

Gratitude Reframes Everything

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For those of us with post-polio syndrome, sometimes it's hard to be grateful. Each year we are faced with new losses, and we're forced to give up activities and hobbies we once loved. For many of us, the life we once knew keeps shrinking. But the more we focus on what we've lost, the harder it is to enjoy what we have, which has implications for both our mental and physical well-being.

In his book *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, Dr. Robert Emmons recounts his studies on the effects of thankfulness. He conducted studies with various groups, including one solely comprised of participants with post-polio syndrome. For all the studies, he divided everyone into three groups, asking each to make weekly journal entries for 10 weeks. The first group was asked to write five things that happened the prior week that they were grateful for, the second group wrote down five hassles from the previous week, while the third group simply listed five events from the prior week.

The gratitude group often mentioned everyday events like seeing the sunset through the clouds or experiencing the generosity of friends. The hassles group mentioned things like paying taxes or coming home to a messy kitchen, while the third group just listed things they had done.

The results of the study were shocking. Those in the gratitude group were 25% happier than the other two, were more optimistic about the future, were healthier and less stressed, and even slept better. Nothing in their lives had changed—they had simply found things to be grateful for. These results were sustained weeks and even months later.

In a separate study, Dr. Emmons sent surveys out to over 300 people primarily struggling with post-polio syndrome and asked them to write about a time when they felt gratitude. He chose this group because he wondered if they'd be able to recall anything given their situation. Some like this 64-year-old woman found little to be grateful for:

My feelings of gratitude are fleeting and few and far between. I suffer from post-polio and have a great deal of anger toward this disease. It robbed me of my ability to continue my career, which I truly loved, and has had a deleterious effect on my everyday life. There is a lot of physical pain involved, to say nothing of the emotional stress. Almost any activity I want to do is no longer a spontaneous happening ... I've no intention of taking my own life, but there are days when I feel that I'd just as soon not be here.

Contrast this with this account is from a 66-year-old woman who contracted polio at age 7:

Our family was on vacation in Florida. My brother and I had been playing in the waves along the beach when I became very chilled and was shivering with a high fever of almost 107° ... For several days and nights, everyone expected me to die ... My mother said that the bobby pins in my hair rusted from the sweat when my fever broke. I clearly remember mother telling me this and also the gratitude upon her face and in her voice that I had lived. [This] made a profound impression on me, which is why I have always felt that life is a gift ... a gift to be cherished.

While most of us can relate to parts of both these women's stories, we can also see that the second one is happier; she's grateful to be alive. Dr. Emmons saw that people who could find the positive aspects of a negative situation were significantly happier than those who could not. So how can we, as polio survivors, learn to cultivate gratitude?

We can all look at the effects of polio on our lives and search for the positive things we have gained as a result. We can journal what we are thankful for each day. We can choose to focus on common blessings like a warm summer day, a hot cup of coffee, or a life-giving conversation, all of which can reframe our perspective. When we practice gratitude, we will be surprised at how much it changes us.

From all his research, Dr. Emmons concluded that the benefits of gratitude were significant and measurable. He found that being grateful magnifies our happiness and joy in everyday things and lifts our emotions. It encourages us to identify the good things in our lives and to celebrate what we have. It combats depression, makes people more resilient to stress and enables them to plan for the future. For those of us who deal with continual loss, being grateful has the power to transform our lives—if we let it. Gratitude reframes everything. ■

Vaneetha Rendall Risner is the author of the book *The Scars That Have Shaped Me: How God Meets Us in Suffering* and blogs at danceintherain.com—though she doesn't like rain and has no sense of rhythm.

A REQUEST FROM PHI

PHI is asking for your help. Do you know of financial resources available specifically for polio survivors to help purchase medical equipment? PHI and the University of Michigan Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation are undertaking a project to compile a directory of these resources. Besides doing a deep search of the internet, we are reaching out to consumer and professional networks. The end goal is to create a list and publish it nationally for everyone to use and share.

More information about the project is available on Sunny Roller's blog (www.sunnyrollerblog.com/post-polio-medical-equipment-funding/). Sunny was instrumental in securing funding for this effort and is organizing the project. If you know of any resources, please send them to info@post-polio.org. We are interested in actual monetary support, not loan closets or low-interest loans. Please include the name, address, phone number and web address along with a two-sentence description of how the specific national or state resource (ex: a philanthropist or organization) would help polio survivors pay for needed medical equipment. ■