

Gratitude—'A vaccine against impulsiveness'

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New research from Northeastern professor David DeSteno shows how cultivating gratitude for everyday occurrences leads to greater patience and more self-control. Credit: Gregory Grinnell/Northeastern University

What small thing are you grateful for today? Me? I am grateful that David DeSteno, professor of psychology in the College of Science, agreed to postpone our interview on Tuesday about his new paper

because I wasn't feeling well.

The paper, which recently appeared in the journal *Emotion*, shows how cultivating [gratitude](#) for everyday occurrences leads to greater patience and more self-control, in particular, the ability to forgo immediate monetary rewards for future ones.

"We can all point to the five things in our lives that we're most grateful for, but if we keep thinking about those, we'll habituate to them—they're going to stop being interesting," says DeSteno. Rather, to cultivate gratitude we should reflect on daily events: the woman who stopped to give you directions, the man who gave you his seat on the T. "Those kinds of daily gratitude boosters will function like a vaccine against impulsiveness and enhance self-control and future orientedness," he says.

From a charade to a revelation

DeSteno and co-author Leah Dickens, PhD'15, his former student, conducted the research in three phases:

First, they brought the participants—105 Northeastern undergraduates—into the lab and ran a "gratitude inducing paradigm," a charade that ended with an actor helping each student restart his or her "crashed" computer in order to complete a frustrating task that had been interrupted when the screen went black. The students had been told that they would have to start the task from the beginning again, but when the machines blinked back on nothing, miraculously, had been lost. Afterward, they rated their emotional states—How happy are you? How grateful?—on a seven-point scale.

Next the researchers sent the students "out into the world" for three weeks, pinging them daily on their smartphones to measure their

emotional states via online questionnaires. In general, says DeSteno, "their levels of gratitude in the lab predicted their levels of gratitude in real life." That made him confident that the students' responses over the three weeks were reliable.

Finally, they administered a 27-measure survey to assess the role of gratitude in their life choices: Would the students rather receive a smaller amount of money now (say, \$30) or a larger amount at some future date (say, \$50)?

"What we found was that people who had higher levels of gratitude in their daily lives were more patient and less impulsive when it came to those financial decisions," says DeSteno. "That suggests that the more you regularly experience gratitude, the more self-control you have in various areas of your life."

The findings upend conventional wisdom: Emotions such as gratitude, more than willpower, help curtail [impulsive behavior](#) by leading us to act in a more future-oriented way.

DeSteno doesn't just research the subject of gratitude; he practices it. Among the things he's grateful for today? "I'm grateful that when I left a bag on the train this morning—because I was reading a text—a stranger ran after me to hand me the bag," he says.

More information: The Grateful Are Patient: Heightened Daily Gratitude Is Associated With Attenuated Temporal Discounting.

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