

Psyche & Soul 28

ENHANCING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING THROUGH GRATEFUL LIVING

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

In this weekend's podcast I shall continue exploration of mental health and wellbeing by looking at the role of gratitude

Role of Positive Emotions in Mental Health

There is a growing body of psychological and medical research that shows positive emotions have a profound impact on our physical and mental wellbeing. Positive emotions like love, joy, hope, contentment are robust predictors of increased psychological well-being, especially during upsetting times. They optimize health, and psychological resilience. One major reason for this is that positive emotions strengthen our immune system.

An important feature of positive emotions, psychologist Barbara Frederickson observes, is that their effects do not end once suffering is prevented or alleviated. Positive emotions lead to an increment in personal resources that help us both in the present and the future to cope more effectively with challenges and adversities and in that way help promote physical and mental wellbeing.

Power of Gratitude

Important among the dispositions, or virtues, that promote positive emotions is gratitude. Frequent expressions of gratitude evoke in us a sense of wellbeing and strengthen us to face adversity. We feel good when someone thanks us. So too, we can make others feel good by genuinely thanking them and expressing our appreciation.

However, gratitude is much more than saying "thank you" to someone who has given us a gift or helped us in some way, or to God for a blessing received. Gratitude, as defined in research literature, is —*"the capacity to feel the emotion of thankfulness on a regular and consistent basis, across situations and over time."* In other words, gratitude is a disposition that accompanies us through good times and bad, when things go well and things go wrong, in illness and health, in success and failure.

It does not take great effort to be grateful. There is so much goodness and blessings even in the midst of all the disruptions and distress that is part of our lives.

Awe and Wonder

For us to grow in gratitude and thankfulness we need to cultivate what the great scientist Albert Einstein called a sense of “*awe and wonder*” - our ability to be amazed by the daily miracles that happen around us. He wrote: those “who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead.” Further, “There are only two ways to live your life: as though nothing is a miracle, or as though everything is a miracle.” When we see these daily miracles around us, we cannot but be grateful and feel good about ourselves and the world around us.

Daughters of St. Paul Sister Caroline Duia has a lovely song entitled “*Miracles*.” (available on YouTube). Its lyrics speak of these daily miracles “*There are miracles every moment... each day is a miracle with its countless blessings. ...Yes, it's a miracle to be alive and be living... to see the golden sunrise, to hear the birds sing, to feel the gentle breeze, to see the wind dancing in the trees... Isn't it a miracle that just when you feel lonely and blue, then an unannounced friend comes to sooth and comfort...?*”

Life is full of these little miracles that should truly make us stand in awe and wonder and experience gratitude and reverence.

Antidote to Mental Illness

Gratitude is an important antidote to mental illness. We cannot, for example, be grateful and depressed at the same time. The moment we begin to be grateful, the depression lifts, even if it is only momentary. The more frequently we express gratitude, the more our depression will be lifted. The more grateful we are, the more we enhance our wellbeing.

There are certain dynamics that mediate the relationship between gratitude and wellbeing. Clayton McClintock, professor of psychology at Columbia University, observes that gratitude “is fundamentally a way of seeing that alters our gaze.” It begins with “a simple recognition that nothing at all can be taken for granted. And if that is so, this life that we have in all its ephemeral particularities, is a precious gift. To recognize this gift is the beginning of gratitude” (*Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 2014, 2(1), 21-22).

McClintock's observation was confirmed by a cancer patient during a patient-physicians conference which about a hundred persons attended. Based on his experience, he observed: “*When you don't consider life as a gift, then you become sick.*” He had been too busy with work to notice and appreciate his life and the gifts that life brought him.

According to McClintock “Gratitude immediately shifts one's attitude away from the negative, away from the seemingly ordinary, and into the new, the good and the beautiful.”

Gratitude is an attitude and disposition that we can consciously cultivate. Gratitude, McClintock observes, “depends on inner intention and not on outer circumstance.” Hence we can be grateful in all circumstances good and bad by shifting our intention and changing our disposition.

Ways to Cultivate Gratitude

One easy means to cultivate gratitude is the daily practice of the *Examen of Consciousness* that is at the heart of Ignatian spirituality. We take a few minutes at the end of the day to sit quietly and allow memories of the good things – the little miracles - that have happened during the day

to come into awareness and we let our heart fill with thankfulness. Gradually we will become more and more sensitive to these gifts and develop a grateful disposition and enhance our mental and emotional wellbeing.

A second means, one that McClintock recommends, is the practice in Buddhist tradition, of calling to mind, at least occasionally, a benefactor, a person whom we actually know, and wanting for the person deep happiness and wellbeing.

A third practice, which many psychologists suggest, is keeping a daily *Gratitude Journal*. We look back over the day that is ending and pick up at least three blessings, even little ones, we have experienced, list them and describe in writing our feelings about them and whatever else these evoke in us. Gradually, with regular practice, we will cultivate an enduring disposition of gratitude.

We could stay quietly for a while with whatever this podcast is evoking in us today....

For Introspection and Prayer

We often find Jesus giving thanks to his Father. For example, in the Gospel of Mathew he says: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes" (11, 25).... In the Gospel of John, he acclaims at the tomb of Lazarus: "Father, I thank you for you have hard me." (11, 41)...

In his first letter to the Thessalonians Saint Paul exhorts us: "Give thanks in all circumstances" (5, 1-8). Writing to the Philippians he says: "I thank my God every time I remember you..." (1, 3).

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We could now look back over the year that has ended and allow memories of good things that have happened to us, the blessings we enjoyed in the midst of the pandemic, and spend some time filling our hearts with gratitude. It's good to be aware of what happens to us when we do that. We can also consider how we can live more gratefully - feeling and expressing gratitude in our daily lives.

Have a pleasant weekend in which you can take time to savour the blessings of life.

Thank you for listening/reading.

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