

## Intentional 7-Day Gratitude Journaling and Activities: A Qualitative Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Gratitude journaling has emerged with compelling research showing that it enhances general health and well-being. We carried out a 7-day gratitude journaling exercise through social media, that involved encouraging participants to record what they were grateful for on a daily basis, and also by having them complete one gratitude-related activity every day. The objective of our study was to inculcate a sense of gratitude in participants. On the seventh day, a feedback form was sent to participants to gain feedback about their experience from the 7-days. 36 participants participated in our study, out of which 28 participants gave their feedback on the form. Participants reported that they slept better, showed more forgiveness towards others, were satisfied with the experience, and had let go of at least one issue in their life. Therefore, gratitude journaling is to be included as an active and staple part of our everyday lives.

**Keywords:** *Gratitude Journaling, Social Media, Well-Being, Mental Health*

Feelings of gratefulness towards material or intangible aspects in life, that are essentially experienced upon the intentional acknowledgement and appreciation of them corresponds to gratitude (McCullough & Seligman, 2011). The showing of gratitude is not an instinctual or unconscious act in life, therefore requiring individuals to actively cultivate its experience through their thoughts and actions on a regular basis (Lai, 2014). Studies demonstrate that individuals who actively show gratitude tend to experience an enhanced well-being, contentment in life, enhanced social bonds, and better sleep quality (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), as well as lowered risks of developing mental health issues such as panic disorder, antisocial tendencies, substance usage, phobias, and anxiety (Behzadipour, Sadeghi, & Sepahmansour, 2016).

Gratitude journaling is a proposed method of actively and intentionally recording and thinking of events, feelings, or aspects of one's life that they are grateful for, that can also be incorporated into one's daily life and routine to make the act of showing gratitude a habit. Studies carried out regarding gratitude journaling show that those who wrote down things they are thankful for illustrated greater amounts of optimism in their life, less physical

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ailments, and invested more time in exercising (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), and had greater inclinations to demonstrate good deeds such as donating to charities (Chaplin, John, Rindfleisch, & Froh, 2019).

If studies demonstrating the significance of showing gratitude are accurate, gratitude journaling can be actively implemented in the lives of individuals to enhance their social, physical, and mental health. Although the positive effects are important to be reaped at all times, the need to take care of mental and physical health significantly emerged during the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. As the pandemic induced feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, heightened stress levels, fear, hopelessness, depression, and panic in individuals, the need for interventions that allowed individuals to intentionally care for their mental health became apparent. As gratitude journaling gives individuals time to focus on themselves and shift their attention to the positives in life, its effectiveness has come under study. Despite the many benefits of gratitude journaling, the fast-paced daily routine often pushes gratitude to the curb, turning it into an act that has to intentionally be cultivated.

This study intends to instil and develop an attitude of gratitude in individuals by having them practice the act on a daily basis. The 7-day gratitude journaling procedure took place through social media, during the COVID-19 lockdown due to which individuals located in various regions of India were involved. We sought to document the journaling process, bring out the act of gratitude in individuals, and examine the responses of participants to further understand the impact of gratitude journaling.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Design*

An observational research design was implemented as the responses of the participants, and their experience in the gratitude journaling process was documented through the course of the 7-days.

#### *Participants*

Information regarding the 7-day gratitude journaling was spread through social media forwards based on which participants were gathered through convenience sampling. 177 participants had initially signed up, following which only 36 actively participated in the daily gratitude-illustrating activities and gratitude journaling practice, and only 28 participants provided responses to the feedback form regarding their evaluation of the 7-day gratitude journaling process at the end.

As this study took place over social media, it involved participants located in various regions of India. WhatsApp was used to connect with the participants by creating a gratitude journaling group to send information regarding the Google Form links, and the daily activities that they were to take part in.

#### *7-Day Gratitude Journaling Process*

A self-report approach was taken as participants were required to respond to the questions regarding gratitude themselves every day, with the questions being made available to them using the Google Forms platform. Social media, mainly WhatsApp and Google Forms, were utilized to in the study.

