

Why Gratitude is Good by Robert A. Emmons

[...]For more than a decade, I've been studying the effects of gratitude on physical health, on psychological well-being, and on our relationships with others.

digitalskillet

In a series of studies, my colleagues and I have helped people systematically cultivate gratitude, usually by keeping a "gratitude journal" in which they regularly record the things for which they're grateful. (For a description of this and other ways to cultivate gratitude, [click here](#).)

Gratitude journals and other gratitude practices often seem so simple and basic; in our studies, we often have people keep gratitude journals for just three weeks. And yet the results have been overwhelming. We've studied more than one thousand people, from ages eight to 80, and found that people who practice gratitude consistently report a host of benefits:

More on Gratitude

Watch videos of Robert Emmons discussing the power of gratitude.

Check out Emmons' list of "10 Ways to Become More Grateful"--and print it for your refrigerator!

Read Christine Carter's [Raising Happiness](#) post about how to encourage teenagers to practice gratitude.

Learn more about the science of gratitude in Emmons' book, [Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier](#).

Physical

- Stronger immune systems
- Less bothered by aches and pains
- Lower blood pressure
- Exercise more and take better care of their health
- Sleep longer and feel more refreshed upon waking

Psychological

- Higher levels of positive emotions
- More alert, alive, and awake
- More joy and pleasure
- More optimism and happiness

Social

- More helpful, generous, and compassionate
- More forgiving

- More outgoing
- Feel less lonely and isolated.

The social benefits are especially significant here because, after all, gratitude is a social emotion. I see it as a relationship-strengthening emotion because it requires us to see how we've been supported and affirmed by other people.

Indeed, this cuts to very heart of my definition of gratitude, which has two components. First, it's an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we've received. This doesn't mean that life is perfect; it doesn't ignore complaints, burdens, and hassles. But when we look at life as a whole, gratitude encourages us to identify some amount of goodness in our life.

The second part of gratitude is figuring out where that goodness comes from. We recognize the sources of this goodness as being outside of ourselves. It didn't stem from anything we necessarily did ourselves in which we might take pride. We can appreciate positive traits in ourselves, but I think true gratitude involves a humble dependence on others: 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.

What good is gratitude?

So what's really behind our research results—why might gratitude have these transformative effects on people's lives?

I think there are several important reasons, but I want to highlight four in particular.

1. Gratitude allows us to celebrate the present. It magnifies positive emotions.

Research on emotion shows that positive emotions wear off quickly. Our emotional systems like newness. They like novelty. They like change. We adapt to positive life circumstances so that before too long, the new car, the new spouse, the new house—they don't feel so new and exciting anymore.

But gratitude makes us appreciate the value of something, and when we appreciate the value of something, we extract more benefits from it; we're less likely to take it for granted.

In effect, I think gratitude allows us to participate more in life. We notice the positives more, and that magnifies the pleasures you get from life. Instead of adapting to goodness, we celebrate goodness. We spend so much time watching things—movies, computer screens, sports—but with gratitude we become greater participants in our lives as opposed to spectators.

2. Gratitude blocks toxic, negative emotions, such as envy, resentment, regret—emotions that can destroy our happiness. There's even recent evidence, including a 2008 study by psychologist Alex Wood in the *Journal of Research in Personality*, showing that gratitude can reduce the frequency and duration of episodes of depression.

This makes sense: You cannot feel envious and grateful at the same time. They're incompatible feelings. If you're grateful, you can't resent someone for having something that you don't. Those are very different ways of relating to the world, and sure enough, research I've done with colleagues Michael McCullough and Jo-Ann Tsang has suggested that people who have high levels of gratitude have low levels of resentment and envy.

3. Grateful people are more stress resistant. There's a number of studies showing that in the face of serious trauma, adversity, and suffering, if people have a grateful disposition, they'll recover more quickly. I believe gratitude gives people a perspective from which they can interpret negative life events and help them guard against post-traumatic stress and lasting anxiety.

