

Gratitude

“This sucks,” we’ve often said. For many of us, those were the most frequently used words in our vocabulary. We were the doomed glass-half-empty, sky-is-falling, no-good-will-come-of-this kind of people.

We always expected the car to break down, the roof to leak, the benign tumor to turn malignant. That’s life, we thought. Always one wrong turn or misstep away from complete and total calamity.

Of course, real trouble always came. We lost a job, got sick, or a relationship we cared deeply about fell apart. Then we raged about our enemies, our cursed luck, and the pitiful state of the world. “See,” we’d say, “this is the crap I’m talking about.”

We fixated on our problems so much that problems became all we could see. It was our superpower. We would find the hole in any plan, the flaw in every person. We wished our partners dressed better, that our parents raised us better. If only we were thinner, richer, or better respected—nothing, and we mean *nothing*, was good enough.

It made a certain tortured sense that we escaped from an unacceptable reality into a fantasy world of sex and porn. A world where the performers and sexual partners were always available and ready to offer whatever we desired. They never got sick. Never turned us down. Never complained. What more could anyone want?

So, we stewed in our gloom. When that climate became unbearable, we ran to our favorite strip club or porn site for sweet, if temporary, relief. On the painful cycle went. Our ingratitude, judgments, and resentments fueled our addiction. And we had an endless supply of those.

That is until we found a tool to help us get rid of our unwanted negative thoughts: gratitude. When we’re down, or can’t see the good in anything around us, gratitude is our can of Popeye’s spinach.

By practicing gratitude day after day, we broke our habit of negative thinking. But it took time and persistence. We were building a muscle we had never used.

In our early days in SPAA, we often wrote gratitude lists (and still do). First thing in the morning is usually best. That way, we get our head on straight before we do anything more challenging than brushing our teeth.

Of course, negative thoughts naturally pop up over the day. Maybe someone cuts us off on our commute to work, or a colleague steals our yogurt (which we clearly labeled with our name!) from the communal fridge.

Now, when faced with a problem, we're actually thankful. Thankful because the program has provided us with the spiritual tools to tackle the problem without losing our minds or our sobriety.

We accept these frustrations as an inevitable part of life and re-direct our attention with a little positive self-talk. For instance, we might remind ourselves that the guy who cut us off might be racing to a genuine crisis, and aren't we lucky not to be in that position.

Or far worse: we're permanently handicapped by an accident, illness, or birth defect. We could allow the unfairness of it to torment us, sink into self-pity. Certainly, we could sexually act out to forget our pain. But we'd only be adding to our problem. Alternatively, we could be grateful for the strength and health that we do have, and make the most use of ourselves we can within our physical limitations. We can focus on our talents, and how to share them to be of service to the world and to those around us.

That is an exceptional case, of course. But, for the most part, we face smaller battles in our everyday lives. Here we try to watch out for a case of the "shouldas." As in, they *should've* done this. I *should* have that. It *should* be this way.

We know now that usually when we're upset, it's because we have convinced ourselves that someone or something in our life is objectionable. And maybe it's even true: that the guy who cut us off really is an asshole.

The problem is our resentment and anger could consume us, and destroy any chance we have at happiness, unless we redirect our attention to gratitude.

We won't pretend this is as simple or easy as throwing on a smile every time it rains. Many of us have found that the hardest words to say are "thank you."

Saying it, however, becomes easier with practice. We try to make writing gratitude lists part of our daily routine and occasionally text those lists to our fellow members. To help build that gratitude muscle, and lovingly remind each other that the world isn't just doom and gloom.

Now, whenever we find a person, place, or situation unacceptable to us, or say someone jumps in front of us in the supermarket checkout line, we reach out in our minds to someone or something for which we're thankful. And we say thank you.