

Grateful teens may have less risk for depression, other problems

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Parents, teachers can help kids learn to identify good things in their lives, study says.

(HealthDay) -- For anyone raising teenagers, the idea of helping them feel grateful for everyday things may seem like a long shot; just getting them to mumble a "thank you" every now and then can be a monumental accomplishment.

But a new study suggests that helping teens learn to count their blessings can actually play an important role in positive mental health. As gratitude increases, so do [life satisfaction](#), happiness, [positive attitudes](#), hope and even academic performance.

Giacomo Bono, study author and a professor of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills, said it seems there's not much time these days for teens to pause and consider their appreciation of their friendships, activities they enjoy or even the food on the table.

But among those kids who say they feel grateful for a variety of things in their lives, Bono found an association with critical life skills such as cooperation, a sense of purpose, creativity and persistence.

"Gratefulness allows us to understand what matters most to us and translate that to a broader goal," said Bono. He is expected to present his research Sunday at the [American Psychological Association](#) annual meeting in Orlando, Fla.

The study involved 700 students living in New York, aged 10 to 14. The participants were white (67 percent), Asian American (11 percent), black (10 percent) and Hispanic (1.4 percent), and about 11 percent were other ethnicities or did not identify their race. The researchers took into account for [socioeconomic factors](#) and parental [educational attainment](#), but not for religious beliefs.

The study authors defined grateful teens as having a disposition and moods that enabled them to respond positively to the good people and things in their lives, Bono said.

Students completed questionnaires in school at the beginning of the study and then four years later. Bono compared the results from the least grateful to the most grateful. He found those who were among the most grateful gained 15 percent more of a sense of meaning in their lives, became 15 percent more satisfied with their lives overall and became 17 percent more happy and hopeful about their lives. That group also had a 13 percent drop in negative emotions and a 15 percent decrease in symptoms of depression.

Bono said there's a strong link between having a sense of satisfaction with life and feeling grateful. "People who are grateful are more optimistic and hopeful, feeling they have the resources to be successful in their future," said Bono.

An expert involved in working with teens said it makes sense that gratitude would increase a teenager's sense of purpose in life. "I help kids become more aware of what they're grateful for, not just in treating depression, but in materialistic, busy, media-driven lives," said Alec Miller, chief of child and adolescent psychology at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City.

Interestingly, socioeconomic status doesn't appear to be linked to gratefulness. "You don't have to be rich to feel grateful," said Bono. "We've found poor kids are very appreciative when other people help them out."

Miller agreed. "I see Medicaid kids and children from wealthy homes in Westchester County, and I don't see any greater or lesser sense of gratitude from one group or another. It's fairly low in both groups," he said. "Unfortunately, our society isn't focused much on gratefulness; it's become out of vogue to talk about it," said Miller. "But I give these researchers credit for reviving interest in the topic."

Miller said he often asks kids what they're grateful for. When they can't identify anything much at all, he sees it as a danger sign of increased risk of severe depression and suicide. But developing a sense of gratitude in kids can help prevent the gradual erosion of self-esteem and build their sense of purpose and ability, he noted.

How can parents help instill a sense of gratitude in their children? Bono suggested parents start paying attention to their own sense of gratefulness and model it. "Talk about what you're grateful for, and ask your kids what they appreciate," he said. He also advised mentioning people who have helped in their lives: a teacher who stayed after class, a coach who made a difference. "Talking about gratitude helps guide us all to the things that matter most," he noted.

Because this research was presented at a meeting, the data and conclusions should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

The research was funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

More information: Learn more about gratitude from the [Greater Good Center](#) at the University of California, Berkeley.

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