



## Original Article

# Cultivate an attitude of gratitude among college students: Examining the positive effect of gratitude intervention on subjective well-being

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## Abstract

**Background:** Positive psychological interventions (PPIs) is the premise that focuses on how people can learn contentment and move toward Subjective well-being (SWB). One of the well-known Positive psychological intervention strategies is the gratitude intervention that challenges to evoke gratitude and helps produce positive feelings. The primary purpose of this study was to examine the implementation of 3 weeks gratitude meditation program and determine its effects on SWB (spell out) measures. Also, it was observed whether or not the Gratitude practice can improve the tendency to respond with a sense of gratitude itself.

**Methodology:** This Quasi-Experimental study included 160 students from 2 colleges in Karachi who were participating voluntarily in the gratitude meditation program, conducted by investigators. All study subjects gave written informed consent before proceeding further. The mean age of the study subjects was 15 to 20 years. A total of 80 male and 80 female students participate in this study. The purposive non-probability sampling technique was used for recruiting the study sample. Data were obtained using a brief demographic sheet, followed by pre-and post-intervention measures, using the Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6), the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS), and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). Statistical analysis was conducted on SPSS version 22.0. Descriptive analysis technique and paired-sample t-test applied for within-group comparison.

**Results:** The findings were highly significant with  $p < .001$ . The results showed a significant difference between the mean scores of pre-and Post-intervention conditions of SWB. Moreover, the participant's level of gratitude was increased by experimental manipulation.

**Conclusion:** Cultivating gratitude significantly contributes to satisfaction and positive outcomes in life, suggesting that gratitude training could be proposed as a beneficial practice for increasing SWB.

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## Keywords

Positive Psychological Interventions, Gratitude Intervention, Subjective Well-Being.



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## Introduction

As health is not considered the absence of disease, in the same way, gladness is also not the absence of misery. To balance both situations, contentment is needed to be taught that can lay the foundation of the welfare of human civilization<sup>1</sup>. In this endeavor, Positive psychology rings a bell in the world of the psyche. Moreover, they compelled psychologists to shift their mental health and well-being paradigm. Recently, psychologists started emphasizing the need to promote adolescents' well-being beyond the current focus on reducing the symptom since it is essential to mitigate pathology whose absence is not possible from mental health issues<sup>1</sup>.

Well-being is a term that comes to mind when discussing positive mental health. In the past few decades, the explosion of research in well-being has turned the tide for a good many terms persistently occur in the literature and are used in several ways<sup>1</sup>. Typically, psychologists have two eminent traditions prevailing in the research field of well-being. The first one is eudemonic tradition, and the other practice is named hedonistic<sup>2</sup>. The perspective of eudaimonia stemmed from the Aristotelian philosophy. Its roots are also in humanistic psychology, which has been concerned with concepts allied with positive human functioning<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the Hedonistic perspective that emphasizes contentment is defined as the presence of positive emotions or getting contentment and the absence of negative emotions or avoid discontentment. This states that all and only pleasure is intrinsically valuable, while all and only pain is intrinsically unwanted. Thus, the term "Hedonic" is linked with SWB. The phenomenon of Hedonic includes two components. The affective component is related to positive or pleasant effects and the absence of adverse effects.

The other is the cognitive component based on satisfaction with life. Neugarten et al. investigated that 'Life Satisfaction is a successful aging component<sup>4</sup>. In contrast, Sumner stated that Life satisfaction is a positive appraisal of the conditions of life, and it measures up positivity against standards or expectations. Carruthers & Hood specified that a person experiences joy when both components are present<sup>5</sup>. Whereas Diener proposed that SWB is reflected when a person's life is worthwhile and successfully moving toward a desirable way<sup>6</sup>. It is considered subjective because one can evaluate oneself on the degree of one's experience and sense of wellness. SWB is perceived through personality filters with the cognitive and emotional judgment; it implies a positive self-appraisal<sup>5,6</sup>. The works on SWB have advanced speedily since the emergence of the field. Undeniably, continued work shows professionals' consideration of the factors influencing SWB, and research on this domain has been booming worldwide.

