Gratitude Sessions

Excerpt from Developing Wisdom in the Elder Years: Curriculum for Guiding People along the Way of Transformation by Dr. Karen Edwards

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Materials for Workshop Leaders

Opening Quote: "Day and night gifts keep pelting down on us. If we were aware of this, gratefulness would overwhelm us. But we go through life in a daze. A power failure makes us aware of what a gift electricity is; a sprained ankle lets us appreciate walking as a gift, a sleepless night, sleep. How much we are missing in life by noticing gifts only when we are suddenly deprived of them! But this can be changed. We need some methodical exercise in gratefulness. Years ago, I devised a method for myself which has proved quite helpful. Every night I note in a pocket calendar one thing for which I have never before been consciously thankful. Do you think it is difficult to find a new reason for gratitude each day? Not just one, but three and four and five pop into my mind, some evenings. It is hard to imagine how long I would have to live to exhaust the supply."  

A Listening Heart: the spirituality of Sacred Sensuousness by David Steindl-Rast
**Intentions for the sessions:**

Participants will develop a fuller awareness of the power of gratitude in personal relationships by recognizing the other’s efforts and showing them that we value them. This appreciation raises the value of the relationship for everyone. Some of these activities are designed to raise our awareness of how gratitude for ourselves as well as the larger world affects our mood and emotional lives. Some of the exercises help psychological healing. There are 12 activities or exercises described here. How many you choose to offer depends on the length of your workshop and the interests of participants. In an on-going group, you could offer one or two exercises each time with discussion following each.

**Procedure:**

Send out the reflection questions by email in advance if possible. Also include them at the beginning of your handouts, or have them showing on the power point screen as people enter the room. You could also include one of the opening quotes in the email or handout. You can talk through the research-based reasons for practicing gratitude with or without a power point visual. If this is a new group, you can help break the ice after going around with basic introductions by inviting twosomes to discuss the first questions. Debrief this discussion in the larger group by writing down key concepts about what they have learned about gratitude from others who do it well. Call attention to the ideas that are most prevalent.
Introduction to the topic and definitions:

Robert Emmons, a scientific expert on gratitude, argues that **gratitude has two key components**, “First, we affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we've received.” and “we recognize that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves. ... “We acknowledge that other people—or even higher powers, if you're of a spiritual mindset—gave us many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives. I see it as a relationship-strengthening emotion because it requires us to see how we’ve been supported and affirmed by other people.”

Gratitude opens our heart to connection and the impulse to give of our selves.

George Simmel called this the moral memory of mankind. Gratitude begins with particular relationships and situations and grows to cosmic proportions as we realize the joy of life itself. We want our joy to be experienced by others and we seek to pass on our blessings.

**There are at least 5 aspects to the word “Appreciation”**

- full awareness (the inclusion of all elements in a situation)
- responsiveness (to the nature of a situation)
- recognition of quality and significance (seeing value)
- gratitude (having a loving feeling about what is of value), and
- raising in value.

This means we simultaneously discern the value and potential of a situation and increase its worth, enhancing the wisdom, loving, and blessing nature of all things.

The opposite of gratitude is entitlement—the attitude that people owe you something just because you are special. This preoccupation with the self can cause
us to feel that we are owed things and have no reason to feel thankful. For people with this entitlement attitude “Counting blessings will be ineffective because grievances will always outnumber gifts.” writes Robert Emmons, co-director of the GGSC Gratitude Project. The antidote to entitlement, argues Emmons, is to see that we did not create ourselves—we were created, if not by evolution, then by God; or if not by God, then by our parents. Likewise, we are never truly self-sufficient. Humans need other people to grow our food and heal our injuries; we need love, and for that we need family, friends, and pets. The wise person says that life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be assumed.

**Background: Research-based reasons for practicing gratitude:**

- **Gratitude increases happiness:** Through research by Emmons, happiness expert Sonja Lyubomirsky, and many other scientists, practicing gratitude has proven to be one of the most reliable methods for increasing happiness; it also boosts feelings of optimism, joy, pleasure, enthusiasm, and other positive emotions including life satisfaction.

