

# Is Showing Gratitude Good When Things Go Wrong?

## Introduction

Gratitude is often associated with positive circumstances, yet recent psychological and neuroscientific research suggests its value may be particularly profound during adversity. In times when things go wrong—whether due to personal setbacks, societal crises, or collective trauma—the practice of gratitude is posited to bolster psychological wellbeing, foster resilience, and facilitate adaptive coping. The COVID-19 pandemic, rising mental health concerns among young adults, and the neurobiological underpinnings of adversity all converge to make the exploration of gratitude during hardship both timely and consequential. This essay critically examines whether expressing gratitude is beneficial when circumstances are unfavorable, drawing upon empirical studies and theoretical frameworks from positive psychology, user-centered design in mental health technology, and neuroscience.

## The Psychological Rationale for Gratitude in Adversity

Gratitude, defined as the emotional and social experience of acknowledging the positive aspects of life, even amidst hardship, has garnered significant attention as a positive psychology intervention (Bhattacharjee et al., 2024; Paul & Devi, 2021). Positive psychology, the scientific study of what makes life most worth living, posits that intentionally cultivating positive emotions such as gratitude can mitigate the psychological toll of adversity (Paul & Devi, 2021). During crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals experienced increased anxiety, depression, and loneliness due to social isolation, economic uncertainty, and health concerns (Paul & Devi, 2021). In such contexts, positive psychology interventions—including gratitude journaling and reflection—have been advocated as psychological “first aid” to buffer against negative mental health outcomes.

The mechanism by which gratitude exerts its effects is multifaceted. Regular gratitude practice has been linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression, enhanced resilience, and improved coping with stress and trauma (Bhattacharjee et al., 2024). Gratitude encourages individuals to reframe negative experiences, identify sources of support, and savor positive moments, all of which contribute to psychological wellbeing (Bhattacharjee et al., 2024; Paul & Devi, 2021). For example, in the aftermath of pandemic-induced lockdowns, gratitude interventions were recommended to counteract loneliness and distress by fostering a sense of connection and hope (Paul & Devi, 2021).

## **Empirical Evidence: Gratitude Interventions During Hardship**

Empirical studies substantiate the role of gratitude in enhancing wellbeing precisely when things go wrong. Bhattacharjee et al. (2024) highlight that young adults, who face elevated rates of stress and mental health challenges, benefit from regular gratitude practice facilitated by digital interventions. Their user-centered design study of gratitude-promoting mobile applications found that structured gratitude exercises, prompts for reflection during stressful periods, and opportunities for mood labeling contributed to increased engagement and positive shifts in outlook (Bhattacharjee et al., 2024). Importantly, participants reported that reflecting on blessings—even amid negative circumstances—helped them identify sources of strength and reframe adversity.

Similarly, Paul and Devi (2021) document the psychological fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic—marked by anxiety, depression, and social isolation—and argue for the integration of positive psychology strategies, including gratitude, into public health responses. They reference research demonstrating that gratitude interventions, such as journaling and letter writing, can increase life satisfaction and social support while reducing negative emotions (Paul & Devi, 2021). Notably, these benefits were observed even among individuals facing acute stressors, underscoring gratitude’s role as a resilience factor.

The technological delivery of gratitude interventions further reinforces their accessibility during hardship. Jeong et al. (2020) investigated the efficacy of a social robot delivering positive psychology sessions, including gratitude exercises, to college students experiencing mental health challenges. The intervention led to statistically significant improvements in psychological wellbeing and mood, with students appreciating the opportunity to focus on positive aspects of their lives despite ongoing stressors (Jeong et al., 2020).

## **The Neuroscience of Adversity and Gratitude**

Neuroscientific research provides additional insight into why gratitude may be effective when things go wrong. Vadovicšová and Gasparotti (2024) describe the brain’s adversity processing circuits, which are activated when individuals face harm, loss, or failure. The dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC) generates warning signals in response to negative outcomes, mobilizing attention and caution to prevent further harm (Vadovicšová & Gasparotti, 2024). This adversity circuit competes with the brain’s reward processing system, which is associated with positive affect and approach behaviors.

