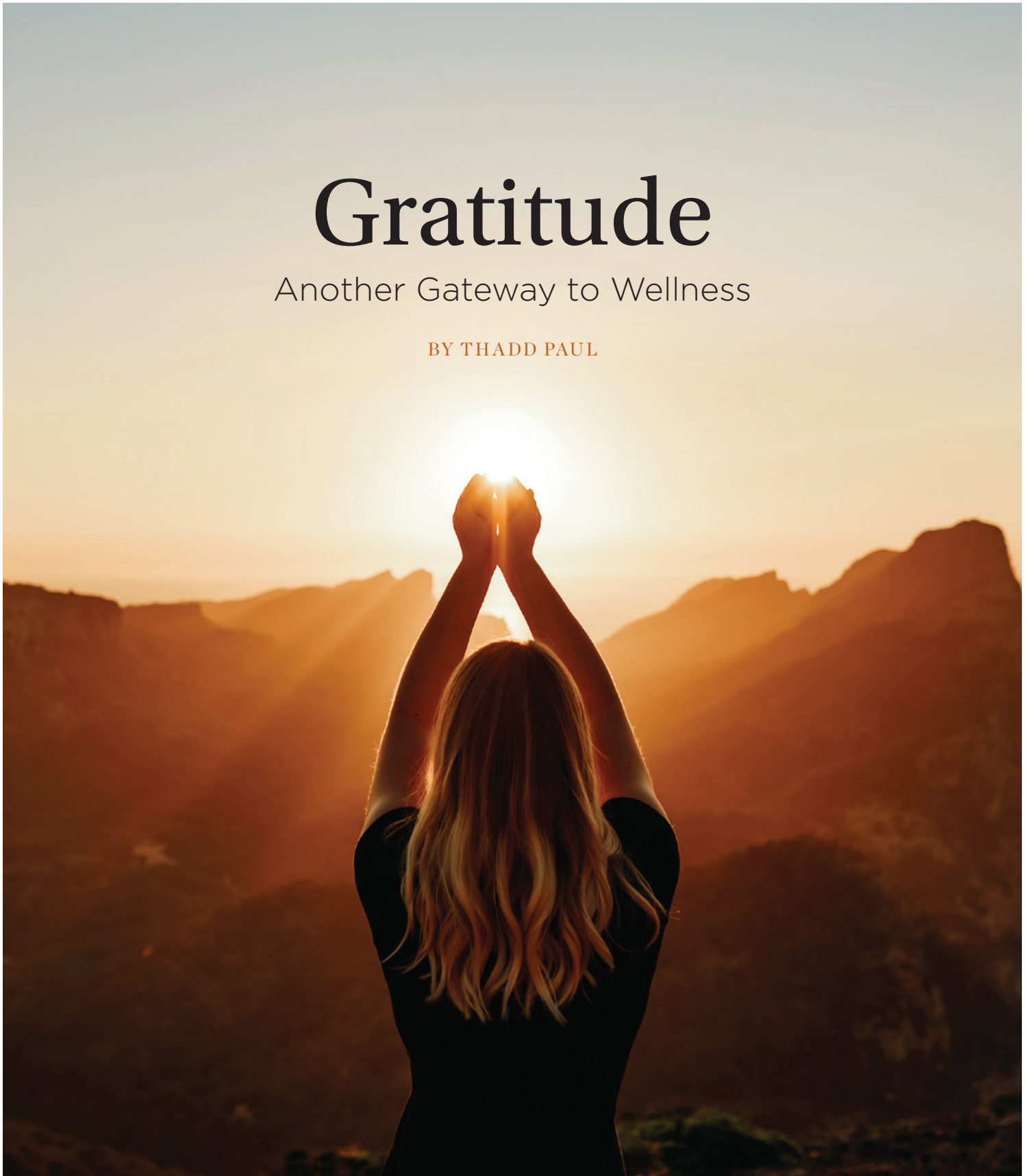


Gratitude

Another Gateway to Wellness

BY THADD PAUL



When we think of wellness, we often consider things like diet, exercise, work/life balance, connecting with those we care about, and cutting back on some of our less healthy habits. Many have also found great benefits from practices like yoga and meditation. But how many of us have tried to achieve a greater sense of wellness through the mindful practice of gratitude? If you're among those who regularly practice gratitude, you're probably aware of its many virtues. But if not, this article may give you something new to add to your wellness toolbox.

