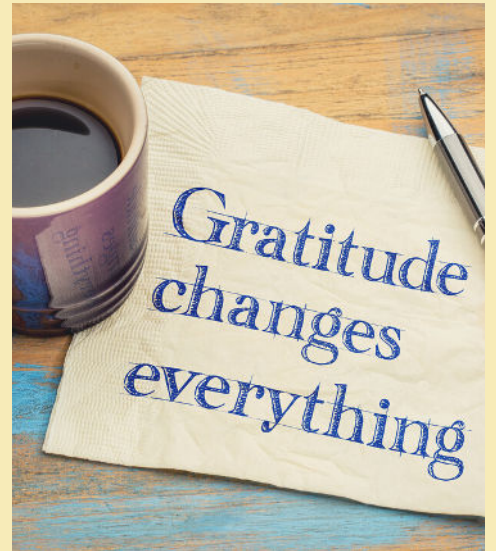
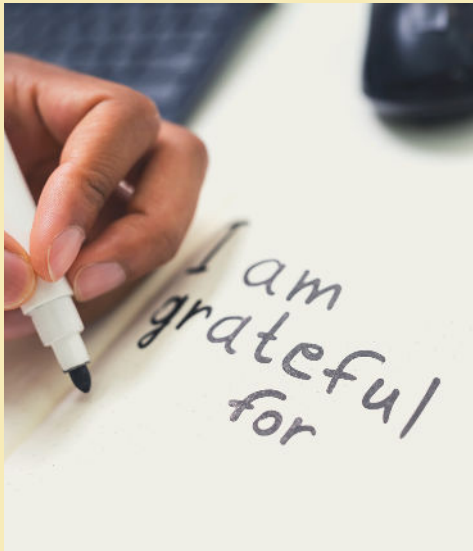


# RECOVERY

*The official newsletter of the  
Fletcher Group Rural Center Of Excellence*



## HOW GRATITUDE WORKS

2

## HOW RESIDENTS BENEFIT

3

## ONE WOMAN'S STORY

4

## THE POWER OF GRATITUDE



The Fletcher Group Rural  
Center of Excellence

*by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher*

This month's webinar and newsletter focus on "The Transformative Power of Gratitude." It's a subject close to my heart, not just because I was raised in a Christian denomination that encouraged it or because I loved singing the hymn, *Count Your Blessings—Name Them One by One*. I've also witnessed the power of gratitude in countless peer-led support groups as people, sometimes with tears in their eyes, name those who have helped them and vow to thank them. Expressing gratitude in that setting—whether rural or urban—has been an "evidence-based best practice" for years, long before its documentation by researchers.

Dr. Joel Wong, Director of Indiana University Bloomington's Gratitude Interventions and Practices Lab, seemed to say as much as he launched this month's webinar. "I straddle," he said, "both the world of science and the world of practice." Practice? Is that an allusion to what scientists call "the placebo effect?" Something that remains forever beyond measure—and so powerful that we're as apt to fear and avoid it as use it.

I know this: The power of gratitude is real. With that in mind, may I say to anyone reading this: Thank you for the work you do, for your selflessness, your perseverance, your resilience. Because of you, the world is a better place. We see you, believe in you, and thank you.



# GRATITUDE

## HOW DOES IT WORK?

Research has shown a correlation between the expression of gratitude and numerous important benefits, including lower risk of mental illness, greater life satisfaction, improved relationships, better health benefits (including better sleep), and reduced drug use as a result of improved coping strategies.\*

Gratitude interventions—the supervised practice of expressing gratitude in control groups—has also proven effective in reducing headaches and depression while improving the amount of time spent exercising and the willingness to support others.

### A Two-Way Street

But that's not all. Additional research has shown that gratitude benefits the receiver as well as the giver of thanks. It does that by improving their sense of belonging and self-efficacy. This is particularly helpful among people of color and people with substance use and mental health conditions.

### How does it work?

There is evidence now that the expression of gratitude opens neurological pathways that might otherwise remain closed. For example, fMRI brain scans during a three-month study have shown that people in therapy who regularly write letters of gratitude experience increased activation of the medial prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain associated with learning and decision-making. Researchers have concluded that expressions of gratitude may somehow *train* the brain to be more sensitive to subsequent experiences of gratitude.

### Self-Regulating Pathways

Similar gratitude interventions have been shown to reduce negative thoughts, negative emotions, aggressive behaviors, uncivil workplace behaviors, and substance use.

The evidence from these studies suggests that when people turn their attention to what's positive in their lives, they are better able to exercise self-control due to an improved ability to regulate negative emotions, thoughts, and behavior.

“

*When you are grateful, instead of taking things for granted, you take them as granted (gifted to you)."*

— Robert Emmons

\* The data appearing on this page draws from the following studies: Leung and Tong (2017), Emmons and McCullough (2003), Seligman et al. (2005), Geraghty et al. (2010), Wong et al. (2018), Grant and Gino (2010); Ni et al. (2022), Kini et al. (2016), Heckendorf et al. (2019), Deng et al. (2019), Locklear et al. (2021), and Chen (2017).

## HOW RESIDENTS BENEFIT

There are, as yet, no studies of gratitude programs in recovery housing, but Dr. Joel Wong, Director of Indiana University Bloomington's Gratitude Interventions and Practices Lab, believes RH is an ideal venue. "Expressions of gratitude tell people they're valued. That's hugely important for people from marginalized backgrounds such as people with substance use problems."

