



## Gratitude and Well-being in Adolescents: An Overview

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**Abstract:** The main aim of the paper is to study the impact of gratitude and well-being on adolescents. Earlier most of the research focused on the negative aspects but Positive psychology aims to strength the positive aspects of one's life. Keeping that view in account, gratitude and well-being have been studied. Based on the review of literature, common practices have been concluded which can strength well-being as well gratitude in adolescents who are facing numerous stressors. Development of these positive emotions is expected to have a positive effect on overall mental health of the adolescents who are the future of society.

**IndexTerms** – gratitude, well-being, adolescents

### I. INTRODUCTION

According to Myers and Diener (1995), earlier the focus of psychology was on problems of the people as well as the disorders instead of paying attention to their strengths. The movement of positive psychology focused attention towards human virtues as well as trends. It directed attention towards those inner psychological processes as well as traits that in most religions, cultures and philosophies have been emphasized as essential qualities for people (Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000). Positive Psychology follows a scientific approach wherein behaviour, human thoughts and feelings are studied with primary focus on strengths instead of weakness. Hence, the focus is on building the good instead of only repairing the bad (Peterson et al., 2008). Gratitude is one of the most common emotions which is experienced by every individual. The frequency of experience of the emotion of gratitude varies from person to person. Smith (1976) expressed the importance of gratitude by terming it as an important civic virtue which is vital for a society's overall healthy functioning. In almost all religions traditions i.e., Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist gratitude is considered to be an important disposition (Carmen & Streng, 1989). The main question which arises is that if gratitude is such an important virtue, then when is it experienced? Fritz Heider (1958) expressed that people tend to feel grateful when they have received a benefit from someone who intended to benefit them. This means that the positive intention of the benefactor following the receipt of benefit leads to experience of gratitude in an individual. On the other hand, the absence of gratitude is termed ingratitude. Kant (1797, 1964) has expressed ingratitude as one of three vices that are the "essence of vileness and wickedness." Hume (1888) described ingratitude as "the most horrid and unnatural of all crimes that humans are capable of committing." Emmons and Crumpler (2000) opined that an experimental form of gratitude intervention helps in elevating physical functioning as well as short term moods of individuals.

### Gratitude

Thomas Brown(1820) described gratitude as "that delightful emotion of love to him who has conferred a kindness on us, the very feeling of which is itself no small part of the benefit conferred."

Vertocci and Millard (1963) represented Gratitude as "the willingness to recognize the unearned increments of value in one's experience."

Solomon (1977) opined that gratitude is "an estimate of gain coupled with the judgment that someone else is responsible for that gain."

In the words of Kant (1979) gratitude means "honoring a person because of a kindness he has done us."

Clare et al. (1987) described gratitude as the "self- habituation of positive thinking for the grace people received and positively behaving to show gratitude to the source that gives grace or kindness to oneself."

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) Gratitude is "the quality or condition of being thankful; the appreciation of an inclination to return kindness."

Various philosophers and psychologists over the years have given their own definitions of gratitude. Gratitude can be expressed as "an attitude toward the giver, and an attitude toward the gift, a determination to use it well, to employ it imaginatively and inventively in accordance with the giver's intention." (Harned, 1997).

Fitzgerald (1998) recognized three components of gratitude: (i) a warm sense of appreciation for somebody or something, (ii) a disposition to act that flows from appreciation and goodwill, and (iii) a sense of goodwill toward that person or thing.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) have expressed two ways of being grateful to the main source i.e. God- transpersonal and in the intermediary i.e. human- personal.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1967) believed that “In ordinary life we hardly realized that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.”

### Dimensions of Gratitude

Adler and Fagley (2005) gave eight dimensions of gratitude:

- Interpersonal
- Personal assets
- Present moment
- Gratitude rituals
- Social comparisons
- Appreciating life
- Gratitude expression

### Stages of Gratitude

According to Emmons (2012) the feeling of gratitude comprises of two stages:

- In the first stage, one becomes aware of the present blessings in their life.
- In the second stage, one recognizes that the sources of blessings lie outside in the social environment.

