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Is Gratitude a Tool for Patience?



By Wray Herbert

Recovering alcoholics who find their way into the rooms of AA are told to expect dramatic changes in attitude and outlook. Their feelings of uselessness and self-pity will disappear, they are told, as will their interest in selfish things. They will become more intuitive about life, and experience serenity and peace. Their haunting fears will diminish. They will experience a new kind of freedom.

These are known as the “promises” of AA, and they are a cornerstone of 12-step recovery. But there is no timetable given. Indeed, alcoholics are told only that these results will materialize “sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly,” and only with painstaking work. In other words, the promises require patience.

And there’s the rub. Patience is not a virtue that most addicts are famous for. In fact, addiction by definition is an inability to delay gratification, to tamp down immediate appetites for greater rewards later on — rewards like happiness and peace. Addicts share this pathological impatience with lots of other risk takers, but theirs has some of the saddest outcomes.

Psychological scientists are very interested in human impatience, and with its connection to emotion. It’s known, for example, that sadness can make us even more impatient than we are normally. When we are depressed, we tend to make decisions that devalue future promises in favor of the here and now. That’s why many alcoholics relapse early on. New sobriety can bring with it an intense sense of loss, which makes it very hard to choose abstract promises over that bottle of whiskey right over there.

But what about other emotions? If sadness exacerbates impatience, is it possible that positive emotions might diminish it? That is the question that David DeSteno of Northeastern University has been exploring in his laboratory. He and his colleagues—Jennifer Lerner of Harvard, Ye Li of University of California, Riverside, and Leah Dickens of Northeastern—had reason to doubt that happiness in general would have this effect, because happiness has no obvious connection to judgments and rewards. But they wondered if gratitude might. After all, gratitude is a discrete social emotion linked to cooperation and altruism, and as such might be instrumental in reinforcing a future perspective. They decided to compare gratitude and global happiness, to see if either one boosts patience.

To do so, they asked volunteers to recall and write about past events. Some wrote about events that made them feel grateful and appreciative, while others wrote about events that made them happy or content. Still others, the controls, wrote about a typical day. Then they all made a series of choices — choosing a certain amount of cash immediately versus a greater amount later on. The amounts and the delay varied from choice to choice, so that the scientists were able to assess each volunteer’s overall level of patience.

The findings, reported in an article that will appear in the journal *Psychological Science*, were very clear. The grateful volunteers



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they showed much more patience than did either the happy volunteers or the controls, who didn't differ from one another. What's more, the intensity of gratitude directly predicted the volunteers' increasing levels of patience.

These results have profound implications. But this may be an instance of the recovery literature running ahead of the science. It's well known, in AA and other recovery programs, that willpower is an unreliable tool for abstinence. Effortful self-regulation can and does fail us, and such failures can leave us vulnerable to impatient decision making — including picking up a drink. A better alternative can be seen in another practice well known in the rooms of recovery — the gratitude list. Daily reflections on all that we have to be grateful for — this exercise may be the most effortless and effective way to inoculate ourselves against the pernicious consequences of impatience.

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