- **Anxiety and depression are reduced when we are experiencing gratitude.**

- **Gratitude is good for our health.** Studies by Emmons and his colleague Michael McCullough suggest gratitude strengthens the immune system, lowers blood pressure, reduces symptoms of illness, and makes us less bothered by aches and pains. It also encourages us to exercise more and take better care of our health.
• Grateful people get more hours of sleep each night, spend less time awake before falling asleep, and feel more refreshed upon awakening. If you want to sleep more soundly count your blessings.

• Gratitude can make us more resilient: It has been found to help people recover from traumatic events, including Vietnam War veterans with PTSD.

• Gratitude makes us feel more intimate and committed to friends and romantic partners. When partners feel and express gratitude for each other, they each become more satisfied in their relationship. When Amie Gordon and colleagues studied gratitude in couples, they found that spouses signal grateful feelings through more caring and attentive behavior. Gratitude may also encourage a more equal division of chores between partners.

• Gratitude encourages forgiveness, even after a divorce.

• Grateful people are more compassionate helpful and altruistic. They feel motivated to give back to the world.

• When 10-19 year olds practice gratitude, they experience more positive emotions and greater life satisfaction, and they feel more a part of their community.

• Gratitude is good for education. Studies suggest it makes students feel better about their school; it also makes the teachers feel more satisfied and accomplished, and less emotionally exhausted.
Reflection and Discussion Questions - Reflect on these before the workshop and we will discuss them at the workshop

1. Who in your life best demonstrates gratitude? What can you learn from their attitude or actions?

2. What everyday things such as electricity, running water, or a comfortable chair are you grateful for?

3. What rituals of gratitude do you have to mark life’s transitions?

4. Where have you expected something in return for your own giving?

5. What is grace and how have I experienced it in my life?
Gratitude exercises or activities

1. Appreciation exercise in Small group

Gratitude starts with appreciation. Think about every thing that has gone well today or the past few days. We all know how easily things can go wrong so we need to appreciate what is working in our lives. Did someone respond to your phone call or email? Did the store have the milk you needed? Were you able to find a weather forecast?

2. Gratitude Log- Inspired by the opening quote by David Steindl-Rast

Write for 5 minutes about everything you are grateful for in your current life. Many people keep a daily or weekly gratitude journal or log to remind themselves of the positive in their life. One way to determine the value of any of these exercises for you would be to rate your level of anxiety on a scale of 1-10 before doing the exercise, then rate your level anxiety after completing the exercise or activity.

3. Reminders of gratitude:

What could you put around your home to remind you of what you are grateful for? Perhaps a note on your computer or bathroom mirror would help keep your gratitude practices alive.

4. Treasure Chest of Life

Reflect on your earliest memories of the positive moments in your life and write down each one, like a one liner. For example, I remember being lifted up by my father so I could pick my first orange from a tree in Florida when I was 5 years old. Write: “First orange in Florida”
Make your way through each decade of your life, noting all the sweet moments, small and large. Make the list as long as you can and cut up each one-liner into a single strip of paper. Place it in a basket, vase, box, to which you have ready access.

Eventually, you will have hundreds of recorded memories in your chest of treasures. Each day as you pass by your “Treasure Chest” pull out a memory and notice how your heart opens, your body relaxes, you are more present and there is more fullness and appreciation for your life.

5. Gratitude Letter

According to the research, gratitude letters provide strong and long-lasting happiness boosts, especially when they're delivered in person. When participants in her studies write gratitude letters, Sonja Lyubomirsky provides them with these instructions. Please take a moment to think back over the past several years of your life and remember an instance when someone did something for you for which you are extremely grateful. For example, think of the people parents, relatives, friends, teachers, coaches, teammates, employers, and so on who have been especially kind to you but have never heard you express your gratitude. Although you should try to write your letter of gratitude to a new person each week; if you prefer, you can write another letter to the same person you wrote to previously. Now, for the next 10 minutes, write a letter to one of these individuals. Use the instructions below to help guide you through this process:
a. Write as though you are directly addressing the individual you are grateful to. You could head the letter “Dear so and so,” or end with “Sincerely, XXX.” Do not worry about perfect grammar and spelling.

b. Describe in specific terms what they have done for you, why you are grateful to this individual and how the individual’s behavior affected your life.

