

18

GRATITUDE

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS WITH GRATITUDE

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This activity demonstrates how grateful coping can help bring closure to troubling memories and how this can be an important facet in explaining how gratitude contributes to the good life. In this activity, students write about an unpleasant memory in a manner that helps them gratefully reappraise that memory. Following the writing exercise, students assess closure and the emotional impact of the memory.

CONCEPT Gratitude has been shown to be one of the strongest correlates of emotional well-being, and experimental studies have supported the theory that gratitude enhances happiness (Watkins, Van Gelder, & Frias, 2009). This activity demonstrates one of the mechanisms whereby gratitude enhances well-being: grateful coping. In this exercise, students will write about a painful memory in a manner that helps them reframe the memory to help bring closure and decrease the unpleasant emotional impact of the memory.

MATERIALS NEEDED Although students can complete this exercise using their own materials (blank sheets of paper and writing utensils), we think that it is better to provide the journaling materials, including the outcome measures and the journaling instructions (see Appendix 18.1). Presentation slides of the results from Watkins, Cruz, Holben, and Kolts (2008) will assist in your discussion of the exercise (see Figures 18.1, 18.2, and 18.3).

INSTRUCTIONS Although there are probably several mechanisms whereby gratitude enhances well-being (for a review, see Watkins et al., 2009), some research suggests that one of the strongest explanations is that grateful people deal particularly well with difficult events. Grateful people are probably good at reframing negative events in memory in such a way as to decrease their unhealthy impact. We like to present this exercise in the context of discussing gratitude mechanisms that might enhance happiness.

At least one day or one lecture before conducting this activity, you should prepare your students for this exercise. In an announcement, you should inform them that they will be asked to recall and write about an unpleasant *open memory*, and you should describe the nature of open memory. This announcement serves two purposes: It provides an appropriate preparation for the exercise and helps students come to the

DOI: 10.1037/14042-019

Activities for Teaching Positive Psychology: A Guide for Instructors, J. J. Froh and A. C. Parks (Editors)

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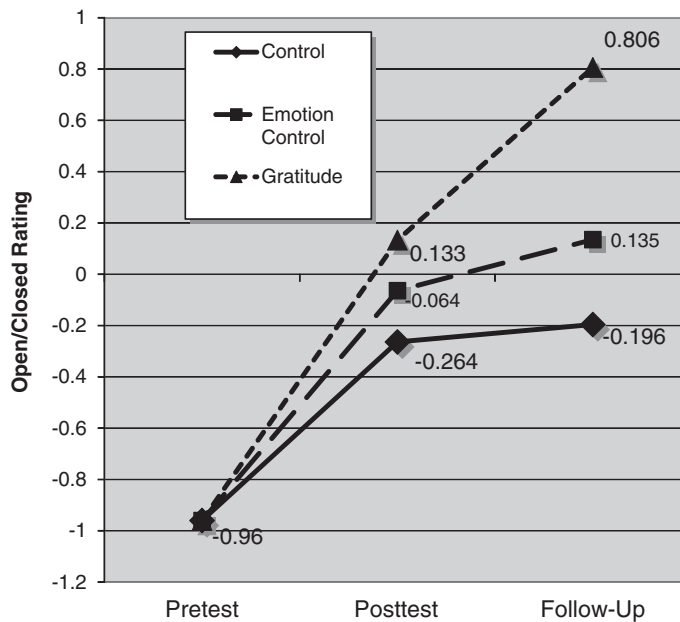


Figure 18.1. Estimated marginal means of memory openness by writing condition and test. Higher scores indicate more closure. From "Taking Care of Business? Grateful Processing of Unpleasant Memories," by P. C. Watkins, L. Cruz, H. Holben, and R. L. Kolts, 2008, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3, p. 93. Copyright 2008 by Routledge. Adapted with permission.

