



A New Year of Practicing Gratitude, Extending Kindness, and Setting Goals

SPEAKERS

Tierney King, Seena Haines, Stuart Haines

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast, sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your every day teaching. It's a new year, which means you may have created a long list of goals. Maybe you've created a vision board, or maybe you're spending time to just reflect on the past year and the upcoming year. No matter your plans, I hope you take a few minutes to listen to this episode, and learn to find peace when setting goals, learn to find gratitude in your daily life, and learn to find moments to extend kindness and generosity to those around you. In this episode, we'll cover snippets from the Wellbeing Elixir course presented by Seena Haines and Stuart Haines on how gratitude is associated with numerous mental and physical benefits; how extending generosity to others has been shown to lower blood pressure, increase self esteem and self worth, and enhance optimism; and lastly, we'll cover goal setting and how both success and failure are part of the journey. It's important to set goals, but to also know that having goals does not guarantee success, and that's okay.

Seena Haines 01:18

Gratitude is associated with many mental and physical benefits. It helps boost our feel good hormones like releasing neurochemicals, serotonin, and oxytocin. Our immune system can be strengthened. Grateful people are less likely to get sick and heal faster. And it serves as an inner reservoir of strength and an antidote to fear or worry. And we are more resilient to stress. It has been associated with better sleep quality and with our cardiovascular health. So as you see, gratitude is a therapeutic superpower. And cultivating an attitude of gratitude indeed has many health benefits. Additionally, our relationships are often strengthened as we are more freely able to express ourselves and our appreciation for others. When we feel gratitude, we feel more loved, cared for and feel less lonely or isolated. Having an attitude of gratitude also helps us see the positive things in life. It can help sort those negative ruminations that play over and over in our heads. When employees feel gratitude they seem more committed to an organization and to their colleagues. It can boost employee wellbeing and reduce sick days. A thank you from a supervisor gives people a strong sense of self worth, which leads to an increase in motivation and productivity. Gratitude recipients are more trusting and helpful. Saying thanks at work makes people feel happier and hearing things makes them happier and more productive. As a faculty member, it can be so easy to get caught up in the negativity spiral. When faculty complain or students are challenging for points on an exam. They're not engaged in the classroom. The volume of daily emails to answer are just time consuming. And you've fallen behind on

your deadlines having to work nights and weekends just to get caught up. But if I can pause, and notice how fortunate I am to be in a position that affords me great flexibility and an environment that stimulates creativity and fosters innovation, and allows me the freedom to approach my duties and tasks with independence, to help train future pharmacists who can improve the health of our patients lives, then I am focusing my attention on developing a more grateful thinking and on eliminating ungrateful thoughts. I have the choice to feel gratitude. So how can you develop a gratitude practice? It can be a simple or structured process depending on your preference. Here are a few options to consider: You might like to adopt a gratitude journal with or without the use of guided prompts to reflect and respond to. Maybe you would like to send letters or postcards to show your gratitude to others. This could be a colleague, a friend or family member, you might like to have a best possible self diary, a narrative practice that has been shown to lead to more optimism. Maybe keeping a gratitude jar of pennies to help address more negative thinking to identify barriers in our wants and our goals. And then maybe consider taking that money to donate to a charity or worthy cause. And finally, a loving kindness meditative practice can be considered to send positive vibes to others in the world and to help show compassion. The literature shows that a once a week gratitude practice can lead to happiness and contentment as typically a higher frequency and may be harder to stay committed to doing. Perhaps use the time while routinely practicing good hand hygiene to pause and use that time to think of people and experiences that you're grateful for.

Tierney King 05:31

As you think of ideas to practice gratitude, perhaps implementing a minute routine of gratefulness in the morning or at night. Seena and Stewart also encourage you to perform acts of kindness. These acts of kindness can actually release endorphins, which is our natural painkiller.

