

Top 12 Tips to Strengthen Gratitude

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your happiness could use a boost, commit to cultivating an attitude of gratitude. It not only boosts life satisfaction, it's also the single best predictor of good relationships, and benefits both sanity and physical health
- Gratitude involves affirming the good in your life and recognizing its sources. It is the understanding that life owes you nothing, and that the good things in your life are gifts that cannot be taken for granted
- A dozen different strategies are reviewed, all of which can help you build and strengthen your sense of gratitude
- Research shows gratitude, depression, peace of mind and rumination are all interrelated, and that gratitude counteracts depression by enhancing peace of mind and reducing ruminative thinking
- When you start seeing everything as a gift, opposed to things you've deserved (for better or worse), your sense of gratitude will begin to swell. Another way to practice gratitude when life leaves you uninspired is to identify and express gratitude for seemingly "useless" or insignificant things

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Keeping a written record of the things you're thankful for is good for your health. That's the conclusion reached by an ever-growing number of published studies showing a wide range of physical benefits. According to Laurie Santos, a psychologist who teaches a science of well-being and happiness course at Yale, focusing on gratitude has become a growing trend in recent years,¹ and for good reason.

There's an awful lot of stress and unhappiness in the world, and gratitude is an effective remedy that costs nothing. According to a 2020 report only 29% of Americans have ever called themselves very happy, and only 14% call themselves very happy.² Other research suggests that nearly 1 in 4 experiences no life enjoyment at all.³

If your joy quotient could use a boost, commit to cultivating gratitude this year. A simple and proven way of doing this is to keep a gratitude journal, in which you document the things you're grateful for each day.

One 2015 study⁴ found participants who kept a gratitude diary and reflected on what they were grateful for four times a week for three weeks improved their depression, stress and happiness scores. In a more recent study,⁵ high school students asked to keep gratitude journals over the course of a month also exhibited healthier eating patterns.

Definition of Gratitude

According to Robert Emmons, one of the leading scientific experts on gratitude⁶ featured in the video above, gratitude has two key components.⁷ First of all, it's an "affirmation of goodness."

When you feel gratitude, you affirm that you live in a benevolent world. Second, it's a recognition that the source of benevolence comes from outside of yourself; that other people (or higher powers, if you so like) have provided you with "gifts." In Emmons' view, gratitude is "a relationship-strengthening emotion, because it requires us to see how we've been supported and affirmed by other people." If you've decided to keep a gratitude journal, keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Focus on the benevolence of other people — Doing so will increase your sense of being supported by life and decrease unnecessary anxiety
- Focus on what you have received rather than what's been withheld
- Avoid comparing yourself to people you perceive to have more advantages, more things or "better luck," as doing so will erode your sense of security. If you're going to slip into comparisons, contemplate what your life would be like if you didn't have something you currently enjoy

Health Benefits of Gratitude

As noted by Dr. P. Murali Doraiswamy,⁸ an expert in brain and mind health, gratitude has "a health maintenance indication for every major organ system" in your body.⁹ For example, research shows that gratitude:¹⁰

Alters your brain in a number of beneficial ways — Examples include triggering release of mood-regulating neurotransmitters¹¹ such as dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine and oxytocin; inhibiting the stress hormone cortisol; stimulating your hypothalamus (a brain area involved in the regulation of stress) and your ventral tegmental area of your brain's reward circuitry that produces pleasurable feelings)¹²

Increases happiness and life satisfaction^{13,14}

Lowers stress and emotional distress

Improves emotional resiliency¹⁵

Reduces symptoms of depression¹⁶ — According to one study,¹⁷ "Correlation analysis showed that gratitude, depression, peace of mind and rumination were interrelated ... Results ... suggested that gratitude may ... counteract the symptoms of depression by enhancing a state of peace of mind and reducing ruminative thinking"

Reduces pain

Lowers inflammation by inhibiting inflammatory cytokines

Lowers blood sugar

Improves immune function¹⁸

Lowers blood pressure

Improves heart health,¹⁹ reducing the likelihood of sudden death in patients with congestive heart failure and coronary artery disease

Lowers risk for heart disease^{20,21} — According to the authors, "Efforts to increase gratitude may be a treatment for improving well-being in heart failure patients' lives and may be of potential clinical value"

Improves general health by encouraging self-care — In one study,²² people who kept a gratitude journal reported exercising more and had fewer visits to the doctor

Improves sleep²³

Improves interpersonal relationships

Boosts productivity — In one study,²⁴ managers who expressed gratitude saw a 50 percent increase in the employee performance