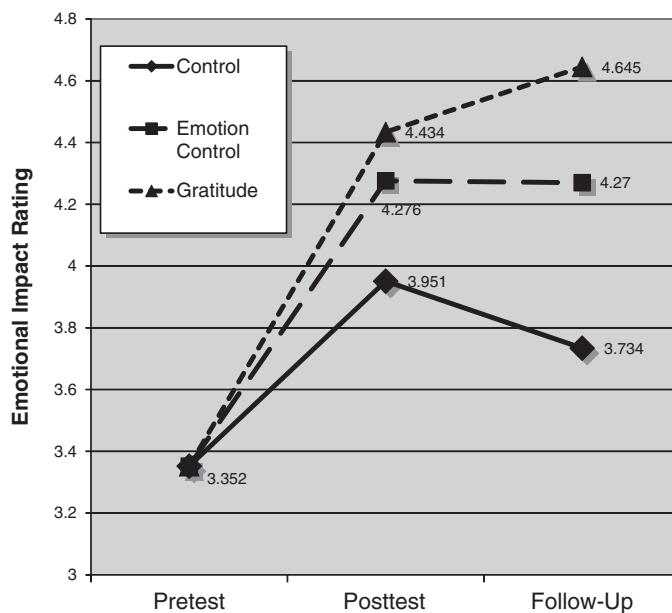


Figure 18.2. Estimated marginal means of emotional impact of memory by writing condition and test. Higher scores indicate more pleasantness. From "Taking Care of Business? Grateful Processing of Unpleasant Memories," by P. C. Watkins, L. Cruz, H. Holben, and R. L. Kolts, 2008, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3, p. 93. Copyright 2008 by Routledge. Adapted with permission.

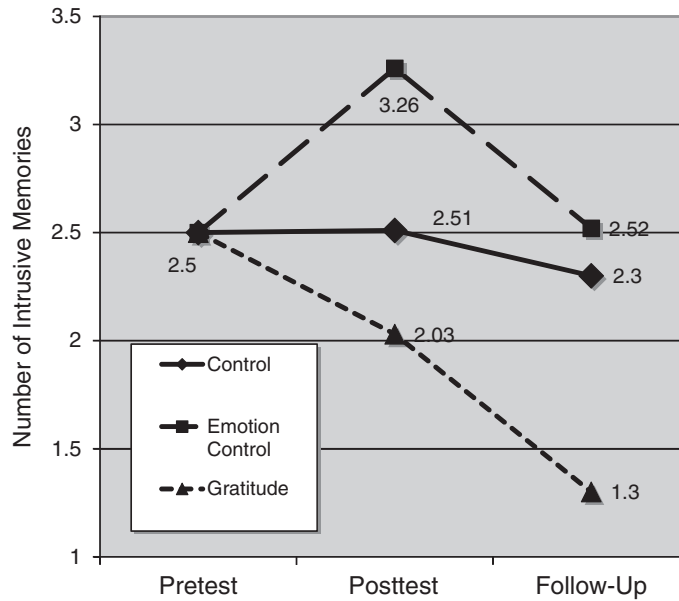


Figure 18.3. Estimated marginal means of number of intrusive open memories by writing condition and test. From "Taking Care of Business? Grateful Processing of Unpleasant Memories," by P. C. Watkins, L. Cruz, H. Holben, and R. L. Kolts, 2008, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3, p. 94. Copyright 2008 by Routledge. Adapted with permission.

demonstration with the painful memory that they can work with during the exercise. The following is a suggested announcement:

On (date) we will conduct a gratitude exercise in which you will be asked to recall an "open memory" from your past. This is a negative emotional memory that you feel has some "unfinished business" associated with it. This memory should not be too traumatic or too personal (e.g., please avoid memories of abuse), but any unpleasant memory that you feel that you do not understand well and that continues to bother you would be appropriate. For example, many students recall episodes of romantic rejection, disappointing academic performance, or incidents of regret. After you recall this memory, I am going to ask you to write about it in a way that should help you deal with it.

Although this reframing exercise may have value in helping people deal with deeply traumatic memories, we feel that reappraising very traumatic memories in this way is probably better accomplished under the guidance of a therapist, rather than in class.

On the actual occasion of the demonstration, first hand out the exercise packet (see Appendix 18.1). Next, ask students to recall their open memory. After students have written down their memories, ask them to report on the openness and emotional impact of the memory (see Appendix 18.1).