What is Gratitude, Anyway?

Gratitude comes from the Latin root *gratia*, which can mean grace, graciousness, or gratefulness depending on the context in which it's being used. You might think of it as thankful appreciation for that which brings us joy, security, a sense of purpose, or anything else that stirs positive emotions. Gratitude enables us to take active stock of the aspects of our life for which we are thankful or appreciative.

To better understand gratitude, it can be helpful to think about what gratitude is not. It is not comparing yourself with those less fortunate. Rather, it's appreciating what is presently available to you, regardless of what others do or don't have. And it's not about looking for the positive in any situation. When practiced properly, gratitude lets you explore all your emotions and recognize the positive, as opposed to focusing only on the good and turning a blind eye to the bad.

Why Practice Gratitude?

Research suggests that people who incorporate gratitude practices into their daily lives feel more optimistic, report being happier, have improved physical health, and experience improved personal relationships, both inside and outside the workplace.

For example, Dr. Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, Davis, and Dr. Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami, found there is an association between gratitude and wellness.¹ They drew this conclusion from their study in which they asked one group of

subjects to write down things they were grateful for each week. A second group was asked to catalog things that happened during the week that were irritating, annoying, or otherwise unpleasant. This weekly practice was continued for 10 weeks. At the end of that time, those who had focused on gratitude reported feeling more optimistic than those in the other group. The "gratitude group" also reported exercising more and having fewer trips to the doctor than those in the "aggravation group."

During times of worry, challenge, or adversity, I've found that it can be harder to practice gratitude. But with patient focus, I'm inevitably able to create a long list of things for which I'm grateful, even on the most challenging days.

In another study led by Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, subjects were asked to write, and personally deliver, a letter of gratitude to someone in their lives who the subjects felt had never been adequately thanked for their kindness.² Those who wrote and delivered the letter demonstrated a significant increase in the happiness scores that Seligman tracked.

Still other studies have looked at the impact gratitude can have on personal relationships.³ Whether by simply thanking a spouse or loved one for their efforts, or acknowledging the good

work done by a coworker, those who engage in those practices report feeling more positively toward the loved one or coworker. And those who engaged in active expressions of gratitude exhibited more skill at expressing concerns about their relationship when necessary.

In fairness, other studies do not show a strong correlation between gratitude and improved wellness. Like all other forms of wellness practice, it's up to each of us to experiment, try things on, and see for ourselves what works and what doesn't.

Commitment is Key

Candidly, I have cycled between living inside and outside of gratitude over the years. No one is perfect, and it's unrealistic to think that we can access gratitude all the time. But when I am incorporating gratitude practices into my daily life and interactions with others, there's no question that I feel more optimistic, am more engaged and connected with others, find joy more easily, and just generally enjoy my passage through life more.

During times of worry, challenge, or adversity, I've found that it can be harder to practice gratitude. But with patient focus, I'm inevitably able to create a long list of things for which I'm grateful, even on the most challenging days. For me, it just takes commitment to the practice. Gratitude helps me remember what I have, rather than what I lack. It diminishes my inclination to judge myself and assess my worth by comparing myself to others who may have "more" or may seem superior or more successful. I've found that cultivating a grateful heart is the single most important thing I do to remain balanced and grounded.

Developing an Attitude of Gratitude

There are probably as many ways to cultivate gratitude as there are people willing to try it. Only you can find what works best for you. But here are four popular practices that can help foster "an attitude of gratitude."

