

The Effect of a Gratitude Writing Exercise on Body Image and Weight Bias
Internalization
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I don't know about you guys, but I find body image to be one of the most difficult areas of our work. Even after eating disorder symptoms improve, many patients continue to struggle with not feeling good in their bodies. This is especially problematic since body image has a strong impact on both psychological and physical wellbeing. I was excited to read about this new study investigating a short writing exercise in improving body image and weight bias internalization. Perhaps body-focused gratitude could be a new tool to use with clients?

Dunaev et al (2018) examined 369 participants 18-25 years old (mean=22.7 years) who were primarily White/Caucasian (74.8%), had some post-secondary education (50.7% had a bachelor's degree), a mean BMI of 25.6, and approximately half (51.2%) identified as female. Participants were randomly assigned to either a body-gratitude condition (n=185) or a control condition (n=184). The authors hypothesized that participants in the body gratitude condition, when compared to a control condition, would report lower levels of internalized weight bias and higher levels of body satisfaction and appearance evaluation.

In the body-gratitude condition, participants were given the following instructions:

Think about aspects of your body that you are grateful for. This can be anything, including your health, physical appearance, or the functionality of your body. Try to come up with at least five things. Take a minute and really think about those things, picturing them in your mind. Once you have finished thinking about these things, choose at least three of them and write about why you are grateful for those things.

Participants in the control condition were instructed to think and write about their ideal vacation.

Results indicated that, when compared to the control condition, participants in the body-gratitude condition reported significantly more favorable appearance evaluation and body satisfaction and significantly lower weight bias internalization. These effects were not influenced by either gender or BMI, indicating that the intervention worked similarly for both men and women across the weight spectrum.

Some limitations of this study include the post-test only design (participants weren't assessed on body image or weight bias internalization before the intervention) and the brief nature of the intervention. It is possible that the differences in the groups were due to demand characteristics (participants wanting to please the researchers) since there was a transparent focus on the body in the intervention. Future research should address these issues by examining more intensive, more rigorous study designs, and include behavioral outcomes and demand compliance checks.

Despite these limitations, the authors conclude that body-focused gratitude is a potential strategy individuals can independently engage in to improve their body image and reduce internalized weight bias. Individual interventions, such as body-focused gratitude, should be used alongside society-level interventions aimed at

reducing weight bias in the general population, shifting from a focus on weight loss to a more board range of health promoting behaviors, and creating a media culture supportive of diverse beauty ideals.

What do you think? Is body-focused gratitude something you may try in your practice? Let us know on our Facebook Page!

Reference: Dunaev J, Markey C, and Brochu P. (2018) An Attitude of Gratitude: The Effects of Body-Focused Gratitude on Weight Bias Internalization and Body Image. *Body Image*, 25: 9-13