

On Gratitude

We are genetically wired to focus on what is wrong in others, our lives or ourselves; on what we don't have, and what we wish we had. This makes evolutionary sense – it helps to keep us safe and strives to fill the lack. However this natural tendency has some negative consequences. If we only focus on what is wrong, it makes us feel unhappy, frustrated, angry or sad. On the contrary, being grateful for what we have and what is good in our lives creates a sense of satisfaction, happiness and joy.

Throughout the ages, people from all walks of life have shared their wisdom about the virtues of gratitude. Also described as thankfulness and appreciation, expressions of gratitude include a bow and a handshake, a kiss, and a gift. Yet gratitude is something more than an outward expression; it is much deeper and has far-reaching repercussions.

Dr Robert Emmons, a professor at the University of California, is dedicated to creating scientific data on the nature of gratitude and its potential consequences for human health. Emmons specialises in the psychology of gratitude and how this creates wellbeing. He is the author of *The Psychology of Gratitude* and *How The New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. In summary, when you practise giving attention to what you love and appreciate, emotions occur that benefit your whole body. Experiencing genuine gratitude can help manage stress, calm your nervous system, improve your immune function and even prolong your life. The practice of appreciation is also said to speed up recovery from illness and boost your attitude to life.

The Why of Gratitude

Sonja Lyubomirsky in her book *The How of Happiness* gives eight ways of how and why expressing gratitude works to make you happier.

1. Grateful thinking promotes the savouring of positive life experiences. By relishing and taking pleasure in some of the gifts of your life, you will be able to extract the maximum possible satisfaction and enjoyment from your current circumstances.
2. Expressing gratitude bolsters self-worth and self-esteem. When you realise how much people have done for you or how much you have accomplished, you feel more confident and efficacious.
3. Gratitude helps people cope with stress and trauma. That is, the ability to appreciate your life circumstances may be an adaptive coping method by which you positively reinterpret stressful or negative life experiences. Indeed, traumatic memories are less likely to surface – and are less intense when they do – in those who are regularly grateful. Expressing gratefulness during personal adversity like loss or chronic illness – as hard as that might be – can help you adjust, move on, and perhaps begin anew.
4. The expression of gratitude encourages moral behaviour. Grateful people are more likely to help others (e.g. you become aware of kind and caring acts and feel compelled

to reciprocate) and less likely to be materialistic (e.g. you appreciate what you have and become less fixated on acquiring more stuff).

5. Gratitude can help build social bonds, strengthening existing relationships and nurturing new ones. Several studies have shown that people who feel gratitude toward particular individuals (even when they never directly express it) experience closer and “higher-quality” relationships with them. When you become truly aware of the value of your friends and family members, you are likely to treat them better, perhaps producing an “upward spiral,” a sort of positive feedback loop, in which strong relationships give you something to be grateful for, and in turn fortifying those very same relationships. In addition, a grateful person is a more positive person, and positive people are better liked by others and more likely to win friends.
6. Expressing gratitude tends to inhibit invidious comparisons with others. If you are genuinely thankful and appreciative for what you have (e.g. family, health, home), you are less likely to pay close attention to or envy what the Joneses have.
7. The practice of gratitude is incompatible with negative emotions and may actually diminish or deter such feelings as anger, bitterness, and greed. Indeed, it’s hard to feel guilty or resentful or infuriated when you’re feeling grateful.
8. Gratitude helps us thwart hedonic adaptation. Hedonic adaptation is illustrated by our remarkable capacity rapidly to adjust to any new circumstance or event. This is extremely adaptive when the new event is unpleasant, but not when a new event is positive. So, when you gain something good in your life –a romantic partner, a genial officemate, recovery from illness, a brand-new car – there is an immediate boost in happiness and contentment. Unfortunately, because of hedonic adaptation, that boost is usually short-lived. Adaptation to all things positive is essentially the enemy of happiness, and one of the keys to becoming happier lies in combating its effects, which gratitude does quite nicely. By preventing people from taking the good things in their lives for granted – from adapting to their positive life circumstances – the practice of gratitude can directly counteract the effects of hedonic adaptation.

The How of Gratitude

Sonja Lyubomirsky in her book *The How of Happiness* writes that there are multiple ways to practice the strategy of gratitude and it would be wise to choose what works best for you. When the strategy loses its freshness or meaningfulness, don’t hesitate to make a change in how, when, and how often you express yourself. Here are some suggestions:

Gratitude journal. If you enjoy writing, or it feels natural to you, then a promising way to practice this strategy is with a gratitude journal. Choose a time of day when you have several minutes to step outside your life and to reflect. It may be first thing in the morning, or during lunch, or while commuting, or before bedtime. Ponder the three to five things for which you are currently grateful, from the mundane (your dryer is fixed, your flowers are finally in bloom, your husband remembered to stop by the store) to the magnificent (your child’s first steps, the beauty of the sky at night). One way to do this is to focus on all the things that you know to be true – for example, something you’re good at, what you like about where you live, goals you have achieved, and your advantages and opportunities. Don’t forget specific individuals who care for you, have made contributions to or sacrifices for you, or somehow touch your life. You may do this daily, three times a week, weekly or fortnightly. You need to determine the ideal timing tailored to your lifestyle and disposition.

Paths to gratitude. Instead of writing, some of you may choose a fixed time simply to

contemplate each of your objects of gratitude and perhaps also to reflect on why you are grateful and how your life has been enriched. Others may choose to identify just one thing each day that they usually take for granted and that ordinarily goes unappreciated. Alternatively, some may want to acknowledge one ungrateful thought per day (e.g., “my sister forgot my birthday”) and substitute a grateful one (e.g., “she’s always been there for me”).

Friends and family can also help foster your appreciation. One idea is to procure a gratitude partner with whom you can share your blessings list and who prompts and encourages you if you lose motivation or simply forget. Another idea is to introduce a visitor to the things, people, and places that you love. Show off your comic book collection, your favourite park, or your favourite niece. Doing this will help you see the ordinary details of your life through another person’s eyes, affording you a fresh perspective and making you appreciate them as though you were experiencing them for the very first time.

Express gratitude directly to another. The expression of gratitude may be particularly effective when done directly – by phone, letter, or face-to-face – to another person. Perhaps it’s your mum, favourite uncle, or old friend; perhaps it’s an old coach, teacher, or supervisor. Write him or her a letter and, if possible, visit and read the letter out loud in person, on either a special day (birthday, anniversary, or holiday) or a random one. Describe in detail what he or she did for you and exactly how it affected your life; mention how you often remember his or her efforts. Some people find it uplifting to write gratitude letters to individuals whom they don’t know personally but who have influenced their lives (such as authors or politicians) or made their lives easier (such as their postal carriers or bus drivers).

Keep the strategy fresh. An important recommendation is to keep the gratitude strategy fresh by varying it and not over practising it. For example, if you count your blessings every single day – in the exact same way, in a non varying routine – you may become bored with the routine and may cease to extract much meaning from it. Or you may choose to write in a journal some weeks, talk to a friend other weeks, and express gratitude through art (photography, collage, watercolour) during other weeks. On the other hand, you may purposefully want to vary the domains of your life on which to focus – for example, alternately counting your blessings with respect to your supportive relationships or work life or past events or your physical surroundings or even to life itself. These techniques will help make the expression of gratitude a meaningful practice, such that it continues to bolster happiness instead of hitting a plateau.

Reference: <http://www.gratefulness.org/>