

#393 – The Science and Practice of Gratitude with Dr. Robert A. Emmons

A psychology podcast by David Van Nuys, Ph.D.

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Shrink Rap Radio #393: The Science and Practice of Gratitude with Dr. Robert A Emmons

Announcer: It's Shrink Rap Radio. All the psychology you need to know and just enough to make you dangerous. It's all in your head. And now's here's your host, DVN

(Music)

DVN: My guest today is Dr. Robert A. Emmons, and we are going to be discussing his research on the power of gratitude. Be sure to go to our website for more detail on Dr. Emmons very distinguished background. Now, here's the interview.

Dr. Robert Emmons, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

RE: Thank you, David. It is great to be with you today.

DVN: Well, it's a real pleasure to have you on this show. You and I have been playing appointment tag for a little while. And, so, I am glad it finally worked out. My listeners may hear in my voice that unfortunately I've come down with a cold. So, there may be some sniffing or coughing in the background, but I'm going to do my best to keep that to a minimum.

Now, I've been enjoying your most recent book *Gratitude Works: A 21 Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity*. Your name has become pretty much synonymous with research on gratitude. I kept running into your name and saying geez I gotta talk to this guy. At what point did you become interested in gratitude, and I am wondering if there might be a story around that.

RE: Well, first of all, I did discover that one way to become known for something is to make sure no one else is doing work on it, so that's a big part of the equation. When it's a small field, it's easy to be one of the few number of people who are considered to be so called experts on the topic, so that's some advice on all those people out there looking for a topic; find something that no one else is doing and then you can carve it out as your own, but (**DVN:** There you go) seriously what happened, it was quite interesting, it was really an assignment. I was invited to a conference, a very small conference, on a topic that was referred to at the time as the classical sources of human strength. So this is a topic where there were, I don't know, no more than 6 or 7 or 8 of us invited. The assignment was for each of us who were coming there to become an expert on one of these sources of human strength, which we also think of as human virtues, so those qualities that historically were thought of as, by philosophies and religions, as the essential elements of what it means to live a good life. So things like hope and optimism and wisdom and love and spirituality and humility, and gratitude was one of those that was in the pile. Well, it turns out that nobody chose gratitude. I somehow got the last choice, the last pick, and it was the one that was left over.

So they told me, alright, Dr. Emmons, you're going to become our gratitude expert. Go out there and find out what is known about this, come to the conference and tell us what is known about gratitude. So, it was really an assignment. It was the best assignment ever received.

DVN: Wow, wow. Now, we've been hearing about gratitude as one of the components of happiness in relation to positive psychology, and I am wondering to what extent your interest in gratitude was sparked by positive psychology, or if you were already researching it. Actually, the conference that you described sounds like it might have been sponsored by, you know, Marty Seligman or one of those folks.

RE: Well, it sounds that way but actually it pre-dates and precedes the positive psychology movement. (**DVN:** Oh, good for you) It was around the same time. It was in the late 90s. Well, you know, I was doing research back in graduate school on happiness and subjective well-being. This was in the mid 1980s at the University of Illinois with my mentor, Dr. Ed Diener. And Ed Diener became the guru of happiness research. We didn't call it happiness back then, so we couldn't use the h word. The h word wasn't considered to be scientific enough. It wasn't technical enough. It wasn't, you know, a respectable term. So, we called it subjective well-being, trying to figure out who is happy and why they're happy and what are the elements of a happy life, and gratitude is just one of those attitudes that kind of fit right into this approach we were taking in looking at the internal factors, personality traits, dispositions, and attitudes, that enable a person to extract happiness and create happiness in their lives. So it really does pre-date the positive psychology movement by about, I'd say, a good decade or so.

DVN: Yeah, that's one of the things I've discovered as I looked into positive psychology, had some interest in looking into it since I was pretty strongly identified with humanistic psychology and so then along comes positive psychology and it seems to me in some way with a very similar intent. And one of the things I discovered was that it brought some people under the umbrella of positive psychology who'd been, some of them researching, someone probably like Ed Diener and others, who'd been researching a certain topic for thirty years and but now here's a good umbrella for it to fit under.

RE: Well, that's why it had so much, I think, power, and just the way it took off so quickly in research and, not just research, but an entire movement. There's a really great study in the sociology of science, you know how a, how a leader, like a Martin Seligman, can, you know, inspire so many researchers at all levels of development. You know, from the senior scientist like Diener all the way down to undergraduates and graduate students and beginning assistant professor, just to coalesce an entire movement, is pretty impressive in and of itself.

DVN: Yes, really, and, not to harp on this, but it reminded me of the beginnings of humanistic psychology where there was a similar kind of burst of energy and excitement and people coming together so, I'm glad to see a re-birth of that.