Crucially, the adversity processing circuit inhibits the release of dopamine

and serotonin, neurochemicals linked to mood regulation and reward, thereby fostering negative affect when overstimulated (Vadovicřvá & Gasparotti, 2024). However, gratitude activates the reward system, promoting the release of serotonin and dopamine, and attenuating the adverse effects of the dACC-driven warning system. Thus, practicing gratitude in the face of adversity may help rebalance neural circuits, reduce distress, and restore emotional equilibrium (Vadovicřvá & Gasparotti, 2024).

This neurobiological perspective aligns with the psychological evidence that gratitude enables individuals to “count their blessings” even when confronted with hardship, counteracting the brain’s natural tendency to focus on threats and losses.

### **Challenges and Considerations in Practicing Gratitude During Adversity**

While the benefits of gratitude in difficult times are well-documented, several challenges warrant consideration. Bhattacharjee et al. (2024) note that young adults may find it difficult to initiate or sustain gratitude practice when under stress or time constraints. Additionally, the effectiveness of gratitude interventions may depend on individual differences, such as personality traits, engagement levels, and the context of adversity (Jeong et al., 2020).

There is also the risk of gratitude being perceived as forced or inauthentic, particularly in the face of severe trauma or injustice. Interventions must therefore be sensitive to the user’s emotional state and provide options for passive engagement or reflection, rather than mandating active gratitude expression (Bhattacharjee et al., 2024). In the context of technological interventions, user-centered design is critical to ensure that tools are adaptable and supportive, rather than prescriptive or dismissive of negative emotions.

Moreover, gratitude does not entail denying or minimizing hardship. Instead, it involves acknowledging both positive and negative aspects of experience, fostering a balanced perspective that supports adaptive coping (Paul & Devi, 2021). In this sense, gratitude complements rather than replaces other strategies for managing adversity.

### **Implications for Mental Health and Wellbeing**

The cumulative evidence suggests that showing gratitude is not only good but potentially essential when things go wrong. Gratitude practice enhances psychological resilience, facilitates coping with stress, and strengthens social connections—protective factors that are especially important during periods of adversity (Bhattacharjee et al., 2024; Paul &

Devi, 2021). The integration of gratitude interventions into mental health support systems, whether through digital applications, robotic coaches, or community programs, holds promise for mitigating the impact of crises on individual and collective wellbeing (Jeong et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the alignment of psychological and neuroscientific findings underscores the importance of gratitude as a mechanism for restoring balance between the brain's adversity and reward circuits. By consciously cultivating gratitude, individuals can counteract the neurobiological effects of stress and adversity, promoting emotional regulation and sustained wellbeing (Vadovicřvá & Gasparotti, 2024).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the practice of gratitude is demonstrably beneficial when things go wrong. Empirical studies, technological interventions, and neuroscientific theories converge to show that gratitude enhances psychological resilience, mitigates negative affect, and fosters adaptive coping amidst adversity. While challenges in implementation remain, particularly regarding authenticity and accessibility, the potential of gratitude as a positive psychology intervention is well-supported. As societies continue to grapple with collective and personal crises, integrating gratitude into mental health strategies may provide a crucial buffer against the psychological toll of adversity.

## References

- Bhattacharjee, A., Gong, Z., Wang, B., Luckcock, T. J., Watson, E., Allica Abellan, E., Gutman, L., Hsu, A., & Williams, J. J. (2024). "Actually I Can Count My Blessings" : User-Centered Design of an Application to Promote Gratitude Among Young Adults. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2404.17698v1>
- Jeong, S., Alghowinem, S., Aymerich-Franch, L., Arias, K., Lapedriza, A., Picard, R., Park, H. W., & Breazeal, C. (2020). A Robotic Positive Psychology Coach to Improve College Students' Wellbeing. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2009.03829v1>
- Paul, M. T., & Devi, N. U. (2021). Managing mental & psychological wellbeing amidst COVID-19 pandemic: Positive psychology interventions. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2104.11726v3>
- Vadovicřvá, K., & Gasparotti, R. (2024). Reward and adversity processing circuits, their competition and interactions with dopamine and serotonin signaling. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1304.4201v15>