There are other potential benefits for recovery home residents. "When you're more grateful, you're more willing to seek help," says Wong. "You're also more likely to support others, initiate and sustain relationships, participate in skilled social activities such as becoming a leader or volunteer, and less likely to engage in disruptive inter-personal behaviors."

### Two Options

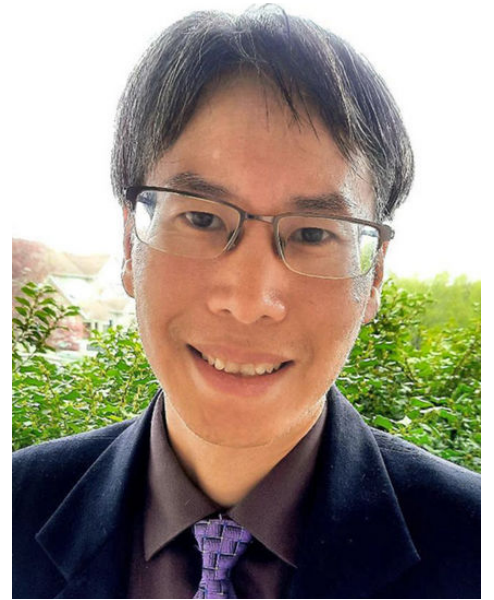
Wong has designed two Gratitude Courses for groups: a six-week in-person course with a set curriculum and a more relaxed virtual course using Zoom.

The first begins with "gratitude journaling" as participants, aided by prompts, write down each day three things they're grateful for and why. Participants proceed to "gratitude letter-writing" where they write and send detailed letters of gratitude to those they have not properly thanked. Exercises like these foster closer relationships and generate what Wong calls an "upward spiral of psycho-social benefits."

Another exercise is called "Redemptive Gratitude"—guided reflections on the positive, redemptive aspects of a past stressful experience. "This doesn't mean we ignore the pain or pretend it didn't happen," says Wong. "It means that in the midst of pain and suffering, we can still find things to be grateful for."

Examples include the support of others, the development of closer relationships, wisdom or other desirable characteristics that were gained, an appreciation for things previously taken for granted, unexpected opportunities that resulted, or disasters averted.

The six-week version of the course is far more casual with each week's Zoom meetings focused on a different theme.



DR. JOEL WONG

**Even Better In Groups!** Gratitude expressed in a group setting is especially powerful, says Wong. "That's because of the personal give and take and the chain-reaction of gratitude that can take on a life of its own."

Wong notes that gratitude exercises cost nothing, can be facilitated by lay people, and work for everyone everywhere, including rural communities where recovery housing resources may be lacking.

They're also non-stigmatizing. "It's not about how bad you were. It's about what's good in your life."

One other thing: "Never tell people they *should* be grateful," says Wong. "It never works."

**CLICK HERE**



To watch Dr. Wong's Gratitude Webinar and access helpful materials in the YouTube description.

# ONE WOMAN'S STORY

The Fletcher Group's November 2022 webinar hosted by Dr. Wong concluded with a first-person testimonial from Mindy Street, a participant in gratitude exercises at the Chrysalis House recovery residence in Kentucky.

Mindy, who struggled with addiction for over 12 years, recounted what seemed at the time to be the worst day of her life. "I was 35, staying in a hotel room, estranged from my children, and I find out I'm pregnant. In my mind, that was the worst thing that could happen. But once I took a friend's advice, checked into Chrysalis House, and began reminding myself each day of my blessings, I started turning things around and mended my relationships with my children and my parents. Today, my new son Robbie is the light of my life, the best thing that's ever happened to me. That shows how much perceptions can change."

Mindy went on: "It wasn't that long ago I was gripped by addiction, but I'm back working now, going to school, and taking care of my children. I attribute so much of it to being grateful. When I'm focused on what I'm thankful for, there's no way I would give this up."

Mindy was riveted by Dr. Wong's presentation. "I took notes the whole time because I know how powerful gratitude is. It inhibits bad decisions and bad behavior by helping me focus on all the good things I have—my kids, my friends, my job and all the opportunities ahead of me.

"And I'm not the only one, either. On the days we practice gratitude I can see the difference in the room, the effect it has. Everyone is suddenly more patient and more interested in each other.

"Just the other day, for example, we talked about blessings in disguise—how you can be challenged, even overwhelmed, by a tough situation. But when you come out the other side, there are still so many blessings if you only look for them."

Expressing gratitude is now a daily habit for Mindy. "I pick three blessings each day to journal about. It helps keep me humble. It also leads to action which is what I think gratitude is really about because it's something you show to others.



**MINDY STREET**

"For example, a coat drive we started to help the homeless stay warm this winter came out of a gratitude exercise where we reflected on the blessings of having a warm home.

## **Filling the Void**

Mindy has her own explanation for why gratitude is so effective, particularly for people in recovery.

"Addicts are so used to constant stimulation that normal life can seem boring, as though something's missing. But focusing on what you're thankful for fills that void. The life you thought was unbearable is now full of blessings. That's what gratitude does—it gives you the positive, life-affirming perspective we need to sustain abstinence and stay the course."