At the current time, therapeutic intervention plays a crucial role in achieving SWB. Several researchers attempt to identify how to enhance and boost the level of SWB rather than what makes people distressing and unhappy. In this exertion, the utilization of the Positive Psychological Interventions (PPIs) may be considered as a complementary strategy for enhancing Well-being. There are some significant groupings under which these meditations practice is divided that include: a) meaning, b) gentleness, c) empathy, d) gratitude, e) strengths, f), hope and g) savoring<sup>7</sup>. These classes are markedly beneficial, but the gratitude practice validates the significant effects. It has been considered the most effective and sensational technique of the PPIs<sup>8,9</sup> and clinically applicable as well<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, it challenged to evoke the feeling of gratitude and promotes SWB<sup>8,9</sup>. It



has been confirmed that gratitude is one of the influential character strengths, enhancing SWB in youth<sup>11</sup> that is now getting attention in scientific research<sup>12,13</sup>.

Gratitude has been theorized as an emotion, approach, amoral, a custom, a personality attribute, or a coping strategy. The word gratitude is derived from the Latin origin "gratia," which means "grace," "graciousness," or "gratefulness." All roots from this Latin source emphasize the principle of "have to do with humanity, kindness, contributions, the majesty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing"<sup>14</sup>.

Whether the gratitude trait can be inculcated therapeutically in our society arises. Seligman et al. stated that assuredly, it can and comes under the considerable accomplishment of positive psychology advancement<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, in clinical psychology, gratitude is considered a significant tactics<sup>10,15</sup>. Besides, it can induce PPIs to increase people's SWB. Sin & Lyubomirsky suggest that gratitude practice reproduces thoughtful healing methods intended to expand positive moods, perceptions, and behavior in an individual<sup>16</sup>. Hence, this therapeutic meditation promotes positivity in people that is considered a vital essence in life, whether in terms of attaining mental health or coping with the adverse events and moods they might experience<sup>17</sup>.

Emmons & McCullough are considered the pioneer of this gratitude meditation program and are working toward the efficacy of gratitude meditations, including SWB and other aspects of human welfare as well<sup>18</sup>. Countless researches proposed that gratitude meditation can have long-term positive effects on a person's life. It is evident in the literature that gratitude interventions in adolescence may boost and maintain positive benefits and leads to more

tremendous gratitude, life satisfaction<sup>18</sup>, positive affects<sup>12,19</sup>, and SWB<sup>9,20</sup>, conversely reducing the negative mood<sup>9,19</sup>. Another study challenged to evoke the feeling of gratitude for producing positive events or feelings in one's life and ultimately enhancing the level of SWB<sup>21</sup>. Likewise, Watkins et al. conducted an experiment that revealed that thankful thought is a mood booster and is associated with a different facet of well-being such as subjective, social, physical, and psychological<sup>19</sup>.

At the same time, there is substantial agreement among investigators that the accurate scales of SWB<sup>22</sup> can assess contentment and pleasure. The first is the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin<sup>23</sup> and can also be used to measure the cognitive side. In contrast, the affective facet of the second one is the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule<sup>24</sup>. These two frequently used measures are considered reliable and valid scales that can portray an individual SWB. Supplementary, SWLS gauges the cognitive factor of SWB, while PANAS assesses the emotional factors.

Although the Gratitude technique is a research-based intervention<sup>18</sup>, the participants are regularly engaged in a task designed to cultivate a sense of gratefulness. Besides, these tasks contained quick and easy activities that can enhance positive affect, pleasure<sup>25</sup> and life satisfaction and decreased NA<sup>26</sup>. In this notion, the individuals first cultivate the gratitude internally and then express it in a handwritten letter or verbally<sup>27</sup>. Undoubtedly, people seem to enjoy the gratitude intervention, and evidence has suggested that respondents are more likely to remain in an intervention and home assignments that allocate to them<sup>28</sup>. The homework usually entails counting blessings, listing things one is grateful for,



maintaining a gratitude journal, expressing gratitude, letter writing, etc. The discipline of gratitude intervention has advanced rapidly in the European countries, but the scarcity of this intrusion remained unprogressive in our culture. So, it is time to take a step forward to teach gratitude interventions to promote SWB, especially in adolescents and adults.

The Gratitude meditation program mainly engrosses individuals to reminiscence the past events and recall the blessing that may persuade and boost gratitude. To summarize, the exploration mentioned above has recommended that gratitude intervention produces several positive outcomes and enhances SWB. Therefore, the central focus of the present study is to examine the effect of the Gratitude meditation program and see if it shows positive effects on measures of SWB on the sample of college students. It is suggested that study participants would have exposed an increase in dispositional gratitude immediately following the experimental manipulation.