### Gratitude as an Emotion

Some psychologists have enlisted gratitude as an emotion. According to Weiner (1985) gratitude as an emotion is an attribution-dependent state which is a result of a two-step cognitive process. The first step involves recognition of the fact that one has obtained a positive outcome. The second step includes recognizing an external source of the positive outcome. McDougall (1929) viewed gratitude as emotion of secondary type, it is considered an amalgamation of reverence, embarrassment, jealousy, admiration, envy, awe, and resentment. It is a combination of “tender emotion and negative self-feeling.” Furthermore, negative self-feeling was simplified as the receiver experiencing a sense of inferiority relative to the giver due to the fact that giver has the power to do something which the receiver cannot do on his own. Edwin Westermarck (1932) has categorized gratitude as a moral emotion and a “retributive kindly emotion” which evokes a desire to give pleasure due to pleasure received. Hence, gratitude can be termed as an emotion which involves an exchange of pleasure between the receiver and the giver. Terming gratitude as an empathic emotion, Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) went on to explain that the roots of gratitude lie in the capacity to empathize with others. On the other hand, Ben-Ze’ev (2000) posited that gratitude is a short-term state which reflects a praiseworthiness of another’s actions. McCullough and colleagues (2001) referred to gratitude as an emotion which has a specific action tendency to contribute to the welfare of the benefactor in the future. According to Wood et al. (2010), gratitude comprises of a positive appreciation of a broad range of behaviours as well as feelings i.e. an appreciation of other people, of the fact that life is short and making positive social comparisons.

Numerous studies have shown that gratitude as an emotion has a positive impact on our brain areas which get activated when one is experiencing gratitude (Amarnath et al., 2019). The experience of gratitude results in cognitive restructuring which leads to low levels of anxiety and fear as cortisol levels are regulated and ultimately leads to optimistic thinking (Zahn et al., 2007). Gratitude activates the hippocampus as well as amygdala area in the limbic system of the brain which regulates body functions, memory as well as emotions. When practiced on regular basis gratitude tends to act as a natural antidepressant which produces the same results as taking medication. This is because the neural pathways of the brain are strengthened as well as established which creates an everlasting optimistic as well as grateful personality in an individual (Fletcher, 2017).

### Well-Being

Heider (1997) described well-being as “being governed by two important factors- personal powers one possesses and environmental powers for exhibition of any behaviour.”

Ryan and Deci (2001) postulated that well being is derived from two philosophical traditions i.e. the eudaimonic and the hedonic approach. According to the eudaimonic approach well being is an extent to which an individual is fully functioning whereas the hedonic approach conceptualized well being depending upon obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain (Kjell, 2011).

Kitayama (2002) explained that for people living in an individualistic culture i.e. Western society happiness is a “subjective state that belongs to an individual and thus experienced as a personal property whereas for an individual of collectivistic culture happiness is mediated by harmony belief.”

There are numerous definitions of well being given by various researchers. Many researchers have also asserted that well being involves affective and cognitive components i.e. experiencing relatively more positive than negative emotions i.e. affect balance and evaluation of one’s life in positive sense i.e. life satisfaction ( Diener, 2000; Schimmack, 2003).

### Gratitude and Well-Being

Plethora of research studies have been conducted which have shown significant positive relationship between gratitude and well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Park et al., 2004; Macknulty, 2004; Bono & Froh, 2009). Additionally, numerous researchers have opined that gratitude is associated with various dimensions of well-being (Fredrickson et al., 2003; Froh et al., 2009; Al-Seheel & Noor, 2016; Noor et al., 2018).

Gratitude is always associated with well-being (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Lyumbomirsky et al., 2005). Gratitude can be both state and trait. State gratitude is defined as a sense of appreciation, gratefulness and awe for consequences received. On the other hand, dispositional gratitude is described as an individual's predisposition to understand the feelings of gratitude. (Lai, 2014). A grateful individual appreciates positive events in life and has a broader sense of acknowledging such events (Wood et al., 2010). In a study conducted by Emmons and McCullough (2003) wherein gratitude was studied through daily blessing calculation for a period of sixteen days which encouraged development of positive emotions in adolescents and stimulation to do good for others.

Gratitude is associated with hedonic as well as eudemonic well-being. Longitudinal studies on gratitude and well-being point towards gratitude being an antecedent of well-being (Wood et al., 2008). In a study conducted by Froh et al., (2009) gratitude showed significant positive relationship with emotional support, psychological well-being, and significant negative relationship with physical symptoms. Additionally, Gratitude also has a significant positive relationship with altruism (Tsang, 2006). It is considered as an important aspect for optimal functioning of an individual (Maltby et al., 2004) and is associated with forgiveness (Deshea, 2003).