Stuart Haines 05:47

Extending kindness and generosity to others has been shown to lower blood pressure, increase self esteem, and self worth, and enhance optimism. Generosity may also have some antidepressant properties. Performing acts of kindness increases the release of serotonin, which is one of the neurotransmitters which regulates mood and motivation. And for those that volunteer their time and money for charitable causes, they report fewer aches and pains. It seems that kindness also increases the release of endorphins, which is our natural painkiller. Looking back at our ancestors, those early hunter gatherer communities, the natural size of a human social group was about 40 to 50 people who lived together most of their entire lives. So it was advantageous to be really good at sticking close to members of your tribe. And it was also advantageous to distrust those other folks, those other tribes, because tribes were frequently competing even in violent ways for scarce resources. And that legacy of our evolution is inside all of us today. But if we can widen our perspective and see others outside of our immediate circle, as part of our tribe, we can learn to be more generous, kind, and empathetic. And there are a number of ways to cultivate this kind of thinking. There is a style of Buddhist meditation known as the loving kindness meditation or the metta meditation. And the purpose of this meditation is to build our capacity to extend kindness and love towards ourselves and others. And in stoic philosophy, there's a similar concept known as "oikeiosis," where we envision our connection to all beings to nature and the cosmos in an ever widening circle of care and concern. Now, we're often moved to act with kindness towards our family and friends. But it's generally more difficult for us to take some sort of action to benefit a stranger or someone we don't particularly like. But that's why practices

like a loving kindness meditation is so helpful because it helps us widen our circle of empathy. Recognize how all of us all humans have similar wants and needs similar sorrows and losses. And this realization can make it a bit easier to feel empathy and extend a kindness even to those we find difficult to deal with. And those who are different than us. Acts of Kindness don't need to be anything expensive or grant and deed relatively small acts of kindness can have a very significant impact. It can be something as simple as making a point to go out of your way to encourage someone, a student or a colleague. One of the places where generosity and kindness can have a very significant impact is at work. There is perhaps nothing that can make the workplace more enjoyable than to work with people who treat each other with respect and kindness. Well, not everyone is as Adam Grant describes them a giver at work, but you can be one. If there are enough givers, you can help create and sustain a culture of generosity and kindness. A culture where people regularly offer to assist colleagues who are having a rough time, or willing to cover for others during an illness. A place where colleagues express genuine gratitude, either privately by sending an email or better yet a handwritten note, or publicly expressing gratitude by giving a shout out to someone during a meeting. You can imagine how impactful it might be for everyone to rally together to support a cause that a member of the team is passionate about. All of us can use our professional connections to help a student find a job or introduce a colleague to a potential collaborator or support someone's nomination for an award.

Tierney King 09:50

Lastly, I'm sure many of you have opened up a new planner for the new year, set goals and maybe even created a vision board for 2023, but goal setting takes time and it's important to be realistic. Although we would all love to accomplish our goals seamlessly and without obstacles, that's often not the case. While having a vision and a goal is important, Stuart explains that by considering the obstacles we may encounter, and formulating a plan for those obstacles, we are far more likely to achieve our goals.

Stuart Haines 10:22

So I think it's important to start with the why, what and how whenever we set goals. There are a few different ways to articulate goals. One of the most popular is to write SMART goals, which stands for Specific that's the S, M for measurable, A stands for achievable or attainable, R stands for relevant, and T stands for timebound, meaning that one must consider the amount of time it would take to achieve the goal. I think articulating our goals in this way is helpful. And it's often required when we're asked to set our professional goals as part of our annual review process. But before we go any further, I want to revisit an important concept that Seena shared with you in her presentation. And that's this idea that success and failure are part of the journey, it's important to set goals, but having goals will not guarantee success. Indeed, in most cases, whether we are successful or not is not entirely under our control. We may be able to influence the outcome, but we really do not control it. For example, you can influence but you can't control your health. You can influence but you can't control your professional reputation. You can influence whether or not you get into a car accident, but you can't control it. So you and you alone, control your judgments, your impulses and your desires and these all originate from your mind. The ancient Greek Stoic philosophers rightly point out that ultimately, our bodies, our material possessions, and our worldly success are out of our control. And much of our suffering or disappointments in life, are due to this misclassification, thinking that we can or should be able to control all of these outcomes, because of our efforts or the events in our lives. But we can't control

