



Why do greater curiosity and fewer depressive symptoms predict gratitude intervention use? Utility beliefs, social norm, and self-control beliefs ☆



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 September 2013

Received in revised form 12 March 2014

Accepted 23 March 2014

Available online 21 April 2014

Keywords:

Gratitude

Curiosity

Depression

Theory of planned behavior

ABSTRACT

Prior research found that greater trait curiosity, fewer depressive symptoms, and being a woman increase the likelihood that a person will start a gratitude intervention on their own. Yet, little is known as to why these individual differences lead to self-initiation. In the present study, we examined motivational mechanisms that might account for these effects. In-home interviews were conducted with 257 adults from the community. Participants received a leaflet about gratitude interventions that asked about gratitude social belief norms (what other important people they care about would do), utility and self-control beliefs (e.g., usefulness, perceived difficulty), and intentions to start a gratitude intervention. They also completed measures of curiosity and depressive symptoms. Afterwards, participants received codes that allowed them to take part in a web-based gratitude intervention (strictly voluntary). Using structural equation modeling, we found that greater trait curiosity, fewer depressive symptoms, and being a woman indirectly led to the initiation of the gratitude intervention as a function of utility beliefs, social norm beliefs, and perceived self-control. Results suggest specific motivational pathways through which curiosity, depression, and sex influence the development of grateful people.

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1. Introduction

Despite the ubiquity and lucrative market, little is known about who initiates self-help interventions and why they do. Self-help seekers are not a homogeneous group (Parks, Della Port, Pierce, Zilca, & Lyubomirsky, 2012) suggesting that there are problems with one-size-all approaches for motivating people. In a recent study, Kaczmarek and colleagues (2013) gave people information about a website with free gratitude interventions that they could access if they chose. Greater curiosity, fewer depressive symptoms, and being a woman were each linked to a greater likelihood of voluntarily starting the gratitude intervention. To date, no research

exists on the mechanisms accounting for these effects. The primary goal of the present study was to examine motivational factors (perceptions about usefulness, social norm beliefs, self-control beliefs) that might explain why certain individual differences (curiosity, depression, sex) alter the likelihood of initiating a gratitude intervention.

1.1. Gratitude interventions

Gratitude is an emotional state that occurs when an individual attends to the benefits and gifts that are attributable to the kindness of others (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Intentionally attending to moments of gratitude in one's daily experiences has been shown to enhance positive experiences and reduce depressive symptoms (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Similar effects were maintained as much as six months after the formal intervention ended (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Compared to other positive psychological interventions, gratitude journaling is perceived by recipients as more efficacious and useful compared (Huffman et al., 2014) and it is more willingly self-initiated than other interventions (Parks et al., 2012). Gratitude

☆ Project supported by National Science Center Poland (N N106 291239) to Lukasz Kaczmarek. Todd Kashdan was funded by the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being, George Mason University.

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interventions are particularly appealing because of their low financial cost and with minimal time commitment.

1.2. Theory of planned behavior

The theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991, 2011) offers a framework for understanding how individual differences (i.e. curiosity, depression, sex) work in concert to understand the motivation for and actual engagement in a gratitude intervention. In the TPB human behavior is guided by three belief symptoms: the likely consequences of the behavior (utility beliefs), the normative expectations of highly valued people (social norm beliefs), and the presence of factors that may hinder the behavior (self-control beliefs). Behavioral beliefs result in a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the behavior, normative beliefs result in assumptions about what other important people think is the best course of action, and control beliefs result in perceptions about the difficulty or effort required to execute a behavior. Together, these TPB components inform behavioral intentions that can translate into actual behavior in a given context. The TPB is particularly relevant to the study of positive interventions. It provides evidence that accounting for intentions is necessary to explain relationships between personality and behaviors, and it helps to identify specific areas of individual differences (e.g., attitudes) that guide intentional behaviors. Thus, TPB might help disentangle the motivation of voluntarily participating in a self-help intervention.

The TPB provides a guide to understanding behavioral motivations, but the foundational framework fails to account for background factors such as personality or trait-like variables. It does not specify how and where beliefs originate. Background factors provide critical information about possible antecedents of behavioral, normative, and control beliefs. Failing to account for intention and its motivational antecedents misses crucial information about which individuals are likely to initiate a gratitude intervention.

