

## The Importance of Gratitude

It was a warm, sticky spring evening, and I was out on my daily run. The podcast I chose to distract me that evening was an episode of Freakonomics Radio, entitled “Why is My Life So Hard?”[1]. As I ran up and down the seemingly endless hills in my hometown, I shifted my focus from the pain of exertion to the podcast, and listened carefully as the host, Stephen Dubner, discussed the tendency of people to think they have it harder than everyone else, and undervalue the advantages they have. Though many specific details from the episode blended together with the slew of information from the many podcasts on my playlist, one part stuck with me to this day - the role gratitude plays in a person’s happiness.

The episode described how sports fans often think their team has it harder than other teams, how both major political parties think they have it harder than the other side, and how people tend to undervalue their advantages because they are focused on what is going wrong in their lives. Dubner interviewed renowned psychologists who described in-depth why people tend to think this way. However, for me, the important takeaway from this episode came from a conversation Dubner had with Steven Levitt, his friend and co-author who was often featured on the podcast. Levitt described his method for breaking the cycle of negative thinking - taking time to list what he was grateful for. He described how every night, he wrote down three things he was grateful for, no matter what mood he was in or how bad of a day it was. He said it made him happier. Somehow, this simple act performed every day made him happier. I was incredibly skeptical. How could such a simple action that takes so little time really make

a person happier? With nothing to lose, I decided to ignore my skepticism and give Levitt's list technique a try.

From then on, I set aside time every night before bed to write down three things I was grateful for. It started off with handwritten notes in purple pen in an old, half-filled notebook and evolved to a note written in my phone. Knowing my options were almost endless, I made an effort to make a unique list every night. Some nights I was grateful for the experiences I had that day, and some nights I was grateful for something more on the scale of what happened to me that year, or throughout my life.

With each night, I uncovered more and more things to be grateful for that had never occurred to me before. A few weeks went by, and even though I made sure to write a unique list each night, I was still skeptical as to whether this experiment could improve my overall happiness. I mentally checked in with myself - am I happier? No, pretty much the same. Nevertheless, the experiment continued until putting my gratitude into words every night became a habit.

Finally, after a few more weeks went by, something in my mind clicked. There was no specific event that triggered the revelation, but all of a sudden I realized I saw the world differently. Somehow, it was working. I felt my perspective shift, and all of a sudden I was noticing little things I was grateful for throughout the day. I brushed my teeth and thought about how grateful I was for access to dental care. I took my computer in for an expensive repair for a problem that occurred twice before, but I was focused on not only how thankful I was to have a computer in the first place, but also how lucky I am to have a repair center just a short walk from my apartment. I went to

work and thought about how happy I was to have a job I love instead of how the time I spent at work cut into time I could spend with friends or doing homework. Before this experiment, I rarely thought specifically about what I was grateful for, despite having so much to be grateful for in my everyday life.

Around the same time as this revelation, I started taking time off from running. I was sidelined by torn cartilage in my hip, an injury that prevented me from running and biking. Suddenly unable to perform my two favorite hobbies, I felt lost and confused. Not running for the first time in years felt earth shattering to me, and my inability to at least bike during my time off added insult to injury. I found myself abandoning the goal I set to run 1000 miles in one year, and opting out of all the races I had planned to run that summer, because it was no longer physically possible for me. I went through the next few months lamenting my inability to exercise outside during the mild Wisconsin fall, doing physical therapy every day, and seeing doctors every few weeks to discuss how to move forward with treatment.

The injury seemed to be getting better, and then suddenly got worse again. As fall turned to winter, I struggled with finding any form of exercise that didn't cause pain, and I could no longer complete my five-minute walk to class without a heavy limp. With exercise formerly a big part of my life, suddenly finding myself barely able to walk was a bigger emotional hit than the one I took when I initially had to stop running. I started discussing surgery with my doctors, and I felt the possibility of running again slowly slipping out of my reach. The image I had of myself running races for many years to come suddenly seemed impossible.

Even though I spent a lot of time feeling upset and broken, I still made sure to list things I was grateful for every night. Through this process, I realized just how much I could still do. I thought I felt my body failing me, but then I remembered: I could walk. I could breathe. I could use both of my arms freely. My heart continued to beat and my organs kept functioning. On top of that, I realized access to the doctors and physical therapists helping me through the process was something to be grateful for in itself. Though cutting out almost all physical activity seemed depressing at the time, I still had so much to be grateful for, including a healthy body, even though I did not realize it when the injury first popped up.

By simply listing three things I was grateful for every day, I shifted my focus from the negative feelings I had about being injured to the positive feelings I had about the rest of my body functioning well. With this shift, my mood greatly improved. I went from sadness and self pity to feeling truly content with my situation. Sure, I'm still injured. But on top of that, I have the opportunity to pursue an education. I have a roof over my head and the means to put food on my table every night. The list goes on and on. I have so much to be grateful for, and even though I was skeptical at first, I can say with confidence this experiment is one worth trying. Before the injury, I already knew listing what I was grateful for made me happier, but hurting my hip is what truly put my attitude to the test. I thought months of no physical activity would break me, but the fact I made it this far and am as happy as I am today proves gratitude is a powerful tool for shifting perspective and improving mood.

Almost a year has passed since I first heard “Why is My Life So Hard?” broadcast on Freakonomics Radio. Almost a year since I first started making lists of what I’m grateful for. Today, I mentally check in with myself again - am I happier? This time, the answer is yes.

## **Works Cited**

1. Werth, C., & Dubner, S. (Producers). (2017, March 15). Why Is My Life So Hard? *Freakonomics Radio*.

Podcast retrieved from <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/why-is-my-life-so-hard/>