those things, we can only control our minds, our thoughts, not the world around us. Like a captain sailing a boat, it is essential that we remain focused and prepared for whatever might happen. Like a captain, we need to determine what is worthwhile in terms of the destination, and develop a plan how to get there. But we can't control the weather and we can't control how much wind will be available to fuel our journey. We must focus on the process and give it our best effort and then be at peace with whatever happens during our journey. So goals are important, but they may lead to certain pitfalls and our thinking that actually demotivate us and reduces the likelihood that we will achieve the outcomes we truly desire. And nearly always the outcomes that we truly desire is a sense of autonomy, mastery, and control a sense of purpose, and ultimately happiness. So we have to be careful goals can be an impediment to our happiness if we are not careful. And as I said, high achieving people, like faculty, have no shortage of goals. So there are a few pitfalls that I think we need to explore to ensure that goals are serving you well. These pitfalls include, if only then thinking goals that are too focused on the outcome, too big or difficult to achieve, or too rigid. And let's take a closer look at each of these. So the first pitfall is the notion that our happiness is contingent on achieving the goal. If only I get promoted, then I'll be happy with my job. If only the paper gets accepted, then I'll be a success. If only I won teacher of the year, if only I get hired as the department chair. The problem with this kind of thinking are twofold. First, we if we are fortunate enough to achieve the goal we don't experience the kind of elation or happiness that we envision. In fact, research has repeatedly shown that we adapt very quickly to this new normal. The good feelings are often very fleeting, and more often than not achieving the goal feels anticlimactic. About an hour after the graduation ceremony, most students feel let down wondering what's next. Yes, when you first learn about the promotion, you're gonna feel great, but the next day, it's back to the grindstone. And this prompts us to set yet another goal, which we toil away at believing that if only we achieve this new goal, then I'm going to feel happy and successful then. So we quickly adapt. This is called hedonic adaptation, and we all experience it. So goal attainment doesn't lead to happiness, just like acquiring material possessions doesn't lead to happiness. Now, there's a second reason why this form of thinking is so harmful. What happens if you don't achieve the goal, if your happiness is contingent on achieving the goal, then there really is no way to be happy. You can only be happy if you get promoted, you can only be happy if you win the award. Remember, a goal is merely a tool to set a direction and increase motivation, your happiness, your sense of purpose, your autonomy. And your ability to do good things in this world is not contingent on achieving a goal. So the second pitfall is becoming too focused on the outcome or the goal. In doing so, we often lose sight of the reason why the goal was important to us in the first place, the goal becomes a substitute for the core value. And I want to give you a concrete example of a goal that gets substituted for the core value, and one that I really struggle with with my students. And I think I was certainly guilty of it when I was a student. And that's the goal of getting a good grade, getting an A in a class. But is that really the goal? Is the purpose of taking a class to earn a good grade? Or is it to learn to become well educated to use what we learn to better our lives, to produce things that better the lives of others, that unfortunately, when we get really focused on the goal, we lose sight of the intent and purpose, our motivations get misplaced. And this happens to all of us in many aspects of our lives. Is the purpose really to get your paper published? Is that really the goal, the underlying why? In addition, when we focus too much on the goal, we often don't plan very well, we don't consider the process, the how, and the process is critical to achieving the goal. If we don't consider the potential obstacles and how to manage those, we're less likely to succeed. If we're not clear about the steps that are needed and necessary to make the plan happen. It's obviously not going to be achieved. Now there's a saying that a goal without a plan

is just a wish. And there's a helpless mnemonic called WOOP, which stands for W for wish, O for outcome, O for obstacle and P for plan. And there's empirical data demonstrating the benefits of this approach, while having a vision and a goal is important, by considering the obstacles and formulating a plan, we are far more likely to achieve the goal. So the route process has been studied in a number of circumstances, including people who want to lose weight and students who want to earn a better grade. Those who consider the obstacles and have concrete plans were far more likely to succeed. Now, it's important not to just think about the external factors that may hinder your ability to achieve the goal but also to consider perhaps more importantly, those internal obstacles within you, that may get you off track. Things like a propensity to get distracted, a fear of failure, automatic negative thoughts when things don't go as planned. It's often these obstacles that derail us and having a plan on how to manage external as well as internal obstacles is critical to our success. So process matters. Don't get too focused on the goal, do the work, and the goal will usually take care of itself.

Tierney King 18:45

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