



Episode 3: The Most Effective Happiness Hack

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Let me ask you a question. What if I told you that I had a brain tool you could use to immediately have peace of mind, that I could teach you a mindset strategy that would immediately shift your thinking from overwhelm to calm? How might that help you and the people you live and work with? This tool that can help your brain think more calmly, clearly, and creatively is simple. It's the practice of gratitude.

Today, we're going to talk all about gratitude, and not in a way that's fluffy and airy and ignoring the realities of life. We're going to explore gratitude as a tool that can change your brain and the brains of the people you live and work with for the better, potentially even long-term because the realities in life are that there are a lot of things that make us say, "it's not fair." People and situations and conversations can make us feel frenzied or worried or angry. We work with people who can be difficult. We have family members who often push our buttons. And we worry about the state of the world. And with all of these things, the single most effective mindset shift you can do to stop the stress in its tracks is to go to gratitude.

In an earlier podcast, I talked about the wisdom of listening to your gut and intuition. I talked about the neurons in our heart and our gut, and I shared a very personal story of knowing that medical school was not the right career path for me and yet ignoring that intuition and becoming a doctor anyway. The day that podcast came out, my 14-year-old child listened to it, and then my child, this very thoughtful, introspective person, came into my office and asked, "Do you regret going to medical school?" I wasn't really sure where this line of questioning was going, and so I asked, "What's important about that question for you?" Here's how my teenager responded: "If you regret that choice, then maybe you regret everything that stemmed from that decision, like me."

Okay, I'm going to be honest. That brought tears to my eyes; it broke my heart, and so as I fumbled for an answer, here's what I said: "I absolutely do not regret my life. In fact, I am incredibly grateful for the life I have, including you, my third child, the one who has taught me so much."

And I wasn't just saying this, it's the truth of how I feel. I do think about other professional paths I could have taken early on, and I'm immensely grateful for where I've landed now. I deeply appreciate my family, my home, and my career that I love and enjoy every day. From this place where I am now, I can even be grateful for the discomfort of my early professional life.

Yet gratitude doesn't come naturally. It's a mindset and a perspective. It's a choice about how we look at ourselves and the world around us and make sense of everything because there are lots of ways to make sense of our lives. We can complain, we can be envious and jealous of others, we can feel dissatisfied, and we can feel grateful. There is no one truth about our lives. How we make sense of our

life depends on the perspective we're in, and what I know is that gratitude is a very powerful perspective. It's a mindset and a practice that you can cultivate with attention and intention.

Here are the steps to practicing gratitude and refocusing your mindset. First, you need to stop and pause. Before you're able to see things differently, you need to change your usual way of thinking. Second, you need to seek and notice. Consider your life, your environment, your family, your colleagues, and look at all of them through the lens of the question, "What am I grateful for?" Third, you need to make your thoughts real. This involves voicing what you appreciate about yourself, about your world, to yourself or out loud.

When I give workshops and talk about gratitude, I always share one research study that's so interesting. In 2016, in psychology research, Joel Wong and his colleagues published a study about the effect of gratitude on mental health and happiness. In their study, they looked at almost 300 college students who were using mental health services. They divided these students into three groups.

The first group was the gratitude group. This group had to write letters of gratitude at least 20 minutes once a week to someone they felt they had not properly thanked. They just had to write them; they did not have to mail them. The second group was the expressive writing group. This group had to write for at least 20 minutes once a week about a stressful or upsetting time. The third group was the control group. They did nothing special.

At the end of four weeks, the researchers evaluated the mental health of everyone using a questionnaire, and they found that the gratitude group had significantly better mental health and happiness. That's really encouraging. What was even more encouraging, though, was a further finding.

So, the study ends, everyone goes on their way, lives their lives, and three months later, the researchers come back and have everyone fill out the mental health questionnaire. And three months after the study ended, the gratitude group still had significantly better mental health and happiness. Practicing gratitude has a potential to change our brains for the better, maybe even long-term.

The key word with all this is practice because it's one thing to know about gratitude - to read articles, to watch TED talks about gratitude. It's another thing to put it into practice. There's a great quote I use that says, "We are what we practice, and we're always practicing something." You need to practice gratitude to build your gratitude mindset, period. So how do you put this mindset into practice? There are lots of different ways. Some people list, every day, a few things that they're grateful for. Some have a gratitude share at a family meal, having everyone go around the table to share something they're grateful for.

Recently, I've been taking gratitude walks around my neighborhood. When I feel like my brain has gone to a negative place, I'll go for a 10-minute walk and follow this one rule. I can only think about and say out loud things I'm grateful for, like "I'm grateful my legs can walk me up this hill," "I'm grateful for the birds I hear," "I'm grateful that my dinner is cooking in our slow cooker." A gratitude practice is also a tool that you can use with the people you work with to help them change their brains.

Here's an example. I was working with this client, a leader in the pharma industry, and she was really overwhelmed. She and her team were working 24/7 to develop very needed drug treatments. She told me that her team was totally stressed out and under pressure. I encouraged her to try this tool of gratitude with her team. I asked her to ask the people she met with in every one-to-one meeting in the next two weeks, to start the meeting by asking them what they're grateful for. She said she would.

The next time we met for a coaching session, I asked her how it went, and she said it was surprising in a positive way. She said that when she asked people what they were grateful for, they immediately smiled and even relaxed in their seat. My client had been really nervous that people would find this question weird, and she found the opposite, that everyone happily answered it, and that it helped to set a more productive tone to the beginning of their conversations.

So, here's the thing: gratitude is a tool, and just like all other tools, you get to decide if you want to use it or not. No one's telling you, "You have to be grateful all the time." If you want to stay grouchy, that's fine. If you want to see everything as a problem, go for it. God knows I have grouchy days myself. There are days I just want to complain and vent and stay frustrated, and I know that when I'm ready to switch my brain thinking and outlook on life, I can always rely on gratitude.

My reminder to you is that if you want to feel more positive, you can choose to use this brain tool that you always have at your disposal. Let's bring this to your life. This week, I invite you to practice gratitude. Write down two things every night you're grateful for or go around and have a gratitude share at your family meal. Or maybe start your team meeting with having everyone share one thing they're grateful for and see what you notice. If you want to continue learning about brain-based ways to think and feel more positive, I invite you to subscribe to my podcast and share it with a friend. I am so grateful for each and every one of you.

Until next time!