RE: And the time is right, people are realizing the shortcomings of traditional models, and so you get, just the right time for a movement, and I think it is very similar to the parallel you drew with humanistic psychology.

DVN: Yeah. So, why is gratitude important? It's a short question but probably a big answer.

RE: It's a big answer. We could spend the rest of the day talking about it. You know, but one way I thought about answering a question like that is in what ways is it not important? I mean, it's just so fundamental, so central, so foundational. It really affects every realm of functioning, you know cognitive, emotional, social, relational, spiritual, biological, I mean, just think about life itself. So much of life is about giving, receiving, repaying benefits. It's about relationships. It's about dependency. Other people doing things for us that we cannot do for ourselves. I mean that's the way we are born, obviously we can't do much for ourselves when we're born. At the other end of the lifespan, we get to the point where we can't do a lot for ourselves either. You know, we have a few good decades or relative independence and self-reliance in between, but even then we still need other people to provide us with benefits and kindnesses and favors things that we can't accomplish for ourselves, so what's the emotion? What's the engine that drives the perception other people are doing things for us? And I think that's where gratitude comes in. So, just for that reason alone, gratitude is foundational to life.

DVN: Yeah, now in fact, you've done a bunch of research, and your research has shown that there are many positive consequences of gratitude. Are there any that sort of come to top of mind here. Is there a study or two maybe that you'd like to take us through?

RE: Well, our first study. So, when I was invited to this conference and they asked me to go out and review the research. It was quite, actually, an easy task because there was no research. I mean the only study that was conducted was one that was like in the 1920s and there were a couple of scattered studies in the field of emotions from the 1960s, 1970s but there was no systematic research on gratitude and the benefits or practicing gratitude, so I began to conduct gratitude journaling studies where I asked people to, you know, keep a journal or diary, write entries for what they were grateful for, and at the same time trying to measure other aspects of their well-being: Happiness, purpose in life, relationships, how close connected they felt to others, the absence of loneliness, the absence of distress. And so, one of the first findings from this study was that gratitude seemed to work in activating and energizing positive feelings, things like joy and enthusiasm and alertness and attentiveness. So gratitude was magnifying positive feelings at the same time it was also decreasing negative feelings. It was just, I mean the exercise was really surprising that people actually began exercising more when they were keeping a gratitude journal and the fact they reported they slept a little bit more and they felt more refreshed when they woke up. So, we were seeing benefits in realms we didn't really predict in advance. It wasn't that surprising that people felt better emotionally. After all, when they are focusing on what's going right in their lives, you kind of expect that. But, to actually demonstrate that to become more active physically and to spend more time exercising and sleeping better. That was really what we found to be the most surprising findings.

DVN: Yeah, that's great. And, at the same time, one of the things that intrigued me is your finding that there are non-obvious results of gratitude. I mean that's one. But there were some other examples that you gave where you for example, found that occasional gratitude journaling may be more effective than daily journaling. And, remembering failures and painful experiences in relation to gratitude may be more effective than dwelling only on successes. So tell us more about these and any other paradoxes.

RE: Well, that one paradox is intriguing to me- that last finding because, you know, we tend to think of gratitude as really dwelling on the positive and you're focusing on, your turning your mind to all that which is going right in your life and in fact, some people say that's a, one of the critiques of the gratitude

movement and positive psychology more generally is just this happy thinking or positive thinking and denial of the negative.

DVN: Yeah.

RE: We actually show that that's far from the case and the fact that one route to increasing gratitude is to focus on the negative or to what we call remember the bad, where we ask people to think of you know really bad things that happened. We're not trying to make them depressed, what we're trying to do is create a contrast between where they were and where they are now, which is the way our mind works anyway, by making these comparisons and contrasts. We're just trying to use this for our advantage here by saying, okay so remember something bad that happened, some loss, some failure, some disappointment, and that's where you were then but here you are today. Here you are now. You've gotten through this worst day of your life, you've gotten through the trauma, you've gotten through the trial and remember where you were now, I mean remember where you were then, where you are now, and you look to see where you are now, you remember how difficult life used to be and how far you've come. So this now becomes a positive contrast, which is great way for growing gratitude. You think about how worse life was or how worse life could be right now, and that can be a very potent strategy for growing gratitude.

DVN: Yeah, I believe that. Now, you mentioned the increase in physical exercise. What do we know about other health consequences of developing gratitude?

RE: Yeah, that's a great question. That's really a growing area of research. In fact, it's a lot considered to be the new generation or in some ways, the next generation, of research on gratitude is all about the physical health outcome. There's a whole host of research studies that are looking at very modern up to date, state of the art, methods and measures looking at some of the real objective outcomes and endpoints for gratitude.