The next step is to have your students begin the journaling exercise. We like to have the journaling instructions written down for our students, but we think it is also good to read the instructions in Appendix 18.1 aloud. (Feel free to provide students with extra blank pages if needed.)

After 20 minutes, inform the students that they can stop their journaling and that they may now complete the questions on the following page. An optional aspect of this exercise is to provide your students with the real-time intrusive memory measure that is

provided in Appendix 18.1. In this portion of the exercise, students are to recall as “many *positive* events as you can from anytime in your past” for 3 minutes. If, however, their open memory comes to mind during this task, they are to check a box at the bottom of the page. Because the students’ task is to recall positive events, the coming to mind of an open memory is an incidence of an intrusive memory. One of the characteristics of open memories is that they tend to be intrusive, that is, they invade consciousness at times when they are unwelcome. Having students engage in this aspect of the exercise will give them a good understanding of the intrusive memory results that you will discuss following this exercise.

A discussion of students’ experiences with the demonstration should follow this activity. First, we recommend encouraging students to continue the exercise outside of class. In most expressive writing paradigms, three journaling sessions, 20 minutes each, are used, and in the study that this demonstration is based on (Watkins et al., 2008), we used three sessions on consecutive days. Often students will carry the activity discussion themselves, but there are a few issues that we think should be emphasized for this demonstration to provide a complete learning experience.

We recommend beginning the discussion by asking students about their experience with the grateful reappraisal exercise and their perception of the outcome of this exercise. Following are some questions that might help guide discussion:

- As you wrote about your memory, what kinds of facts about your unpleasant event became prominent?
- Were there new facts about the event that you recognized?
- As you thought in this new way about the event, how did you feel?
- Did you find yourself experiencing new emotions about the event?
- How has the meaning of this event changed for you?
- How has the significance of this event changed?
- How does this event fit into your life story?
- Have you learned anything new about yourself?
- How has this writing exercise changed you?
- Do you think that this might change how you act in the future?

For the most part, this discussion can take place without students divulging the content of the painful experience that they recalled. Some students will report significant gains in their understanding of this painful event, although many will not see any notable effect. This may be because, as in other positive psychology interventions, something similar to a sleeper effect seems to occur with this intervention.

We found that the largest gains from the grateful reappraisal intervention occur in the week *after* the intervention. This is why we feel that it is important to discuss the results of Watkins et al. (2008) after completing this exercise. Briefly, in our study we randomly assigned participants to one of three journaling conditions in which they wrote for 20 minutes on 3 consecutive days. In our two comparison conditions, participants either wrote about their plans for the following day, or in the emotion control condition they wrote about the unpleasant event itself. In the critical grateful reappraisal condition, students wrote about outcomes of the event that they could now feel grateful for. Our results are presented in Figures 18.1 through 18.3. In Figure 18.1, higher numbers indicate more closure. In Figure 18.2, higher numbers indicate more

pleasant impact of the memory. Numbers of intrusive memories of the critical event are shown in Figure 18.3. We recommend presenting these graphs during your discussion of the exercise. You will need to describe the comparison conditions from this study for the students to fully understand these graphs. Students seem to gain a personal understanding of these outcomes fairly easily because they have just completed the gratitude journaling activity.

This exercise illustrates several issues that usually produce fruitful discussions in class. For example, as explained above, the results of this study illustrate the sleeper effects that are sometimes found in positive psychology interventions (e.g., *using signature strengths* and *recalling three good things*; see Seligman, Stern, Park, & Peterson, 2005). This contrasts with the treatment effects that are often found in traditional clinical psychology, where the benefits of treatment usually show declines after the conclusion of treatment. Another issue that this exercise effectively demonstrates is *closure*. Often issues of closure are discussed in the context of clinical psychology, but unfortunately this valuable construct is not fully defined. Here, we feel that the work of Beike and her colleagues (e.g., Beike & Wirth-Beaumont, 2005) provides a good discussion that helps move forward our understanding of “bringing closure” to issues in therapy. In this context, we have also found that this demonstration provokes interesting discussion of *pleasant open memories*. Whereas it is probably important to bring closure to negative open memories, might positive open memories actually enhance well-being? Although we know of no research that speaks to this issue, we have found this to be an enjoyable discussion topic for students.