4. Grateful people have a higher sense of self-worth. I think that's because when you're grateful, you have the sense that someone else is looking out for you—someone else has

provided for your well-being, or you notice a network of relationships, past and present, of people who are responsible for helping you get to where you are right now.

Once you start to recognize the contributions that other people have made to your life—once you realize that other people have seen the value in you—you can transform the way you see yourself.

Challenges to gratitude

Just because gratitude is good doesn't mean it's always easy. Practicing gratitude can be at odds with some deeply ingrained psychological tendencies.

Greg Sargent

One is the "self-serving bias." That means that when good things happen to us, we say it's because of something we did, but when bad things happen, we blame other people or circumstances.

Gratitude really goes against the self-serving bias because when we're grateful, we give credit to other people for our success. We accomplished some of it ourselves, yes, but we widen our range of attribution to also say, "Well, my parents gave me this opportunity." Or, "I had teachers. I had mentors. I had siblings, peers—other people assisted me along the way." That's very different from a self-serving bias.

Gratitude also goes against our need to feel in control of our environment. Sometimes with gratitude you just have to accept life as it is and be grateful for what you have.

Finally, gratitude contradicts the "just-world" hypothesis, which says that we get what we deserve in life. Good things happen to good people, bad things happen to bad people. But it doesn't always work out that way, does it? Bad things happen to good people and vice versa.

With gratitude comes the realization that we get more than we deserve. I'll never forget the comment by a man at a talk I gave on gratitude. "It's a good thing we don't get what we deserve," he said. "I'm grateful because I get far more than I deserve."

This goes against a message we get a lot in our contemporary culture: that we deserve the good fortune that comes our way, that we're entitled to it. If you deserve everything, if you're entitled to everything, it makes it a lot harder to be grateful for anything.

Cultivating gratitude

Partly because these challenges to gratitude can be so difficult to overcome, I get asked a lot about how we can go beyond just occasionally feeling more grateful to actually becoming a more grateful person.

I detail many steps for cultivating gratitude in my book *Thanks!*, and summarize many of them in this *Greater Good* article. I should add, though, that despite the fact that I've been studying gratitude for 11 years and know all about it, I still find that I have to put a lot of conscious effort into practicing gratitude. In fact, my wife says, "How is it that you're supposed to be this huge expert on gratitude? You're the least grateful person I know!" Well, she has a point because it's easy to lapse into the negativity mindset. But these are some of the specific steps I like to recommend for overcoming the challenges to gratitude.

First is to keep a gratitude journal, as I've had people do in my experiments. This can mean listing just five things for which you're grateful every week. This practice works, I think, because it consciously, intentionally focuses our attention on developing more grateful thinking and on eliminating ungrateful thoughts. It helps guard against taking things for granted; instead, we see gifts in life as new and exciting. I do believe that people who live a life of pervasive thankfulness really do experience life differently than people who cheat themselves out of life by not feeling grateful.

Similarly, another gratitude exercise is to practice counting your blessings on a regular basis, maybe first thing in the morning, maybe in the evening. What are you grateful for

today? You don't have to write them down on paper.

You can also use concrete reminders to practice gratitude, which can be particularly effective in working with children, who aren't abstract thinkers like adults are. For instance, I read about a woman in Vancouver whose family developed this practice of putting money in "gratitude jars." At the end of the day, they emptied their pockets and put spare change in those jars. They had a regular reminder, a routine, to get them to focus on gratitude. Then, when the jar became full, they gave the money in it to a needy person or a good cause within their community.

Practices like this can not only teach children the importance of gratitude but can show that gratitude impels people to "pay it forward"—to give to others in some measure like they themselves have received.

Finally, I think it's important to think outside of the box when it comes to gratitude. Mother Theresa talked about how grateful she was to the people she was helping, the sick and dying in the slums of Calcutta, because they enabled her to grow and deepen her spirituality. That's a very different way of thinking about gratitude—gratitude for what we can give as opposed to what we receive. But that can be a very powerful way, I think, of cultivating a sense of gratitude.