

# 25 Years To Be Grateful For

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

✓ Fact Checked

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › There are two key components to gratitude – affirmation of goodness and a recognition that the source of the goodness is outside us. Gratitude is acknowledging the actions of others that help us achieve goodness in our lives
- › The dramatic increase in the number of people reporting depression during the COVID pandemic illustrates the need for using strategies that have proven to boost life satisfaction, reduce depression and improve physical, emotional and relational health
- › Practicing gratitude meets these criteria as it can trigger a cascade of psychological effects that can be traced to the stimulation of areas of the brain that are associated with the regulation of stress and the production of pleasurable feelings
- › Gratitude is a powerful antidepressant that may show benefits in as little as two weeks, without the litany of side effects often linked to antidepressant drugs; it can also improve work performance and reduce mistreatment in the workplace
- › Practical strategies include keeping a gratitude journal, changing your perception, offering praise to others, being mindful of your nonverbal actions and listening to your own advice

Even before the 2020 pandemic, the happiness index in the U.S. was slowly dropping. Gallup poll results from 2010 show 48.4% of Americans expressed “a lot” of happiness and without a lot of stress.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, a Harris Poll showed only 31% reported they were happy overall and in 2017 33% of Americans reported feeling the same.<sup>2</sup>

In 2020, the COVID Response Tracking Study<sup>3</sup> from the University of Chicago found that just 14% of adults in the U.S. said they were very happy, a precipitous fall from 31% measured in 2018. In addition to the drop in happiness, 50% also said they recently felt isolated.

These data follow estimates from a literature review<sup>4</sup> and a nationally representative study<sup>5</sup> published by the Boston University School of Public Health that revealed the rate of depression had more than tripled, from 8.5% before the pandemic to 32.8% in 2021.

These data demonstrate the need for instituting small changes in perspective and behavior that can add up over time and lessen the burden of anxiety and depression. One of those strategies at the top of the list that is known to boost happiness and life satisfaction is practicing gratitude.

If you are among those who feel like your happiness factor could use a pick-me-up, consider committing yourself to cultivating an attitude of gratitude every day. Research data shows that it can pave the way to life satisfaction, better mental health, and improved physical health.

While there are several strategies that can be used to help reduce depression and anxiety, practicing gratitude is an effective remedy that costs nothing and has no side effects.

## **What Is Gratitude?**

According to Robert Emmons, one of the leading experts on gratitude,<sup>6</sup> there are two key components to defining gratitude. He describes these in an essay entitled “Why Gratitude is Good,” where he writes:<sup>7</sup>

*“First, it’s an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we’ve received ... [In the second part,] we recognize that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves ... We acknowledge that other people – or even higher powers, if you’re of a spiritual mindset – gave us many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives.”*

Emmons recognizes the importance of gratitude as a relationship-strengthening emotion since it “requires us to see how we’ve been supported and affirmed by other people.”<sup>8</sup> Gratitude focuses on the benevolence of other people and not on negative behavior. Instead, practicing gratitude focuses your attention on what you've received and not on what's been withheld.

Additionally, it's important to avoid comparing yourself to others, since focusing on the advantages or better luck of others will erode your sense of security and does not change your reality.

In his presentation<sup>9</sup> of some of his research at the greater Goods Science Center, Emmons noted that 11 years of research has demonstrated significant psychological and physical benefits for participants who have practiced maintaining a gratitude journal, even over a short period of time.

## **There Is Power in Gratitude**

Relationships you have with others play a large role in your perception of happiness. Research has also demonstrated that gratitude in a romantic relationship is the single best predictor of relationship satisfaction.<sup>10</sup>

Gratitude triggers a cascade of psychological effects that can be traced back to stimulation of the hypothalamus and ventral tegmental area.<sup>11</sup> The hypothalamus is the area of the brain involved in the regulation of stress<sup>12</sup> and the ventral tegmental area (VTA) is part of the reward circuitry, or an area that produces pleasurable feelings.<sup>13</sup>

One study<sup>14</sup> published in 2015 demonstrated that gratitude could also play a significant role in your ability to make more friends. The researchers concluded that “insofar as gratitude expressions signaled interpersonal warmth of the expresser, they prompted investment in the burgeoning social bond.”<sup>15</sup>

Gratitude is a form of generosity since it involves offering “something” to another person, even when it may only be a verbal affirmation. Generosity is also neutrally linked

to happiness. In other words, your brain boosts happiness when you commit acts of generosity, even when no money is involved.<sup>16,17</sup>

In Emmons' research,<sup>18</sup> he found that gratitude offered psychological, physical and social benefits. After keeping a gratitude journal, people reported a 25% increase in feeling more positive emotions, including feeling more enthusiastic, attentive, energetic and alert than the control group.

He went on to explain that the participants also experienced better overall health and exercised more with a difference of 10% to 30% as compared to the control group. People who kept a gratitude journal slept 10% more and woke up feeling more refreshed. Blood pressure was also substantially lower in people keeping gratitude journals and they experienced reduced hostility.

