
INTRODUCTION TO GRATITUDE PRACTICE

What Is Gratitude?

The world's foremost expert on gratitude, Robert Emmons, defines gratitude as "a sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life." He notes that gratitude consists of two separate but interconnected steps:

- First, we acknowledge the goodness that is present in our lives.
- Second, we recognize that the source of these blessings lies at least partially outside of our own doing.

Gratitude can be an external, visible behavior, such as the act of thanking someone. But it can also be a more private or internal process, such as acknowledging and reflecting on the good aspects of our lives.

Why Practice Gratitude?

An explosion of research on the many benefits of gratitude has marked the past decade or so. As it turns out, gratitude is not merely an emotion that feels good; it actually holds the key to a number of psychological, physical, and social benefits as well.

The Psychological Benefits of Gratitude

Studies show that individuals who regularly practice gratitude perform better across a number of areas when it comes to mental and emotional health. Indeed, gratitude has been linked to lower rates of depression, along with helping to buffer against future depressive episodes. It has also been shown to decrease rates of depression and stress, while also enhancing positive mental states such as joy, optimism, and tranquility. Please enjoy these three worksheets featured in The Mindfulness Toolbox.

The Health Benefits of Gratitude

Not only are grateful individuals happier, but research suggests that they are healthier as well. Studies have found that individuals who regularly practice gratitude have improved overall physical health, stronger immune systems, and reduced rates of stress-related illnesses. Not only that, but research has linked the practice of gratitude to other benefits such as getting better sleep (as much as an extra hour per night), and exercising more (as much as 90 minutes more per week).

The Interpersonal Benefits of Gratitude

Many studies have shown that grateful individuals have stronger interpersonal relationships, including more satisfying romantic relationships. They also are more altruistic, making them more likely to donate to charities and engage in volunteer work, and they are even able to let go of resentments easier and foster forgiveness.

The Grateful Brain

The practice of gratitude is believed to impact our brain in several ways. First, on a structural level, the practice of gratitude has been linked to two areas of the brain in particular: the hypothalamus and the left prefrontal cortex. Though small in size, the hypothalamus is mighty in function, and it impacts things like our stress level, our sleep, and even our metabolism. The left prefrontal cortex, conversely, has been linked to positive emotional states, including happiness, compassion, love, and joy.

On a chemical level, gratitude has been linked to several neurotransmitter systems, including serotonin and dopamine. Serotonin influences a number of bodily functions and is thought to be strongly connected to our moods. Low levels of serotonin are thought by some researchers to be linked to higher rates of depression, and gratitude may increase our levels of serotonin in our brain. Dopamine, on the other hand, is considered to be a "feel good" neurotransmitter and plays a role in our ability to anticipate rewards and pleasure. Studies suggest that the practice of gratitude may increase levels of dopamine in our brains.

GRATITUDE PRACTICE

THREE GOOD THINGS

Duration: 10 minutes

Frequency: Daily, for at least two weeks

Level of Difficulty: Easy/Moderate

Overview: Because of our brain's built-in negativity bias, many of us find ourselves constantly stuck on problems, or ruminating about negative events from our day. This helps to contribute to a host of problems, including depression and anxiety. Research suggests that to combat this tendency of the mind, we must deliberately and consciously shift our attention away from the negative and towards the good. In this exercise, you'll be taking the time to notice and appreciate the positive experiences that occur throughout your day. Over time, this will help shift your focus more naturally to these events.

Instructions: Each night for the next two weeks before you go to bed, write down three things that went well for you that day. These good things can be relatively small, even seemingly minor occurrences throughout your day. Or they can be larger, more significant events. There's no right or wrong answer. Simply write three positive experiences from the day, followed by a brief explanation of your contribution to it, or why you think it happened. To challenge yourself further, and make the exercise even more powerful, I recommend never repeating an item from your list over the course of the two weeks (or longer, if you so choose!).

Example:

Good Thing #1: I had a fulfilling day at work and my sessions with patients went well.

Why this happened/My contribution: I made sure I got plenty of sleep last night, and I tried to be very present and attuned in my sessions.

Good Thing #2: My partner cooked my favorite dinner, spaghetti and meatballs.

Why this happened/My contribution: I expressed gratitude and thanked her the last time she cooked.

Good Thing #3: It was a beautiful and sunny day when I was driving to work.

Why this happened/My contribution: I took the time to notice and appreciate the weather, rather than being stuck on "autopilot" as I drove.

Good Thing #3:

Why this happened/My contribution:

Key Points to Consider:

Make sure your “good things” are experiences from the same day you’re journaling, rather than more general sources of gratitude.

By never repeating an item on your list, you force yourself to stretch your comfort zone and make the exercise even more powerful.

Don’t worry about spelling or grammar.

Make sure you write down your good things; although mentally reflecting on positive experiences never hurts, research suggests that taking the time to actually write them down is much more effective.

How and why it works: As you continue to practice this skill, you’ll begin noticing a shift in your outlook and the way you view the world. Rather than focusing on sources of stress or negative things that happened throughout your day, you’ll find yourself having more and more appreciation for the positives in your life. Over time, you may even begin to find yourself seeking out things to be grateful for throughout the day, in anticipation of writing in your journal. By becoming more able to notice good things as they occur, and to savor them in hindsight, you’ll be able to cultivate a deep sense of gratitude and thereby increase your overall happiness and well-being.