

# The Impact of Gratitude on Mindfulness in College Students: A Mixed Methods Analysis

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## Abstract

*This study explored how gratitude may impact mindfulness in college students. Participants were assigned to a gratitude journaling group who journaled about things they were grateful for or to a control group who journaled about something arbitrary. Results suggested that self-reported mindfulness among participants in the gratitude journaling group did not differ from the control group. Major themes of the gratitude journals reflected Maslow's (1987) physiological and belongingness needs. Factors that contributed to the results are discussed, and suggestions for future study are provided.*

Sansone and Sansone (2010) defined gratitude as the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself. Whereas most people tend to regard gratitude as principally involving thankfulness for interpersonal experiences (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Kashdan et al., 2009), Schultz (2019) expanded the definition to also include appreciation for one's own assets, cherishing of beauty in everyday objects, or a general sense of thankfulness for the simple experience of living. The current COVID-19 pandemic that requires social distancing inhibits the development of many emotions that are usually developed interpersonally (Yamaguchi et al., 2020). Gratitude can be especially useful during this time where people may be experiencing stress because it helps to recognize and appreciate the resources present in one's life.

Mindfulness refers to the awareness that arises psychologically from non-judgmentally attending to the present moment and from approaching life with openness (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). Chen et al. (2016) expressed that integrating gratitude and mindfulness in studies is important because it may open significant new avenues for the enhancement of well-being and provide new mechanisms for optimal self-regulation. Further, in a study by Froh (2007), it was noted that reflecting on fortunate events in life can engage students and may also help them become more mindful.

## Purpose of This Study

This study contributes to the existing literature on gratitude and mindfulness by analyzing the role a gratitude exercise may have on mindfulness in a sample of college

students. First, it heeds the identification of a “deep and serious need” to continue studying gratitude and exploring its capacities for enhancing well-being (Smith et al., 2020, p. 29). Second, it serves as a follow-up to Froh’s (2007) aforementioned finding that gratitude helps students become more mindful. Third, Hayes et al. (1999) suggested that mindfulness and acceptance are mechanisms that allow people to effectively live in the present moment, to recognize personally-important values, and to live in accordance with these values—all developmental tasks of emerging adulthood (Baxter Magolda & Taylor, 2016).

*Hypothesis 1 (MAAS Scores):*

- a. Students in the gratitude journaling group will have higher scores on the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale—which focuses on the attention and awareness aspects of mindfulness—compared to the control group (arbitrary prompt).

## Method

The final sample consisted of  $N = 56$  participants, with 31 participants in the gratitude journaling (experimental group) and 25 participants in the arbitrary journaling (control group). Participants were between 17 and 24 years old, with over half ( $n = 31$ , 55%) between 18 and 19 years old.

First, the participants completed an informed consent form (see Appendix A) and a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). After receiving this information, participants were instructed to journal daily for one week. The experimental prompt was: “Please discuss 3 things you encountered today that you are thankful or grateful for.” The control group question asked: “Please pick an animal and describe it as best as you can. You may find it helpful to answer these questions: What sound does it make? How does it spend most of its time? What does it look like? Where can you find it?”

Control group participants were instructed to choose a different animal each day. After the journaling was complete, they received their final survey which included the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) posttest (see Appendix C) and a debriefing screen (see Appendix D). The MAAS (Brown & Ryan, 2003) is a 15-item self-report scale used to measure mindfulness—particularly, enhanced attention to and awareness of current experiencing or present reality—in each participant.

## Discussion

The quantitative results of this study suggest that the gratitude exercise did not yield a statistically significant difference in mindfulness scores as measured by the MAAS between participants who engaged in gratitude journaling versus those who journaled about an arbitrary topic (see Appendix E). In the former group, the only part of Schultz’s (2019) definition of gratitude the journals aligned with was the appreciation of relational assets. Otherwise, they tended to focus on the more basic levels of Maslow’s (1971/1993, 1987, 1999) holistic-dynamic theory of needs—especially those involving physiological needs (food) and belongingness (relationships and pets).

Furthermore, this study involved gratitude journaling on a daily basis, which may have been too often. Researchers have found that once a week may be the ideal frequency for an effective gratitude journaling intervention (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). More research is necessary to conclude whether it was the gratitude exercise that was unable to promote mindfulness in this study or whether the frequency of the gratitude exercise may have been a confounding factor. It is also important to note that previous gratitude studies utilized longer timeframes for their journaling exercises (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Therefore, the duration

over which journaling occurred in the present research may have been a limitation.

