

Positioning Gratitude As A Well-Being “Savior” During Covid-19: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The first case of covid-19 was confirmed in December 2019, and the world has been altered immeasurably ever since. While this virus certainly impacted physical well-being, its highly contagious nature created a state of alarm globally and negatively impacted mental well-being as well. The lockdown made things further complicated by physically isolating people and disrupting their daily lives in an unforeseen manner. The new normal led to the shifting of social, economic and political life to online platforms.

Research has time and again suggested that gratitude interventions designed to increase appreciation of positive qualities, situations, and people in one's life can improve psychological well-being among people going through difficult times. In the given backdrop, this study looks at the role of Gratitude in bringing salvation to mental well-being in the times of Covid-19. This study was conducted during India's first pandemic wave, which lasted from February 2020 to January 2021. It is qualitative in nature as it wanted to capture the in-depth lived experiences of people practising Gratitude during Covid-19 times. The study divulges how the practice of Gratitude helped people cope with the trauma and anxiety caused during the times of Covid-19 and how it can be an effective instrument in times of crisis.

Keywords: Covid-19, Well-being, Gratitude, Qualitative Methods.

Introduction

On 31st December 2019, the first case of covid 19 was reported in Wuhan province in China. The global community has not remained the same ever since. As per the WHO, the number of confirmed covid 19 cases globally has reached 137, 866, 311 as of 15th April 2021, including 2,965,707 deaths. The lives of people throughout the globe have been impacted by the pandemic in varying degrees but have been affected nonetheless. While this virus outrightly impacted the physical health of people who contracted it, the highly contagious nature of this potentially deadly virus created a lot of panic globally and negatively impacted mental well-being. From people starting to hoard the essentials to openly discriminating against anyone who has contracted the virus or is likely to contract it (e.g., frontline health workers) were some of the fear and panic-

driven behavioural patterns were observed everywhere. The lockdown did not make things any more manageable as well. It physically isolated people from each other and disrupted people's daily lives in an unprecedented way. People had to let go of their everyday routines, and a new normal was born out of this necessity. The new normal included online work, online education, online health facilities, online workout, letting go of house help, doing chores by yourself, etc.

The question of the hour was how this new normal could be tweaked to enable everyone to maintain their mental well-being in these uncertain times. Various governmental, non-governmental organisations and mental health experts across the globe came up with different guidelines to combat the possible negative impacts of the pandemic on mental health. Most of the guidelines revolved around the following

factors, i.e., maintaining social contact and relationships despite the physical distancing norms, having some daily routine that helps in navigating through the days with some sense of certainty in these uncertain times, practising some form of Gratitude for everything good in our lives irrespective of the chaos all around us or having physical exercises and medication in the daily routine etc. Research suggests gratitude interventions—designed to increase appreciation of positive qualities, situations, and people in one's life—may improve psychological well-being among people going through mental health issues in life and even in general. (Seligman et al., 2005)

This paper uses positive psychology as a lens and tries to understand the role that Gratitude has played in people's lives in maintaining and bolstering their mental well-being in these challenging and uncertain times. The study has used people from different walks of life and has gained an insight into how they have combatted the challenges posed by the pandemic in their day-to-day lives. In-depth unstructured interviews were conducted for this study in order to gain an enriching insight into the various nuances and aspects of the problem in question.

Methodology

This study was conducted during the first wave of the pandemic in India, which lasted from February 2020 to January 2021. This study is qualitative in nature as it wanted to capture people's in-depth lived experiences during the pandemic. For the purpose of this study, Gratitude has been operationalised as a coping response to the mayhems caused by the covid-19 pandemic in India. Three people who were practising Gratitude in dealing with the stress caused by the pandemic were selected using the purposive sampling method. Respondents from different walks and stages of life were interviewed for this study to get a holistic view of the issue in question. In-depth unstructured interviews were conducted with all the subjects of the study over the period of nine weeks, and

their due consent was taken for the publication of this study. Their anonymity is maintained in keeping with the research ethics in mind.

Gratitude and Well-Being: A Review

The term gratitude has its origin in the Latin word *gratia*, which essentially means grace, gratefulness or graciousness, contingent on the context in which it is used. Gratitude is the appreciative outlook for what an individual has in his or her life, whether tangible or intangible. Through Gratitude, people recognise the goodness in their lives. In due course, they also realise that the source of the before said goodness lies beyond themselves to an extent. This realisation enables them to connect to something grander than themselves as individuals- it could be nature, people or a higher power such as God or the Universe.

