



KIND



SAFE



AND



FAIR







# CULTIVATE AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

*By Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP*

When my kids were little, one of the best things they learned in school was to ask this question about an action or behavior: “Is it kind and safe and fair?”

I have thought about this teaching often over the last few years, as kindness, safety, and fairness seem to be slipping quietly from our social fabric. These qualities are being replaced with irritability, quick anger, strong judgments, and narrow-mindedness. Even basic, simple courtesy seems to have flown out the window.

When worldviews narrow and the capacity to listen to and care about another person’s viewpoint declines, we become less enriched by the people around us. We wind up living in our own silos and, by intention, do not connect across the various divides.

No doubt, we live in very challenging times. It’s also true, however, that some people just seem to be more negative than others, independent of their position in life or the social environment. Is there anything that can be done about that? The following patient’s story shows how homeopathy, naturopathic medicine, and cultivating a change in focus can help to turn the tide on even life-long negativity.



## Cranky, unkind Kayla

When 56-year-old Kayla first came to my office, she was so cranky, negative, and judgmental, I sensed immediately that the digestive complaints that brought her to see me were just the beginning of her story. She spoke rudely and demanding to my office staff and expressed irritation at my being just a few minutes late. In short order, she told me she was embroiled in a big fight at her condo association, entangled in a difficult divorce, and not speaking to one of her adult children.

She recounted a long string of stories in which everyone was against her, everything was someone else's fault, and "by the way, what is wrong with people these days?" She did not have a nice word to say about anyone, from her office co-workers, to her circle of so-called friends, to her family members. She talked of cutting people out of her life, yelling at people on the phone, and being incredulous at how unintelligent people were. In just a few minutes of having met her, even I, who aims to keep a very open mind, started wondering if maybe the problem was Kayla ... Kayla was not kind, safe, or fair!

## Why are some people so grumpy?

What does it mean to be a negative person? Why are some people vindictive? Why can't some people let go of past hurts? Why do others turn to violence? As a homeopath, of course, I understand that the answers to these questions are unique for each person. *And* the general answer is: it depends!

Studies show that optimism and pessimism are at least somewhat influenced by genetics. And life experiences reinforce, challenge, or shift such underlying tendencies. It's also true that we can impact how we perceive the world by what we choose to pay attention to—more on that later.

For decades, I have used homeopathy and natural medicine to successfully treat children and teens with behavioral issues—everything from being unable to go with the flow in a family, to hitting, biting, and kicking, to obsessive-compulsive violent thoughts\* and behaviors, and to other anti-social actions. Children who are unwilling to follow directions, who fight at every turn, who blame others, and who have acted upon their mean feelings are increasingly being diagnosed with "oppositional defiant disorder." Many of them are also inflexible, unable to delay gratification, and low in self-esteem.

And these children and teens, left untreated, or within a social environment where such behaviors are accepted or

encouraged, can grow up to be adults with a similar set of characteristics.

While Kayla had not physically hurt anyone, she left a battlefield of enemies in her wake and persisted in being "right all the time," in control, and grudge-bearing for decades. She was sensitive to other people, felt vulnerable, and was easily offended, taking everything in the wrong light.

## Fissures, the tip of the iceberg

As is often the case when a person's central challenges are psycho-emotional or cognitive, what brought Kayla into the office were physical complaints. She had painful, itchy anal fissures that were driving her crazy. They made her not want to have a bowel movement, so she held it as long as she could and then used laxatives and stool softeners to make the accumulated stool easier to pass. She had intense pain with each bowel movement. For several hours afterward, she had to lie down and try to keep her buttocks apart to attempt to alleviate the pain. Kayla was terribly anxious about the fissures, worrying that they might never heal or that they were cancerous. She worried about cancer, in general, and she often went to doctors for reassurance that she did not have cancer.

Kayla told me of ongoing issues with sores in her mouth—on the inside of her cheeks and at her gum line. She also struggled with warts that cracked and bled along her fingers and toes. She had "bad nails," as she described them, with cracks at the corners, and rough cuticles, which she picked at.