Participants were initially asked to fill out a form to collect their general characteristics such as age, occupation, name, sex, and marital status. The prompts about gratitude stimulated

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participants to think of their capacities, skills, and aspects of life that they were grateful for. On a daily basis, participants were given activities (activities are presented in **Table 1**) that stimulated them to exercise their gratitude, and were then asked to respond to the questions which prompted them to think of what they were grateful for at the end of the day.

**Table No. 1: Gratitude Stimulating Activities Assigned on a Daily Basis**

Day	Activity	Description
1	Gratitude Pictionary	Ice breaker
2	Gratitude to Self	Self-appreciation
3	Gratitude to Relationship	Enhance interpersonal rapport
4	Introspective Gratitude	Develop intrapersonal connection
5	Recycling Gratitude	Acknowledging used objects
6	Complimenting the Gratitude	Reviving responses
7	Random Act of Kindness	Spreading love

On the seventh day, participants were asked to fill out a feedback form with questions regarding their experience throughout the 7-day gratitude journaling process.

### *Data Analysis*

The data was exported into Microsoft Excel and the frequencies were computed to assess the distribution of the general characteristics of the participants, as well as their responses to the Google Forms.

### *Ethics*

For our study to be adherent to ethical guidelines, we ensured that informed consent was taken from participants before the start of our study.

## **RESULTS**

There were 36 participants that participated in the 7-day gratitude journaling process throughout the week, out of which most of the participants were female (n=31), married (n=24), educators (n=12), and in their middle adulthood years (n=24). From these 36 participants, 28 participants provided their feedback about the 7-day gratitude journaling process on the feedback form.

**Table No. 2: General Characteristics of Participants**

General Characteristics		Number of Participants (N=36)
Age	Early Adulthood (20-39 years)	12
	Middle Adulthood (40-65 years)	24
Sex	Females	31
	Males	5
Educational Qualification	UG	12
	PG	12
	Professional	12
Marital Status	Married	24
	Single	12
Designation	Educator	12
	Business	3
	Homemaker	4

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General Characteristics		Number of Participants (N=36)
	Medical	2
	Science & Arts	4
	Psychologist	7
	Students & Research Scholar	5

**Table No. 3: Gratitude Activity Preferences of Participants**

Day	Activity	Activities Participants wanted to Repeat (Number of Responses)	Activities Participants Hesitated For (Number of Responses)
1	Gratitude Pictionary	6	1
2	Gratitude to Self	7	0
3	Gratitude to Relationship	15	1
4	Introspective Gratitude	11	3
5	Recycling Gratitude	7	7
6	Complimenting the Gratitude	10	4
7	Random Act of Kindness	19	1
8	None of Above	0	12

The act of gratitude that individuals most desired to perform again were random acts of kindness (n=19) and gratitude towards relationships (n=15), and the activity which participants least preferred to engage in was the act of recycling (n=7). However, 12 participants reported that they were not hesitant towards repeating any of the activities.

**Table No. 4: Prevalent Themes in the Daily Gratitude Journaling Activity**

Question	Prevalent Themes (Number of Responses)	Examples of Responses
What skills and abilities are you grateful for today?	Personal qualities (66)	My ability to be silent when I'm angry. Ability to work fast Ability to interact
	Communication (21)	Speech skills and confidence Cooking and communication skills. Communication, able to start a conversation
	Relationships (15)	My ability to keep in touch with my extended family members and my friends. To be warm and welcoming to family members My aged father cares about me much, I'm so grateful.
What materialistic items are you grateful for today?	Electronic devices (107)	TV and internet My cell phone My laptop, mobile phone, house, all gadgets and comfort.
	household items (72)	Kitchen appliances Pressure cooker & washing machine My air-conditioner and bed
	Stationary (29)	my water bottle, pencil, note Notebook

