



Gratitude Gives You Wings: 6 Tricks For Rising Above Negativity

"Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world."-John Milton

Epiphanies and awe are two things not generally cited in the day-to-day conversations of people struggling to take care of an elderly loved one. More often mentioned are the painful, anguishing, and embarrassing moments: the outburst your mother had at the grocery store or the ongoing fight with your brother over who should be dad's POA.

"When we are feeling scared, worried, or overwhelmed in life, it's hard to find our gratitude," says Karol Ward, LCSW, a licensed psychotherapist. "Our minds feel caught in a loop of anxiety, which makes us view the world through a darker lens."

How does one get beyond this world of shadowy gloom? Is it possible for a caregiver to experience "everyday epiphanies," even as you find yourself staring at life through a barrel of obscure blackness?

Milton thinks so—he even tells you how to do it with one, simple word: Gratitude.

What is gratitude?

According to relationship advice expert, April Masini, being grateful means, "taking yourself out of the moment and out of the situation, enough to see that things could be worse," she says, "Gratitude is the ability to rise above."

Mastering this ability to rise above can do wonders for a caregiver's physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Elizabeth Waterman, Psy.D., a psychologist at the Morningside Recovery Center who specializes in mood and anxiety disorders, says that gratitude is a very healing emotion that can help caregivers gain a more optimistic outlook on life and, as a result, access a wider and more reliable social support network.

She also points out that a number of different studies have linked feelings of gratitude with reduced stress and a healthier immune system, and says that substantial evidence shows that grateful people are more likely to take care of their own health by eating right and exercising.

Caregiver rising

Since human caregivers lack wings, (though their dedication to their loved ones certainly qualifies them for a pair) they can't physically fly away from their problems.

What they can do, according to Waterman, is practice being grateful for the good things in their lives—even when these things are nearly impossible to recognize. "Even if you aren't feeling positive or grateful about your situation, you can enact certain behaviors and the [grateful] attitudes and feelings will follow," she says.

Here are a few tips to help caregivers find their wings of gratitude and rise above negative emotions:

1. **Thank your mortal guardian angels:** Whether or not you refer to them as guardian angels, every caregiver has people in their lives that love and support them. These are the people who've gotten you through past trials, or are currently helping you cope with the challenge of caring for your loved one. Taking the time to thank these folks will not only make them feel good, but it is also likely to generate a host of positive feelings within you as well. When expressing your gratitude, Waterman says that face-to-face interactions are best because they can provide a more powerful positive response. But, if time and distance prohibit you from thanking your earth-bound angel in person, a hand-written thank you note will certainly suffice.
2. **Share your light:** Ward touts the power of smiling and greeting the people you see on the street or in the grocery store. Even if you don't know someone personally, Ward says that when you say 'Hi' to a stranger, you may, "be surprised by how another person's smile or wise words can lift your spirits."
3. **Spend 8 minutes on Cloud 9:** Each day, Waterman suggests taking eight minutes to sit and reflect on the positive experiences in your life. For the caregiver, it may help to try and identify those things you are grateful for when it comes to taking care of your elderly loved one. (After your reflection, if you feel up to it, Waterman says you may want to express these feelings of appreciation to the elder. Even if they can't understand you, or brush off your comments, giving voice to your gratitude may foster a more loving relationship between the two of you). If your present situation seems too gloomy, you can turn your attention to the simpler days of yesteryear. Delve into those moments and really feel the positivity and gratitude that wells up inside of you when you think about them.
4. **Collect daily joy sprites:** It's easy to get so caught up in our own problems that we fail to notice the beautiful moments of everyday life. Waterman's remedy for this is to keep small pieces of paper and a pencil with you wherever you go. Throughout the day, as you notice things like how nice the flowers in your garden smell, or how great a cool breeze feels on a hot summer day, write them down. At the end of the day, re-read those pieces of paper, and then put them in a special box for safekeeping and future reference.
5. **DIY your wings:** If it's just been, "one of those days," and you can't seem to pinpoint any instances of positivity, you may need to create your own motivational moments. Ward advises searching for inspiration in books, videos, music—anywhere you can find it. For a quick pick-me-up, buy a book of motivational quotes, or create your own, personalized list of poignant phrases. According to Ward, doing this as little as once a day for a week can be enough to help foster feelings of gratitude and perspective.
6. **Seek out like-minded souls:** People have a tendency to feed off of one another's emotional vibes. This means that just one Negative Nancy or Positive Polly can influence the attitudes of those around them.

"Negativity is contagious," Waterman says, "but so is positivity." For someone taking care of an elderly loved one, it is important to be able to engage in gripe sessions with caregiving comrades. But, Waterman stresses that it's also vital to maintain a network of positive people who can support you and offer perspective when needed.

Fostering an attitude of gratitude while taking care of a loved one can be a challenge. Even if you do every single one of the things on the list above, the effects won't be miraculous or instantaneous. As Masini says, "Cultivating gratitude is a matter of discipline. It requires mindfulness and focus."

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