

Gratitude

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/gratitude>

Thankfulness

Gratitude is the expression of appreciation for what one has. It is a recognition of value independent of monetary worth. Spontaneously generated from within, it is an affirmation of goodness and warmth. This social emotion strengthens relationships, and its roots run deep in evolutionary history—emanating from the survival value of helping others and being helped in return. Studies show that specific areas of the brain are involved in experiencing and expressing gratitude. Brain scans of people assigned a task that stimulates expression of gratitude show lasting changes in the prefrontal cortex that heighten sensitivity to future experiences of gratitude.

What Is Gratitude?

Gratitude is a spontaneous feeling but, increasingly, research demonstrates its value as a practice—that is, making conscious efforts to count one's blessings. Studies show that people can deliberately cultivate gratitude—and there are important social and personal benefits to doing so. It is possible to feel grateful for loved ones, colleagues, animals, nature, and life in general. The emotion generates a climate of positivity that both reaches inward and extends outward.

Is gratitude an emotion?

Gratitude is an emotion, one that makes a person feel happier. Gratefulness is also a mood as well as a personality trait. Some people are just more inclined to feel grateful as a daily habit.

Is gratitude a feeling?

Gratitude is both a temporary feeling and a dispositional trait. In both cases, gratitude involves a process of recognizing, first, that one has obtained a positive outcome and, second, that there is an external source for that good outcome. (the article below explains more about this process.)

Why Gratitude Matters

Psychologists find that, over time, feeling grateful boosts happiness and fosters both physical and psychological health, even among those already struggling with mental health problems. Studies show that practicing gratitude curbs the use of words expressing negative emotions and shifts inner attention away from such negative emotions as resentment and envy, minimizing the possibility of ruminating, which is a hallmark of depression.

Does gratitude reduce stress?

People who are grateful feel less pain, less stress, suffer insomnia less, have stronger immune systems, experience healthier relationships, and do better academically and professionally. Overall, it can boost both your mental and your physical health.

Are grateful people less depressed?

Grateful people are indeed less likely to have mental health problems like depression. One study found that a gratitude intervention was successful in reducing negative affect and increasing mental resilience in a group of older adults.

Can gratitude help you engage in better self-care?

How to Cultivate Gratitude

Gratitude starts with noticing the goodness in life. A materialistic culture that encourages constant wanting and sees possessions as the source of happiness is not the most fertile ground for gratitude. But it is not an insurmountable barrier to developing it. Envy and especially cynicism and narcissism are similarly *thieves* of gratitude. In fact, the cultivation of gratitude may be at least a partial remedy for narcissism.

How do you practice gratitude?

Just being around your family and friends can help you feel more grateful. Also, being more appreciative of life and feeling less cynical pushes you in a more thankful frame of mind. At other times, when you are facing a tough decision, seeing it as a gift is useful, some people wouldn't mind having such a decision to make.

What makes a person feel grateful?

This depends on the person, and we all differ in the degree to which we are inclined to experience and express gratitude. It can be something as simple as a healthy spring shower, just because the rain washes everything clean. Engaging in a more specific act, such as volunteering to help others, makes people feel good about themselves.

Is gratitude contagious?

Tips to Foster Gratitude

- Keep a journal of or in some way note big and little joys of daily life.
- Write down "three good things"—identify three things that have gone well for you and identify the cause.
- Write thank-you notes to others.
- Think about people who have inspired you and what about them was most significant.

- Engage in "mental subtraction." Imagine what your life would be like if some positive event had not occurred.

The Science of Gratitude

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/201911/the-science-gratitude>

Why giving thanks is one of the best things you can do this holiday season (or anytime)

With this week marking the start of the holiday season, many of us will be taking stock of that for which we are most thankful. While this is generally recognized as a good thing to do, many of us may not spend much time thinking about why, or how we can do it better. There's a growing field around the science of gratitude that looks to answer these questions from an evidence-informed perspective, so I asked two experts to share more about their work in this area.