The reason for this is that it makes the expression of gratitude feel more authentic. It reveals that the thanker was really paying attention and isn’t just going through the motions. The richest thank you will acknowledge intentions; “the omelets you make when you see I’m hungry” and costs; “you massage my feet after work even when you’re really tired”; and they’ll describe the value of benefits received; “you give me hugs when I’m sad so that I’ll feel better”.

6. Write a gratitude note to group members.

To help you practice writing and experience what it is like to receive a letter like this, write appreciations for someone in this workshop and give it to them!

7. Write a gratitude note to God, the sacred, the creator or whatever term you currently use. Most church services do this through singing praise. Look at the praise hymns in a church hymnal and you will find some glorious ways of describing gratitude for the sacred. Buddhism places great emphasis on the cultivation of gratitude; gratitude for this precious life and for the possibility of contributing to the world. Gratitude moves us beyond selfish interests into the world of community. Buddhism is similar to Judaism in relating to everything as a blessing. When we are
aware of being blessed by all the little things we are given, we feel spiritually alive in
the satisfaction of the moment.

8. **Appreciate your body** (from Gratitude.org) The facilitator may read the
following instructions to the group. Be sure to give people an opportunity to get
comfortable before you ask them to focus on the rest of this practice.

You may want to take a few moments to lie, or sit, down, allowing your body
to rest comfortably. Feel your body supported by whatever is underneath you. You
may want to put your hand, or both hands, gently on your chest. Let yourself be
aware of your heart beating and/or your lungs breathing. Allow your attention to
focus on how much is happening in your body without your effort, without your
having to try to make anything happen.

It is very difficult to take our attention off of physical pain or distress. The
nature of distress is that it seems to want every last morsel of our attention. But it is
very important for us to know, that with attention, challenging sensations and
experiences in the body can be dwarfed by the larger context of all that is working.
No matter what is/feels “wrong” with your body, there is an overwhelming amount
that is perfectly right with your body at all times.

Your body is, indeed, nothing short of an absolute miracle. Allow yourself to
consider these amazing facts:

- Your body produces approximately 2.5 million new red blood cells each
  second
- Your heart beats around 100,000 times each and every day
- Your lungs can take in more than 3,000 gallons of air each day
- Your brain uses 20% of your body's oxygen and caloric intake, even though it
  is only about 2% of your body mass.
Is there one fact that stands out to you – that makes you really appreciate the gift of your body and how much it is offering you? Allow yourself to focus on one thing about your body that is working. Are you able to smell lovely aromas? Taste good flavors? Move your elbow or wrist? Appreciate it with your whole awareness.

Move throughout the next moments carrying the idea that – no matter what else is true – your body is nothing short of miraculous. You are more than any part – you are even more than the sum of your parts. Your body is alive and it is a miracle.

**9. Write down 3 things about your body that are working and you feel grateful.**

Whenever your mind slips into negative thoughts about your body, interrupt the pattern by saying to yourself, or writing, “I am grateful for my body. I will focus on what is working”. Choose a physical gesture you could use to remind you to appreciate your body – perhaps a hand on your chest or kissing your own hand.

**10. Gratitude walk** – Take a walk outside by yourself for at least 20 minutes.

As you walk, try to notice as many positive things around you as you can. These can be sights, sounds, smells, or other sensations. For example, you could focus on the sound of the breeze, blooms on a tree you never really noticed before, the color variety of flowers, the shadows of clouds on the ground, the smell of grass or mulch, or the way people relate as they walk together. As you notice each of these positive things, acknowledge each one in your mind. Really take it in; pause as you hear or see each thing and make sure it registers with your consciousness, Try to identify what it is about that thing that makes it pleasurable to you. Be fully present with Nature. Feel
your gratitude for the world around you. You might want to repeat “Thank you” as you experience each positive aspect of the world around you.