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## Methodology

Quantitative research was conducted using the Quasi-Experimental designs within the groups of college students from two different colleges in Karachi, participating voluntarily in the gratitude meditation program.

### Participants

Indeed, mental health problems are a significant public health concern for all ages, especially adolescents. Typically, the majority of mental disorders first emerge in this period. So, there is a strong need to improve their well-being to prevent disorder. Thereby it was most desirable to recruit students from the college. The sample consisted of 160 participants voluntarily

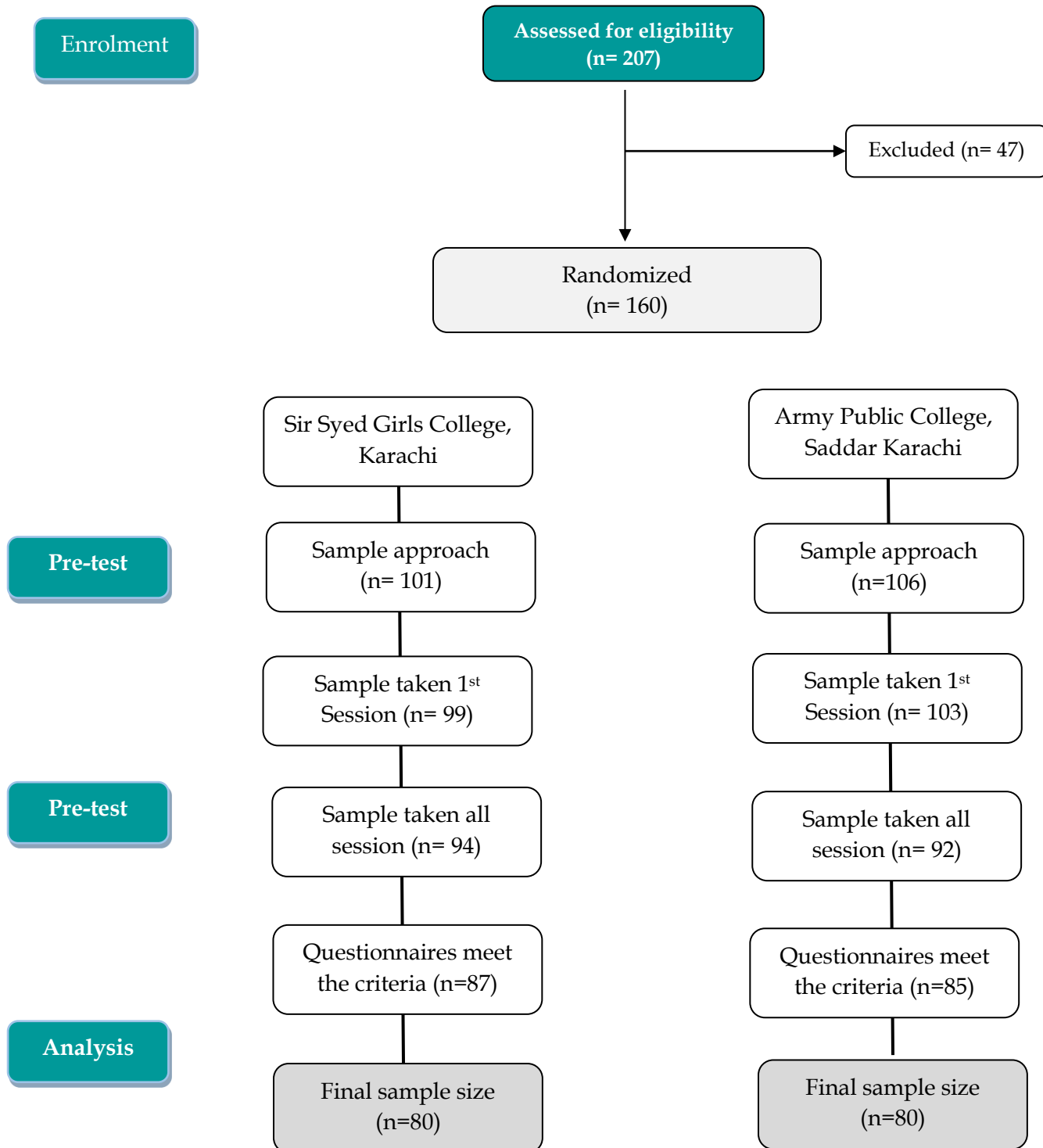
participating in the gratitude meditation program. The age of the study participants ranged from 15-20 years and was employed from two colleges of Karachi in approximately equal proportions. The sample was divided into two groups regarding college, 80 students from Sir Syed Govt College and 80 from Army Public College, Saddar. All study participants were given informed consent before any gratitude meditation intervention.