Being grateful or giving thanks is not something alien to human civilisation; in fact, it is as old as the human civilisation itself. In every society and religion, Gratitude is celebrated, encouraged and seen as a moral virtue. In Judaism, thanksgiving offerings or prayers are found in the chapters of the Torah (Old Testament). They also recite blessings numerous times a day. In Christianity, the rite of Eucharist signifies "thanksgiving" with bread and wine as a symbol of Gratitude. The very popular American secular holiday of Thanksgiving also revolves around the values of giving thanks. The Islamic sacred text Quran contains numerous verses about being grateful. Gratitude or *Shukr* (as it is called in Arabic) is the path to loving Allah in Islam. In Hinduism, Gratitude is part of almost every prayer (*Arti* as it is called in Hinduism) and festival they have; for instance, during Diwali, thanks is offered to Goddess Lakshmi for bringing in all the abundance and prosperity in life.

In the domain of positive psychology research, Gratitude is significantly connected with greater happiness. It aids people in feeling further positive emotions, building solid and meaningful relationships, dealing with

hardships, and it positively affects physical health. Leading scholars like Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (2003) have defined Gratitude as having two components, a) recognition that one has something good or positive in life and; b) recognising that the source for this good is external to the individual. Like many other psychological constructs, Gratitude also has different meanings, depending upon the backdrop it is used in. Gratitude has been seen as a habit, an emotion, a moral virtue, a personality trait, and a coping mechanism. For the purpose of this study, Gratitude has been conceptualised as a coping response to the havoc caused by the covid-19 pandemic in India. Gratitude, the acknowledgement of good things received in our lives or as a whole, is both an individual good and a communal good, beneficial for the individual who holds it and beneficial for humanity at large. Gratitude is an indispensable component of thriving in humans, vital to harmonious functioning (Henning et al., 2017). Empirically conducted research over two decades (Watkins, 2014) has found evidence of the benefits of practising Gratitude on spiritual, physical, psychological and relational well-being. Vernon et al. (2009) revealed that Gratitude aids in recuperating from trauma and loss as it enables people to look at the bigger picture and the prospects that lie therein. In a way, it broadens their perceptual field so that they can look beyond their immediate losses. Feelings of Gratitude serve as a buffer in lowering stress levels and also as a reinforcer of positive emotions, resilience and life satisfaction in general. But most importantly, Gratitude helps develop and preserve social relationships (Algoe et al., 2020).

Emmons and McCullough (2003) conducted a series of experiments with different degrees of intervention intensity, measurements, and samples to assess the idea that cultivating feelings of Gratitude can enhance people's daily psychological functioning. Participants in their original study completed nine weeks of weekly diaries. According to the group they were

allocated to, the first group in the diaries recounted their difficulties, the second group their reasons for Gratitude, and the third group their ordinary everyday activities. All participants reported their weekly well-being in addition to the diaries.

The results showed that the gratitude group exhibited higher well-being than the other two groups, indicating that Gratitude will be much more effective in promoting well-being than other types of daily evaluations. The research into what is now known as "gratitude interventions" was developed based on this study. In a gratitude program, participants engage in behaviour designed to raise their awareness of why they should feel grateful (often on a regular basis for a prolonged period of time).

Even though some studies have discovered benefits from gratitude treatments, there is considerable uncertainty about supporting their efficiency. According to Wood et al. (2010), who reviewed the research on Gratitude, "Indeed we believe that the portrayal of gratitude interventions as a key success of positive psychology is somewhat premature, and are alarmed that the effectiveness of these interventions now seems to be taken for granted amongst the positive psychology community ..." (p. 898). A meta-analysis of gratitude interventions reached the same conclusion: "Our results show little evidence for the efficacy of gratitude interventions" (Davis et al., 2016, p. 25). Despite these reservations, Wood et al. and Davis et al. were optimistic about the outcomes of gratitude interventions and felt that further research was warranted. This optimism and the demand for additional research served as the inspiration for further studies in the field of gratitude interventions. Additionally, gratitude interventions may have a significant impact on those who are feeling less positive affect than persons who are experiencing more positive affect, according to Wood et al. (2010).

