

6 Habits of Highly Grateful People by Jeremy Adam Smith

I'm terrible at gratitude.

How bad am I? I'm so bad at gratitude that most days, I don't notice the sunlight on the leaves of the Berkeley oaks as I ride my bike down the street. I forget to be thankful for the guy who hand-brews that delicious cup of coffee I drink mid-way through every weekday morning. I don't even know the dude's name!

I usually take for granted that I have legs to walk on, eyes to see with, arms I can use to hug my son. I forget my son! Well, I don't actually forget about him, at least as a physical presence; I generally remember to pick him up from school and feed him dinner. But as I face the quotidian slings and arrows of parenthood, I forget all the time how much he's changed my life for the better.

Gratitude (and its sibling, appreciation) is the mental tool we use to remind ourselves of the good stuff. It's a lens that helps us to see the things that don't make it onto our lists of problems to be solved. It's a spotlight that we shine on the people who give us the good things in life. It's a bright red paintbrush we apply to otherwise-invisible blessings, like clean streets or health or enough food to eat.

Gratitude doesn't make problems and threats disappear. We can lose jobs, we can be attacked on the street, we can get sick. I've experienced all of those things. I remember those harrowing times at unexpected moments: My heart beats faster, my throat constricts. My body wants to hit something or run away, one or the other. But there's nothing to hit, nowhere to run. The threats are indeed real, but at that moment, they exist only in memory or imagination. I am the threat; it is me who is wearing myself out with worry.

That's when I need to turn on the gratitude. If I do that enough, suggests the psychological research, gratitude might just become a habit. What will that mean for me? It means, says the research, that I increase my chances of psychologically surviving hard times, that I stand a chance to be happier in the good times. I'm not ignoring the threats; I'm appreciating the resources and people that might help me face those threats.

If you're already one of those highly grateful people, stop reading this essay—you don't need it. Instead you should read Amie Gordon's "Five Ways Giving Thanks Can Backfire." But if you're more like me, then here are some tips for how you and I can become one of those fantastically grateful people.

1. Once in a while, they think about death and loss

Didn't see that one coming, did you? I'm not just being perverse—contemplating endings really does make you more grateful for the life you currently have, according to several studies.

For example, when Araceli Friasa and colleagues asked people to visualize their own deaths, their gratitude measurably increased. Similarly, when Minkyung Koo and colleagues asked people to envision the sudden disappearance of their romantic partners from their lives, they became more grateful to their partners. The same goes for imagining that some positive event, like a job promotion, never happened.

This isn't just theoretical: When you find yourself taking a good thing for granted, try giving it up for a little while. Researchers Jordi Quoidbach and Elizabeth Dunn had 55 people eat a piece of chocolate—and then the researchers told some of those people to resist chocolate for a week and others to binge on chocolate if they wanted. They left a third group to their own devices.

Guess who ended up happiest, according to self-reports? The people who abstained from chocolate. And who were the least happy? The people who binged. That's the power of gratitude!

2. They take the time to smell the roses

And they also smell the coffee, the bread baking in the oven, the aroma of a new car—whatever gives them pleasure.

Loyola University psychologist Fred Bryant finds that savoring positive experiences makes them stickier in your brain, and increases their benefits to your psyche—and the key, he argues, is expressing gratitude for the experience. That's one of the ways appreciation and gratitude go hand in hand.

You might also consider adding some little ritual to how you experience the pleasures of the body: A study published this year in *Psychological Science* finds that rituals like prayer or even just shaking a sugar packet “make people pay more attention to food, and paying attention makes food taste better,” as Emily Nauman reports in her *Greater Good* article about the research.

This brand of mindfulness makes intuitive sense—but how does it work with the first habit above?

Well, we humans are astoundingly adaptive creatures, and we will adapt even to the good things. When we do, their subjective value starts to drop; we start to take them for granted. That's the point at which we might give them up for a while—be it chocolate, sex, or even something like sunlight—and then take the time to really savor them when we allow them back into our lives.

That goes for people, too, and that goes back to the first habit: If you're taking someone for granted, take a step back—and imagine your life without them. Then try savoring their presence, just like you would a rose. Or a new car. Whatever! The point is, absence may just make the heart grow grateful.

3. They take the good things as gifts, not birthrights

What's the opposite of gratitude? Entitlement—the attitude that people owe you something just because you're so very special.

