

Study: Want to be happier? Be more grateful

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Want to quickly improve your happiness and satisfaction with life? Then the pen may be a mighty weapon, according to research done by Kent State University's Dr. Steven Toepfer.

Toepfer, an assistant professor of family and consumer studies at university's Salem Campus, says that expressive writing is something that has been available to mankind since ink first appeared in Egypt more than 4,000 years ago.

"Everyone is pursuing the American dream. We are wealthier than previous generations, consuming more and experiencing more, but yet so many of us are so unhappy," Toepfer says. "The question of 'is there something simple we can do to be happier?' is one that I have been thinking about for many years and one that has interested people for much longer."

With that question in mind, Toepfer enlisted students from six courses to explore the effects of writing letters of gratitude to people who had positively impacted the students' lives. Over the course of a six-week period, students wrote one letter every two weeks with the simple ground rules that it had to be positively expressive, required some insight and reflection, were nontrivial and contained a high level of appreciation or gratitude.

After each letter, students completed a survey to gauge their moods, satisfaction with life and feelings of gratitude and happiness.

"I saw their happiness increase after each letter, meaning the more they wrote, the better they felt," says Toepfer, who also witnessed improvement in participants' life satisfaction and gratitude throughout the study. "The most powerful thing in our lives is our social network. It doesn't have to be large, and you don't always need to be the life of the party, but just having one or two significant connections in your life has shown to have terrific psychological and physical benefits."

In all, 75 percent of the students said they planned to continue to write letters of gratitude even when the course was over.

Studies demonstrate, according to Toepfer, that practicing expressive writing is often associated with fewer health problems, decreased depression, an improved immune system and improved grades.

"We are all walking around with an amazing resource: gratitude," says Toepfer. "It helps us express and enjoy, appreciate, be thankful and satisfied with a little effort. We all have it, and we need to use it to improve our quality of life."

Source: Kent State University

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