

Gratitude - Week 4 Notes

3 Ways Gratitude Benefits Our Brains

1. It can help relieve stress and pain. The regions associated with gratitude are part of the neural networks that light up when we socialize and experience pleasure. These regions are also heavily connected to the parts of the brain that control basic emotion regulation, such as heart rate and arousal levels, and are associated with stress relief and thus pain reduction. Feeling grateful and recognizing help from others creates a more relaxed body state and allows the subsequent benefits of lowered stress to wash over us.
2. It can improve our health over time. They are also closely linked to the brain's "mu opioid" networks, which are activated during close interpersonal touch and relief from pain—and may have evolved out of the need for grooming one another for parasites. In other words, our data suggest that because gratitude relies on the brain networks associated with social bonding and stress relief, this may explain in part how grateful feelings lead to health benefits over time.
3. It can help those with depression. Perhaps even more encouraging, researcher Prathik Kini and colleagues at Indiana University performed a subsequent study examining how practicing gratitude can alter brain function in depressed individuals. They found evidence that gratitude may induce structural changes in the very same parts of the brain that we found active in our experiment. Such a result, in complement to our own, tells a story of how the mental practice of gratitude may even be able to change and re-wire the brain.