

Gratitude – a drug with positive side effects

By Linda Fine Conaboy

INCLINE VILLAGE – Gratitude. The word slides easily off of our tongues. But have you ever thought about what it really means? According to Webster's New World Dictionary, gratitude is a feeling of thankful appreciation for favors or benefits received; thankfulness.

Easy enough definition to digest, but Bob Emmons, a scientific expert on the subject, isn't satisfied to simply feel grateful and move on. Emmons has made gratitude his life's work.



Bob Emmons

During his lecture to a packed house at Sierra Nevada College last week, the psychology professor at UC Davis, passionately explained his take on gratitude, how it works, why it matters, what it means in the scheme of worldly things and how it can have a most favorable impact on those who practice it daily.

Gratitude, he said, requires a benefactor, a beneficiary, intentionality and appreciation. "There's a moral face to gratitude," he said. "It's very complex. But it's available to anyone from kids to oldsters." He recommends keeping a gratitude journal. "It's a good thing to do, almost like a spiritual exercise."

Emmons described gratitude as a drug without side effects, saying there's a significant difference for those who actually practice it and those who don't. People feel alive and alert; they get along well with others and they notice the good things. Additionally, he said grateful people feel alive—they comprehend what it means to be more connected with others and to life. "You don't want to keep in the good, you want to give it back," he said.

It's hard to believe that a "drug" like gratitude isn't used by everyone. Emmons said there's an impact on physical function. Threatening situations suddenly become less bothersome. Exercise becomes important; leading to lower levels of cortisol, which can lead to less depression.

There definitely is something going on in the grateful brain, there's a pattern of activity, but it's hard to track. To get a handle on the subject, researchers turned to Holocaust survivors, tracking their memories to see what impact gratitude had.

While not conclusive, they found that in the brain gratitude is more than just a pleasant experience. The social impact is tremendous. People began to recognize what others did for them; that the good deeds were amplified. "We begin to notice the good in ourselves and others," Emmons said. "Gratitude connects. It's the moral memory of mankind."

He described gratitude as the new willpower. "If you're depressed, you take it now. There's no gratification delay. If you're in a grateful mood, you can accept delayed gratification."

But why, you may ask? And that is what scientists are attempting to determine. How does gratitude "get under your skin?"

Emmons' website discusses the long-term research he and others are now engaged in. According to his website, his project is

“designed to create and disseminate a large body of novel scientific data on the nature of gratitude, its causes and its potential consequences for human health and well-being.”

Emmons said that much of his team’s recent work focuses on the development of gratitude in children.

Children, he said, are notoriously ungrateful. Gratitude does not emerge early in life, rather it seems to kick in between ages 7 and 10. He said kids can easily be taught the concept. He listed a few ways to heighten grateful attitudes in children:

- Link gratitude to philanthropy. Giving not receiving mobilizes gratitude and establishes your identity.
- Teach that gratitude isn’t something you can just go out and get. It’s the everyday good things that happen to you.

And finally. “Being thankful isn’t just saying thanks, it’s a divine feeling that can’t be hidden. It’s the everyday things that happen to you. It’s an operating system; a way of looking at life.”