As mentioned earlier in the paper, gratitude practice is something that is well accepted or rather revered across cultures and religions. It humbles people as they believe there is a power outside of them (could be a person, event or even a 'divine intervention' per se). A power that is always looking out for them in their time of need; as a result of this realisation, people feel motivated to express gratefulness towards the donators or helpers in some morally appropriate way. However, Gratitude goes past reciprocity as it also stimulates people to do good. This particular behaviour is much apparent during the catastrophic times of covid-19, with people pooling in their resources for the betterment of those in need or to meet the most urgent needs such as oxygen cylinders, plasma, or medications. This behaviour could be due to the fact that people who are faring relatively better in the covid-19 crisis have been grateful for all they have and wanted to extend a helping hand to the people who need help in these trying times.

The advantages of a grateful bent of mind or a grateful orientation towards life, in general, could be highly useful, especially in times of crisis that generate high levels of panic and stress, such as the covid-19 crisis at present. In a study conducted by Watkins et al. (2021), evidence of Gratitude's encouraging role in maintaining well-being during the pandemic was found. The study found that more than 56% of people felt Gratitude. This percentage was 17 % more than any other positive emotion such as happy, joyful, hopeful etc., felt by the respondents of the study. This study exposed that even in the catastrophic times of pandemic, people described being very thankful, and they positively anticipated their gratefulness to rise in the future. In times of disasters or in disconcerting times in general, people depend on positive feelings to cope with the situation, and they seem to turn to Gratitude much more than any other positive emotion. This finding clearly supports the argument that, 'Gratitude is not only the best answer to the tragedies of life.

It is the best approach to life itself' (Solomon, 2004, p.105).

Emmons (2004) describes Gratitude as 'a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift is tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty' (p.554). He looks at it as being centred in the present moment. Studies have shown that gratitude interventions do in fact, increase well-being, life satisfaction, happiness and self-esteem (Davis et al., Dickens, 2017; Rash et al., 2011). Other beneficial mitigating effects of Gratitude on mental health have been shown in dealing with stress, anxiety, depression and various kinds of health anxieties (e.g., anxiety among cancer patients) (Cregg & Cheavens, 2021; Otto et al., 2016). Thus, it was vital to see through this study how Gratitude could help people in times of covid-19 distress, especially during the first wave when they were caught off guard by the consequences of this deadly virus.

Role of Gratitude in the times of Covid-19

Sunanda (name changed) is a Doctor at a Government Hospital in one of the Northern states in India. During the covid outbreak, she was appointed to take care of the patients in the covid-19 ward at the hospital. At the time she was living with her six years old daughter and her house help while her husband was posted in a different station. As soon as she was appointed to serve at the covid ward she had carefully shifted her belongings to the servant room in which the house help used to live and it had its own bathroom and separate entrance, so that she could minimise the contact with her little daughter. And the daughter would feel really upset for not being able to run to her mother as soon as she returned from her call of duty. But things really took a toll on her when fine day she lost her sense of smell, started having breathing issues and lost her appetite as well. At that point she knew there was something wrong, she did not come back from her job that day, instead she got herself tested

and after a horrible wait for eight hours, she was declared positive for covid-19. She remembers that the first feeling she felt was of fear and guilt that she might have also caused her daughter to contract the disease from her. She was then put into an isolation ward and her house was sealed which clearly had a negative impact on the health of a six years old already living away from either of her parents. In this scenario although she felt really upset for being sick and weak, she still remained grateful throughout for the good health of her child and having her family by her side. Having video chats with her daughter was something that got her through this tumultuous time along with the help from her mother and her husband who immediately moved in temporarily to take care of her and the child. She said though she was physically and mentally weak, and would be really depressed at times, she had to make deliberate efforts to count the number of things she was grateful for, as that would put her mind at ease. She says,

“I remember feeling really frustrated for being so weak and away from my six years old, thinking about her, worrying about her, feeling so helpless, and then I realised that my vitals weren’t getting any better because I was not just physically weak but I was also struggling mentally. And that’s when something switched in me and I told myself that I have been telling all my patients over the years, that the fight against any ailment is fifty percent psychological. And that I need to pull myself up and be strong and also be grateful that I have all these resources and people to ensure my recovery. And I picked up my journal and looked around and started jotting down everything that I am grateful to have in my life. I did this for everyday that I was in the Covid-19 ward as patient and I continued doing it even afterwards. And after that point everything started becoming more positive. This not only helped my recovery and also made me all the more grateful for getting back at my job after I had recovered as my own covid-19 experience as a patient had increased my gratification from job as a doctor and I was more than ever

motivated to help patients heal. I also went back to praying as I had been out of touch for a past couple of years (ever since I left home and moved to the medical school hostel), I think it gives me a sense of relief to know that there is some higher power looking after me also guides me in the right direction, when I feel lost and worn out. I thinking praying and being grateful for everything in my life has helped me in coping with all the pandemic related challenges in a way that nothing else has.”

