

4 Reasons to Cultivate Patience

by Kira M. Newman

As virtues go, patience is a quiet one.

It's often exhibited behind closed doors, not on a public stage: A father telling a third bedtime story to his son, a dancer waiting for her injury to heal. In public, it's the impatient ones who grab all our attention: drivers honking in traffic, grumbling customers in slow-moving lines. We have epic movies exalting the virtues of courage and compassion, but a movie about patience might be a bit of a snoozer.

Yet patience is essential to daily life—and might be key to a happy one. Having patience means being able to wait calmly in the face of frustration or adversity, so anywhere there is frustration or adversity—i.e., nearly everywhere—we have the opportunity to practice it. At home with our kids, at work with our colleagues, at the grocery store with half our city's population, patience can make the difference between annoyance and equanimity, between worry and tranquility.

Religions and philosophers have long praised the virtue of patience; now researchers are starting to do so as well. Recent studies have found that, sure enough, good things really do come to those who wait. Some of these science-backed benefits are detailed below, along with three ways to cultivate more patience in your life.

1. Patient people enjoy better mental health

This finding is probably easy to believe if you call to mind the stereotypical impatient person: face red, head steaming. And sure enough, according to a 2007 study by Fuller Theological Seminary professor Sarah A. Schnitker and UC Davis psychology professor Robert Emmons, patient people tend to experience less depression and negative emotions, perhaps because they can cope better with upsetting or stressful situations. They also rate themselves as more mindful and feel more gratitude, more connection to mankind and to the universe, and a greater sense of abundance.

In 2012, Schnitker sought to refine our understanding of patience, recognizing that it comes in many different stripes. One type is interpersonal patience, which doesn't involve waiting but simply facing annoying people with equanimity. In a study of nearly 400 undergraduates, she found that those who are more patient toward others also tend to be more hopeful and more satisfied with their lives.

Another type of patience involves waiting out life's hardships without frustration or despair—think of the unemployed person who persistently fills out job applications or the cancer patient waiting for her treatment to work. Unsurprisingly, in Schnitker's study, this

type of courageous patience was linked to more hope.

Finally, patience over daily hassles—traffic jams, long lines at the grocery store, a malfunctioning computer—seems to go along with good mental health. In particular, people who have this type of patience are more satisfied with life and less depressed.

These studies are good news for people who are already patient, but what about those of us who want to become more patient? In her 2012 study, Schnitker invited 71 undergraduates to participate in two weeks of patience training, where they learned to identify feelings and their triggers, regulate their emotions, empathize with others, and meditate. In two weeks, participants reported feeling more patient toward the trying people in their lives, feeling less depressed, and experiencing higher levels of positive emotions. In other words, patience seems to be a skill you can practice—more on that below—and doing so might bring benefits to your mental health.

2. Patient people are better friends and neighbors

In relationships with others, patience becomes a form of kindness. Think of the best friend who comforts you night after night over the heartache that just won't go away, or the grandchild who smiles through the story she has heard her grandfather tell countless times. Indeed, research suggests that patient people tend to be more cooperative, more empathic, more equitable, and more forgiving. "Patience involves emphatically assuming some personal discomfort to alleviate the suffering of those around us," write Debra R. Comer and Leslie E. Sekerka in their 2014 study.

Evidence of this is found in a 2008 study that put participants into groups of four and asked them to contribute money to a common pot, which would be doubled and redistributed. The game gave players a financial incentive to be stingy, yet patient people contributed more to the pot than other players did.

This kind of selflessness is found among people with all three types of patience mentioned above, not just interpersonal patience: In Schnitker's 2012 study, all three were associated with higher "agreeableness," a personality trait characterized by warmth, kindness, and cooperation. The interpersonally patient people even tended to be less lonely, perhaps because making and keeping friends—with all their quirks and slip-ups—generally requires a healthy dose of patience. "Patience may enable individuals to tolerate flaws in others, therefore displaying more generosity, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness," write Schnitker and Emmons in their 2007 study.

On a group level, patience may be one of the foundations of civil society. Patient people are more likely to vote, an activity that entails waiting months or years for our elected official to implement better policies. Evolutionary theorists believe that patience helped our ancestors survive because it allowed them to do good deeds and wait for others to reciprocate, instead of demanding immediate compensation (which would more likely lead to conflict than cooperation). In that same vein, patience is linked to trust in the people and the institutions around us.

3. Patience helps us achieve our goals

More on Patience

Read about the benefits of delaying gratification.

Is patience one of your signature strengths? Take the VIA survey.

Watch a video on patience (embedded below) by Gratitude Revealed, a journey into the science of gratitude and emotional wellness. The GGSC created the science facts, quizzes, and practical exercises accompanying each Gratitude Revealed video.

The road to achievement is a long one, and those without patience—who want to see results immediately—may not be willing to walk it. Think of the recent critiques of millennials for being unwilling to “pay their dues” in an entry-level job, jumping from position to position rather than growing and learning.

In her 2012 study, Schnitker also examined whether patience helps students get things done. In five surveys they completed over the course of a semester, patient people of all stripes reported exerting more effort toward their goals than other people did. Those with interpersonal patience in particular made more progress toward their goals and were more satisfied when they achieved them (particularly if those goals were difficult) compared with less patient people. According to Schnitker’s analysis, that greater satisfaction with achieving their goals explained why these patient achievers were more content with their lives as a whole.

4. Patience is linked to good health

The study of patience is still new, but there’s some emerging evidence that it might even be good for our health. In their 2007 study, Schnitker and Emmons found that patient people were less likely to report health problems like headaches, acne flare-ups, ulcers, diarrhea, and pneumonia. Other research has found that people who exhibit impatience and irritability—a characteristic of the Type A personality—tend to have more health complaints and worse sleep. If patience can reduce our daily stress, it’s reasonable to speculate that it could also protect us against stress’s damaging health effects.

Three ways to cultivate patience

This is all good news for the naturally patient—or for those who have the time and opportunity to take an intensive two-week training in patience. But what about the rest of us?

It seems there are everyday ways to build patience as well. Here are some strategies suggested by emerging patience research.

Reframe the situation. Feeling impatient is not just an automatic emotional response; it involves conscious thoughts and beliefs, too. If a colleague is late to a meeting, you can fume about their lack of respect, or see those extra 15 minutes as an opportunity to get some reading done. Patience is linked to self-control, and consciously trying to regulate our emotions can help us train our self-control muscles.

Practice mindfulness. In one study, kids who did a six-month mindfulness program in school became less impulsive and more willing to wait for a reward. The GGSC’s Christine

Carter also recommends mindfulness practice for parents: Taking a deep breath and noticing your feelings of anger or overwhelm (for example, when your kids start yet another argument right before bedtime) can help you respond with more patience.

Practice gratitude. In another study, adults who were feeling grateful were also better at patiently delaying gratification. When given the choice between getting an immediate cash reward or waiting a year for a larger (\$100) windfall, less grateful people caved in once the immediate payment offer climbed to \$18. Grateful people, however, could hold out until the amount reached \$30. If we're thankful for what we have today, we're not desperate for more stuff or better circumstances immediately.

We can try to shelter ourselves from frustration and adversity, but they come with the territory of being human. Practicing patience in everyday situations—like with our punctuality-challenged coworker—will not only make life more pleasant in the present, but might also help pave the way for a more satisfying and successful future.

An inspiring video on patience.