For example, it's been found recently that gratitude is related to blood pressure. Gratitude can actually lower both systolic and diastolic blood pressure. There's some studies looking at improved immune function. Higher levels of good cholesterol, HDL, lower levels of bad cholesterol, LDL. Higher levels of heart rate variability, which is very good as a marker of cardiac, good positive cardiac functioning. Lower levels of Creatinine, which measures kidney functioning or renal functioning, so you want lower levels of that. There's other evidence looking at cardiac inflammation, c-reactive protein, which is a measure that cardiac researchers are looking at now and gratitude is related to that as well. So this is really this new generation looking at real biomarkers of health, and I think is very exciting. Basically, grateful people take better care of their health. They exercise, they are less likely to engage in health damaging behaviors like tobacco and excessive alcohol use. So gratitude really is good medicine.

DVN: Yeah. Is there a genetic component to gratitude with some people just being born with a stronger tendency in that direction, as with optimism?

RE: Yeah, you know, I don't know too much about that right now. I've always thought as a personality psychologist those studies always seemed to show the same amount of heritability of all these traits, so showing somewhat of a moderate amount whether it's optimism or happiness or any of these. It seems like a certain degree of it is genetic. We know that people can move around regardless of where they're

at today if they start to practice gratitude. Their actual dispositional or long-term level of gratitude can change. So, yeah, I think heritability counts for part of the reason people are at different levels of gratitude. I also think that people can move that level of gratitude by practicing. We find that gratitude can transform people. I mean, if people were stuck at the set point, there would be no point in trying to practice gratitude because, you know, it would be futile. But, in fact, people can shift in their level of gratitude over time.

DVN: Well, that's good. That's good news. What's the relationship of gratitude to other virtues or strengths such as optimism, forgiveness, resilience?

RE: Right, You know, I mean in some respects, they tend to come in as a package deal, to co-occur, so people who practice gratitude are often the same ones that practice forgiveness or are more hopeful or optimistic. In some respect, there's a lot of overlap between them, particularly if you break them into different categories. Let's say the social virtues versus more of the internal cognitive virtues or knowledge based virtues. So, people who are grateful tend to be forgiving. They tend to be more compassionate, more generous, and so on. I think forgiveness is an interesting one because, in many respects, it's the total opposite of gratitude but the effects are similar. Because gratitude results in increasing positive feelings because you're amplifying the goodness you've received. Whereas in forgiveness, you're trying to let go of negativity. You're trying to let go of negative emotions, things like resentment and hostility and anger. You're letting go of negative thoughts like thoughts of retaliation, or revenge. You're letting go of negative behaviors toward a person who has done something harmful to you. So, in some respect, that's the very opposite of gratitude which is involving experiencing more positive feelings toward the other person. So, they fit very nicely together as a package or suite of interpersonal strengths.

DVN: Yeah. There's a place in the book where you use the term gratitude light, and that caught my interest because, as one moves forward in the book, it becomes clear that there are a lot of dimensions to gratitude and that one can...kind of your challenge to the reader is to really go as far with it as they can. So you suggest that gratitude is not a simple monolithic thing but rather is more nuanced with such dimensions as intensity, frequency, span, and density. Take us through these four dimensions, if you will.

RE: Yeah, you know the more I study and think about and reflect and write about gratitude, I realize there's so many different qualities or components to it. It's not just one thing, that's for sure, and a practice to try to increase gratitude can focus on these different elements or dimensions. So intensity and frequency, I think, are the easy two, the ones that we're mostly familiar with where intensity is simply the strength. So when you feel gratitude, how strong is that feeling? Is it very strong, is it mild, is it moderate? So that's regardless of how often or how frequent you feel a sense of thankfulness in your life.

And then frequency is just how often on a regular basis, is it something you feel every day, or do you feel it once a week, or once a month, or on Thanksgiving day, you know one time a year. That's your gratitude day. So that's frequency.

The other two are a little different. Density has to do with how many people you feel grateful to for a single thing in your life at the time. So something beneficial has happened to you. You've won an

Olympic medal, for example, or an Academy award, to talk about two current events. Do you give credit to a number of people or to a single person, or take all the credit yourself? So that would be the density.

And then the other one is span, which is the number of different circumstances at any one point in time. So, do you feel grateful about your family, your friends, your job, your health, life itself? What are the very specific things you can list? So that's how wide is your range or span of those things for whom you are grateful. So, all different ways of looking at gratitude really.

DVN: Yeah. Now mindfulness is a very popular topic these days. What's the relationship between gratitude and mindfulness?