People keeping a gratitude journal also experienced more social positive behaviors and less destructive behaviors, reporting they felt more altruistic, generous and compassionate. The data were first gathered in college students but replicated in adults and adults with chronic health conditions. When gratitude journals were kept by sixth and seventh graders, the children experienced some mental health benefits and better educational outcomes.

## **Gratitude Is a Powerful Antidepressant**

What may be particularly significant in the years following 2020, is the powerful effect that gratitude has on depression. University of Pennsylvania professor Martin Seligman, author of "Flourish: A Visionary New Understand of Happiness and Well-Being," found when people get in the habit of listing three things they are grateful for each day, it results in considerable improvement in mental health and depression.<sup>19</sup>

Some experienced benefits in as little as two weeks, which is far faster than the maximum relief from antidepressant medications which often take up to three months<sup>20</sup> and are often accompanied by a litany of side effects.

There are biochemical changes associated with gratitude that support the antidepressive effects. Gratitude triggers the release of mood-regulating chemicals such as serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine and oxytocin, while inhibiting the stress chemical cortisol.<sup>21</sup> These neurochemical effects are also why gratitude has been linked to reduced stress.<sup>22</sup> Yet, another reason is that it improves emotional resiliency.<sup>23</sup>

Lastly, gratitude has been shown to improve work performance. When managers expressed gratitude and appreciation the result was an improvement in the employees' performance, well-being<sup>24</sup> and a reduction in mistreatment.<sup>25</sup> Considering that more than half of all American workers say they're frustrated at or by work,<sup>26</sup> it's quite clear there's a lot of room for improvement, and gratitude could go a long way toward fostering a healthier work environment.

## Practical Strategies Help Strengthen Your Gratitude

There are many gratitude journals or journal apps you can download to write in each day. The key is to consistently use this strategy for three to four weeks and take note of the changes you experience in your mental, physical and relational health.

As you notice a change in how you feel and your outlook on life, you may want to incorporate other ways of practicing gratitude. I've compiled suggestions below from which you can pick and choose as they fit your lifestyle.

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**Acknowledge seemingly insignificant goodness** — Express your pleasure in simple things like the color of a flower, your child's freckles or the scent in the air.

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**Write thank you notes** — This is an act of your gratitude in response to someone else's act of kindness or a gift. I am grateful for the outpouring of support and gratitude expressed by readers in this video.

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**Say grace at each meal** — Saying grace can help foster a deeper connection with a divine spirit or with your food.

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**Change your perception** — Let go of negativity by changing your perception of events since how you feel about something has little to do with the event itself. Whether you choose to see it positively or negatively, it doesn't change the reality of the event, but it does change your resilience and lowers your stress level.

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**Be mindful of your nonverbal actions** — Smiling, words of encouragement and expressing empathy and support are ways of expressing gratitude.

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**Offer praise** — Offering positive reinforcement to others that focus on them is more beneficial for you than phrasing it as a benefit for you.<sup>27</sup> For example, saying “thank you for going out of your way to do that” is more powerful than a compliment framed for your benefit, such as “it makes me happy when you do that.”

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**Nightly gratitude ritual** — For example, writing in your gratitude journal, or creating a gratitude jar where the family can add notes each day. Consider making it an event to read through the notes occasionally.

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**Spend money on activities instead of things** — Research<sup>28</sup> shows this generates more gratitude than spending on material things and motivates greater generosity.

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**Try Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT)** — This is a helpful tool for many emotionally-based challenges. [EFT](#) is a form of psychological acupuncture based on the energy meridians used in acupuncture.

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**Listen to your own advice** — You can raise your positive-to-negative emotion ratio by asking yourself, “What would I recommend if this happened to someone else?” and then follow your own advice. This works because when we make a recommendation to others, we are more emotionally distant from the event, which allows us to make more reasonable decisions.

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**Thank You for All Your Support Over the Last 25 Years**

Mercola.com is celebrating its 25th year online and I have much to be grateful for. If it were not for my passionate staff and readers, none of this would be possible. I want to express my deep gratitude to all of you who support this work by reading the newsletter and sharing this information with your friends and family. You are helping to pay it forward, one healthier person at a time.

I often get notes of thanks from readers, some of which you can see in the video above. Knowing that people are turning their lives around and regaining their health brings me great satisfaction and joy. Sharing simple, inexpensive strategies that have a powerful effect on health is my passion. The small steps we take each day using simple and inexpensive strategies have a powerful effect on your health.

I began Mercola.com after recognizing how these simple changes helped my patients develop better health. From a small beginning 25 years ago, we have grown to becoming part of the lives of many people around the world. The fact that so many are implementing and sharing these recommendations to benefit themselves, their friends and their family, fills me with gratitude and it's what makes this journey worthwhile.

## Sources and References

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