Reduces materialism²⁵

Increases generosity²⁶

Science and Practice of Gratitude

In 2011, the Greater Good Science Center (GGSC) at the University of California, in collaboration with Emmons, launched a project called Expanding the Science and Practice of Gratitude. This project aims to:²⁷

- Expand the scientific database of gratitude, particularly in the key areas of human health, personal and relational well-being, and developmental science
- Raise awareness and engage the public in a larger cultural conversation about the meaning and significance of gratitude
- Promote evidence-based practices of gratitude in educational, medical and organizational settings

The organization has a number of resources you can peruse at your leisure, including The Science of Happiness blog and newsletter,²⁸ and Thnx4, a digital gratitude journal²⁹ where you can record and share the things you're grateful for year-round. There are also many other gratitude journal apps you can download. Last year, Positive Routines rated 11 of the best apps to track your happiness.³⁰ Remember Emmons words:

"Neuroscientist Rick Hanson has said that the brain takes the shape the mind rests upon. Rest your mind upon worry, sadness, annoyance and irritability and it will begin to take the shape neurally of anxiety, depression and anger. Ask your brain to give thanks and it will get better at finding things to be grateful for, and begin to take the shape of gratitude.

Everything we do creates connections within networks of the brain, and the more you repeat something, the stronger those connections get. The mind can change the brain in lasting ways. In other words, what flows through the mind sculpts the brain."

Blocks to Gratitude

Depending on circumstances, gratitude can sometimes be a struggle. However, according to Emmons and the GGSC, materialism is frequently the greatest stumbling block, and it really need not be. As noted in one of the GGSC's newsletters:³¹

"Seen through the lens of buying and selling, relationships as well as things are viewed as disposable, and gratitude cannot survive this materialistic onslaught ... Research has proven that gratitude is essential for happiness, but modern times have regressed gratitude into a mere feeling instead of retaining its historic value, a virtue that leads to action ...

[G]ratitude is an action of returning a favor and is not just a sentiment. By the same token, ingratitude is the failure to both acknowledge receiving a favor and refusing to return or repay the favor. Just as gratitude is the queen of the virtues, ingratitude is the king of the vices ...

If we fail to choose [gratitude], by default we choose ingratitude. Millions make this choice every day. Why? Provision, whether supernatural or natural, becomes so commonplace that it is easily accepted for granted.

We believe the universe owes us a living. We do not want to be beholden. Losing sight of protection, favors, benefits and blessings renders a person spiritually and morally bankrupt ... People who are ungrateful tend to be characterized by an excessive sense of self-importance, arrogance, vanity and an unquenchable need for admiration and approval.

Narcissists reject the ties that bind people into relationships of reciprocity. They expect special favors and feel no need to pay back or pay forward ... Without empathy, they cannot appreciate an altruistic gift because they cannot identify with the mental state of the gift-giver."

If entitlement is the hallmark of narcissism, then humility is the antidote and the answer when you struggle with gratitude. As noted by Emmons, "The humble person says that life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed. Humility ushers in a grateful response to life."³²

So, gratitude isn't a response to receiving "your due," but rather the recognition that life owes you nothing, yet provided you with everything you have anyway

— a place to live, family, friends, work, your eyesight, your breath, indeed your very life. When you start seeing everything as a gift, opposed to things you've deserved (for better or worse), your sense of gratitude will begin to swell.

Another way to flex your gratitude muscle when life events leave you uninspired is to identify and express gratitude for seemingly "useless" or insignificant things. It could be a certain smell in the air, the color of a flower, your child's freckles or the curvature of a stone. Over time, you'll find that doing this will really hone your ability to identify "good" things in your life.

10 Practical Strategies to Build and Strengthen Gratitude

Aside from keeping a daily gratitude journal and being grateful for the simple, insignificant things around you, there are many other ways to practice gratitude. I've compiled 10 additional suggestions from various experts below. The key is to stay consistent. Find a way to incorporate your chosen method into each week, ideally each day, and stick with it.

Place a reminder note on your bathroom mirror if you need to, or schedule it into your calendar along with all of your other important to-do's.

1. Write thank-you notes³³ — When thanking someone, be specific and acknowledge the effort and/or cost involved.

This year, make it a point to write thank-you notes or letters in response to each gift or kind act — or simply as a show of gratitude for someone being in your life. To get you started, consider practicing mindful thank yous for seven days straight.

2. Say grace at each meal — Adopting the ritual of saying grace at each meal is a great way to flex your gratitude muscle on a daily basis,³⁴ and will also foster a deeper connection to your food.