According to Emmons (2012), gratitude is associated with well-being in five vital ways-

- Gratitude improves physical health. Its reduces pain as well as other complaints. Gratitude improves overall sleep quality and sleeping patterns.
- Gratitude causes high levels of savouring the present moment by making the best out of positive life events.
- Gratitude mitigates the negative due to which people tend to experience less toxic and negative emotions such as regret, greed, jealousy or envy and instead are more grateful.
- Being grateful increases spiritual awareness as it aids religious people to recognize that all the positive things and blessings originate from a higher power or God.
- Gratitude bolsters communal or social relationships (Noor et al., 2018).

Among adolescents, there are numerous pressures and challenges during the adolescent years. These pressures can be in the form of stress over performance in academics, need to be popular, body image, peer pressure etc. This means that the self evaluations of adolescents are more than often unfavorable (Sternberg, 1999). These negative judgments about self in this critical period of life can lead to high rates of depression, anxiety and even suicide attempts (Harter & Marold, 1994; Laufer, 1995). Adolescence is a period of transition from childhood to adulthood where growth is observed in all domains such as psychological, biological, social and emotional (Verma & Chavan, 2018). Numerous problems are faced by the adolescents in this critical period such as negative influence from their social circle and peers, depression, anxiety, stress, heedlessness, bullying, lack of peers, domestic abuse, absenteeism, impulsiveness, lack of self worth, issues related to anger, low self esteem, alcohol, drug abuse, smoking, teen pregnancy, family issues, eating disorders, insecurity, poverty and sexual identity (Joshi & Kaul, 2018).

In a recent survey report by UNICEF (2022) it was outlined that India has the highest number of adolescents globally, one in five person in between the age group of ten to nineteen. The adolescent count as per the report was two hundred fifty three million. According to the report it was seen that worldwide one in seven adolescents experiences psychological disorders which contributes to thirteen percent of global liability of illness in their age group. The main causes were anxiety, depression and stress which had a negative impact on the overall well being. In a survey conducted by WHO (2022) it was reported that adolescents comprise sixteen percent of the world's population. They play an important role in achieving sustainable development goals and the period of adolescence plays a crucial role in the foundation of good mental and physical health.

The period of adolescents is classified into three stages. The first stage is known as early adolescents with the age range between twelve to fourteen years. This stage comprises of increased growth spurt wherein concrete thinking is developed along with appearance of secondary sexual characters. The second stage is known as middle adolescence with the age range between fourteen to seventeen years. This stage is characterized by almost ninety five percent attaining adult development and abstract thinking. Lastly, the third stage is called late adolescence with the age range between seventeen to nineteen years where the adolescents become mature physically (WHO, 2022).

### Review of Literature

In two cross sectional studies conducted by Chen and Kee (2008) examined the relationship between gratitude and well-being of the athletes. The first study investigated the relationship between gratitude and well-being. The sample of the study comprised of hundred and sixty nine senior high school athletes from Taiwan. The adolescents completed the gratitude questionnaire, team satisfaction, the athlete burnout questionnaire and satisfaction with life scale. The second study examined the relationship between sport-domain gratitude and well being. The sample of the second study comprised of two hundred and sixty five adolescent athletes. The participants completed the team satisfaction scale, domain gratitude questionnaire and athlete burnout questionnaire. The results of the first study revealed that dispositional gratitude had positive impact on life and team satisfaction. Additionally dispositional gratitude had negative impact on burnout. With respect to the second study, the results revealed a strong relationship between gratitude and well-being. Additionally sports domain gratitude positively predicted team satisfaction and negatively predicted burnout in athletes.

Wood et al. (2010) reviewed numerous studies on gratitude and well-being based on which they came up with a new model of gratitude which incorporated gratitude feeling which arises post received help from others which focuses on appreciating the positive aspects of one's life. The studies which were reviewed were based on individual differences in personality, health, gratitude, psychopathology, humanistic oriented functioning, subjective wellbeing, relationship and eudemonic well being. Additionally, interventions pertaining gratitude were also reviewed. It was found that gratitude is pertinent to the field of clinical psychology due its explanatory power in understanding well-being. The ways to increase gratitude with the help of simple activities was also delved into.



Sood and Gupta (2012) conducted a study on Indian adolescents residing in Jammu and Kashmir in which the role of gratitude and well-being was examined. Age and gender were also taken into account while conducting the study. The sample of the study comprised of two hundred adolescents. The findings of the study revealed that no significant relationship existed between gratitude and well-being. Additionally, no gender differences were found. However, the results of the study revealed that an association existed between students' well-being and their age which pointed towards the fact that well-being decreases with age.