RE: Yeah, that's an interesting one. I tend to think of- was it necessary for feeling grateful in terms of a little acronym I've developed. I call it AIM- A I M where each of those letters stands for a different process that's necessary for gratitude. A stands for attention. Attention, noticing, or looking for the good things that are going right in a person's life. If a mindful reflection helps us to stop and notice and look for the good, then I think mindfulness becomes one of the core components that's necessary. But when we find that good thing, we also have to think about it in a very detailed way. I think break it down into multiple components. So the person who says they're grateful to their spouse, for example. Well, what are the various things about this spouse - the person's character, what they've done that elicits this amount of gratitude. So that requires also a mindful reflection. So gratitude is really about a way of looking at the world, about noticing, becoming aware of, acknowledging. You know, we think of it as an emotion, a feeling, but it's also very cognitive, which requires all this awareness.

DVN: You advocate keeping a gratitude journal as one of the most powerful tools for developing a stronger disposition toward gratitude. What's that recommendation based on?

RE: Well, the journal is based on that fact that it's the method we use when we start to do our research studies. You know, it turns out that these journaling studies have now been replicated in the laboratories, actually all around the world there's several hundred if not now a few thousand participants who have been in these studies between the ages of 8 and 80, and it's one of the most, I think, easiest places to start if you want to cultivate gratitude, whether you doing it individually in your life, you're doing it with a client, or you want to do it as a researcher to activate gratitude. It's one of the best and most reliable and simplest ways for people to journal is to take out some pieces of paper or use their phone or some other device, technology, and just reflect every day on those things in their lives for which they are grateful or thankful. So, it's just based on the fact that that's what we've done in our research studies and that's what most of the studies are using the same methodology.

DVN: Yeah, I've used my iPhone and iPad to, the voice recognition feature, to do that kind of journaling. So I was glad to encounter that in your book so I don't have to feel guilty about not doing it the old fashioned way. That really makes sense to me. How does one keep at it, keep it fresh, because there are so many things I had, self-improvement projects I've undertaken in my life, and you know, then they can kind of fade out.

RE: That's right. It's like anything, you know, physical exercise, trying to change one's bias, and it just seems to be the way we're wired so that we get accustomed to, the process known as habituation, where you get less and less of an effect for the same behavior. I think one of the most important things, we try

to keep this fresh. We don't do it the same way all the time. So whether that involves a different mode, such as writing it down versus talking about it, sharing it with other people, posting it through social media, using an app. That's great. I think if we vary it and don't force ourselves to try to do it every single day. I think that goes back to one of those findings showing that occasional journaling.

Occasional doesn't mean once a month, it means irregular like two or three times a week versus every single day. I think that can help it become fresh, so we can avoid what is called gratitude fatigue. That's an important one. And if we're very specific in the things that we write about, studies have shown that if you can take one benefit in your life and elaborate upon that one, breaking it down into various components, you're going to extract more benefits from it than just writing globally about that one thing. Focus on things which are very surprising, things that happen during the day that maybe came out of nowhere. You didn't expect it to happen. Write about things you normally take for granted. What do I take for granted in my life? I'm going to write about that today. So if you actually shift your mental set and write differently, find different things to write about or have a different focus, you know. Write about the bad thing, remember the bad that happened where you are now. So you can achieve some, I think, some freshness and some novelty and keep it fresh and novel and new and different. And then, you're less likely to give up on it. You're more likely to persist and sustain in its effects over time.

DVN: In my own experience with doing it it's always kind of amazed me that there, I don't know, that there's no bad day. It's pretty hard to have a day where you can't find some things to be grateful about.

RE: That's very true. Even, you know, we've got people who start fairly depressed or just by nature tend to be more prone to negativity and for them a good day is that nothing bad happened, and that's fine, too.

DVN: Yeah. What about children and gratitude. What are your thoughts about teaching children gratitude and what's the best age to begin?

RE: Well, early as possible, of course. Children- it's very interesting to look at research on gratitude. Quite a bit of it now, over the past decade on adults, but very little on children. I think one of the reasons why is that there's a stereotype out there, a belief that children are notoriously ungrateful. You know, we have to teach them to write thank you notes and we come believing that they are so self-absorbed and egocentric and have difficulty taking the perspective of other people. So, we think that gratitude is something which is a very foreign concept to them and maybe we haven't researched it or thought about it too much in terms of its development because of these biases that we hold.

I don't think that's necessarily the case. In fact, it may be the case that children are actually much better at gratitude than are adults. They find it easier, for example, to accept gifts, than do adults. I think one of the things that gets in the way, hopefully we'll have a chance to talk about some of the obstacles, but one of the things that gets in the way of gratitude as an adult is that we don't want to be indebted to others. We don't want to necessarily have to reciprocate. When we receive a gift, our first thought is, oh my gosh, how am I going to pay that back. What do I need to do to reciprocate that. Whereas, a child, not so much so. They willingly accept the gift. Think about it, if they were so worried about being indebted, as soon as they were old enough to be making money or be out on their own, they'd get to the point where they would say "OK, well, Dad, how much do I owe you for 18 years?". They don't think in those terms, right? So, they don't have as many hang-ups or biases against accepting goodness. So maybe it's easier for them to become grateful and then we just need to develop age appropriate strategies, I don't know if you can call them strategies, or practices or activities, maybe it's a better word, that one can do as a

parent or as a teacher to cultivate gratitude whether it's at home or in the classroom. Kids are very imaginative, and they're very creative when it comes to ways to display their gratitude, so there's a lot of specific things they can do.