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Question	Prevalent Themes (Number of Responses)	Examples of Responses
		Pen and paper
What food and meal are you most grateful for today?	Homemade foods (213)	Homemade wafers and lunch Today I made tomato rice which is one of my husband's favorites. I too like it. In the evening my daughter has prepared noodles and sweet lime juice. I thank them Home-made string-hoppers and tomato khurma-grateful for the tasty dinner
	Liquids and healthy drinks (33)	Milk shake Tea Butter milk, lime juice
	Healthy food (24)	Healthy n nutritious food I am Grateful to God for making me learn all nutritious food and healthy food for my family All the food that nourished me today
List the acts for which you were not able to express gratitude today.	Relationships (64)	My extended family, who have always looked out for me. I got a call from an uncle who wanted to know my well-being. I am thankful for all my family members, relatives and friends. But I can't express all. I have not thanked my father and mother for giving us such a beautiful life for taking care of me whenever I'm not well and even if I'm fine too.
	Spirituality (24)	Prayer time with God Not able to express thanks to God I had forgotten to thank God for another day
	Helpers (19)	I missed to say thank you for my maid. Usually I do it every time Cleaner maid, kind chat was not able to greet the garbage collector in front of my house as I slept for a little longer today
What aspects of work from home are you grateful for today?	Relationships (54)	Appa for his kindness. Free from my guilt. Extending my boundaries to friends and their family For quality talk with my children Having fam around
	Being able to engage in other activities (36)	Cooking learning new skills Being able to clean my home while working Cleaning my garden
	Workspace (32)	Peaceful work station and internet Convenient work atmosphere to be productive Having a laptop and internet

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Question	Prevalent Themes (Number of Responses)	Examples of Responses
Mention any additional records of gratitude.	Relationships (78)	My daughter, who is very cooperative and helpful. Having my son nearby Thank you to all my family members for making my day a good one.
	Spirituality (43)	God takes care of those who take care of animals Even during the crisis, God keeping around people who are so caring on me Thankful to God for always being by my side and forgiveness for my sins.
	Friends (28)	My friends and family who helped me today when I took a step towards a new venture. I'm grateful that I have friends and family to remind me about myself and why I should feel good about myself. For friends

The key findings of the prevalent themes indicate that participants were predominantly grateful for relationships, spirituality, electronic devices, and food in their life. In the context of being grateful for technology, participants responded with the following:

*“I am grateful for my laptop as it is helping me learn”*,

*“Grateful for having a smart phone which helps me in staying connected with many”*.

Participants were also mostly grateful for relationships, with this being evident through statements such as:

*“Grateful to the understanding and supportive nature of my husband, parents, brother and close friends”*

*“I'm grateful that my aged father cares for me so much”*.

When participants were asked what they had learned from intentionally expressing gratitude to aspects of their life, some of the responses were:

*“It relieved my long pending issues”*

*“Increased consciousness about me, as well as the people and things around me”*

*“Learned to express my gratitude which enhances peace of mind and happiness, and helps get out of negativity”*.

**Table No. 5: Response to Feedback Form**

Feedback Questions	Number of Responses	
	Yes	No
Was your expectation of joining the Gratitude Journal program satisfied?	28	0
Has the meaning of the word Gratitude changed for you after you joined the program?	23	5
Did the gratitude related tasks help you to get to know yourself better?	28	0
Do your feelings of gratitude sometimes protect you from getting hurt?	25	3
Will you continue to do the journal writing in your own style?	25	3

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Feedback Questions	Number of Responses	
	Yes	No
Has this program helped you to start any new habit which is surprising to you?	21	7
Has your sleep improved?	20	8
Are you having better conversations with people around you?	26	2
Have you forgiven at least one person?	26	2
Have you let go of at least one issue of yours?	27	1
Do you have a sense of relief?	27	1
Are you smiling more?	27	1
Were you able to relate to the gratitude responses of the other members in the group?	28	0
Do you think there were surprises in the group that you enjoyed?	27	1

All participants that provided their response on the form (n=28) reported being content with the 7-day gratitude journaling. 20 participants reported experiencing a better quality of sleep, 26 individuals reported forgiving someone else, with 26 participants reporting improved conversations with individuals around them.

### DISCUSSION

From the feedback of participants, it was observed that they had better sleep, social interactions, less focus on problems, and also felt motivated to engage in novel activities. As per the intent of our study to motivate individuals to engage in gratitude journaling, 25 participants felt encouraged to continue recording what they were grateful for. The responses also demonstrated that participants were mainly grateful for certain aspects of their life such as technology, relationships with others, jobs, food, water, health, money, and spirituality.

In the present study, a main limitation is that it is likely to have been influenced by attrition bias due to participants dropping out from the inception of the study, to the last day. Also, demand characteristics are likely to have been displayed in the responses on the feedback form as participants may have understood the responses that the researchers were looking for. The questions provided on the Google Form about gratitude also restricted the participants to only express their gratitude specific to those question, which reduced their freedom to record their gratitude.