Aside from these concerns, Kayla reported no significant issues in her current or past health history. She did not get sick often and had no known allergies. She slept okay and had a big appetite, though she was picky about what she ate. She liked salty and pickled foods, dried meats, and aged cheeses.

## "Bet you can't!"

Kayla had seen many doctors in her life, and she relayed her concerns to me with an attitude that seemed dismissive and adversarial. It felt a little like she was saying: "Let's see if you can help me! I bet you can't!"

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When I am with a patient like Kayla, where the general feeling in the room, the interaction, and the dialogue are strained, and where I can feel her negativity and judgment, I do not prescribe a homeopathic remedy based on these features. But I do not ignore them either. Instead, I try to understand the behavior and attitude. In Kayla's case, I wanted to find out whether this was how she always was. She was putting so much energy, every day, into being negative and fault-finding, that I figured this posture towards the world must be addressing something. So, at the risk of being sneered

at or worse, I simply said: "You seem a bit down on your luck and down on others. I wonder if there's a reason why, or how it serves you?"

### A sensitive, neglected child



Kayla then related the very sad story of feeling abandoned and neglected as a child, the last of four kids in an unhappy home. Her parents divorced when she was little. She was then shuttled between them, neither parent really seeming to want her. She had some learning issues and was often bullied; she never felt

## FLEX YOUR GRATITUDE MUSCLE

### 5 tools that pack a positive punch

**Gratitude** has a positive impact on everything. It strengthens your friendships and relationships, improves your physical and psychological health, enhances the quality of your sleep, and boosts your sense of happiness and life satisfaction.

**Gratitude** also reduces the tendency to be aggressive and seek revenge, while building a deeper capacity for empathy. Gratitude grows self-esteem and allows you to more genuinely celebrate other people's successes. Those with an attitude of gratitude show enhanced resilience, bouncing back more easily from challenges and hard times, a quality we all could use a little bit more of these days.

**This year**, start a personal or family tradition that brings gratitude front and center. Here are some ideas to help you build your gratitude muscle.

#### 1. Host a Thank-You-Note-Writing Party

Do this on your own or, better yet, with a small circle of family or friends, in person or via Zoom! Bring out (or make!) stationery for the thank-you notes. Think here: personalized cards to relatives, teachers, friends, your mail carrier, babysitter, and others. Be specific in your thank-yous. Tell how that person helped you, brightened your day, or encouraged you in a particular way. Emails also count!

#### 2. Meditate Five Minutes on Gratitude

A short time of being seated comfortably, breathing deeply, and then naming, aloud or to yourself, things for which you are grateful, is a simple yet powerful way to start or end your day. A time of stretching or a gentle walking meditation, where you focus on your breathing and name the things for which you are grateful, also works. Many online resources and apps also offer guidance on gratitude meditation, if you need it.

**As you begin to flex your gratitude muscle**, like most anything you decide to pay attention to, it becomes stronger. Gratitude becomes a powerful experience that can shift your perspective, help you become more open to joy and connection to people in your life, and quiet some of your more overwhelming feelings. And remember, it's just fine to repeat the same things you are grateful for each day, too. Often, it's in these very basics of our day-to-day lives—taking time to notice, name, and be thankful for them—where gratitude has the most power to transform.

#### 3. Create a Gratitude Jar or Box

Decorate it, if you like. Keep a pen and small pad of paper nearby, and fill the jar with grateful sentiments you experience during the day. If you have children at home, involve them, too. Modeling gratitude helps our children adopt this posture early, which brings the same benefits mentioned above and creates a lifelong attitude of gratitude. Once a week during dinner or another family time, each person can choose one slip of paper to read. No need to identify the writer. On a day you're feeling down or overwhelmed, even a glance at your container can lift your spirits.

#### 4. Keep a Daily or Weekly Gratitude Journal

Highlight things, large and small, for which you are grateful. This helps you pay closer attention to the details of your life. When we tune our focus to gratitude, we find welcome surprises that are otherwise hidden.

