

Express Gratitude

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Only 1 in 3 Americans report being “very happy.” More than half say they’re frustrated at work. Nearly 1 in 4 experience no life enjoyment at all
- › Small changes in perspective and/or behavior can add up, and practicing gratitude has been scientifically verified as a way to boost happiness and life satisfaction
- › Gratitude is also a form of generosity, as it involves extending “something” to another person, even if it’s only a verbal affirmation of thanks, and generosity and happiness are neurally linked
- › 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
- › A dozen different strategies are reviewed, all of which can help you build and strengthen your sense of gratitude

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According to the Harris Poll Happiness Index, a mere 1 in 3 Americans report being “very happy.” More than half say they’re frustrated at or by work.¹ Other research suggests nearly 1 in 4 experience no life enjoyment at all.² The good news is, small changes in perspective and/or behavior can add up, and practicing gratitude may be at the top of the list of strategies known to boost happiness and life satisfaction.

In "The Little Book of Gratitude," Robert Emmons notes, "We did not ... get to where we are in life by ourselves. So, living in gratitude is living in truth. It is the most accurate and honest approach to life." According to Emmons, gratitude involves "affirming the good and recognizing its sources. It is the understanding that life owes me nothing and all the good I have is a gift."

Gratitude is also a form of generosity, because it involves offering or extending "something" to another person, even if it's only a verbal affirmation of thanks. After all, it's not yourself you are grateful for but rather something or someone outside of yourself. And generosity has also been shown to augment happiness. In fact, generosity and happiness are neurally linked. As noted by the authors of a recent study:^{3,4}

"[W]e predicted that the neural link between generosity and happiness would involve functional interactions between brain regions engaged in generous behavior [temporoparietal junction (TPJ)] and those mediating happiness (ventral striatum). The results confirmed our hypotheses.

We found significantly higher levels of generous behavior and happiness, as reflected by greater TPJ activity for generous choices and generosity-related connectivity of the TPJ with striatal happiness regions in the experimental group.

We thus conclude that the interplay of these brain regions links commitment-induced generosity with happiness ... [T]he amount spent did not matter ... [E]ven little things have a beneficial effect – like bringing coffee to one's office mates in the morning."

Commit to Cultivating an Attitude of Gratitude

If your happiness could use a boost, this year, commit to cultivating an attitude of gratitude – every day. Gratitude not only paves the way to life satisfaction, research has also demonstrated it is the single best predictor of good relationships, and benefits both

sanity and physical health. Enhancing your well-being, then, may be as simple as taking the time each day to reflect on what you're thankful for.

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. In one study,⁵ participants who kept a gratitude diary and reflected on what they were grateful for just four times a week for three weeks improved their depression, stress and happiness scores.

A mindfulness intervention, consisting of a mindfulness diary and mindfulness meditation, led to similar improvements. In another study, people who kept a gratitude journal reported exercising more, and had fewer visits to the doctor.⁶

The Many Health Benefits of Gratitude

Aside from augmenting happiness and life satisfaction, gratitude also produces measurable effects on a number of bodily systems, including beneficial effects on mood and pleasure-related neurotransmitters, reproductive and social bonding hormones, cognition, blood pressure and more. Importantly, it lowers the stress hormone cortisol and inflammatory cytokines, which are often elevated if you have chronic disease. Health benefits associated with gratitude include:^{7,8}

A greater sense of pleasure, as gratitude stimulates your hypothalamus (a brain area involved in the regulation of stress) and your ventral tegmental area (part of your brain's "reward circuitry," an area that produces pleasurable feelings)⁹

Improved sleep¹⁰ (especially if your mind has a tendency to go into overdrive with negative thoughts and worries at bedtime)

A higher likelihood of engaging in other healthy activities and self-care such as exercise

Higher relationship satisfaction

Improved work performance (in one study, managers who expressed gratitude saw a 50% increase in the employees' performance)

Reduced stress¹¹ and emotional distress, in part by improving emotional resiliency

Enhanced well-being¹² and improved mental health by triggering the release of antidepressant and mood-regulating chemicals such as serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine and oxytocin, while inhibiting cortisol

Improved heart health,¹³ reducing the likelihood of sudden death in patients with congestive heart failure and coronary artery disease

Reduced inflammation and pain

Improved immune function¹⁴

Consistent Practice Pays Dividends

If keeping a gratitude journal isn't your "thing," don't despair. There are loads of other strategies that can help you build and strengthen your sense of gratitude. So, while a gratitude diary is highly recommended, feel free to select one or more of the suggestions listed in the section 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-dos. As noted by Emmons:

"Gratitude recruits other positive emotions, such as joy, contentment and hope, and these produce direct physical benefits through the immune or endocrine systems. A grateful perspective on life is a stress-buster, so grateful people are more equipped than others to deal with uncertainties, ambiguities and situations that trigger anxiety."