DISCUSSION

There are other gratitude exercises that we feel should be used in positive psychology courses as well as the one we described here. Demonstrations that use the “counting blessings” type of exercise (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman et al., 2005) and the “gratitude visit” (Seligman et al., 2005) have been used successfully in positive psychology courses. Because these interventions are well known and adequately described elsewhere, we chose to present this “taking care of business” exercise.

In the study that this activity is based on (Watkins et al., 2008), we found that grateful reappraisal of unpleasant open memories results in more closure, decreased unpleasant emotional impact, and decreased intrusiveness of these memories. Although evidence seems to support the theory that gratitude is an important facet of the good life, very little is known about *how* gratitude promotes well-being. We have found that a presentation of putative gratitude mechanisms for well-being provokes good discussion in positive psychology courses, and we believe that the activity we have described here provides an effective demonstration of how grateful coping enhances the good life.¹

¹To better grasp this topic, instructors and students are encouraged to consult the following sources: Beike and Wirth-Beaumont (2005); Emmons and McCullough (2003); Seligman et al. (2005); Watkins et al. (2008).

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Appendix 18.1

Now I would like you to bring to mind an open memory. An *open memory* is a troubling memory from your past that you feel is not yet behind you and is poorly understood. It is an emotional memory that may intrude into your consciousness at unwelcome times, and you feel you have some “unfinished business” associated with this memory. In other words, in many ways this emotional memory is still an “open book” for you. On the lines on the first page of your packet, write several sentences about the event you have recalled.

Please rate your open memory on the following attributes:

How open/closed would you say the memory you recalled is? (Please circle a number.)

Unfinished business (Very Open)				Neither open or closed				Closed Book
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3		3

How does recalling this memory *affect you now*?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
very negative effect	strong negative effect	moderate negative effect	slight negative effect	no effect at all	slight positive effect	moderate positive effect	strong positive effect	very positive effect

Please wait until your instructor tells you to continue to the next page.

Please recall your open memory again. For the next 20 minutes I would like you to write about your open memory. Think again about this experience for a few moments. At first it may seem that the event you wrote down might not have had any positive effects on your life. However, sometimes even when bad things happen, they ultimately have positive consequences, things we can now be grateful for. Try to focus on the positive aspects or consequences of this difficult experience. As the result of this event, what kinds of things do you now feel thankful or grateful for? How has this event benefited you as a person? How have you grown? Were there personal strengths that grew out of your experience? How has the event made you better able to meet the challenges of the future? How has the event put your life into perspective? How has this event helped you appreciate the truly important people and things in your life? In sum, how can you be thankful for the beneficial consequences that have resulted from this event? As you write, do not worry about punctuation or grammar, just really let go and write as much as you can about the positive aspects of your experience that you feel you now can be grateful for.

Please wait until your instructor tells you to continue to the next page.

Now I would like to ask you some more questions about your ***open memory***.

How open/closed would you say the memory you recalled is? (Please circle a number.)

Unfinished business (Very Open)				Neither open or closed			Closed Book
-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	

How does recalling this memory ***affect you now?***

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
very negative effect	strong negative effect	moderate negative effect	slight negative effect	no effect at all	slight positive effect	moderate positive effect	strong positive effect	very positive effect

For the next 3 minutes we would like you to briefly list as many **positive** events as you can from anytime in your past. Each number represents a different life event. Just write a short sentence describing the event. If, while trying to think of positive events from your life, you actually remember the open memory you wrote about on the previous page, check one of the boxes provided at the bottom of the page. Check a box each time you think of your open memory. Remember, your primary task is to **list as many positive events that you can think of from any time in your past.**

Event	Event
1.	17.
2.	18.
3.	19.
4.	20.
5.	21.
6.	22.
7.	23.
8.	24.
9.	25.
10.	26.
11.	27.
12.	28.
13.	29.
14.	30.
15.	31.
16.	32.

Every time your open memory comes to mind, check a box below:

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>