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## Fostering Gratitude and Purpose among Adolescents

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The main goal of this project is to help young people navigate a path towards a happy and meaningful life. A critical component of this endeavor is fostering a more sophisticated understanding of how one fits into the world. Gratitude and purpose represent two sides of this understanding. Whereas gratitude involves recognizing all the good things that someone receives from the world, purpose entails considering how one can contribute to the world around them. Indeed, we find these constructs work in tandem; when people feel grateful, they naturally tend to turn towards thinking about how they can give back. In addition, expressing gratitude strengthens relationships, which can then help to guide and support the development of purpose. Therefore, we believe that cultivating a deeper sense of gratitude will help individuals to find a sense of purpose in life. These strides should bolster academic motivation, social relationships, and overall well-being.

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### GRATITUDE

#### What is gratitude?

Gratitude is an emotion that people experience when they perceive another person performing a benevolent act towards them. People tend to feel more grateful when the benefit is more significant and when they believe that the other person's help is intentional and involves a cost to the benefactor, such as time, effort, and money. Simply put, people feel grateful when they recognize an action as indicating that another person cares about them.

#### Why is gratitude important?

Gratitude is desirable for several reasons. First, it feels good. Gratitude is associated with positive physical feelings such as a warmth, alertness, and elevated mood. It also leads to physiological changes such as lower blood pressure and stronger immune systems. Second, those who feel and express gratitude tend to have stronger social ties. This is because people who regularly reflect on what is going well in their relationships are more likely to take steps to maintain those bonds. Third, feeling grateful makes people more likely to help others. In other words, focusing on what one has received motivates the desire to pay it forward.

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### How is gratitude fostered?

Researchers have identified several strategies for promoting gratitude. These strategies encourage people to focus on the good things in their lives and to express their gratitude for the people who help them. For example, the "three good things" activity asks people to write down good things that happen to them each day. People who did this for at least one week demonstrated higher levels of gratitude and lower levels of depression, even six months later. A second powerful strategy is to write a gratitude letter and deliver it to the subject. This activity is shown to increase gratitude and happiness and decrease depression for at least one month. Other strategies include teaching people how to recognize when someone helps them and keeping a gratitude journal to reflect on good things.

## Purpose

### What is purpose?

A purpose in life is a meaningful, long-term goal that contributes to the world beyond the self. There are three important components of this definition. First, a purpose is personally relevant; it reflects a person's values and identity. It is something that a person believes deeply matters. Second, a purpose is a goal that a person invests time, energy, and effort in working towards over a long period of time. Third, a purpose is self-transcendent. It is a goal for contributing to the world in a way that touches not our necessarily our own, but others' lives. A "beyond the self" focus is central to the concept of purpose, and accordingly this aspect of the definition distinguishes purpose from meaning. Whereas a walk in nature may engender meaning for oneself, working to preserve the environment may engender purpose for society at large. Thus, a purpose in life represents how a person hopes to make their mark on the world.

### Why is purpose important?

Many researchers consider a sense of purpose as the ultimate indicator of positive youth development. Indeed, people who possess a purpose report higher levels of hope and life satisfaction and describe themselves as happier and more fulfilled. This is likely because having a sense of purpose in life helps people to structure their lives, assign meaning to their daily activities, and feel like their life matters. This is particularly important for young people who are in the midst of making big-picture decisions about their lives, such as whether to attend college or enter into long-term romantic relationships. Indeed, adolescents with a sense of purpose are more likely to feel confident in their abilities, bounce back from failure, are more academically engaged, and perform better in school.

### How is purpose fostered?

Given that psychological research on purpose is relatively new, few programs have intentionally and explicitly sought to cultivate purpose. Findings from these studies indicate it is helpful to engage young people in activities, discussions, and experiences that help young people explore what is most meaningful to them. More work is needed to investigate specific activities that promote purpose.



## Current Study

The main goal of the current study is to test strategies for fostering gratitude and purpose among adolescents. We adapted a gratitude curriculum that was successful with elementary school students<sup>1</sup>. Modifications were designed to make lessons developmentally appropriate for middle and high school students, to engage teachers and parents, and to incorporate the most recent research findings. We also added lessons to help older adolescents transition from thinking about what they have received from the world to how they can give back.

We hope that this curriculum will help students to cultivate both gratitude and a sense of purpose. All lessons are based on previous research, but have not yet been tested in combination, in a school setting, and among an adolescent age group. If this set of activities proves to be effective in the current classrooms, then we will test it out in schools in other regions of the U.S. to see if it works for students in different types of communities. The final goal for this project is to create a tool for promoting gratitude and purpose among adolescents that can be distributed to teachers across the country.

## About us

We are a team of researchers at Claremont Graduate University (<http://sites.cgu.edu/bronk/>) and California State University, Dominguez Hills (<http://www.csudhnews.com/2012/09/bono-giacomo/>). This project is generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation, in collaboration with UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center.



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