Robert A. Emmons is a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, as well as founding editor and editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Peter C. Hill is a professor of psychology at Biola University's Rosemead School of Psychology. He is also a past president of Division 36 (Psychology of Religion) of the American Psychological Association (APA) and was elected Fellow of the APA in 1998. Together they are co-directors on a \$4.1 million initiative entitled *Gratitude to God: Psychological, Philosophical, and Theological Perspectives*. In this interview, they both offer insight drawn from their research on what gratitude really means, how it impacts our lives and those around us, and how we can intentionally cultivate it this holiday season.

JA: How do you personally define gratitude?

RE: Gratitude is an affirmation of the goodness in one's life and the recognition that the sources of this goodness lie at least partially outside the self. So, it emerges from two stages of information processing: affirming and recognizing. Gratitude is the recognition that life owes me nothing, and that all the good I have is a gift. It is a response to all that has been given. It's a way of seeing that alters our gaze. Living gratefully begins with affirming the good and recognizing its sources.

PH: There are gradations of gratitude and an important predictor of the degree to which gratitude is experienced is the extent to which the benefactor made a personal sacrifice in providing the valued benefit.

JA: What are some ways gratitude can help us live more resiliently?

RE: If we have learned one thing from the science of gratitude (and parenthetically we've learned a lot!) is that there is no resilience without gratitude. It's impossible. Gratitude is absolutely indispensable for growing an unshakable core of calm, strength, and happiness. Gratitude helps us recover from loss and trauma, gratitude widens the perceptual field and

helps us see the big picture and the opportunities in it, and of course, it connects people together.

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In *The Little Book of Gratitude*, I present the ARC model for why gratitude makes us resilient:

- *Gratitude amplifies*: Like a microphone or amplifier, gratitude pumps up the volume on the good in our lives. The good that we see in ourselves, the good that we see in others, and the good that we see in the world are multiplied and magnified through a grateful outlook.
- *Gratitude rescues*: Left to their own devices, our minds tend to hijack each and every opportunity for happiness. Negativity, entitlement, resentment, forgetfulness, ungratefulness all clamor for our attention. Whether stemming from our own internal thoughts or the daily news headlines, we are exposed to a constant drip of negativity. Weighed down by negativity, we are worn down, worn out, emotionally and physically exhausted. To offset this chronic negativity, we need to continually and perpetually hear good news. We need to constantly and regularly create and take in positive experiences. Gratitude is our best weapon, an ally to counter these internal and external threats that rob us of sustainable joy.
- *Gratitude connects*: We cannot and do not live alone. One just needs to imagine human relationships existing without gratitude—they would unravel. Gratitude is the moral cement, the all-purpose glue, the emotional spackle that squeezes into the cracks between people, strengthening and solidifying these relationships. Without gratitude, we'd be in relational ruin. Organizations, families, societies would crumble.

PH: Positive emotions thrive off of each other. As a positive emotion, gratitude feeds and is fed by, in a reciprocal manner, other positive emotions such as feeling more secure, more loving, more contented, happier, and more joyful as well as a number of other warmth-based emotions. Expression of gratitude creates a social bond with others. Such a sense of connection helps fuel psychological (and possibly physical) resiliency which, in turn, according to Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, triggers an upward spiral towards improved emotional well-being, even in the face of challenge.

JA: What are some ways people can cultivate gratitude during this holiday season?

RE: Everyone is exhausted during the holidays. But because gratitude energizes, it is our best approach. It sounds corny, but one of the best things we can do for ourselves is to give the gift of gratitude. Make a gratitude phone call or visit. Select one important person from your past who has made a major positive difference in your life and to whom you have never fully expressed your thanks. Choose someone who is still alive. Tell them how your life is better because of what they have done for you. This will be transformational for both you and the receiver. Gratitude, by its very nature, is an external focus. It's about receiving a gift or benefit

from a source out there. It's about other people doing things for us that we could never do for ourselves; it's about noticing the good, taking in the good, and giving back the good. Grateful people are absorbed by the good that others are doing for them. Focus on the other—this is the best gratitude message we can give people.