#### 5. Share the Warmth and Love of Your Kitchen

Surprise a loved one with a home-cooked meal or baked offering, with a thank-you note tucked in. This is a beautiful way to express your gratitude that is often quite appreciated.



she had any ally in school. She married the first person that paid her any attention, but he wasn't a good man ... and the story went on.

I started to understand. Here was a sensitive person, with a sensitive spirit, who did not receive what is the birthright of every child: unconditional love, support, and devotion. As a child, she started to build up her protective devices of pushing people away, and she had stayed with these attitudes and behaviors all these many years later, because in some sense, they worked.

### Different people, different responses

It's never the insult, but rather a person's response to the insult that helps us understand them better. A person with a similar history of neglect as Kayla's but with a different constitutional and genetic makeup could have responded in a different way. For example, a sensitive person who fits the *Pulsatilla* homeopathic remedy profile might have leaned into his inherent sweetness and neediness, thereby *getting* people to take care of him. Or a sensitive person who fits the *Nux vomica* profile might have leaned into her ambitious and workaholic nature to become the boss and get her needs met that way.

Kayla had found a way to ensure that she would not be neglected anymore, by being aggressive, loud, demanding, and complaining. She would harden herself off to others, so she couldn't be hurt. In reality, however, her approach was incomplete, so she continued to be bothered by other people around her, their actions, or their inactions, and this perpetuated her fault-finding behavior.

### Four remedies to ponder

In choosing a homeopathic remedy for Kayla, I needed one that suited her negative attitude and aggressive behavior, as well as her anal fissures. The main remedies I considered were *Anacardium*, *Lachesis*, *Nux vomica*, and *Nitric acid*.

People who need *Anacardium* often display a combination of low self-esteem and violence. They can be heartless in their actions and have little remorse, yet they feel like they are worth nothing. Kayla had a relatively strong sense of self, despite her history, and she had more confidence than people who need *Anacardium*. And, thankfully, her overwhelming negativity had not led to any physical acts of violence.

People who benefit from *Lachesis* can be critical, fault-finding, and grudge-holding, as Kayla was, and others may feel threatened in their presence. They tend to feel worse from any form of constriction, whether physical (tight clothing) or emotional. Constriction often leads to swelling and, eventually, some form of discharge (diarrhea, excessive perspiration, extreme talkativeness, yelling, etc.). If Kayla had needed *Lachesis*, I would expect her to report more swelling with the anal fissures and more discharge of liquid or blood. She also lacked tendencies towards jealousy and comparing herself to others, which are signatures of the person needing *Lachesis*.



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People who benefit from *Nux vomica* tend toward bossiness and focusing primarily on work. They are typically tidy and put a premium on organization and efficiency. Kayla may have been bossy, but she was *not* all about her work, nor was she very organized or efficient. Instead, she was all about complaining about her interactions, her experiences, and her disappointments in life.

### The top choice

I settled on *Nitric acid* as the best remedy for Kayla. People who need it tend to get into a cycle of being easily offended by others, taking things the wrong way ... and then feeling easily offended all over again. They get hurt in this process, so they close themselves off to others, which then leads to much stress and anxiety. They actually *want* to connect with people, but the only way they seem able to reach out is by complaining and dumping negativity on others.

They can hold onto grudges from long ago that still make them angry. All that complaining, blaming, finger pointing, and holding onto old hurts ultimately exhausts them and robs them of being present, of connecting in meaningful ways with others, and of finding joy in this lifetime.

People who need *Nitric acid* can often be described as self-centered or even narcissistic. I recall a new mother I successfully treated for postpartum depression who exemplified this. She could not believe how much time the baby took—feeding, changing, rocking—and she very much resented the child for it. “I mean, I need to have my life back!” she told me. Any parent will feel overwhelmed with new parenthood, as I well know, having brought three children into this world. But to resent the *child*? This was one key to finding the right remedy for that patient—*Nitric acid*!



People who do well with *Nitric acid* often have issues in areas where the mucus membranes meet the skin. This was certainly true for Kayla, with her mouth sores and her anal fissures. In fact, *Nitric acid* is often considered one of the leading homeopathic remedies in cases of anal fissures. The cracks and roughness around her nails and cuticles were further confirmatory symptoms for this remedy.