My colleagues just wrote a book. It's entitled *Making Grateful Kids*, and it's just out this week, so this book *Making Grateful Kids* is just full of all sorts of ideas and practical suggestions for how to cultivate gratitude- what works in kids. So, I'd recommend any listeners interested in that topic to consult that book.

DVN: Yeah, that's a great suggestion. I've got some grandchildren who are in that age of real spontaneity and just spontaneous love and, yeah, it seems like it's pretty spontaneous and not taught and it just, it makes you feel so good to be on the receiving end of that.

RE: Very much so, and I'm sure you model it for them and their parents model it for them, and that's one of the best ways too, I talk to parents who say "what can I do to get my kids to be grateful?". They want to give their kids the gift of gratitude, and I tell them, it's not always what I think they want to hear, but I think it's true- well, you cannot give your kids something you yourself don't have, and if you yourself don't practice gratitude or model gratitude, it's going to be very difficult to convey the importance of that to your kids or grandkids.

DVN: Yeah, that kind of leads into my next question, kind of swinging back to adults. Would I be right in saying that gratitude is not just an attitude or a feeling but is also has an action component?

RE: Right, and I think we hinted at that before when we talked about the gratitude light approach, sort of listing all the things that you feel good about implies it's just internal. Just this warm fuzzy feeling that really has no outward focus or has no implications for what a person actually does. And that's simply not true. We know that there's an action component to any emotion whether it's fear, which freezes us, or anger which causes us to lash out. Gratitude causes us to want to give back the goodness we have received. We want to express that thankfulness whether it's in thoughts, whether it's in actions, whether it's in words. But there is this tendency that, I think it's a very important component of gratitude, this desire to give back in some way, in some measure toward which we've received and are still receiving. I think the experience of gratitude is not complete without the expression of it, the action contingency, which also makes that feeling stronger, more likely to be expressed in the future, so it reinforces the internal feelings. So, gratitude is doing something, it's not just about feeling good, but it's causing people to engage in behaviors consistent with that emotion, such as generosity and giving back. And becoming, just changing one's relationship, like becoming more open and more trusting of others. So, a number of benefits in that domain, very much expressive.

DVN: Yeah, you just made me think of the idea of paying it forward and there've been some stories in the paper recently about people in line to get, you know drive up coffee places, paying for the people behind them, and suggesting that it can be kind of infectious.

RE: Infectious, right. You receive a gift and you want to give back that gift that you receive rather than hoard it all for yourself. And so it's just a natural outgrowth of the internal feeling.

DVN: Yeah. And of course another thing in this regard that you've rolled into your research is gratitude letters and gratitude visits that both you and Martin Seligman write about. Maybe you can just say a little bit about each of those.

RE: Sure. So, another way to create the feeling of gratitude and to sustain this over time is to find a person in your life whom you've never really properly taken the time to thank, so an influential person, could have been a parent, grandparent, relative, teacher, mentor, coach, could be your child, could be a student. There's no limit to who this could be. But the idea is you focus on one individual and then you think about all the things that this person has done for you, helped you, taught you. And you reflect on this, and you write a testimonial to this person. At least one page about what this person has done or has meant to you. And then you present this to the person. You make an appointment. You go visit them. You have coffee. You have a meal together. And then you share this with the person. So it's a letter plus a visit. So it's kind of like highly focused or highly concentrated gratitude journaling, whereas just instead of making a list of stuff toward a bunch of people, it's really all about one person and what this person has meant to you. And studies have shown that it's a very effective way for amplifying happiness and decreasing depressive feelings and the effects can last for as long as three months afterward from a simple act. I know a number of people have been doing this as a project- like they take a year and they write 52 letters, one a week, and actually try to make a visit to each of these people. It becomes, a really, way of defining their life at the time where they're at, where they're at right now.

DVN: Wow. Yes, I was inspired by that literature and not only to use exercises like that in a class that I was teaching but also I reached out to one of my graduate professors and realized that, you know, boy this guy, it wasn't as close a relationship as say a mentor, but he really, he really made some important interventions in my graduate school life. And it felt so good to call him and tell him that. It really did.

RE: It does. Abraham Maslow. You mentioned your humanistic background, and Abraham Maslow wrote about this toward the end. He said we have this unfinished business toward the end of life, we haven't really taken the time to thank people. You know, that can gnaw at us. This sense of incompleteness, and we really gotta do that. It's a really important part of, I think, just closing the cycle, and this act between your receiving and then giving back the benefit and then acknowledging the role that someone has played in our lives.

