

Developing an Attitude of Gratitude Can Help You Live a Longer, Happier Life

Besides sharing time with family and friends over food, the primary ingredient of the American Thanksgiving holiday is *gratitude*. While it's certainly good to have an annual holiday to remind us to express gratitude, there's much to be said for the benefits of cultivating the spirit of thankfulness year-round.

People who are thankful for what they have are better able to cope with stress, have more positive emotions, and are better able to reach their goals. Scientists have even noted that gratitude is associated with improved health.

As noted in a previous article on this topic published in the *Harvard Mental Health Letter*,¹ "expressing thanks may be one of the simplest ways to feel better:"

"The word gratitude is derived from the Latin word gratia, which means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness (depending on the context). In some ways gratitude encompasses all of these meanings. Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives, whether tangible or intangible.

With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives. In the process, people usually recognize that the source of that goodness lies at least partially outside themselves.

As a result, gratitude also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals – whether to other people, nature, or a higher power.

...People feel and express gratitude in multiple ways. They can

apply it to the past (retrieving positive memories and being thankful for elements of childhood or past blessings), the present (not taking good fortune for granted as it comes), and the future (maintaining a hopeful and optimistic attitude).

Regardless of the inherent or current level of someone's gratitude, it's a quality that individuals can successfully cultivate further."

Gratitude—It Does a Body Good

Dr. P. Murali Doraiswamy, head of biologic psychology at Duke University Medical Center once stated that: "If [thankfulness] were a drug, it would be the world's best-selling product with a health maintenance indication for every major organ system."²

One way to harness the positive power of gratitude is to keep a gratitude journal or list, where you actively write down exactly what you're grateful for each day. In one study,^{3, 4} people who kept a gratitude journal reported exercising more, and they had fewer visits to the doctor compared to those who focused on sources of aggravation.

As noted in a previous ABC News article,⁵ studies have shown that gratitude can produce a number of measurable effects on a number of systems in your body, including:

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| Mood neurotransmitters (serotonin and norepinephrine) | Inflammatory and immune systems (cytokines) |
| Reproductive hormones (testosterone) | Stress hormones (cortisol) |
| Social bonding hormones (oxytocin) | Blood pressure and cardiac and EEG rhythms |
| Cognitive and pleasure related neurotransmitters (dopamine) | Blood sugar |

<http://www.youtube.com/embed/8-hZQ3FJkcg>

Ways to Cultivate Gratitude

Cultivating a sense of gratitude will help you refocus your attention toward what's good and right in your life, rather than dwelling on the negatives and all the things you may feel are lacking.

And, like a muscle, this mental state can be strengthened with practice. Besides keeping a daily gratitude journal, other ways to cultivate a sense of gratitude include:

- **Write thank you notes:** Whether in response to a gift or kind act, or simply as a show of gratitude for someone being in your life, getting into the habit of writing thank-you letters can help you express gratitude in addition to simply feeling it inside.
- **Count your blessings:** Once a week, reflect on events for which you are grateful, and write them down. As you do, feel the sensations of happiness and thankfulness you felt at the time it happened, going over it again in your mind.
- **Pray:** Expressing thanks during your prayers is another way to cultivate gratitude.
- **Mindfulness meditation:** 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.

Expanding the Science and Practice of Gratitude

Three years ago, the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California,⁶ in collaboration with the University of California, launched a project called

“Cultivating Gratitude in a Consumerist Society.” This \$5.6 million project aims to:

- *Expand the scientific database of gratitude, particularly in the key areas of human health, personal and relational well-being, and developmental science;*
- *Promote evidence-based practices of gratitude in medical, educational, and organizational settings and in schools, workplaces, homes and communities, and in so doing...*
- *Engage the public in a larger cultural conversation about the role of gratitude in civil society.*

In 2012, 14 winning research projects were announced, with topics covering everything from the neuroscience of gratitude, to the role of gratitude for the prevention of bullying. The organization has a number of resources you can peruse at your leisure, including The Science of Happiness blog and newsletter,⁷ and a Digital Gratitude Journal,⁸ where you can record and share the things you’re grateful for. Scientists are also permitted to use the data to explore “causes, effects, and meaning of gratitude.”

For example, previous research has shown that employees whose managers say “thank you” feel greater motivation at work, and work harder than peers who do not hear those “magic words.” As noted in a previous Thanksgiving blog post in Mark’s Daily Apple:⁹ “[R]esearch¹⁰ has shown that being on the receiving end of a person’s gratitude can boost subjects’ sense of self-worth and/or self-efficacy. It also appears to encourage participants to further help the person who offered the gratitude but also another, unrelated person in an unconscious ‘pay it forward’ kind of connection.”

Cultivating an Attitude of

Gratitude as Part of a Healthy Lifestyle

Starting each day by thinking of all the things you have to be thankful for is one way to put your mind on the right track. Also, remember that your future depends largely on the thoughts you think *today*. So each moment of every day is an opportunity to turn your thinking around, thereby helping or hindering your ability to think and feel more positively in the very next moment.

Most experts agree that there are no shortcuts to happiness. Even generally happy people do not experience joy 24 hours a day. But a happy person can have a bad day and still find pleasure in the small things in life.

Be thankful for what you have. When life gives you a 100 reasons to cry, remember the 1,000 reasons you have to smile. Face your past without regret; prepare for the future without fear; focus on what's good *right now*, in the present moment, and practice gratitude. Remember to say "thank you"—to yourself, the Universe, and others. It's wonderful to see a person smile, and even more wonderful knowing that you are the reason behind it! And with that, I wish you all a Happy and Healthy Thanksgiving!