I gave Kayla one dose of *Nitric acid* 200c that day, along with a number of naturopathic recommendations. I encouraged her to include bone broths in her diet, so she would have essential collagen to help with healing the fissures. I asked her to add cultured foods to help support a more robust and diverse microbiome, alongside a probiotic to aid digestion and reduce overall inflammation. I suggested she take L-glutamine, 500 mg twice a day, for its role in supporting a healthy gastrointestinal tract and mucous membranes in the mouth and anus.

### Cultivating gratitude

I also asked Kayla to start a gratitude practice, which is a proven antidote to even life-long negativity. When I wrote earlier about how we can alter our worldview by what we choose to pay attention to, this is what I meant. As contradictory as it may sound, when you're feeling beleaguered and you look for, cultivate, and name specific things for which you are grateful, this can help you mitigate and navigate even the most difficult times.

Specifically, I asked Kayla to keep a gratitude journal, where each night before bed she writes down three things for which she is grateful. And I asked her to return in six weeks.

### Good news

At our first follow-up visit six weeks later, Kayla acted guarded and still complained a lot, but she also seemed somehow softer. For example, she complimented me on my haircut!

She still had the anal fissures, but she said they did not hurt as much. She could have a bowel movement without having to lie down afterward, and she no longer was using her laxative or stool softener. This was a good first report, as she'd suffered with that painful, inconvenient bowel movement routine for many years.

Kayla said that she felt less anxious about the possibility of having a serious illness, which was also a good sign. She casually added that she had reconciled with her adult daughter after several years of not speaking. To me, that was the best news yet, because it reflected letting go of a past hurt and bringing more connection into her life! Because she was

making excellent progress, I did not give another dose of *Nitric acid* but asked her to continue with the naturopathic medicine recommendations and her gratitude practice, and to meet in another six to eight weeks.

### Steady improvement

Kayla continued to see me periodically over the next three or four years, making steady progress. I gave her additional doses of *Nitric acid* 200c a number of times, such as when the fissures flared up again, although never as badly as before, and they eventually resolved completely. *Nitric acid* 200c also helped Kayla when she had a sore throat, a stubborn skin rash, and a few other concerns.

Kayla's attitude and psycho-emotional state improved immensely over time. She still tended to be irritable but was nowhere near as negative as before. Kayla re-partnered, much to everyone's surprise, including her own!

### Kind and safe and fair?

Circling back to the original question, had Kayla's attitude and actions improved so much that they were always kind and safe and fair? I cannot be sure, but I know she bends that way now more than ever before in her life. At one point, after a couple of years had passed, Kayla actually thanked me for my help. I am not in this career to be thanked, but for a *Nitric acid*-type of person to say thank you, I know I have done a good job!

When I think about our challenging times related to lack of civility and general grumpiness, I think about Kayla and her transformation. I wish all people had access to quality medical care, natural and integrative medicine, and homeopathy—so that they might find help for illnesses, of course, but also approaches that support them, nurture them in positive thinking, and lift their spirits. 🌊

\* For an example of someone with obsessive-compulsive disorder helped with homeopathic treatment, see "Peace of Mind Restored: Intrusive, obsessive thoughts troubled him for 40 years and one remedy relieved him" in *Homeopathy Today*, Summer 2017. [www.HomeopathyCenter.org/magazine/](http://www.HomeopathyCenter.org/magazine/)

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**Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP**, practices in Connecticut and Massachusetts ([www.nhcmcd.com](http://www.nhcmcd.com)) and by telemedicine. Dr. Rothenberg is the AANP's 2017 Physician of the Year. With her husband, Paul Herscu, ND, MPH, DHANP, she teaches through the New England School of Homeopathy ([www.NESH.com](http://www.NESH.com)), where virtual learning is now available. For information on NESH's new entirely virtual class, as well as other resources, see [www.nesh.com](http://www.nesh.com). Her writing can be found at *Medium*, *Thrive Global*, *The Huff Po*, and more. When not working, Dr. Rothenberg enjoys spending time with her family, in nature, and puttering in her art studio.

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