What is meant by “gratitude” almost goes without saying. We know it when we feel it. While often occasioned by an external event, gratitude can also be cultivated from within as a conscious appreciation for what one receives in life. In its expression, people usually connect to something larger than themselves—whether to other people, nature, or a higher power. Alice Walker writes: “‘Thank you’ is the best prayer that anyone could say. . . . Thank you expresses extreme gratitude, humility, understanding.”

A simple gratitude exercise that is part of a popular positive psychology practice involves “gratitude journaling,” where each day one reflects on a few things for which one is grateful and notes them in a journal. A powerful gratitude practice shared by Martin Seligman involves writing and personally delivering a letter of gratitude to someone who had never been properly thanked for his or her kindness. Along with these more deliberate engagements with gratitude, we are frequently practicing what we could term “gratitude-light” when we thank someone for everyday gestures such as replying to an e-mail request, holding open a door, or serving us food at a restaurant.

## Why Practice Gratitude?

The value of expressing gratitude has been recognized for thousands of years. Cicero noted, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.” More recently, researchers are exploring the health benefits of practicing gratitude. In his book *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (2007), psychologist Robert A. Emmons reports on various emotional, physical, and interpersonal benefits that flow from practicing gratitude. He writes that:

[w]e have discovered that a person who experiences gratitude is able to cope more effectively with everyday stress, may show increased resilience in the face of trauma-induced stress, and may recover more quickly from illness and benefit from greater physical health. Our research has led us to conclude that experiencing gratitude leads to increased feelings of connectedness, improved relationships, and even altruism.

I could list a series of bullet points with a host of eye-catching benefits, but perhaps the more reliable research findings are those you note from your direct experience. Below is a way to infuse greater mindful awareness in the middle of your day by bringing greater attention to those moments in which you spontaneously express gratitude.

## Mindful Gratitude

Brené Brown offers us a helpful reminder when she writes, “I don’t have to chase extraordinary moments to find happiness—it’s right in front of me if I’m paying attention and practicing gratitude.” One reason people have turned to mindfulness is to help counteract the tendency to become lost in distraction and caught up in momentary urgencies, real and imagined. Because we habitually stop paying attention to what is taking place in the moments of our lives, we take steps to reclaim a present-moment engagement. It may well be the case that if we were ceaselessly present, we would not forget our fortunate circumstances, the good in our lives, and the kindness, generosity, and support we have received from others. And with this sustained awareness, a feeling of gratitude would naturally flow. But this is not the case. Brown points to the value of “paying attention and practicing gratitude.” And so how might we practice paying attention and practicing gratitude in a way that coincides with the regular course of our day?

Looking back to what was termed “gratitude-light,” we are likely to find many moments in the day when we are absentmindedly thanking someone for something they did. Rather than issue our thanks on automatic pilot, we can do so with a greater degree of intentionality and authenticity. By

bringing a little more awareness into these moments, a curt “thank-you” can be transformed into a smile, a knowing look into someone’s eyes, and a genuine acknowledgment of thanks. While this likely will register with the person in a meaningful way, it may also awaken gratitude in us, and shift our experience in that moment. After all, it is difficult, if not impossible, to experience gratitude and negative thoughts at the same time.

Every reader of this column likely knows what it feels like to be on both sides of this exchange with another person. It feels good. It enriches a sense of connection. It’s contagious. And because it’s already in our nature, a little nudge in this direction can go a long way. And importantly, while it is nice if someone else is the knowing recipient of your gratitude, the mere generation of a feeling of gratitude is a fruitful end in itself.

Thank you for the opportunity to explore mindfulness and gratitude with you. Truly.

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## Authors



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[Scott L. Rogers](#) is a nationally recognized leader in the area of mindfulness and law, as well as a teacher, researcher, and trainer. He is founder and director of the University of Miami School of Law’s [Mindfulness in Law Program](#), and he co-founded and co-directs the University of Miami’s [Mindfulness Research & Practice Initiative](#). Scott is the author of five books including the recently released *The Elements of Mindfulness*.

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