While this can be a perfect opportunity to honor a spiritual connection with the divine, you don't have to turn it into a religious speech if you don't want to. You could simply say, "I am grateful for this food, and appreciate all the time and hard work that went into its production, transportation and preparation."

3. Let go of negativity by changing your perception — Disappointment can be a major source of stress, which is known to have far-reaching effects on your

health and longevity. In fact, centenarians overwhelmingly cite stress as the most important thing to avoid if you want to live a long and healthy life. Since stress is virtually unavoidable, the key is to develop and strengthen your ability to manage your stress so that it doesn't wear you down over time.

Rather than dwelling on negative events, most centenarians figured out how to let things go, and you can do that too. It takes practice, though. It's a skill that must be honed daily, or however often you're triggered.

A foundational principle to let go of negativity is the realization that the way you feel has little to do with the event itself, and everything to do with your perception of it. Wisdom of the ancients dictate that events are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. It is your belief about the event that upsets you, not the fact that it happened.

As noted by Ryan Holiday, author of "The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living,"³⁵ "The Stoics are saying, 'This happened to me,' is not the same as, 'This happened to me and that's bad.' They're saying if you stop at the first part, you will be much more resilient and much more able to make some good out of anything that happens." And, once you can see the good, you're more apt to feel gratitude.

4. Be mindful of your nonverbal actions — Smiling and hugging are both ways of expressing gratitude, encouragement, excitement, empathy and support. These physical actions also help strengthen your inner experience of positive emotions of all kinds.

5. Give praise — Research³⁶ shows using "other-praising" phrases are far more effective than "self-beneficial" phrases. For example, praising a partner saying, "thank you for going out of your way to do this," is more powerful than a compliment framed in terms of how you benefited, such as "it makes me happy when you do that."

The former resulted in the partner feeling happier and more loving toward the person giving the praise. Also, be mindful of your delivery — say it like you mean it. Establishing eye contact is another tactic that helps you show your sincerity.

6. Prayer and/or mindfulness meditation — Expressing thanks during prayer or meditation is another way to cultivate gratitude. Practicing "mindfulness" means that you're actively paying attention to the moment you're in right now.

A mantra is sometimes used to help maintain focus, but you can also focus on something that you're grateful for, such as a pleasant smell, a cool breeze or a lovely memory.

7. Create a nightly gratitude ritual — One suggestion is to create a gratitude jar,³⁷ into which the entire family can add notes of gratitude on a daily basis. Any jar or container will do. Simply write a quick note on a small slip of paper and put it into the jar.

Some make an annual (or biannual or even monthly) event out of going through the whole jar, reading each slip out loud. If you have young children, a lovely ritual suggested by Dr. Alison Chen in a Huffington Post article³⁸ is to create a bedtime routine that involves stating what you're grateful for out loud.

8. Spend money on activities instead of things — According to recent research,³⁹ spending money on experiences not only generates more gratitude than material consumption, it also motivates greater generosity. As noted by co-author Amit Kumar, postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Chicago, "People feel fortunate, and because it's a diffuse, untargeted type of gratitude, they're motivated to give back to people in general."⁴⁰

9. Embrace the idea of having "enough" — According to many who have embraced a more minimalist lifestyle, the key to happiness is learning to appreciate and be grateful for having "enough."

Financial hardship and work stress are two significant contributors to depression and anxiety. The answer is to buy less and appreciate more. Instead of trying to keep up with the Joneses, practice being grateful for the things you already have, and release yourself from the iron grip of advertising, which tells you there's lack in your life.

Many who have adopted the minimalist lifestyle claim they've been able to reduce the amount of time they have to work to pay their bills, freeing up time for volunteer work, creative pursuits and taking care of their personal health, thereby dramatically raising their happiness and life satisfaction. The key here is deciding what "enough" is. Consumption itself is not the problem; unchecked and unnecessary shopping is.

Many times, accumulation of material goods is a symptom that you may be trying to fill a void in your life, yet that void can never be filled by material things. More often than not, the void is silently asking for more love, personal

connection, or experiences that bring purpose and passionate engagement. So, make an effort to identify your real, authentic emotional and spiritual needs, and then focus on fulfilling them in ways that does not involve shopping.

10. Try tapping – The [Emotional Freedom Techniques](#) (EFT) is a helpful tool for a number of emotional challenges, including lack of gratitude. EFT is a form of psychological acupressure based on the energy meridians used in acupuncture that can quickly restore inner balance and healing, and helps rid your mind of negative thoughts and emotions. In the video below, EFT practitioner Julie Schiffman demonstrates how to tap for gratitude.