A total of 207 students were taken as additional participants to compensate the questionnaires with errors or absentees of students in the remaining sessions. Students who did not take all sessions of the program or those who did come to take training after getting enrolled in the program were excluded. A purposive non-probability sampling technique was used as the recruiting strategy for the study sample (Figure 1). The primary health care population does not have any psychiatric severe condition at baseline. The inclusion criterion involved reading and writing English to give informed consent and filling pre and post-measures. A total of 80 males and 80 females students participate in this study.

### Measures

*Gratitude Questionnaire-Six-Item Form (GQ-6)*<sup>29</sup>:

This scale is designed to evaluate the proneness to experience gratitude in daily life. The responses of item measures are based on a 7-point Likert-style response scale, where participants rate their level of agreement on each item ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). There was a reverse scoring for items 3 and 6 to get the total sum, and that was our total GQ-6 score. The range of scoring was between 6 and 42. McCullough et al. reported the GQ-6 to have high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha 0.77<sup>29</sup>.



**Figure 1: Flow chart for Data Collection**

***Satisfaction with life scale (SWLS)***<sup>23</sup>:

The instrument design measures the universal cognitive gauging of satisfaction

with one's life. It is a brief questionnaire that contained only five items measured by a 7-point Likert-type scale. The probable range



of scoring is 5-35, and a score of 20 indicates a neutral point on the scale. Diener et al. found SWLS to have favorable psychometric properties with the 0.87 coefficient alpha and 2 -month test-retest stability coefficient of 0.82, whereas Factor analysis of the SWLS suggests it unidimensional<sup>23</sup>.

#### **Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)<sup>24</sup>:**

Participants are requested to ask whether they generally feel this way (a certain way) using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very slightly (score 1) to significantly (score 5). The scale contains two scales- Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). PA assesses ten emotion adjectives (e.g., excited, interested, and alert), and NA judges ten negative emotion adjectives (e.g., distressed,

hostile, scared). The score range for both scales (PA and NA) ranges from 10-50, respectively. The PANAS scale seems to be a reliable measure and acquires both convergent and discriminant validity with high internal consistency and Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.84 to 0.88.

#### **Procedure**

The three weeks' interventions consisted of three workshops or sessions. Each session is to be conducted weekly with one and half-hour of duration. Participants are supposed to administer Pre and Post-intervention measures of SWB.

The three-week Gratitude meditation program for improving SWB among college students is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: 3 weeks Gratitude meditation program for improving SWB**

Sessions	Theme	Interventions
1 <sup>st</sup> session	Awakening the heart to gratitude daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grateful seeing</li> <li>• Breath of thanks</li> <li>• Maintain gratitude journal</li> <li>• Praying for gratitude (Religious ritual)</li> </ul>
2 <sup>nd</sup> session	Grateful contemplation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counting blessings</li> <li>• Living gratefully</li> <li>• Sharing gratitude</li> <li>• Help someone less fortunate</li> </ul>
3 <sup>rd</sup> session	Behavioral expressions of gratitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving thanks</li> <li>• Gratitude prompts</li> <li>• Write a gratitude letter to a loved one</li> <li>• Gratitude Quotes</li> </ul>

Further, the researcher explained the relevance of the study and then distributed questionnaires with a demographic section, where they were inquired about the age, education, and date of the test administration. Additionally, they were asked about any concerns regarding the study and taking further sessions. Though, after getting active participants' conformity with an explanation of the purpose and

procedure of the study, pre-intervention measures were administered.

PowerPoint slides were prepared for visual presentation in each session separately. And a gratitude booklet (designed by the study researcher) was also provided to each participant before starting the session; the material of the booklet was connected to a variety of gratitude exercises and homework



sheets, and those were also conducted throughout the whole sessions. As mentioned earlier, students from both colleges were assessed at two time points, three weeks apart: (a) Pre-test (before the intervention); (b) Post-test (instantly after intervention). All participants were reported for the next session. The results were analyzed on the Statistical Package for the

Social Sciences (SPSS) to clarify the results' pattern and compute the mean.