**11. Post traumatic growth**

Journal about an experience that at first seemed traumatic which in time you came to understand as a blessing.

Processing a life experience through a grateful lens does not mean denying negativity. It is not pretending happiness. Instead, it means realizing the power you have to transform an obstacle into an opportunity, reframing a loss into a potential gain, moving from total negativity to some gratitude. People may feel grateful for their insurance when they are injured and find fulfillment in helping others get insurance. One may feel grateful for their savings account when the furnace breaks down and continue to keep an emergency fund in the future. Feeling grateful for their family during a romantic breakup deepens family intimacy.

An attitude of gratitude is helpful when dealing with emotions like regret. Regret helps us clarify what is and is not important to us. Be thankful for the ethical direction this emotion provides. Being thankful for all of the things that have happened to us is a spiritual path in many religions. Include everything.

**12. Entitlement** - Think of someone you know who seems to feel that they are owed things from others. Perhaps they think they are so special, they don’t need to feel thankful. They are particularly grieved when things don’t go well because they think they deserve a smooth life. Close your eyes and take some time to imagine how their
relationships would change if they realized that life is a gift, not a right to be assumed? How might gratitude affect their level of contentment?

13. Gratitude soothes Grief

Grief is a vital emotion to experience. It honors the experience of loss and the love that preceded it. It would not be wise to try to eliminate grief. However, the wrenching pain of grief over the loss of a person can be soothed by focusing on what is appreciated in them. You might think this would augment your loss but it actually shifts the emotional focus from the loss to the value that person holds for you. The shift to gratitude expands your constricted heart and helps to metabolize the grief. An activity that facilitates this shift is writing a eulogy for the person you lost. Even if you are not going to give the eulogy at a memorial service, just the process of writing it will move you to gratitude for your relationship with them and change your grief experience. Alternately, you could write long sympathy letters to others who are experiencing this loss, appreciating the value the dead person had in your life. This movement to gratitude may help soothe their grief as well.

14. Large group ball game of gratitude - The workshop leader gets a plain colored blow up beach ball. With water fast sharpie pen, write these words or phrases, spaced randomly on the ball- “Place, Experience, person, friend, family member, public figure, body part, opportunity, ability, decision, medicine, health discovery.” Feel free to choose your own words that might elicit gratitude. Start the game by rotating the ball and passing it the person next to you who has their eyes closed. Whatever word is closest to their right thumb, they will tell the group about the
“_______” that they are grateful for. For instance the “person” I am grateful for is... because... etc. They will then rotate the ball and pass it to the next person.

15. **Homework Exercises**

a. Make an effort this week to forgive yourself about something.

b. Try an experiment and see if you can find something beautiful about someone you feel anger or resentment for.

c. Gratitude Walk- Try to walk a different route each day so you don’t become too accustomed to any of your sensory observations and start to take them for granted. It doesn’t have to be sunny to do this exercise. Sometimes we need it more during a dismal period of weather.

d. Write a gratitude letter once a week to the same or different people.

e. Put reminders about gratitude around your home.

**Resources: Music for the Workshop:**

Any of these are available on Youtube and could be playing at the beginning, end, or on breaks. Perhaps you have your own favorite appreciation music to play or sing.

“Hallelujah Chorus” by Handel or “Ode to Joy” by Beethoven for the classics

“Thank you” by Bonnie Raitt (a woman appreciating her man);

“Thank you” by Led Zeppelin (a man appreciating a woman);

“Thank you” by New Edition (a son appreciating his father);

“Thank you for the Music” by Abba; (upbeat and feel good)

“The Gift: Songs of a Grateful Heart” by Kathleen Deignan (A collection of religious ballads based on the psalms, poetry, and sacred writings which give us intimations of gratitude toward God for all good gifts).