



“... gratitude is the biggest boost available: it is strongly linked with physical as well as emotional wellbeing.”

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Gifts and gratitude

Wine and chocolates! I admire them as they rotate gently in the air. I feel surprised but more than that, I feel gratitude: someone values me and the help I give.

A voice clears. ‘*You haven’t given me the prescription yet.*’

I return to the real world and the actual gift. ‘*Sorry,*’ I gather the luxury selection of bodily fluids, each in their own hurriedly-washed jar, and carry them gingerly away from my desk. ‘*Thanks for all these though, most diligent.*’

As she leaves the room I see I have dropped further behind again, the computer screen informing me another three patients are already getting bored watching Waiting Room TV. I wish I could stay more focused. Apparently though, the magic figure is 47%: nearly half the time our minds are not on what is in front of us.¹ If you drill down on this you find that for some activities it is much worse still — when did you last focus on being in the shower when you were showering? It matters because the same research shows that wandering minds are less happy ones. Even my fantasising about gifts is unhelpful.

Sullenly refocusing, I collect my next patient.

‘*Morning doc,*’ he smiles. ‘*Brought you this as a wee thanks for your help with that nasty rash.*’ He winks and hands over a box of chocolates. A real gift! I try not to look disappointed at the lack of accompanying wine. ‘*Wow!*’ I enthuse a little over-much, taking the box in my gloved hands and popping it beside my cluster of jars.

‘*It’s back, isn’t it?*’

He nods. ‘*Yes, it’s up my back this time. Never went away, mind.*’

Of course, there is something positive about the power of social connection. Simply this contact with members of my community is affirming, rashes aside.² What irks me now though is that receiving this dubious gift is going to contribute more to his happiness than mine; his act of kindness trumps what joy I might feel from taking receipt of the goods.³ And then if I actually try some active listening this time, he will be left feeling better still.⁴ Never mind the question of whether I finally give him the right cream.

There is some hope for me, though.

Remembering to pay attention to what is in front of me, I feel a bit better after bottoming-out this fellow’s problem and then staying tuned in until the end of the surgery. My sense of wellbeing increases further after I have popped those jars into the bin marked ‘Glass for Recycling’, moderated only by the slight pang of conscience from not having had the courage to remove the lids first. I wander through to the coffee room and offer up those chocolates to everyone there and that really helps.

But actually, gratitude is the biggest boost available: it is strongly linked with physical as well as emotional wellbeing.⁵ I sit down and savour the reasons to be grateful. First, I take pleasure in the coffee. Then I think appreciatively of the team around me, and of kind patients like that chap earlier who has provided this chance to be kind to my colleagues. My imagination takes hold and I realise we are fortunate the NHS spends its money on primary care, no matter that it spends less than in the past.⁶ I feel gratitude too, that the link between happiness and income extends only as far as \$75 000 (roughly £45 000),⁷ meaning there really is no need to earn more. Before long I am infused with a warm glow of gratitude to all humanity, even the government.

Then I realise my mind has wandered again.

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