Katie Murphy

Calmness in the Midst of Chaos-The Benefits of Gratitude Journaling

On college campuses across the country, students-like myself-are finding themselves in the middle of virtual Zoom calls, trying to adjust to their new classrooms. They are prompted to discuss their feelings and asked how they are coping. In this day and age of COVID-19 it feels as though everyone wants to hear how students are handling the drastic change to the “best four years” of their lives. Us students are encouraged to discuss our emotional health but are given few tools to actually improve it. After researching and reading different articles, I joined the trend of Gratitude Journaling. Opposite from a diary, a Gratitude Journal is a short list ranging from 5- 20 quick notes of things, people, or moments you’re grateful for. At the beginning of August, I decided to give this a shot. I had just settled into my new house with three close friends. I was back on the campus that I missed so much and I was starting my Junior Year (finally an upperclassmen). Life felt good again. I decided to capture this fleeting happiness in the midst of COVID on paper. This new trend has recently come to the forefront of easy mental health tasks, especially for Gen-Zers. While we all preach gratitude during Thanksgiving and Christmas, now it is time to preach it all year round. Not only is Gratitude Journaling easy to fit into the busiest of schedules, but it also helps you years down the line. Gratitude Journaling is a simple 15 minute a day task; it lowers depression, improves heart health, helps you sleep sounder, and thus is worth incorporating into your daily routine.

The “New Normal,” which my school proudly boasts of, will never encompass everything that made college so great. Girls are returning their formal dresses, the online format for classes is disengaging students, and even the rarely-attended small-school football games have been missed by some. With everyday pulling at our hearts for what we once had, my Gratitude Journal is my daily reminder that life is not as bad as it sometimes feels. I can always find 10-20 reasons to be grateful. According to a journal by the Kaiser Family Foundation, between March and April of 2020 there was a 21% increase of adults who reported that their mental health worsened from COVID-19. This additional stress and quick environmental changes is a lot for anyone’s mental health. This easy writing tool can make a big difference in someone’s daily mindset and even in their night’s sleep. According to Psychology Today, the act of Gratitude Journaling combined with getting a better night’s sleep has been found to lower depression and anxiety. By calming your mind and focusing on the good, you are allowing yourself to heal from the day’s downfalls. A study by the University of Georgia found that the average college student gets 6-6.9 hours of sleep, far from the recommended eight hours. Gratitude Journaling can help you get the most out of however long you sleep. The simple act of taking some time to be grateful is ultimately helping you in more ways than one.

Across the country, college students are snuggling into bed and scribbling down their favorite moments of the day. While my journal is helping me get past the sadness of my missed date parties and postponed school events, it is doing a lot of good in other ways. Through a study with the American Psychological Association men and women with heart failure kept a mini Gratitude Journal where they wrote down three things they were thankful for daily for eight weeks. At the end of the study, all participants had improved their heart rate and reduced their cardiac risk. As my mother likes to say being grateful is good for the heart, and it is proven to be true. Recognizing what is going well in your life is reducing your stress and ultimately helping you down the line. Gratitude Journaling can help anyone, no matter their age or physical well-being.

When it comes down to the nitty-gritty of how to keep a Gratitude Journal, one of the most important parts of the strategy is to do it before bed. No matter how hectic my day is I always make time for these 15 minutes. Honestly, I look at this as self-care. I light my favorite pumpkin scented candle, play some soft music, and lay in bed with a pencil and my journal. My night is more peaceful because of it. I find keeping a physical journal is much better than using my phone in terms of staying consistent and altering my headspace. It is important to center yourself around the task and not have any distractions. Dodge the temptations of your phone. Ignore the urge to see what friends or family are doing in the next room. Just focus on the journal. I try to jot down 10-20 things I am grateful for. The first few are always the same (i.e. my best friend, my education, my health). Once you are past the obligatory ones you would feel guilty not jotting down, you can really reflect on your day. What made you smile? *Who* made you smile? Doing this right before bed has been proven to calm you down and even improve your sleep. A journal published in ScienceDirect demonstrates that keeping a Gratitude Journal helps you sleep both better and longer. Especially when a Gratitude Journal is kept right before bed, it aids in sleep and calms you down for a more restful night.

While some may think that they do not have an additional 15 minutes in their day to journal, I challenge you to think of how many ways you spend 15 minutes. Maybe watching a video, scrolling through Facebook, or just drifting off into space. None of those activities are likely to impact both your mental and physical health the same way a Gratitude Journal can. Imagine, 15 minutes a day could be spent so well. Gratitude Journaling is a simple task; it lowers depression, improves heart health, helps you sleep sounder, and is worth incorporating into your daily routine. Almost everyone has been struggling with this “New Normal” and I urge you to try Gratitude Journaling if you have ever had a momentary wish that life would go back to how it was.

Kaitlyn Murphy is a Junior at Elon University who is studying Strategic Communications with minors in Sport Management and Leadership Studies.

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