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# Gratitude Toward God, Stress, and Health in Late Life

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The purpose of this study was to see if feeling grateful to God reduces the deleterious effects of stress on health in late life. In addition, an effort was made to test for gender differences in this process. Three main findings emerged from the analysis of data provided by a nationwide sample of older adults. First, the data suggest that older women are more likely to feel grateful to God than older men. Second, the results revealed that the effects of stress (e.g., living in a deteriorated neighborhood) on health are reduced for older people who feel more grateful to God. Finally, the analyses indicated that the potentially important stress-buffering properties of gratitude toward God emerge primarily among older women but not older men.

**Keywords:** *gratitude; beneficial effects; stress; health; gender differences*

The field of positive psychology is beginning to make significant inroads in the literature (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Positive psychology is concerned with human strengths and virtues that tend to promote a range of beneficial outcomes, including a sense of optimism, well-being, and life satisfaction. Recently, a concerted and broad-based effort was made to examine the impact of a full spectrum of character strengths on health and well-being (Peterson and Seligman 2004). This research revealed that gratitude is among the most beneficial character strengths (Park, Peterson, and Seligman 2004). Even so, Peterson and Seligman (2004) pointed out that empirical research on gratitude is in its infancy. This is surprising because philosophers have been studying gratitude for centuries (Harpham 2004), and classic sociologists, such as Simmel (1950), paid a good deal of attention to it as well. The lack of empirical research on gratitude may be traced in part

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**Table 1**  
**Core Study Measures**

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|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1. | Self-rated health   |
| A. | How would you rate your health at the present time? <sup>a</sup>                              |
| 2. | Gratitude toward God <sup>b</sup>   |
| A. | I am grateful to God for all He has done for me.  |
| B. | If I were to make a list of all the things God has done for me, it would be a very long list. |
| C. | As I look back on my life, I feel I have been richly blessed by God.                          |
| D. | I am grateful to God for all He has done for my family members and close friends.             |
| 3. | Neighborhood deterioration <sup>c</sup>   |
| A. | The condition of other houses and buildings in the neighborhood                               |
| B. | The amount of noise from traffic, trains, airplanes, industry and things like that            |
| C. | The quality of the air—the amount of pollution, dirt, and fumes in the air                    |
| D. | The condition of the streets and roads in the neighborhood                                    |
| E. | The condition of the yards and sidewalks in front of the structures in the neighborhood       |
| 4. | Frequency of church attendance  |
| A. | How often do you attend religious services? <sup>d</sup>                                      |

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a. This item was scored in the following manner (coding in parentheses): *poor* (1), *fair* (2), *good* (3), *excellent* (4).

b. These items were scored in the following manner: *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *agree* (3), *strongly agree* (4).

c. These items were scored in the following manner: *excellent* (1), *good* (2), *fair* (3), *poor* (4).

d. This item was scored in the following manner: *never* (1), *less than once a year* (2), *about once or twice a year* (3), *several times a year* (4), *about once a month* (5), *2 to 3 times a month* (6), *nearly every week* (7), *every week* (8), *several times a week* (9).

## Measures

Table 1 contains the measures that were used in this survey. The procedures used to code these items are provided in the footnotes to this table.

*Self-rated health.* Global self-rated health was assessed with a single indicator that asked study participants whether their overall health status was poor, fair, good, or excellent. This indicator is used widely in gerontological research (Idler 1999). A high score on this indicator denotes better health ( $M = 2.721$ ,  $SD = 0.837$ ).

*Gratitude toward God.* This construct was measured with four items that were developed especially for this study. Some were devised by modifying existing indicators so they reflected gratitude specifically toward God (Emmons et al. 2003). The internal consistency reliability estimate for this brief composite is .964. A high score represents more gratitude ( $M = 13.964$ ,  $SD = 2.466$ ).