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You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

--- Episode ---

Hello there. I'm Heather Crabtree and I am a psychologist who works primarily with children, adolescents, and their families. In my work with clients and families I often partner with schools and also hear a lot from my clients about the impact that school personnel have on their lives. This is such an important and valued contribution to these children's lives and society as a whole. By listening to this podcast, it is obvious how much you care about your students and that you want to continue to develop your understanding and skills. Thank you for all you do. I hope this will be helpful for you.

Today we will be starting our discussion on gratitude. This is the first of a multi-part series on gratitude, which is a big topic. In this discussion, we will focus on the impact of gratitude on mental health and other parts of our health as well. In the other parts of this series we will touch on different ways to implement gratitude in our daily lives.

Let's begin by first defining gratitude. The dictionary definition of this word is: the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness. In psychology, gratitude is often discussed as the act of people acknowledging the goodness in their lives. In the process, people usually recognize that the source of that goodness lies at least partially outside themselves. As a result, being grateful also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals — whether to other people, nature, or a higher power.

Two Stages of Gratitude

According to Dr. Robert Emmons, the feeling of gratitude involves two stages (2003):

1. First comes the acknowledgment of goodness in one's life. In a state of gratitude, we say yes to life. We affirm that all in all, life is good, and has elements that make worth living, and rich in texture. The acknowledgment that we have received something gratifies us, both by its presence and by the effort the giver put into choosing it.
2. Second, gratitude is recognizing that some of the sources of this goodness lie outside the self. One can be grateful to other people, to animals, and to the world, but not to oneself. At this stage, we recognize the goodness in our lives and who to thank for it, ie., who made sacrifices so that we could be happy?

The practice of gratitude typically involves two main steps:

1. Identifying who or what you are grateful for

2. Voicing or showing that gratefulness or gratitude to the other person when possible.

Purpose of this Emotion:

People can use gratitude to form new social relations or to strengthen current ones. Acts of gratitude can be used to apologize, make amends and help solve other problems. Alternatively, people may feel gracious because it can be an intrinsically rewarding process. Simply being grateful for being alive is a great way to motivate oneself to seize the day. The idea that tomorrow is not guaranteed is a strong motivator for some people to be their “best self” today.

What does the research say about gratitude?

In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships.

1. Enhanced Well-being

Expressing your thanks can improve your overall sense of well-being. Grateful people are more agreeable, more open, and less neurotic (McCullough et al., 2002; McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley et al., 2008).

Furthermore, gratitude is related inversely to depression, and positively to life satisfaction (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008). This is not to say that “depressed people” should simply be more grateful, as depression is a very complicated disease and struggle for millions of people. Instead, perhaps gratitude practices need to be a part of the therapy and treatment for people who struggle with depression.

2. Deeper Relationships

Gratitude is also a powerful tool for strengthening interpersonal relationships.

People who express their gratitude for each other tend to be more willing to forgive others and less narcissistic (DeShea, 2003; Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998).

Giving thanks to those who have helped you strengthens your relationships and promotes relationship formation and maintenance, as well as relationship connection and satisfaction (Algoe et al., 2008; Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010).

3. Improved Optimism

Dr. Emmons and Dr. McCullough did a study in 2003 exploring the impact of practicing gratitude. After 10 weeks, their research conveys that people who focused on gratitude showed more optimism in many areas of their lives, including health and exercise.

When people are optimistic about their well-being and health, they may be more likely to act in ways that support a healthy lifestyle (such as exercising more and eating a healthier diet).

4. Increased Happiness

Toepfer, Cichy, and Peters (2011) conducted a study asking people to write and deliver a letter to someone for whom they were grateful. After the task, their happiness levels and life satisfaction were dramatically impacted—even weeks later.

In the pursuit of happiness and life satisfaction, gratitude offers a long-lasting effect in a positive-feedback loop of sorts. Thus, the more gratitude we experience and express, the more situations and people we may find to express gratitude towards.