1. Make a gratitude list or keep a gratitude journal.

There's something powerful about putting pen to paper. Find a quiet place and focus your



mind on your blessings, both large and small. Don't judge yourself for those things that make you grateful. If you love your car, write it down! Loved ones, upcoming trips, settling a case, winning a trial, closing a deal, dinner with a friend, watching a Colorado sunset, hiking in the mountains, good health, recovery from bad health—it doesn't matter. If it's important to you, it's important to write it down. As your journal grows, you can return in times of challenge to those entries you made when you were feeling particularly grateful. This can serve as a good reminder that challenging times are temporary and will pass. When you're feeling uninspired, you can rewind to those times when the flow of life was easier and more enjoyable. This can help jump-start your gratitude practice.

2. If you appreciate someone, tell them.

Too often, we get stuck in our own heads and focus only on what's happening in our own lives. Our minds might race with thoughts such as: My job is really hard. My boss is aggravating. I'm out of work. The money never seems to

stretch far enough. My teenagers are annoying me and causing me concern. The list goes on. Expressing appreciation for others takes the focus off yourself and shifts your focus onto them. This practice can help us keep our own life situations in perspective. And in our "high feedback" culture, we routinely hear about what could have been done better, and seemingly aren't thanked enough for what has gone well. But gratitude is contagious. If you authentically practice it toward others, you will likely experience it coming back your way—and often just when you need it most.

3. Become an active observer of your thoughts.

Our minds are like busy highways. And sometimes our thoughts take us into bad neighborhoods. Don't believe every thought you have. Instead, try to become an unattached observer of your mind's activity. As negativity creeps in, as it always will in each of us, pause for a moment. Quietly note the thought as simply "thinking" rather than as a picture of objective reality. Challenge your belief in, or attachment

to, the thought. Just note it. Don't try to judge or change it. The minute you've noted it, turn briefly to actively using your mind to think about something for which you are grateful or that brings you joy. Leverage your mind as a tool, rather than as something that controls you.


4. Set aside time each day when you can rest in a quiet place and consider gratitude.

If you're as busy as most, and a still, quiet setting doesn't seem realistic, then practice gratitude in the shower, on your drive, while waiting in line, or while exercising. Just a few minutes will do the trick. Like exercise, meditation, and yoga, a daily (or at least frequent) practice will be much more effective than trying to seek out gratitude only when you're feeling pressed, challenged, or down. Practice it in good times and bad. The idea is that through consistent repetition, you will train your brain and rewire your neurologic pathways. This concept is known as neuroplasticity. The metaphor is that the brain is "plastic" and can therefore be remolded and changed. The effects of a regular practice

compound over time and can become a working part of your everyday life. Sporadic attention to gratitude is better than nothing, but the results probably won't be as striking.

Where to Learn More

If any of this resonates with you and you'd like to learn more, there are many free resources available on the internet. Type "gratitude practice" into your favorite search engine and you'll almost certainly find something that speaks to you. There are also books, podcasts, and even apps that you can buy to help get you started and guide you on your way. Finally, while a gratitude practice can benefit anyone, it is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your medical doctor or a qualified behavioral health professional if you are experiencing difficulties beyond what seem manageable to you.

If you're feeling stuck, are unsure where to start your gratitude or well-being work in 2022, or would like access to supportive resources, contact COLAP for a free, confidential, and individualized well-being consultation. Call COLAP at (303) 986-3345 or email info@coloradolap.org to request your consultation today. 



Thadd Paul has been a practicing attorney since 1993. After spending eight years in private practice, he moved in-house in 2001, joining Nintendo of America Inc. in the Seattle area. Paul has worked as in-house counsel for a number of Fortune 500 companies, where he has focused on commercial transactions, technology, and intellectual property. Outside of work, Paul enjoys a variety of active outdoor activities, aviation, and time with his family.

Coordinating Editor: Sarah Myers, smyers@coloradolap.org

NOTES

1. Emmons and McCullough, "Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life," 84(2) *J. of Personality and Soc. Psychol.* 377 (2003).
2. Seligman et al., "Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions," 60(5) *Am. Psychologist* 410 (2005).
3. Lambert et al., "Expressing Gratitude to a Partner Leads to More Relationship Maintenance Behavior," 11(1) *Emotion* 52 (2011).

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