

# Can Gratitude Reduce Costly Impatience?

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The human mind tends to devalue future rewards compared to immediate ones — a phenomenon that often leads to favoring immediate gratification over long-term wellbeing. As a consequence, patience has long been recognized to be a virtue. And indeed, the inability to resist temptation underlies a host of problems ranging from credit card debt and inadequate savings to unhealthy eating and drug addiction.

The prevailing view for reducing costly impatience has emphasized the use of willpower. That is, emotions are to be tamped down in order to avoid irrational impulses for immediate gain. But as Northeastern University psychological scientist David DeSteno notes, “Emotions exist to serve adaptive purposes, so the idea that emotions would always be a hindrance to long-term success makes little sense.”



In a potentially landmark study, a team of researchers from Northeastern University, the University of California, Riverside, and Harvard Kennedy School challenge the conventional view by demonstrating that feelings of gratitude automatically reduce financial impatience.

The study is forthcoming in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Impatience was assessed using a set of decisions pitting desire for instant gratification against waiting for larger, future rewards. For example, participants chose between receiving \$54 now or \$80 in 30 days. To increase the stakes, participants had the chance to obtain one of the financial rewards they selected.

Before making these decisions, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which they wrote about an event from their past that made them feel (a) grateful, (b) happy, or (c) neutral, depending on condition.

Although participants feeling neutral and happy showed a strong preference for immediate payouts, those feeling grateful showed more patience. For example, they required \$63 immediately to forgo receiving \$85 in three months, whereas neutral and happy people required only \$55 to forgo the future gain.

What's more, the degree of patience exhibited was directly related to the amount of gratitude any individual felt. Positive feelings alone were not enough to enhance patience, as happy participants were just as impatient as those in the neutral condition. The influence of gratitude, possibly due to its ties to a sense of fulfillment and a need to "pay back" in the future, was quite specific.

The implications of this finding are profound.

"Showing that emotion can foster self-control and discovering a way to reduce impatience with a simple gratitude exercise opens up tremendous possibilities for reducing a wide range of societal ills from impulse buying and insufficient saving to obesity and smoking," says Assistant Professor Ye Li from the University of California, Riverside School of Business Administration.

Harvard Kennedy School Professor Jennifer Lerner underscored that economic impatience is one of the most common and troubling tendencies in human decision making.

In addition to DeSteno, Li, and Lerner, co-authors on the report include Leah Dickens of Northeastern University.