The 3 Dishes of Well-Being: The Powerful Emotional States That Overcome Adversity and Foster Healing

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Imagine that you are sitting at an all-you-can-eat buffet. Delicious, mouthwatering dishes abound everywhere you look. But, then you notice something quite extraordinary: The dishes before you are not made from food, but instead are prepared with special ingredients from your own mind--Gratitude, Optimism, and Love. These are “The 3 Dishes of Well-Being”-- the uplifting emotional states that positive psychologists have identified as essential for overcoming adversity, developing psychological resilience, and achieving human potential. When we help those who are ill and suffering, we can provide them with a tremendous benefit by offering them these three sumptuous psychological dishes.

First, we begin with the appetizer: Gratitude.

Gratitude is the realization that the good in your life comes from outside you--whether it is given to you by a higher power, family member, friend, or even a stranger. Research shows that grateful people sleep 40% better, have lower blood pressure, stronger immune systems, and are 30% less likely to suffer from depression. In a controlled study with patients who had neuromuscular disease, those who kept a daily Gratitude Journal reported better sleep and a more positive mood, as well as increased social connection and optimism.

How to Cultivate More Gratefulness: Here are a few powerful techniques you can use to increase gratitude in yourself and the people you help:

*Keep a Gratitude Journal: Every day write down 3 things you’re grateful for: for example, being alive, sharing time with your family, eating a nice meal, spending time in nature, helping someone on the job. This is the most powerful, research-proven way to improve your feelings of gratitude, well-being, and contentment. Research shows that people who keep a gratitude journal have a 25% higher level of happiness.
*Practice Gratitude in Reverse: Mother Theresa said “I am grateful not for what I can receive, but for what I can give.” Those of us in the helping professions can feel grateful for the people we help

on a daily basis.

*Fill Your Gratitude Jar Daily: This is a great way to teach Gratitude to children, and also experience it for ourselves. During the day, put a coin in your “Gratitude Jar” (write “Gratitude” outside it) each time you are grateful for something. Soon, your jar will fill up to the brim with coins. When, it gets full, give it away to a needy person or charitable organization. Then, get a new Gratitude Jar. Valuable lessons are being learned: Gratitude can be grown, then it can be given away. Gratitude never ends.
Next, we come to the main course: Optimism.

Optimism: Optimism is the belief that everything will turn out all right--that tomorrow we will be healthier, happier, and more prosperous. Optimism reduces fear, anxiety, and stress because we no longer are afraid that the worst will happen. Optimism is now making its way into medicine. Nurses are using it to promote the mental health of patients--to speed up recovery and achieve more positive medical outcomes. More medical facts: Optimists are less likely to die between the ages of 50 and 65, and are 30% less likely to die from cardiac arrest. Optimists also make more money--optimistic salespeople sell 35% more. Optimists are even luckier. In Dr. Richard Wiseman’s research with “lucky” versus “unlucky people,” he found certain common characteristics in lucky people, namely optimism--looking on the bright side of life.

For example, subjects in a study were asked to imagine a scenario where they were in a bank, and suddenly a bank robber came in and started shooting, wounding them in the shoulder. People who were unlucky in life made comments such as “that is the worst thing that could ever happen to them; here I was minding my own business, and I was shot in the shoulder.” Those who were lucky in life, on the other hand, said that incident was actually very lucky. They tended to say things like: “First of all, I could have been shot in the head instead of the shoulder. Plus, I will be on the nightly news, and I may get free publicity; who knows, maybe I can even get my own reality show.” The bottom line: Optimistic people are luckier, as well as happier and healthier.

How do you improve your optimism? Seek out new opportunities, look for the positive in any situation, no matter how gloomy or difficult it may first appear. Practice positive affirmations: Repeat this phrase to yourself several times a day: “I am growing and expanding and learning more each day. I am becoming a better and happier person.” Create a vision board where you cut and paste pictures of the goals you want to achieve in life: relationship, career, financial, health, and family. Look at the board daily, and feel yourself achieving those goals. Every day, decide to live the Optimist’s way: The way of true health

Finally, we come to the most delicious of dishes, the dessert of life, Love.

Love: Philosophers, writers, and poet have all written about love for thousands of years. Now psychologists are scientifically investigating the power of love to heal physical and emotional wounds. In a remarkable study, married subjects were given suction blister wounds, and were then observed to see if they displayed hostile or loving behavior toward each other. Loving couples had a 40% faster rate of healing than the argumentative, hostile couples. Simply put, love can even

heal physical wounds. Loving interaction (even showing affection to a pet) can release more of the hormone Oxytocin, which reduces high blood pressure, lowers anxiety, and inhibits the production of the stress hormone, cortisol.

Loving energy is not simply based on romantic love. It is the special essence of human existence; it can be expressed in all of our daily interactions. Loving energy incorporates the elements of compassion, humanity, caring, and gentleness that are innate in the human mind and spirit.

One of the best ways to increase loving energy is through the practice of loving kindness meditation.

Practice Daily Loving Kindness Meditation: In a quiet place, sit down, close your eyes, and visualize that from the center of your stomach, you are emitting a colored light (maybe red, green, or white) that represents loving energy. Imagine that you are sending this ray of light, this loving energy, to the person who is closest you emotionally in your life right now: perhaps a child, spouse, parent, or animal. Next, visualize that this loving light energy keeps spreading out to your other loved ones--your family members who live elsewhere. Further, see this loving light energy spreading outward to your friends, acquaintances, and co-workers. Continue expanding that loving energy to your neighborhood, to the person at the gas station, the waiter, to people you don't know, to the homeless, to the poor, sick, and elderly, to your entire city, and beyond. Practicing this loving kindness exercise for five to 10 minutes daily can produce tremendous benefits in your life. Loving kindness meditation has been helpful in increasing social connectedness, reducing pain, anger, and psychological distress, and even in treating depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia.

Those who practice loving kindness meditation will experience deep feelings of compassion for themselves and others. Moreover, this compassion will act as a natural healing force for the body, mind, and spirit. Compassion and loving kindness have been found to transform and heal deep trauma because it gives us a sense of hope that love does exist and can be shared.

Now, you are ready for your complete meal. You have the main dishes of Gratitude, Optimism, and Love on your psychological table. Wherever you are, and wherever you go, serve this meal to yourself and others. When you do this, you will never go emotionally hungry. You, and those you care about, will have all of the essential nutritious ingredients to live a happy, healthy, and successful life.

Enjoy the 3 Dishes of Well-Being.Bon Appétit.

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