Kabir (name changed), 28 years old, is a Doctoral research scholar. He has been diagnosed with Bipolar mood disorder. He takes antidepressants and other medicines prescribed by his doctor to cope with the same ailment. As a mental health patient, the lockdown caused by the pandemic had a major impact of his day-to-day life. For starters, it meant that he wasn’t able to visit his psychiatrist as usual, and this weekly meeting has become a major part of his routine life. Talking to his psychiatrist gives him a sense that he can somehow manage and control his thoughts and ergo can control his life. But the uncertainty put forth by the pandemic and the lockdown was already too much and not being able to meet his therapist in such uncertain times took a toll on his mental health. He remembers feeling “jittery and very anxious” while trying to make sense of this unforeseen situation. And with regards to the medicines, his medicines aren’t usually available at the local drugstore, he usually gives the prescription to the pharmacy and then they order that medicine for him. But because of the lockdown, initially he wasn’t able to go to his psychiatrist and could not get his prescription as a result. Later on, his psychiatrist started taking virtual meeting but he did not quite feel the same in these meetings. However, she mailed the prescription to him by post, so he was able to acquire his medicines. He also mentions how this lockdown put a damper on his research work, as his lab was closed and his whole routine so far was disrupted. He remembers feeling ‘very empty’ for not being able to work

as usual. Negotiating with this 'new normal' was all the more difficult for him with his ongoing battle with Bipolar mood disorder which could send him to long spells of depression at any given point. He says there are some things that helped him to come to terms with this change, one this he did was created a work from home routine for himself in which he started focusing on writing research paper based on his lab work so far, started calling his loved ones more regularly, and started writing a gratitude journal as prescribed by his psychiatrist. According to him,

"I was so lost in the initial days of the lockdown, I did not know whether I should stay back or go home, or when will my labs will reopen. There was just so much of uncertainty and conjecture about the lockdown and no one knew anything for sure, either about the lockdown or about this ghastly disease. But I think with the help of my psychiatrist and the gratitude journal practice I learnt how to pace myself in this unforeseen situation and acclimatise to it. I mean I had never thought that something as simple like writing three things that made me happy or grateful today, could bring a sense of safety and calm in me. I think for me, it was like me telling myself that I have got this under control no matter what happens, and that was like a eureka realisation. To me, this gratitude journal was my Savior, my confidant, my only company in these lonely times."

Rajiv and Suman are an elderly couple who live alone as their children are all working in different cities. For them the lockdown was major issue as they had to let go of their house help and had to avoid their morning and evening walks, a time when they met their other elderly friends and chatted with them. Plus, the initial panic about covid-19 being more ruthless to elderly with comorbidities scared them even more as Rajiv who is 74, is a diabetic and also has high blood pressure. So, their lockdown began with negotiating and dividing the household chores between them with Rajiv doing all the Dusting and some

cooking and Suman doing some cooking and some cleaning. Suman was so scared for Rajiv in the beginning that she would not even open the windows of the house thinking that the virus will come in, and contaminate them as well. This kind of paranoid behaviour subsided gradually but it took some doing on the part of Suman and Rajiv and their friends. Her friends from the evening walk group decided to have an online meet up every evening, around the same time as their evening walk and they would share things that they were grateful for during that day, one of them had heard that her sister-in-law had done a similar thing in the US.

"This seemed like an odd idea initially and I was honestly reluctant but then my granddaughter who is a practicing psychologist told me that it is actually a scientifically proven method to improve well-being in behavioral sciences. And as we started doing it every day, I remember getting excited for the group meeting on WhatsApp and waiting eagerly to share what made me happy, sometimes even the silliest things like Rajiv's snoring were the things that made me happy. I realised over the course of time that the things that truly made me happy were actually quite simple, such as sharing a laugh with my husband, video calling my children and grandchildren and even just knowing that we are not in this together, we have a set of family and friends who truly love and cherish us. So then I decided, *bohat ho gya lockdown and covid covid, we are going to live the fullest in our house itself and just like that the paranoia was gone. I still worried about Raj but I wasn't as paranoid as I was in the beginning. This gratitude sharing group with my friends made me realise that we were all in this together. And We still have so much to be grateful for, things that we often take for granted.*"