A significant strength of our study is that it was carried out through social media and had participants provide responses online, when compared to past research studies that did not incorporate social media as means of recording gratitude among participants. The majority of existing studies on gratitude journaling involved participants engaging in gratitude related acts on their own, however our study involved a group of participants working together to inculcate gratitude in each other.

Similar to the study carried out by Emmons and McCullough (2003), our study was conducted over a period of time, demonstrating that when the intentional writing of gratitude is not an isolated event, but rather extends over time, the positive effects on well-being were more pronounced. A study conducted on adolescents and their subjective well-being after they intentionally showed gratitude was also consistent with our study, as the results

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illustrated that participants experienced greater appreciation and forgiveness for individuals in their life (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009).

Participants in our study conveyed gratitude for small aspects of their life such as having water, a home, and even for mangoes, with research claiming that focusing on these small aspects of life that conduct gratitude also impede the fixation on negatives in life (Lindberg, 2019). This finding is further supported by our research as 27 participants insinuated to have let go of one issue in their life after taking part in the 7-days.

Prompts such as gratitude journaling that encourage individuals to show their gratefulness also demonstrate the effectiveness of treating mental issues such as depression, making it a possibility for psychotherapeutic interventions (Emmons & Stern, 2013) to assist individuals in healthily coping with distress. Gratitude being a positive emotional state, directs individuals to further focus on positive occurrences, feelings, and outlooks, which in turn translates to less cortisol, less intense periods of depression, and a lessened inclination towards experiencing a stroke (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

In our study, the majority of participants who continued till the end of the 7-day duration were females, demonstrating that women are more likely than men to actively take part in gratitude journaling, with past studies further suggesting how women demonstrate more gratitude than men (Ansari, 2014), as the act of showing gratitude is often matched with feminine traits (Levant & Kopecky, 1995). However, research also shows that there is no distinction in gratitude among males and females (Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010).

Participants in our study reported having forgiven others (n=26) and experienced better communication with others (n=26), with this finding being consistent with research that suggests gratitude enhances social connections among individuals, and is also related to individuals being favored in social situations (Caputo, 2015).

When asked if sleep quality has improved, 20 out of 26 participants responded stating 'yes', with this finding further supported by research claiming that a gratitude intervention for 2 weeks improved sleep quality possibly due to their enhanced well-being because of the intervention (Jackowska, Brown, Ronaldson, & Steptoe, 2016).

The absence of maintaining a gratitude journal, and less emphasis on showing gratitude has been linked with lower levels of satisfaction in life (Tsang, Carpenter, Roberts, Frisch, & Carlisle, 2014), and those who write gratitude letters to others tend to experience more happiness and satisfaction (Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012). This is also corroborated in our study as participants mainly expressed gratitude for their relationships with their family, friends, helpers, and even God. In addition, 23 participants reported to have their perception of gratitude changed after the 7-day process, marking the need for further awareness about this intervention, and the respective benefits of doing so.

In terms of future direction for this research area, the influence of attrition bias may be lessened by ensuring that participants are aware of the cost and benefits of taking part in the study, and a larger sample of individuals can also be gathered to enhance the external validity of the study.

## CONCLUSION

As per the responses of participants from our analysis, it can be seen that the 7-day gratitude journaling process exerted a positive influence on them, further reiterating the its importance in daily life, and specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, and also the need to further motivate individuals to make gratitude journaling a habit. Considering that gratitude does not happen automatically and requires the conscious attention of individuals, the need for gratitude journaling in everyday life is to be actively inculcated for all individuals, and is to be considered a simple intervention that connects individuals with their innate desire to be grateful. Future research can be carried out with a larger sample for a greater duration of time to investigate the long-term effects of gratitude journaling.

Well-being derives from your emotions, actions, and experiences, over which we often have influence. We tend to have greater mental well-being when we think positive, for instance. We tend to have greater social well-being when seeking meaningful relationships. And we seem to have lower occupational well-being when we lose our job, or really dislike it. These examples begin to illustrate how common well-being is and how many different kinds of well-being are there.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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