“In all its manifestations, a preoccupation with the self can cause us to forget our benefits and our benefactors or to feel that we are owed things from others and therefore have no reason to feel thankful,” writes Robert Emmons, co-director of the GGSC's Gratitude project. “Counting blessings will be ineffective because grievances will always outnumber gifts.”

The antidote to entitlement, argues Emmons, is to see that we did not create ourselves—we were created, if not by evolution, then by God; or if not by God, then by our parents. Likewise, we are never truly self-sufficient. Humans need other people to grow our food and heal our injuries; we need love, and for that we need family, partners, friends, and pets.

“Seeing with grateful eyes requires that we see the web of interconnection in which we alternate between being givers and receivers,” writes Emmons. “The humble person says that life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed.”

4. They're grateful to people, not just things

At the start of this piece, I mentioned gratitude for sunlight and trees. That's great for me—and it may have good effects, like leading me to think about my impact on the environment—but the trees just don't care. Likewise, the sun doesn't know I exist; that big ball of flaming gas isn't even aware of its own existence, as far as we know. My gratitude doesn't make it burn any brighter.

That's not true of people—people will glow in gratitude. Saying thanks to my son might make him happier and it can strengthen our emotional bond. Thanking the guy who makes my coffee can strengthen social bonds—in part by deepening our understanding of how we're interconnected with other people.

My colleague Emiliana Simon-Thomas, the GGSC's science director and another co-director of our Expanding Gratitude project, puts it this way:

Experiences that heighten meaningful connections with others—like noticing how another person has helped you, acknowledging the effort it took, and savoring how you benefited from it—engage biological systems for trust and affection, alongside circuits for pleasure and reward. This provides a synergistic and enduring boost to the positive experience. Saying 'thank you' to a person, your brain registers that something good has happened and that you are more richly enmeshed in a meaningful social community.

5. They mention the pancakes

Grateful people are habitually specific. They don't say, “I love you because you're just so

wonderfully wonderful, you!” Instead, the really skilled grateful person will say: “I love you for the pancakes you make when you see I’m hungry and the way you massage my feet after work even when you’re really tired and how you give me hugs when I’m sad so that I’ll feel better!”

The reason for this is pretty simple: It makes the expression of gratitude feel more authentic, for it reveals that the thanker was genuinely paying attention and isn’t just going through the motions. The richest thank you’s will acknowledge intentions (“the pancakes you make when you see I’m hungry”) and costs (“you massage my feet after work even when you’re really tired”), and they’ll describe the value of benefits received (“you give me hugs when I’m sad so that I’ll feel better”).

When Amie Gordon and colleagues studied gratitude in couples, they found that spouses signal grateful feelings through more caring and attentive behavior. They ask clarifying questions; they respond to trouble with hugs and to good news with smiles. “These gestures,” Gordon writes, “can have profound effects: Participants who were better listeners during those conversations in the lab had partners who reported feeling more appreciated by them.”

Remember: Gratitude thrives on specificity!

6. They thank outside the box

But let’s get real: Pancakes, massages, hugs? Boring! Most of my examples so far are easy and clichéd. But here’s who the really tough-minded grateful person thanks: the boyfriend who dumped her, the homeless person who asked for change, the boss who laid him off.

We’re graduating from Basic to Advanced Gratitude, so pay attention. And since I myself am still working on Basic, I’ll turn once again to Dr. Emmons for guidance: “It’s easy to feel grateful for the good things. No one ‘feels’ grateful that he or she has lost a job or a home or good health or has taken a devastating hit on his or her retirement portfolio.”

In such moments, he says, gratitude becomes a critical cognitive process—a way of thinking about the world that can help us turn disaster into a stepping stone. If we’re willing and able to look, he argues, we can find a reason to feel grateful even to people who have harmed us. We can thank that boyfriend for being brave enough to end a relationship that wasn’t working; the homeless person for reminding us of our advantages and vulnerability; the boss, for forcing us to face new challenges.

“Life is suffering. No amount of positive thinking exercises will change this truth,” writes Emmons in his Greater Good article “How Gratitude Can Help You Through Hard Times.” He continues:

So telling people simply to buck up, count their blessings, and remember how much they still have to be grateful for can certainly do much harm. Processing a life experience through a grateful lens does not mean denying negativity. It is not a form of superficial happiology. Instead, it means realizing the power you have to transform an obstacle into an opportunity. It means reframing a loss into a potential gain, recasting negativity into positive channels for gratitude.

That's what truly, fantastically grateful people do. Can you?

For more reasons to practice gratitude, check out this infographic created by Here's My Chance.