When It’s Hard to Feel Grateful.....

Anne McCormack

There are times in life when being grateful just doesn’t seem to fit well. When times are particularly tough, when someone lets you down, when the deal doesn’t go to plan, when your heart is breaking. How can people be expected to feel grateful when terrible disappointments and hurts come into their life path?

Some people are more optimistic than others, without really having to try that hard. And it’s true that we cannot always fully choose how we feel. On days a person may feel down, they can continue to feel down no matter how much they try not to feel it. And part of that is life, because life is sometimes tough.

Can gratitude fit in on these down days or difficult times? Is it not a lot to except from a person who is dealing with loss or pain to feel grateful? Research says that it is not the *feeling* grateful that makes a difference to a person’s well-being, it is the effort that people make towards *trying* to be grateful. Making a conscious effort to cultivate an attitude of gratitude across the board is the thing that matters most when it comes to building up resilience to stress. This does not mean feeling grateful for every single thing that happens or every situation a person finds themself in. Rather it is about adopting a position that is in alignment with gratitude. Choosing the idea of gratitude and trying throughout the day to stand close to it. People can choose to see gratitude as something to add to their daily diet, even if it is gratitude for waking to another day, gratitude for the experience of having been loved. There is nothing in that sort of attitude that denies or in any way tries to diminish the experience of difficult emotion.

Often with loss and hurt, the pain can be really intense and even felt very physically but there is a way to think about loss that allows space for that attitude of gratitude. To think of the pain of the loss as bearing witness to the love that was felt or shared is a way to bear holding it. As Tennyson once said it was ‘better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all’ and there can be gratitude for having experienced the love that caused the pain, even if a person feels very let down or hurt. Cultivating an attitude of gratitude helps people cope with crisis situations. It builds resilience and while we cannot always choose how we feel, we can make a choice about attitude.

Adopting an *attitude* of gratitude rather than trying to *feel* grateful is a mini-habit that enhances mental health. And it’s those small, daily, mini habits that matter most when it comes to mental health.

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