1.3. Curiosity and motivation for gratitude interventions

Curious individuals might be especially likely to seek out opportunities for self-change. Curiosity involves a preference for new and unusual activities (Spielberger & Starr, 1994). This preference might increase the motivation to try out an intervention that encourages new attitudes and responses to gifts received from other people (via a gratitude intervention). Self-change is at the minimum, mildly uncomfortable. A lack of perceived control or wariness of uncertainty might inhibit less curious people from initiating self-change exercises. Curious people might find it easier to participate because they believe they have the ability to effectively cope with or make sense of the novelty, distress, and uncertainty that accompanies lifestyle changes (Silvia, 2008).

An experimental study indicated that gratitude interventions offer more favorable outcomes for people who are more open to new experiences (Senf & Liao, 2012). Because curious people to have more positive experiences and positive evaluations of themselves and the world (Kashdan, Sherman, Yarbro, & Funder, 2013; Kashdan & Steger, 2007), they may be motivated to initiate a gratitude intervention. Positive experiences ensure more opportunities to feel and express gratitude, increasing the usefulness and ease of gratitude exercises. Taken together, curiosity is a potential predictor of utility, social norm, and self-control beliefs, which in turn, should increase intentions to engage in gratitude experiments on the self.

1.4. Depression and motivation for gratitude interventions

Depressed individuals might be less likely to self-initiate behavioral change. Their avoidance orientation and reduced reward responsiveness (Henriques & Davidson, 2000) may hinder motiva-

tion towards goal-directed activities. Depressed adults have more difficulty improving their mood through positive memories than healthy adults (Joormann & Siemer, 2004). Consequently, more depressed adults may expect their daily gratitude intervention to be useless and unnecessarily difficult. Accordingly, depressive symptoms might prevent voluntary engagement.

While depressed individuals might seek out fewer change opportunities on their own, social factors might increase motivation. Because depressed adults have a strong need for social approval (Zuroff, Blatt, Sanislow, Bondi, & Pilkonis, 1999), social norms can stimulate their motivation. Perceived social pressure motivates depressed individuals to initiate healthy lifestyle changes (Bandura, 1998). Depressed individuals are particularly sensitive to social rejection (Nezlek, Kowalski, Leary, Blevins, & Holgate, 1997). If they perceive participation in the intervention as consistent with social norms, they might be more willing to participate in hopes of gaining social approval.

Taken together, depressed adults possess beliefs that are inconsistent with enjoying or benefitting from gratitude exercises. However, based on prior knowledge on the power of social influence, we explored whether depressed adults can be motivated by social pressure to practice gratitude.

1.5. Sex and motivation for gratitude interventions

Societal gender norms might make women more willing to engage in gratitude interventions. In general, women tend to express positive emotions more often (LaFrance, Hecht, & Paluck, 2003). Expressions of particular emotions can result from normative social pressures and stereotypical beliefs about gender roles (Brody, 1999). With regards to gratitude, women are more likely than men to experience and express grateful feelings (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009). Men are often socially discouraged to experience and express their gratitude, whereas women are encouraged.

As a result of prescribed gender roles, we expected women to show favorable attitude towards gratitude interventions. Women derive more benefits from gratitude, and view gratitude expression as more interesting (Kashdan et al., 2009; Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009). For these reasons, we expected that women would view gratitude interventions as more useful and view social norms as more encouraging and thus, influential in decision to initiate a gratitude intervention.

1.6. The present study

In the present study, we applied the TPB to predict intentions and behavioral engagement in voluntary self-change interventions, and provide explanations for when and why positive interventions are instilled in daily life. We sought to extend prior work that identified factors influencing the start of a gratitude intervention: high curiosity, few depressive symptoms, and being a woman (Kaczmarek et al., 2013). First, we tested the degree to which utility beliefs, social norm beliefs, and self-control beliefs predicted intentions and the actual start of an online gratitude intervention. Unlike prior research that assigns gratitude interventions (Seligman et al., 2005), we informed participants about a voluntary intervention and observed their subsequent actions. Second, we used utility, social norm, and self-control beliefs as mediators to explain how curiosity, depression, and sex influence intentions and actual behavioral engagement in a gratitude intervention. We hypothesized that utility beliefs, social norm beliefs, and self-control beliefs would predict intentions. Upon including individual differences, we hypothesized that curiosity, depression, and sex would have an indirect effect on behavior through these motivational components and intentions.

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