5. Stronger Self-Control

Self-Control helps with discipline and focus. Long-term well-being can benefit from self-control, for example, resisting nicotine in cigarettes for someone who is trying to quit smoking. Self-control helps us stick to the “better choice” for our long-term health, financial future, and well-being.

A study by DeSteno et al. in 2014 found that self-control significantly increased when subjects chose **gratitude over happiness** or feeling neutral. One of the study’s authors, Professor Ye Li, said:

*“Showing that emotion can foster self-control and discovering a way to reduce impatience with a simple **gratitude exercise** opens up tremendous possibilities for reducing a wide range of societal ills from impulse buying and insufficient saving to obesity and smoking.”*

Being thankful can provide us the resolve we need to make choices in our lives that serve us, emotionally and physically, in the long-run. As this study highlights, there are so many applications to using gratitude as a path towards healthier humans and communities.

6. Better Physical and Mental Health

Research performed in 2015 showed that patients with heart failure who completed gratitude journals showed reduced inflammation, improved sleep, and better moods; this reduced their symptoms of heart failure after only 8 weeks.

The link between the mind-body connection aligns with how gratitude can have a double benefit. For example, the feeling of appreciation helps us to have healthier minds, and with that healthier bodies.

7. An Overall a Better Life

Over the last two decades, the evidence supporting the **benefits of gratitude** has increased significantly.

Consider this quote from the Wall Street Journal’s article “Thank you, No, Thank you.”

“...adults who feel grateful have more energy, more optimism, more social connections and more happiness than those who do not, according to studies conducted over the past decade. They’re also less likely to be depressed, envious, greedy or alcoholics.”

Aside from increasing well-being, psychology research shows how practicing gratitude, in this case, gratitude towards a higher power, can reduce levels of stress (Krause, 2006). Practicing gratitude can decrease levels of depression and anxiety (Kashdan & Breen, 2007).

8. Stronger Athleticism

Studies from researcher Lung Hung Chen found that an athlete's level of gratitude for their success can influence their levels of well-being (Chen, 2013; Chen & Wu, 2014). More specifically, adolescent athletes who are more grateful in life are also more satisfied and tend to have higher levels of self-esteem.

Gratitude also affects sports fans (Kim & Jeong, 2015; Kim et al., 2010). Fans' levels of gratitude influence their happiness, connection, and identity with a team. In turn, stronger fan support and pride can influence the performance and pride of the team itself for representing a greater team.

It can have a similar effect on work teams- research has found that employees who have managers that express gratitude towards them at work tend to put forth more effort and report more motivation than those without a gracious manager.

9. Stronger Neurologically-Based Morality

Neuroscience is beginning to explore what gratitude does to the human brain.

One study measured the brain's response to feelings of gratitude with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) (Fox et al., 2015). These researchers elicited feelings of gratitude in their participants and found that gratitude increased activity in areas of the brain that deal with morality, reward, and judgment.

These neural findings are interesting and beget further studies. Is gratitude associated with morality? If so, this supports why philosophical and religious thinkers have used gratitude in the formation and maintenance of their societies (1991).

The study into gratitude and its effects on us is ongoing, but it is clear that it has many benefits. Now that we are all convinced of its usefulness, let's stay together for the remainder of the series and learn how to incorporate gratitude into our daily lives.

Let's talk about 3 take-home points for today:

1. Gratitude involves the intellectual process of being grateful for someone or something outside of yourself, like someone you are close with or a higher power, as well as the action of expressing that gratitude or showing appreciation in some way.
2. Gratitude has many positive impacts on physical and mental health, as well as connections to others.
3. These effects can last weeks and sometimes even months after the act of gratitude. They only take a few minutes to complete, so they are totally worth the time and effort.

If you want more brief, but interesting information about the importance of gratitude, google “gratitude” and “TED talk.” There are many great ones to listen to and the videos are usually 20 minutes or less.

Thanks so much for your time! I hope this has been helpful.

---Outro---

On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at www.changetochill.org. In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!