

The Healing Power of **GRATITUDE**

Forest School practitioner & trainer Louise Ambrose reflects on thankfulness & connection

As I sit down to write this, the rain is streaking down the windows and the grey clouds are making it darker than it should be at this time of late afternoon. I find myself feeling grateful for the soothing sound of the rain hammering on the roof, the turning of the seasons and the cosiness of the log burner in front of me.

Gratitude comes in different forms. It can be an action – the choice to say ‘Thank you’ for some pleasant gift or occurrence. It can also be a state of being – a way of living, healing and growing.

The first form feels good, and the second form is life-changing.

Dr Robert Emmons and colleagues have been studying the benefits of gratitude for over 20 years and found overwhelming evidence that gratitude improves physical health, psychological wellbeing and relationships with others.

They have found that people who have regular gratitude practices (such as writing things down in a journal) have received a host of benefits:

- Increased vitality
- Increased positive emotions – happiness, joy, optimism
- Better quality of sleep
- Stronger immune systems
- More likely to exercise and take care of oneself
- Lower blood pressure
- More helpful, generous and compassionate
- Feel less isolated and alone (1)

These healing benefits of gratitude perhaps were a wisdom our wild, nature-connected ancestors may have known about. According to storyteller and mentor Jon Young, gratitude is core to the traditions and practices of numerous indigenous cultures. It is an essential thread woven through the fabric of native patterns of psyche and supports connection to nature, to others and to oneself (2).



Used in **nature connection** practices, such as sit spots or timeless wandering, gratitude seems to ‘supercharge’ one’s abilities to connect with the other-than-human. Animals will come closer to you, as if they do not perceive you as a threat, birds will land close and sing to you, and plants will share their medicine with you.

Used in **human connection** gratitude amplifies emotional intelligence, increases awareness and grounds you like nothing else. During difficult

conversations, finding gratitude can help you keep calm, find resilience and remain kind.

Used in **self connection** gratitude is life-saving. It heals body, mind and spirit.

Being grateful asks us to look beyond ourselves. To see the complex web of connections that holds us. We realise that we are fully tangled and dependent on the rest of the world, human and non-human alike.

Gratitude = Connection.

And feeling connected is the path to joy, relationships, healing, love and much more.

Another great thing about gratitude is that it's a choice. We don't need any special conditions, abilities, skills or attitudes. We simply have to choose to be grateful. It doesn't even matter what we are grateful for – just that we are grateful.

However, remembering to pause and feel what we are grateful for in the moment can be easily forgotten, especially in challenging times. Steindl-Rast suggests a simple method we can use at any time:

- 👉 Stop** – take a moment to pause and bring our awareness to the present moment
- 👁 Look** – use all our senses to soak in the richness of life on offer in that moment
- ➡ Go** – do whatever life offers to us in that present moment (3)

Being outdoors seems like a natural place to practice gratitude in this way:

- 👉 Stop** - the realness of nature draws our attention and encourages us to be present
- 👁 Look** - our senses are constantly showered with an abundance of sights, sounds, smells, textures and tastes
- ➡ Go** – the natural world offers opportunities in a way that indoors does not

As outdoor practitioners we are already well placed to support mental health, as the numerous studies evidencing the positive effects of being in nature to one's wellbeing show. If we can also incorporate gratitude practices into our sessions then this will surely amplify the positive effects for everyone's health, happiness and the healing of all.

References

- 1) [Why Gratitude is Good by Dr Robert Emmons](#)
- 2) [The 512 Project - Jon Young](#)
- 3) [Want to be Happy? Be Grateful](#) TED talk by David Steindl-Rast



5 tips for sharing gratitude practices with children

Be creative in how you invite people to be thankful

Whisper thanks to a tree, blow grateful feelings into a handful of leaves before throwing them into the air, write thankful thoughts on the wind with a stick, make up songs and dance your gratitude to the earth!

Model being in gratitude

The most powerful way of encouraging thanks giving is to be in it yourself. Sharing your own gratitude out loud may inspire others to do so too.

Reframe Language

Young children may not understand the concept of gratitude. Reframe it by asking 'what made you smile?' or 'what would you like more of?'

You can't force gratitude

Making a child say 'Thank you' for social politeness is a long way off from feeling genuinely grateful and could even make a child resentful of giving thanks.

It doesn't need to be verbalised

The healing benefits of gratitude come from feeling it, not whether we express it to others.



Louise Ambrose has worked as a Forest School practitioner with groups of all ages, coordinated FS development for a local authority & been a FS trainer for 15 years.

Visit her Youtube channel:
[Forest School Lou](#)