DVN: You know, I've heard people talk about unfinished business around death, and often it's been in the context of expressing old wounds and angers and stuff like that

RE: Right. I really got to tell my Mom what she did to me before it's too late.

DVN: Yeah. And it seems like, boy, that's not going to do any good. That's not going to really do anybody any good.

RE: No, I have a friend who had had some conflictual relationships with his mother in law, like most people do, I suppose. And, on her death bed, she wanted to know, she said "Was I a good mother. Was I a good mother-in-law?". And I said, like, what did you say to her. You know, there'd be no point in telling the truth, right, it's not going to help her at this point.

DVN: Yeah.

RE: That's another way to have, to close unfinished business. People want some affirmations. They've done the best they can. Gratitude plays a role in this.

DVN: Yeah, I was interested to see that the psychology of religion is another major research interest of yours. How did you get into that?

RE: Yes, so, as a personality psychologist, and that's my area of training originally. It occurred to me that, you know, here we are personality psychologists, we're supposed to care about the entire person, that's what the field is all about. It's the whole person. It's not just one little aspect of a person. And yet, you know, we hadn't really studied that in psychology. There'd been, kind of this, fringe area for almost a century, not a major area within the field of psychology. I thought wasn't that ironic? That here we are purporting to claim to study the entire person and we're ignoring, neglecting, minimizing what for many people is the most important part of who they are and that's their spiritual religious beliefs and their behaviors. And I thought, wow, we've got to do something about that. We've got to take that seriously. Because if we ignore the spiritual aspects of a person's life, maybe it doesn't matter so much what we do study because we've ignored what for many of them is the most critical component. So that's why I started to think about psychology of religion and personality and gratitude really fits right in there because it's right at that intersection between religion, spirituality, and human personality.

DVN: Yes it is. Were you yourself raised in a certain religious tradition?

RE: I was raised in the Catholic faith and then went to Catholic church and Catholic schools, not all the way through, but for a few years. So, it's always been a part of my life. I think that's probably...it was dormant for a while but came back and got reactivated in my interest in psychology of religion and gratitude and positive psychology. I think maybe it's just an offshoot of that.

DVN: What about transpersonal psychology. That would seem to come from a similar impulse. Have you...do you identify at all with that movement?

RE: Yeah, a little bit. I think that's, there's some core universal aspects of a topic like gratitude which emanate from the spiritual traditions, whether they're religious traditions or transpersonal traditions that really focus on finding meaning and purpose outside of oneself. I think that's why they are so powerful. That's why I think gratitude is so powerful, too, because it's turning outward onto other sources. The self is a very poor location with trying to find meaning and purpose in life and value and significance in what we do, so I think where some of the power of some of the approaches lies.

DVN: That's interesting, what you just said about the self being a poor thing to focus on because people talk about finding themselves, you know.

RE: Well, we know that from the happiness research that the qualities of the happy people are the ones who are outwardly focused. They're engaged in meaningful activities, they're not dwelling upon their own shortcomings. They're engaged in service, they're helping others, they have purposes and goals outside themselves, they're more sociable, they're more invested in relationships, and you have this package of qualities that seems to be inherent for a fully functioning individual.

DVN: You go over five spiritual disciplines which you say can be used to deepen and enhance one's gratitude, and the ones you cover, if I counted correctly, were fasting, silence, simplicity, self-reflection, and confession. And you say these disciplines or practices are found not only in Christianity but across all the major world religions. So what's the relationship between these practices and gratitude? One wouldn't automatically think that fasting is going to make you more grateful.

RE: You wouldn't, and that was the whole point of trying to include that, trying to include something that's not obvious. Let's talk about prayer as a spiritual discipline. Every tradition has prayers for gratitude and thanksgiving. That would be an obvious one. But I wanted to try to find ones that weren't so clearly linked to gratitude, so again if we go back to the acronym of gratitude, having to be something that we AIM at, we need attention, so that was the a. The I stands for intention, so deliberately, intentionally committing to a practice to become more grateful, and then the M stands for memory, remembering those benefits in our lives or people in our lives to whom we're grateful. See, and all of these practices, they have these three components at their core. They're ways to become more attentive, to become more intentional, to remember. So, something like fasting for example, focuses our attention on sources to whom we're dependent on, whether it's food, as we get hungry, as we fast, we start thinking about well, what's the meaning of food and where does it come from, what are the sources of it, and so on. So we do it more intentionally and also more deliberately and also more mindfully. It forces us to think about those things we might ordinarily take for granted like eating or food. So all these are ways of becoming more aware, more mindful, more intentional, in our daily practices, and yet they have their origins in the spiritual traditions, gives them a lot of, I think, motivational power in people's lives. So that's an additional reason why they can be so effective.