PH: I like Bob's practical suggestions. The bottom line is behavioral practice. It's no secret that we often take those things that are common to our everyday lives more for granted and that includes our relationship with others. Since the holiday season involves a focus (and time spent) with those closest to us, perhaps we should wake up each day during this season with a strategy of creating an opportunity to express thanks for those close to us, such as a spouse, child, parent, or sibling. It is just a matter of finding something to compliment that significant other and expressing gratitude for their skill or sacrifice. It's catchy and this fosters that upward positive spiral on a family systems level.

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JA: How can we support others in our lives who might feel like there's little to be thankful about as the holidays approach? For example, supporting a loved one who is going through a difficult time or has experienced a recent loss.

PH: There is nothing that will make that person more grateful than you simply being there with a listening ear. They need empathy, not advice. It may very well be your sacrifice of time and your understanding spirit that they feel thankful for. And, remember, gratitude is a positive emotion that may help energize that person to see some things beyond their sense of loss and despair. This likely won't happen immediately, but it is perhaps one small step toward recovery.

RE: We know that suffering in life is inevitable and unavoidable, and no one is going to feel grateful in that season of life. Perhaps they think they should (or we think they should), but gratitude is never a should, but always a could. Gratitude is an attitude, not a feeling that can be easily willed. What do we do to help? Listen, be compassionate, be present. Be the reason for their gratitude.

Eventually, and over time, we come to realize that there is more to life than our losses, and gratitude for life gives us a realistic perspective by which to view our losses and not succumb to victimhood or despair. The ability to perceive the elements in one's life and even life itself as gifts would appear essential if we are to transform tragedies into opportunities. In doing so, grateful individuals begin to heal from past wounds and look forward to the future with a fresh affirmation toward life. We realize that we can be grateful even if we don't feel grateful. It is under these conditions where we have the most to gain by a grateful perspective on life. In the face of demoralization, gratitude has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to bring hope. I've talked to many, many people who have overcome trials and tribulations and what they have in common is that gratefulness became their spiritual lifeline.

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JA: What are you working on now?

RE: There is so much left to be done! We are at the dawn of a global gratitude renaissance. There is unprecedented enthusiasm for new scientific information on the science and practice of gratitude. Remarkably, though, the spiritual side of gratitude has been largely ignored. Over \$10 million has been invested in research on gratitude, but very little of that has been directed to exploring gratitude to God. Given its centrality within all of the major spiritual traditions, it is time to address this imbalance, and that is why Pete Hill and I are directing the Gratitude to God research initiative to encourage serious scholarship from the sciences and the humanities. Nearly \$3 million will be invested in research projects. Gratitude has strong religious roots. The texts, teachings, and traditions of world religions tend to encourage gratitude. The impulse to give thanks is very natural. It says something very fundamental about us as human beings. The need to understand origins is a spiritual quest. Gratitude directs our minds to the vast oceans of realities not visible. We are excited about this project and are convinced that it will contribute to a bigger, better, and deeper understanding of gratitude.

PH: Gratitude is such a powerful force both internally and interpersonally, yet some people have trouble being thankful. We need to explore gratitude's dynamics even more, especially toward a better understanding of how gratitude can be further cultivated. As Bob mentioned, we are now turning some of our research efforts toward exploring gratitude beyond its expression toward other people. In most cultures, including ours, the majority of people are religious. Gratitude is rooted in many religious traditions, yet research on gratitude toward a transcendent reality has been ignored. Many religious people thank God as the source of all goodness, which includes the goodness of others for which one is thankful. If I choose to thank God for my family, for example, I am experiencing a double dose of gratitude—toward God and toward those others. That may double gratitude's benefits.