## Result

According to demographics, most of the participants were 17 to 18 years old (69.73%) and studying in XII year (53.75%) (Table 2).

**Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the study population.**

Variable		N(%)
Level of Education	XI year	74(46.25)
	XII year	86(53.75)
Gender	Male	80(50)
	Female	80(50)
Age	15-16 years	42(26.25)
	17-18 years	111(69.37)
	19-20 years	07(4.37)

Results also show that the dispositional gratitude mean scores differed at the end of the intervention. Although significant differences were found before the Gratitude meditation program ( $28.10 \pm 0.48$ ) and after intervention ( $32.01 \pm 0.46$ ), with respect to the Gratitude variable shows statistically significant outcomes ( $t = 10.58, p=0.000$ ). Moreover, other findings also yielded significant outcomes. A statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the Satisfaction with Life Scale, Positive and Negative Affects before and after the application of Gratitude interventions was also found. It has been observed that there are considerable increases in the scores of satisfaction with life scale and positive effects while expressing the noticeable decrease in Negative Affectivity from Day 1 (pre-intervention Assessment) to Day 21 (post-intervention Assessment).

However, the mean score of Satisfaction with Life presents a significant difference at the prior ( $19.43 \pm 0.45$ ) and after intervention ( $23.68 \pm 0.43$ ), ( $t = 11.17, p=0.000$ ). While observing the Positive effects variable, the score is meaningfully different on the initial intervention phase ( $30.73 \pm 0.58$ ) as compared to the post-intervention ( $36.91 \pm 0.54$ ) phase and shows statistically significant results ( $t=11.87, p=0.000$ ). Hence, there is a substantial decrease in the Negative effects mean scores from pre-test ( $28.58 \pm 0.57$ ) to post-test ( $22.09 \pm 0.45$ ), yet the results show statistical significance ( $t=-12.644, p = 0.000$ ) (Table 3).

**Table 3: Effect of Gratitude practice on dispositional gratitude & SWB measures.**

Variables		Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	p-value
Gratitude		28.10±0.48	32.01±0.46	0.000
SWB Measures	Satisfaction with life	19.43±0.45	23.68±0.43	0.000
	Positive Effects	30.73±0.58	36.91±0.54	0.000



Negative Effects

28.58±0.57

22.09±0.45

0.000

## Discussion

In the present study, the inclusive goal is to check out and investigate the proficiency of the Gratitude Meditation Program on dispositional gratitude and SWB from Day-one to Day twenty-one (3 weeks program). The program consisted of three workshops scheduled weekly basis on the availability of college students. The workshops examine whether or not the gratitude exercises successfully bring benefits to their respondents. In addition, the importance given to serving others among a representative sample of the population of Colleges was also observed.

Recent research suggests that gratitude intervention is one of the best techniques and working gadget of PPIs and have shown positive results on measures of SWB and dispositional gratitude itself. This intervention is not only effective but easy to administer as well. Besides, a large number of researches and literature have been examined to investigate the benefits of this practice and intervention. In his book "Seven Laws of Spiritual Success," George Herbert says that a heart filled with gratitude and seeing for good is the most valuable thing that one possesses<sup>30</sup>. An individual who experiences gratitude demonstrates more resilience and can deal successfully with everyday problems, and eventually attain a high SWB<sup>11,21</sup>.

In the current study, to enhance the SWB, the researcher instructed the respondents to continue their gratitude practice for 3-week. However, the question that arises here is why three weeks? Because it comprises 21 days and the great body of evidence suggested that it takes 21 days to form a new habit fully. In the old ages, Maxwell Maltz<sup>31</sup> published a book recognized as Psycho-

Cybernetics, in which he stated that people take 21 days to fine-tune or stay at its required level after any major life change<sup>31</sup>. A study shows that the investigator advised the respondents to continue their gratitude practices for 21 days in order to internalize gratitude as a new habit completely. So that it becomes employed over time and gets sustained, leading to continual well-being throughout life. Subsequently, a significant change was observed after 21 days as compared to starting day<sup>21</sup>.