DVN: Actually, I came away from your book with a feeling that gratitude in its highest form is a spiritual discipline in itself. Would you agree?

RE: It could be included many times and often is in lists of spiritual disciplines when people try to develop a classification or a taxonomy, you often find gratitude in there or something that looks very similar to it, and so I think that's a very good point you made there. I like that as a practice itself which deepens our spirituality, is a form of awareness, and so I agree with you on that one, David.

DVN: Yeah. Earlier you mentioned an obstacle to gratitude and you actually have a section in your book about the biggest obstacle to gratitude. What is the biggest obstacle?

RE: Yeah, that's a good question. There's so many different ones. I think it's really the self focus, the fact that is we just, it's just more natural to think about ourselves than to think about other people. And that can make it very difficult to feel gratitude. Even if we develop a goal or set as a goal to become more grateful. We almost turn into a self-help project, which is something, I think a term you used earlier. The focus becomes all about us and how we're doing, You know, we want to become more grateful. It becomes a goal for us. We develop all these techniques and we start to journal and we have apps to do to remind ourselves. It's all good at first. It's all well intentioned, and we mean well. But we approach it as if it's all about us, and I think that can be a very fundamental mistake because then we have this attitude that we have to be totally focused on doing it right or doing it correctly. So we want to be almost, almost, we get perfectionistic about it. Oh gosh, I didn't keep my gratitude journal today. So we beat ourselves up over that. This encourages this, kind of, get better at or try harder, do more mentality, which can leave us very discouraged if we're not doing well. And if we are doing well, you

know, it's okay, we don't feel that much joy about it because we're just trying to achieve this goal which is very difficult to accomplish.

So to make it all about ourselves, the focus becomes on how we're doing versus focusing on the benefits other people are providing for us, which is where the focus should be on gratitude. So, the self, really. That's the main obstacle, the self.

DVN: That sounds very, very Buddhist. (laughter)

RE: Maybe. There's nothing wrong with that.

DVN: Now your book, *Gratitude Works*, culminates with a 21 day program for creating emotional prosperity. Is there anything you'd like to tell our listeners about that program?

RE: Well, you know, I think it's gonna take some time to, you know, if you have an orientation that, by nature, is just focused more on noticing what's going wrong than what's going right. First of all, you're not alone. A lot of us are that way because of the strength of the negative in people's minds. The idea is that, to become more grateful, even to knock it up a notch or two on the scale requires this systematic intention and implementation of these different exercises. So the 21 days is simply seven different sets of instructions that you cycle through once a week for a period of three weeks. So you get into a habit of doing something each day for seven days and then you start again week two and then start again on week three. So you can make this 21 day commitment. At the end of the 21 days, you can discover which of these seven steps or instructions works the best for you, and that can become the one that you rely on most in your future. So the idea is that one size does not fit everyone. That people can journal for gratitude in different ways and this is a way of discovering for yourself what works best for you.

DVN: Interesting. Now, I believe you also have training in clinical psychology. So, what about the applications of gratitude work in psychotherapy?

RE: Yeah, that's a very good question and that's an area I'm quite intrigued in because we know that gratitude, not only can increase positive feelings and states and improve relationships and health and so on but also may be very beneficial in dealing with suffering, dealing with adversity, dealing with internal sources of suffering, things like depression and anxiety. I remember that there was a study published, I think this was in the mid to early 1990s showing that people who experience gratitude as a trait, so they score high in gratitude, using one of the, not our questionnaire, but one that was developed before ours, showed that they actually had a lower lifetime risk of psychiatric symptomatology. So, over the lifetime, they were less likely to be depressed, anxious, have substance abuse disorders, several categories of actual psychiatric diagnoses. So this implied to me that gratitude can be important in, not only the prevention of these psychological disorders but also perhaps in the treatment of these as well. Now there's been some studies showing that grateful people are less depressed, for example, that gratitude as a practice can be effective in the treatment of at least mild forms of depression. There's other research looking at it in terms of post traumatic stress disorder, that grateful individuals are more resilient to stress. So there's a number of ways in which gratitude I think meets up with clinical application of psychology in ways which are just really starting to be discovered.

DVN: Yeah. It will be interesting to see how that unfolds. What about in your own personal life? What's been the impact of gratitude in your personal life? Did you start out as a very grateful person?

