

Activity: Creative Expression Goal: Psychological/Emotional Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Cultivating Gratitude

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Photo by The Sill



Materials

Printed definition of gratitude

Plant materials like leaves, small plants, potting soil, containers, celery

Paper, pencils, notecards, non-toxic paint, brushes

Optional: art materials for selected activities

Gloves, wipes

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will discuss and practice gratitude using plant activities and plant materials.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Discuss definition & dimensions of gratitude; reflect on personal experiences when gratitude has been received, given and could have been given

Physical: Demonstrate physical forms of gratitude (touching, patting where appropriate); reduce stress

Psychological/Emotional: Self-initiate decision-making & choices; discuss & demonstrate gratitude as a psycho-social mindset; share perspectives on gratitude & resiliency; use mindfulness during session; discuss happiness & factors contributing to it including gratitude

Sensory: Use hands-on activity to create a plant gift

Social: Increase awareness about gratitude & its impact on others; show gratitude to someone with a plant gift; discuss gratitude as a way to connect with others, particularly impactful for adolescents

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Prepare discussion questions/prompts ahead. Gather materials & set up plant activity stations. Organize volunteers to assist at stations.
2. Facilitator begins session by distributing a hard copy definition of gratitude to each participant. Reading this aloud & sharing short definitions of commonly accepted stages of gratitude (affirmation & recognition), facilitator introduces concept of grateful living & the mindset of gratitude as a positive way of seeing, being & behaving.
3. Participants are asked questions to prompt self-reflection leading to discussion within group. Allow time for people to think about gratitude and instances when they have received it, given it, and could have given it to others. (More details below).
4. Next phase of session involves practicing gratitude, making items using plants materials. Participants will visit the 3 stations making plant items.
5. Hands-on plant activities can include one or more of these: making & writing thank-you cards with pressed flowers or [leaf printing](#), [Japanese hapa-zome printing](#), [celery shenanigans](#), [flower arrangements](#) and potting a small plant as a gift.
6. Conclude session with health, and most importantly, wellbeing benefits of gratitude (see points in Notes or Other Considerations).

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: The set-up for this TH activity uses multiple stations manned by volunteers (if possible) where hands-on plant activities will be undertaken in second part of session. Beginning with a discussion of what gratitude is and can be, using a [mindfulness](#) framework (Fleming & Crues, 2024), the therapeutic focus can target any of the health domains depending on the clients. The primary theme across domains is seeing the world through a positive lens using gratitude for thoughts and actions, and where involving and interacting with others showing gratitude recognizes goodness beyond oneself. This can refocus on what each person has instead of dwelling on negatives. These can be applied to the past, present and future (cognitive/intellectual goal). Referencing types of meditation practices like loving kindness (grateful for being as you are) or [Naikan](#), a meditative practice developed by Yoshimoto Ishin, using self-examination involving insight, sense of indebtedness, gratitude and conscious decision to shift from self-focus, to attention and sensitivity to others, can address selfishness, positive attitudes and behaviors.

Introducing gratitude using hands-on plant activities for populations where self-centered, narcissistic or selfish behavior, immaturity, harmful self-regulation dysfunction, negative behavior related to mental health challenges, or where negativism has crept in due to medical conditions, life's adversity, or depression, can be an approach without shame or lecturing. Wellness groups and children can also benefit from this gratitude activity.

Several elements can be incorporated into the session. Writing gratitude ideas out. Practicing gratitude. Self-reflection – who have I harmed by selfishness and what roadblocks have I experienced? What gratitude have I experienced that surprised me? Plant metaphors for selfishness, selflessness, and personal growth can transition the discussion component into the hands-on expressions of gratitude. Using the concrete form of gratitude – giving a gift intentionally to another person, grateful for their words or actions, and where the receiver recognizes it as a gift freely given (this latter part may occur after session to family member, teacher, friend) provides the opportunity for participants to make a plant gift in session and give to someone important to them. Plant activities have been suggested in the step-by-step section.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. TH activities should be selected based on safety considerations and maturity of participants. Corrections facilities may limit use of some materials including pencils. Non-toxic paint should be used.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: A short summary of health and wellbeing benefits connected to gratitude can conclude the session, tailored to participants and suitable for their age and life experiences. Research has indicated gratitude is related to 25% lower levels of stress, reduction in dietary fat by as much as 25%, a 10% improvement in sleep, and 19 % lower depression levels (Boggiss et al., 2020; Emmons, 2016). Gratitude and grateful living provide a transformative power of positivity which can increase resiliency, willpower, relationships, and self-esteem. Being and practicing gratitude has psychological, physical and social benefits and can improve personal happiness. Facilitator can suggest participants try it out and consider if these touted health benefits, improved positive outlook and happiness are what they experience.

Tools used within mental health to measure health and wellbeing, happiness levels may be informative, even if measuring outcomes is not part of the TH session. [Psychological Assessment Tools for Mental Health](#) site (2024) provides multiple questionnaire tools, these administered by psychometrists or mental health professionals.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

Boggiss, A.L., Considine, N.S., Brenton-Peters, J.M. et al. (2020). A systematic review of gratitude interventions: Effects on physical health and health behaviors. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 135.

Emmons, R.A. (2016). *The little book of gratitude*. Gia Books.

Fleming, L. & Crues, E. (2024). [Therapeutic techniques applicable to people-plant programming](#). *Cultivate*, 4(3).

Krech, G. (2024). [Naikan therapy: 3 questions to put things in perspective](#). *Tricycle Meditation Magazine*.

Smith, J.A. et al. (2020). *The gratitude project. How the science of thankfulness can rewire our brains for resilience, optimism, and the greater good*. New Harbinger Publications.

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2024.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.