Although, it has been observed that cultivating an attitude of gratitude exhibited conceivable outcomes. Besides that, it is also observed that while the respondent practiced gratitude, its impacts on his or her dispositional gratitude revealed significant increases in the level of gratitude post-intervention. Undoubtedly, the influence of gratitude meditation is associated with the paradigm of gratitude itself and may induce intensely with the help of other therapeutic techniques<sup>21</sup>. This means an analyst can imply and intervene in the methods to nurture the individual to promote grateful habits that could possibly lead to the amplified character of gratefulness. Conclusively, the feeling of thankfulness is created immediately after the grateful thought, and continuous practice of gratitude techniques helps in raising dispositional gratitude<sup>32</sup>.

On the other hand, a significant body of experiential research on gratitude intervention verified that it is an influencing intervention for enhancing SWB. Undoubtedly, gratitude intervention is considered as the vigorous executive for human booming<sup>33,34</sup>. Furthermore, can be one of the essential ingredients of becoming happier<sup>35</sup>. Furthermore, the current paper verified the beneficial effect of gratitude





training on SWB. The respondents' Post-intervention scores were significantly higher as compared to the pre-test, concerning all domains of the SWB.

In the present study, researchers primarily put efforts toward raising awareness about what valuable things they have, alongside general positive events or things that are regularly happening, but we take for granted and do not even consider them. Subsequently taking and attending gratitude exercise sessions, individuals start to notice those events and sources they never observed before. However, studies suggest that contentment and pleasure are partial until an individual expresses gratitude toward the source of the joy<sup>32</sup>. The feeling of gratitude experiences starts to process when one starts to notice the occurrences of positive events<sup>36</sup>. To exam the impact of gratitude intervention on SWB, different techniques were used successfully like Count Blessing, Maintain Gratitude Journal, Behaviour Expression, Letter writing, gratitude Quotes, prompts, etc. These all exercises were included in a gratitude booklet designed by the researcher and were given to each participant before the session started.

The key outcomes that emerged from this study are that gratitude meditation is very effective in boosting satisfaction with life and positive effects, while substantial dropping in Negative scores (Show in Table 3), along with the significant difference of the mean scores between the pre-and post-intervention for all measures were observed. That ultimately facilitates the participant's SWB. These findings are also congruent with Watkin's<sup>22</sup> analysis and Emmons's<sup>21</sup> findings. An experimental study conducted by Seligman et al.<sup>12</sup> and Froh et al.,<sup>37</sup> revealed that grateful feeling leads to increased positive effects and satisfaction with life and a reduction in adverse effects.

These results can also be linked with the study of Fredrickson et al.<sup>38</sup>, who recommend that positive effects are enhanced due to positive emotions like gratitude.

Impartially a simple practice of gratitude is suggested to have numerous benefits along with improving well-being. It performs a vital role in mental, emotional, and physical health throughout life. A study conducted by Emmons & McCullough<sup>21</sup> suggests that those college students who were keeping gratitude journal practice more regularly were observed highly satisfied with their lives, had fewer adverse effects, and were more hopeful about the future as compared to a neutral life event or hassles condition<sup>21</sup>. Again, in their second study, they observed that students who participated in journal-keeping exercises daily were more likely to be attentive, enthusiastic, and strong-minded compared to the hassles or social comparison condition<sup>21</sup>. They replicated the study to find out the results in adults with neuromuscular diseases. The patients were assessed through the self-report measures that show that patients in the grateful condition tend to have a high score on positive effects and satisfaction with life. The results also evidence that those people who are grateful are more likely to experience positive emotions, such as happiness, optimism, and contentment, along with less damaging emotions<sup>22</sup>. As both SWB measures (life satisfaction and positive and negative effects schedule) were amplified in post-intervention, the increasing rate of the mean was statistically significant, suggesting that the intervention was very beneficial and effective for hedonic well-being.

Moreover, it is suggested that continued investigation in gratitude intervention can exhibit credible results and demonstrate that gratitude influences SWB. Unfortunately, little research work has been done in this



area and the field of gratitude meditation and SWB in Pakistan. Therefore, more interventional studies and work are suggested to be done on different sample sizes and statuses to determine the relevancy of PPIs and their effectiveness.

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## Conclusion

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The current study provided evidence that gratitude meditation is a dynamic healing way, influencing the SWB in the sample of college students. The results conclude that gratitude meditation and exercises are among the best approaches to boost an individual's SWB and are considered the most successful PPIs. Moreover, this intervention has increased the level of gratitude itself. Therefore, one cannot ignore that the future of psychology would be lodging to build character strengths, and gratitude can accelerate this idea into a reality. In upcoming psychology, when a client goes to take a session, he/she may talk about his strengths instead of troubles.

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