As per a study by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping comprises of "cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and/ or external demands that are created by a stressful event" (p. 226). Research has proven that positive emotions such as Gratitude can aid

the capability to cope with a traumatic event in an acclimatising manner (Emmons & McCullogh, 2004, Fredrickson, 1998). In particular, Gratitude is one of the positive emotions that has been viewed as a significant part of coping. As per the broaden-and build theory, whenever a person experiences the emotion of Gratitude, he or she becomes more conscious of the compassion conferred upon them by others and this further encourages them to contemplate and act in a manner that would enhance their psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Emmons and Shelton (2002) supplemented this argument by pointing out that gratitude may be a way by which misfortunes are shifted into prospects for growth, being appreciative not for the situations so much, rather for the courage and learnings that comes from dealing with it.

Studies have demonstrated that there is a significant positive correlation between coping and Gratitude. For instance, Wood, Joseph and Linley (2007) studied the relation between Gratitude and coping by studying 236 undergraduate students from two different samples. Both the groups were administered different tests and showed that Gratitude was positively associated with adaptive coping responses such as pursuing social support (ibid.). Vernon (2012) concluded that Gratitude can help trauma survivors in coping with traumatic past experiences.

During a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, being grateful is highly critical to maintain an optimistic outlook towards life amidst all the negativity and uncertainty. It helps in healing, gives you some positive energy and also brings some hope. Positive psychology research has shown that practicing Gratitude in tandem with other positive emotions promotes subjective well-being and flourishing (Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman, 2011). By being grateful, we can mindfully cope with anxiety and uncertainty. It helps in refocusing on what is it that we value, what is it we can control and what it we can give back (Emmons & Stern, 2013).

A study conducted by Wood, Joseph, Llyod and Atkins in 2009 looked at the relationship between the quality of sleep and Gratitude. This study consisted of 401 respondents and their age varied from 18 to 68 years old, GQ-6 scale was used to measure the levels of Gratitude. This study clearly showed that subjects of the study who were more grateful before falling to sleep and had a positive frame of mind had a better quality of sleep on daily basis in comparison to people who had worrying and negative thoughts before sleeping.

Four studies conducted in 2002 by McCullogh, Emmons and Tsang looked at Gratitude and psychological domains. Three specific psychological domains that were studied were religiousness/ spirituality, pro-sociality, and emotionality/well-being. It was found in the studies that investigation of these three aspects of human psychology could distinguish between grateful and less grateful individuals. As per the findings of these studies, individuals who were grateful were more satisfied with their lives, experienced additional positive emotions, and experienced lesser negative emotions like envy, anxiety and depression. They also discovered that more grateful individuals are also more pro-social. They are likely to be more forgiving, empathetic, supportive and helpful that those who are less grateful. Their life goals are also not materialistic in nature, their focus is on finding inner peace and happiness. Study also looked at the relation between spiritually/ religiosity and Gratitude and found that people who were more grateful were also more spiritually and religiously inclined.

In a study carried out by Kashdan, Uswatte and Julian in 2006, the researchers looked at the role of Gratitude in the 'post-traumatic growth' in people suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The sample consisted of 42 subjects diagnosed with PTSD and 35 'comparison' veterans. The findings revealed that the people suffering from PTSD has very low levels of Gratitude. The study further emphasised that Gratitude could be helpful in the post-traumatic

growth process. Being appreciative of our blessings can certainly make us feel happier. In fact, research on Gratitude has shown that it is associated with positive emotions including contentment, happiness, hope and pride (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Conclusion

As many scholars have backed it, Gratitude can be an effective method of coping in times of crisis like Covid-19 (Dennis & Ogden, 2022). Positive emotions like appreciation are strongly associated with health and wellbeing, according to research. (Fishman, 2020) Positive feelings not only increase happiness, but they also set off a chain reaction in your life. By helping you keep your attention on the aspects of life you value, as well as what is within your control and what you can do to benefit others, emotions like thankfulness and humour can also help you deal with anxiety and uncertainty. Having a grateful mindset can also help you become more resilient, which can then help you deal with your current problems and find a way to go forward despite the obstacles you encounter. (ibid.)

However, it goes without saying that it does have its limitations as a first aid when someone has just gone through a traumatic event in their life. Gratitude is certainly more effective as a preventive strategy to ensure that people can maintain and bolster their positive emotions and not fall into the trap of cyclical negative emotions. Gratitude in any form, whether praying, journal writing, or gratitude sharing with your friends and loved ones, can effectively promote well-being.

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