Another limitation of this study involves the sample having been taken from a non-distressed population. Many previous gratitude studies examined its effectiveness as interventions among people who were psychotherapy clients (Seligman et al., 2005, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

This research was intended to investigate whether participating in a gratitude journaling exercise could enhance mindfulness in college students compared to students who journaled about an arbitrary topic. Furthermore, this study was among the first to directly assess the content of gratitude journals. While statistically significant results were not found, many considerations and recommendations for future studies have been identified.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent Form**

Study Title: The Impact of Gratitude on Mindfulness in College Students  
Student Researcher: Brooke Shimer

#### Overview

This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Millersville University. I am a student in the Psychology Departmental Honors Program. I invite you to take part in my research study. You must be currently enrolled at Millersville University to participate in this study.

This study will explore how gratitude impacts mindfulness in college students. You will be asked to complete a confidential journal about your everyday experiences for one week. The journal entries should take no longer than 5-15 minutes to complete.

#### What are the possible risks and benefits?

This is considered a minimal risk study and should pose no more discomfort than that encountered in a classroom setting. Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating.

#### What are my rights as a research participant?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to write anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. If you encounter distress as a result of participating, counseling services are available for free in Lyle Hall to MU students.

#### Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns, you may contact Dr. René Muñoz by phone at 717.871.4457 or by email at [mu-irb@millersville.edu](mailto:mu-irb@millersville.edu). You may also contact me at [bashimer@millersville.edu](mailto:bashimer@millersville.edu) before, during, or after your participation. To contact my mentor, you may email Dr. Andrew Bland at [Andrew.Bland@millersville.edu](mailto:Andrew.Bland@millersville.edu).

#### Consent

I have read this form, the research study has been explained to me, and I understand what I have read. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above.

- I have read and agree with the above statements (1)

I will need your Millersville email address to send you the daily prompts during the 7-day period. The email will be used for sending out this information and nothing more. If you are okay with this form of communication, please type your email below so I can reach out to you concerning your further participation.

**Appendix B**  
Demographics Questionnaire

How do you identify?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Something else (3)
- Prefer not to say (4)

What is your age?

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How do you identify racially/ethnically?

- White (1)
  - Black or African American (2)
  - American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
  - Asian (4)
  - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
  - Arab American (6)
  - From multiple races (7)
  - Some other race (please specify) (8)
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What is your year in college?

- First (1)
- Second (2)
- Third (3)
- Fourth (4)
- Fifth or above (5)

What is your major?

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How often do you meditate as a voluntary practice?

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How often do you journal as a voluntary practice?

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**Appendix C**

## Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Brown &amp; Ryan, 2003)

*Instructions: Below is a collection of statements about your everyday experience. Using the scale below, please indicate how frequently or infrequently you currently have each experience. Please answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience should be. Please treat each item separately from every other item.*

- Almost Always (1)
- Very Frequently (2)
- Somewhat Frequently (3)
- Somewhat Infrequently (4)
- Very Infrequently (5)
- Almost Never (6)

1. I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until sometime later.
2. I break or spill things because of carelessness, not paying attention, or thinking of something else.
3. I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present.
4. I tend to walk quickly to get where I'm going without paying attention to what I experience along the way.
5. I tend not to notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention.
6. I forget a person's name almost as soon as I've been told it for the first time.
7. It seems I am "running on automatic," without much awareness of what I'm doing.
8. I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.
9. I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I'm doing right now to get there.
10. I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing.
11. I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time.
12. I drive places on 'automatic pilot' and then wonder why I went there.
13. I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.
14. I find myself doing things without paying attention.
15. I snack without being aware that I'm eating.

## **Appendix D**

### **Debriefing Message**

Thank you for participating in this study, which is designed to better understand how a gratitude intervention may impact mindfulness in college students. If you were in the group that wrote about 3 things you were thankful or grateful for that day, you were assigned to the gratitude condition. If you wrote about a different animal each day, you were assigned to the control condition. To maintain the validity of this study, please refrain from sharing this information with others.

Gratitude can be defined as the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to a person; it is a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Mindfulness is the awareness that arises from non-judgmentally paying attention to the present moment and, in turn, leading to a fullness of human experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). Both of these constructs have been shown to increase well-being.

In the event that you have experienced distress on account of your participation in this study, you are encouraged to seek individual counseling. The Counseling Center in Lyle Hall offers free counseling services to MU students.

**Appendix E**  
Table 1

*MAAS Total Scores of Students in Gratitude and Control Groups*

MAAS total score	Gratitude	Control
0 – 0.99	0	0
1.00 - 1.99	1	0
2.00 - 2.99	8	6
3.00 - 3.99	13	13
4.00 - 4.99	9	5
5.00 - 5.99	0	1

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