

Gratitude interventions don't help with depression, anxiety: study

March 9 2020, by Jeff Grabmeier

Go ahead and be grateful for the good things in your life. Just don't think that a gratitude intervention will help you feel less depressed or anxious.

In a new study, researchers at The Ohio State University analyzed results from 27 separate studies that examined the effectiveness of [gratitude](#) interventions on reducing symptoms of [anxiety](#) and [depression](#).

The results showed that such interventions had limited benefits at best.

"For years now, we have heard in the media and elsewhere about how finding ways to increase gratitude can help make us happier and healthier in so many ways," said David Cregg, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in psychology at Ohio State.

"But when it comes to one supposed benefit of these interventions—helping with symptoms of anxiety and depression—they really seem to have limited value."

Cregg conducted the study with Jennifer Cheavens, associate professor of psychology at Ohio State. Their results were published online recently in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

There are two commonly recommended gratitude interventions, Cheavens said. One is the "Three Good Things" exercise: At the end of the day, a person thinks of three things that went well for them that day, then writes them down and reflects on them.

Another is a "gratitude visit," when a person writes a letter thanking someone who has made a difference in their life and then reads the letter to that person.

The 27 studies involved in this analysis often had participants do one of these exercises or something similar. The studies included 3,675

participants.

In many studies, participants who did the gratitude interventions were compared with people who performed a similar activity that was unrelated to gratitude. For example, instead of writing about what they were grateful about, a college student sample might write about their class schedule.

The gratitude [intervention](#) was not much better at relieving anxiety and depression than the seemingly unrelated activity.

"There was a difference, but it was a small difference," Cheavens said. "It would not be something you would recommend as a treatment."

As an alternative, Cheavens and Cregg recommend people pursue treatments that have been shown to be effective with anxiety and depression, such as [cognitive behavioral therapy](#).

The results suggest that it isn't helpful to tell people with symptoms of depression or anxiety to simply be more grateful for the good things they have, Cheavens said.

"Based on our results, telling people who are feeling depressed and anxious to be more grateful likely won't result in the kind of reductions in depression and anxiety we would want to see," she said.

"It might be that these sort of interventions, on their own, aren't powerful enough or that people have difficulty enacting them fully when they are feeling depressed and anxious."

The results don't mean that there are no benefits to being grateful or to using gratitude interventions, the researchers said. In fact, some studies show that such interventions are effective at improving relationships.

"It is good to be more grateful—it has intrinsic virtue and there's evidence that people who have gratitude as a general trait have a lower incidence of mental health problems and better relationships," Cregg said.

"The problem is when we try to turn gratefulness into a self-help tool. Gratitude can't fix everything."

More information: David R. Cregg et al, Gratitude Interventions: Effective Self-help? A Meta-analysis of the Impact on Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1007/s10902-020-00236-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-020-00236-6)

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