In a study conducted by Hasemeyer (2013), the relationship between adolescents' psychological, academic, social well-being and gratitude was studied. The sample of the study comprised of four hundred and ninety-nine high school students who completed self-reporting questionnaires on the measures. The results of the study showed positive correlation between life satisfaction and gratitude. Furthermore, life satisfaction predicted increases social support from parents, teachers, friends, higher grades, decreased internalizing symptoms and improved academic self-perceptions.

Son et al. (2014) examined the role of gratitude in school well-being and the mediating effect of social support and interpersonal relationship. The sample of the study consisted of seven hundred and eighty two Chinese students. The participants completed questionnaires on gratitude, school satisfaction, interpersonal relationships, positive and negative affect and social support. The findings of the study indicated positive correlation between gratitude and school well-being. Additionally, social support and interpersonal relationship mediated the relationship between the two variables.

Shourie and Kaur (2016) studied the relationship between gratitude, well-being, and forgiveness in adolescents. The sample comprised of two hundred and fifty adolescents in the age range between sixteen to eighteen years living in Chandigarh, India. The measures of gratitude, well-being and forgiveness were – Gratitude questionnaire, Enright forgiveness inventory and Ryff's psychological well-being scale. The results of the study revealed a positive correlation of psychological well-being with gratitude and forgiveness.

Megawati et al. (2019) conducted gratitude training in order to improve subjective well-being among adolescents. A quasi-experimental design with a non-equivalent control group design was used in the study. The results of the study revealed that gratitude training significantly improved subjective well-being in adolescents. Additionally it was seen that the most improved of subjective well-being was experienced by those participants who actively communicated with caregivers and optimistically achieved goals and expectations. It was seen that even at the follow up stage the subjective well-being of the adolescents was still relatively constant.

Hemarajarajeswari and Gupta (2021) assessed gratitude, psychological well-being and happiness in two hundred students in the age range of fifteen to twenty four years. The sample comprised of one hundred thirty three girls and sixty seven boys. All the participants completed measures of gratitude, psychological well-being and happiness. The scales used in the study were Gratitude questionnaire, Ryff's psychological well-being scale and Oxford happiness scale. The results of the study revealed that all the three variables were positively correlated and influenced one another. Furthermore, gratitude had a significant positive and moderate correlation with the six dimensions of psychological well-being namely, purpose in life, positive relations with others, self-acceptance, personal growth, autonomy and environmental mastery. Furthermore, the results of the study revealed that by increasing gratitude levels can lead of a significant increase in psychological well-being as well as happiness.

Naeem et al. (2021) examined the relationship between trait gratitude and psychological well-being. The main aim of the study was to study the power of gratitude on psychological well-being. The sample of the study comprised of three hundred and seventy-eight adolescents. The participants of the study completed measures on gratitude and psychological well-being. The results of the study revealed that the adolescents reported moderate levels of trait gratitude and psychological well-being. There existed a significant positive relationship between trait gratitude and psychological well-being. Additionally, it was also found that gratitude significantly predicted psychological well-being after controlling demographic variables of the adolescents' such as age and gender.

A study was conducted by Bono et al. (2023) in order to study gratitude, mental health and well-being in adolescents. The sample of the study comprised of three hundred twenty six adolescents. The participants completed measures on trait gratitude, anxiety and subjective well-being. An experimental design was used. The results of the study revealed that gratitude intervention had an impact on anxiety symptoms, well-being and gratitude when measured six weeks later when compared to a control group. Furthermore, it can be said that school gratitude interventions can act as an effective method in order to promote trait gratitude and well-being.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt in labelling the period of adolescents full of ordeals, strain, stressors and uncertainty. There is a lot of stress with respect to the path in life they make overtake considering the risks and uncertainty involved in order to reach their desired goal. Adolescence is a critical period as the manners and conduct developed during this critical period will remain throughout their life (Currie et al., 2012). McCullough and colleagues (2008) believed in the ordinary magic of gratitude which can bring pleasant emotions such as happiness which will benefit not only oneself but others around as well. Gratitude is a feeling subjective in nature of being appreciative and thankfulness for the life which one has and that feeling occurs when an individual receives a benefit or favour from others (McCullough et al. 2001). The research reviewed suggests that gratitude and well-being are vital positive emotions which need to be developed in adolescents who are at a precarious stage of their life. A study by Watkins et al. (2003) found that individuals who scored higher in grateful personality traits has higher subjective well-being, were more satisfied with life and had more positive emotions than their less grateful counterparts. Hence, some of the ways in which gratitude and well-being can be increased in adolescents can be through gratitude exercises (Seligman et al. 2005), count your-blessings exercises (Chan, 2010) and through gratitude journals (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

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