Remember to acknowledge your positive emotions; don't suppress them. The benefit is in the actual experiencing of the emotion. According to Barbara Fredrickson, a psychologist and positive-emotions researcher, most Americans have two positive experiences for every negative one. Remarkably, this 2-to-1 positivity ratio is barely enough to keep you going.

Increase Positive Emotions by Spending More Time in Nature

To actually flourish emotionally, Fredrickson's research¹⁵ shows you need a 3-to-1 ratio. This means you need three positive emotions for every negative. In her experience, 80% of Americans fail to achieve this ratio. If you suspect you fall into this majority, consider turning your attention to the natural world more frequently.

Recent research¹⁶ shows spending time in nature helps reduce rumination — obsessive negative thoughts that go 'round and 'round without ever getting to any kind of resolution. Ruminating thoughts light up a region in your brain called the subgenual prefrontal cortex, an area that regulates negative emotions, and is associated with an increased risk for anxiety and depression.

Other recent research shows that the mere sounds of nature have a distinct effect on your brain, lowering fight-or-flight instincts and activating your rest-and-digest autonomic nervous system.^{17,18,19} Previous research has also demonstrated that listening to nature sounds help you recover faster after a stressful event.

A Dozen Practical Strategies to Build and Strengthen Gratitude

Following are a diverse array of practices, recommended by various experts and researchers, that can boost your gratitude quotient. Pick one or more that appeal to you, and make a point to work it into your daily or weekly schedule. If you like, conduct your own little experiment:

Write down your current level of happiness and life satisfaction on a piece of paper or your annual calendar, using a rating system of zero to 10. Every three months or so

(provided you've actually been doing your gratitude exercise), re-evaluate and re-rank yourself.

Keep a gratitude journal — Each day, or on set days each week, write down everything you're grateful for, and make an effort to really feel the positivity. While you can certainly buy a nice diary specifically for this purpose, you could simply make a notation in your daily calendar. Alternatively, download a Gratitude Journal app from Apple App Store.²⁰

Here are a few tips from Emmons to consider as you journal: Focus on the benevolence of other people. Doing so will increase your sense of being supported by life and decrease unnecessary anxiety. Also, focus on what you have received rather than what's been withheld. "The 'surplus' mode will increase our feelings of worth; the 'deficit' mode will lead us to think how incomplete our life is," Emmons says.

Lastly, avoid comparing yourself to people you perceive to have more advantages. Doing so will only erode your sense of security. As Emmons notes, "Wanting more is related to increased anxiety and unhappiness. A healthier comparison is to contemplate what life would be like without a pleasure that you now enjoy ... Gratitude buffers you from emotions that drive anxiety. You cannot be grateful and envious, or grateful while harboring regrets."

Write thank-you notes²¹ — "When thanking someone who has done something for you, whether large or small, be specific, comment on the effort it has taken, and the cost, and keep the focus on that person," Emmons suggests. "For example, 'Thank you for bringing me my tea in bed. I really appreciate you getting up early each day. You're so thoughtful!' The key to effectiveness is to achieve some separation between the kind act and your expression."

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.

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,²² 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."

Let go of negativity by changing your perception — Disappointment — especially if you're frequently struggling with things "not going your way" — 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,"²³ "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."

Listen to your own advice — Another potent technique that can increase your positive-to-negative emotion ratio is to ask yourself, "What would I recommend if this happened to someone else?" and then follow your own advice.

Dan Ariely, a professor at Duke University and author of "Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions," explains that the reason this technique — which he calls "taking the outside perspective" — works so well is because when we make recommendations to others, we don't take our own current state of mind and emotions into account.

We're distanced emotionally from an event that happens to someone else, and that distance allows us to make saner, more reasonable decisions.

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.

Give praise — Research²⁴ shows that 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.

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.

Create a nightly gratitude ritual — One suggestion is to create a gratitude jar,²⁵ 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 article²⁶ is to create a bedtime routine that involves stating what you're grateful for out loud.

Spend money on activities instead of things — According to recent research,²⁷ 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."²⁸

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." The average credit card debt for Americans who carry a balance is \$16,000. People with a negative net worth or a net worth of zero carry an average of \$10,300 in credit card debt.²⁹

Meanwhile, 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.

It's like being on a hamster wheel — you keep shopping, thinking happiness and life satisfaction will come with it. Yet it never does. 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.

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.

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