(laughter)

RE: That's a great question. I've kind of become known as someone who tells a story of, see my wife says how is it that you're supposed to be this big expert in gratitude, you're like the least grateful person I know. But she knows me well also. So my response to her is well, you don't know enough people because they're other people out there that are far less grateful than me. Regardless, I think that's a valid point. For me, it's a journey like it is for a lot of people. I think I do this stuff because I want to become more grateful like anyone who studies forgiveness or hope or optimism. We want to get better at these things. It is a large self improvement program. So, I write a book like *Gratitude Works* for other people, of course, but also for myself. I speak about gratitude because I need to hear this as much as anybody. In a sense, yeah, I think I've made some progress but you know, when you study virtues like these, it can be very challenging to one's self esteem because you realize how far you have to go. It kind of points at your imperfections, so making progress, but I was there first, so taking things for granted or not expressed enough gratitude. As a guy, I'm challenged in gratitude. We find that that's the case across the board. There's a link to gender. Women are just better at it than men are, and so I'm no different. So it's one way of helping myself as well hope, helping other people, hopefully.

DVN: Yeah, it's always been kind of a rule of thumb for me that, as a professor, and looking around at other professors and teachers and gurus and so on, that we tend to profess what we need to hear.

RE: Right, Happens all the time.

DVN: And, I'm certainly aware of that in myself as well. So, as we wind down here, I wonder if there are any final points that you'd like to make or something that you hoped to get in. I will refer people to your website, so don't worry about that.

RE: You know, I talk about gratitude in terms of all these things you have to do and practices and techniques and tools. It can become a sort of a daunting enterprise: well, I have to have all these in place. I have to have the right app on my phone to practice gratitude. I have to have this journal and do it a certain way, for example, and I don't think any of these are necessarily the case. You know, I really think people have all these tools already at their disposal, ways of looking at their lives, looking at the world to see the good, to take in that good and reflect on it. It's just that we misplace these tools, or they get rusty, or they get dull from disuse. And so, if you came over to my house, went to my garage and tried to find a tool, you know, it would be hard to find because I have misplaced them and some of them are outside and some of them are now rusty and they're gone; you can't use them. I think it's the same way with gratitude. We've got to take these tools out and shine them up and dust them off and sharpen them and then we can find that it becomes much easier than we think it is otherwise because it's a way of looking at the world that we can start right wherever we're at; it doesn't require a certain life circumstance. It doesn't require to get to a certain place in our lives. We already have these tools at our disposal.

DVN: Well, that's a great wrap up. Dr. Robert Emmons, it's been great to speak with you. We covered a lot of ground and I want to thank you for being my guest today on Shrink Rap Radio.

RE: David, thank you. The pleasure has been all mine.

(music)

DVN(wrap up): I'm glad that I was finally able to have this interview with Dr. David Emmons. We'd been playing telephone and calendar tag for a number of months, and I was beginning to despair that this interview was maybe never going to happen. Then finally, when we had locked down a date and time, I ended up coming down with a severe cold. Fortunately, I didn't sneeze or cough during the interview, but I'm pretty sure you were able to hear a difference in the quality of my voice. It's now the next day, and unfortunately, I've not experienced a miraculous recovery. It seems like everyone around me, particularly in my own family, has been sick for some time. And for quite a while it seemed like I had dodged the bullet, and I was feeling pretty cocky and magical around that. But it finally caught up with me, and for the past several days my son Jonathan has been home trying to recuperate from it, my wife has been down with it. Hopefully, we're not just reinfecting one another.

I certainly agree with Dr. Emmons about the importance of gratitude. His writing and research on the topic have definitely expanded and deepened my view of the subtle complexities of the gratitude domain. In my own life, it seems to me that the real challenge has to do with mindfulness. By that, I mean being alert from moment to moment to the blessings that are streaming my way. It's so easy to get caught up in business and worries and a host of other distractions, and in the process to forget to be aware of how much there is to be grateful for. The title of Dr. Emmons' book again is *Gratitude Works: A 21 Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity*. I don't know about you, but when I see a subtitle like that, a 21 day program for creating emotional prosperity, my hackles go up a bit. It gives the impression that this will be a lightweight, self-improvement book, kind of in the mold of so many other books. I think publishers put a lot of pressure on authors to follow these sorts of formats as a path to market success. I don't know if this was the case with Dr. Emmons or not, but I can tell you is that the 21 day program is not brought up until the very last chapter and it's a very short chapter at that. I bring this up so that you will not be misled to think that this is a lightweight book. To his credit, Dr. Emmons weaves plenty of research data into his discussion and takes time to critically evaluate some of the claims and practices around gratitude. You heard Dr. Emmons mention that his mentor during his graduate school work was happiness researcher Ed Diener. You might be interested to hear my interview with Dr. Diener's son, Robert Biswas Diener in Shrink Rap Radio # 270 *Unlocking Psychological Wealth*. I had the privilege of meeting Robert Biswas Diener at that second world congress on positive psychology. In addition, you can hear my recording of an address by his father, Dr. Ed Diener, and others at the second world congress on positive psychology and you'll find that in Shrink Rap Radio episode #277. And of course you can always order any of Dr. Emmons' books including *Gratitude Works*, the one mentioned in this interview, using the amazon.com widget in the right hand side bar on our site.