

The Many Benefits of Gratitude

By Molly Ranns

grat·i·tude / *noun* / The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.¹

We've all had moments of situational gratitude where we feel thankful for a specific event or experience—a Detroit Lions win, a meal paid for by the person in front of you in the drive-through, an afternoon spent with family or friends. Take a moment and close your eyes. Think of a time you've felt profoundly grateful. What feelings and emotions arise?

When I do this, I feel relaxed, content, and serene. A smile spreads across my face. I feel connected to myself and others. During the holiday season, many people find that eliciting gratitude comes more easily this time of year. But what if we could extend these feelings beyond the holidays? If moments of situational gratitude can evoke such warmth and positivity, can we transform this fleeting feeling into something more constant, such as gratitude as a state of being? If so, what benefits might result?

Fact is, there is science behind gratitude. Research shows many scientifically proven benefits of being grateful and the holiday season is a great time to kickstart this state of being. In the book *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You*

Want, Sonja Lyubomirsky, a researcher in positive psychology, writes, "Gratitude is an antidote to negative emotions, a neutralizer of envy, hostility, worry, and irritation."²

Gratitude is present-focused, and it has numerous advantages. First, gratitude can improve physical health.³ Studies show grateful people experience fewer aches and pains and gratitude practices can even reduce cardiac diseases.⁴ Folks practicing gratitude are more likely to seek medical care, exercise, and even sleep better and longer.⁵ Secondly, gratitude significantly and positively impacts mental and emotional health.⁶ Gratitude reduces stress hormones and subsequently decreases depression and anxiety while increasing happiness. It improves interpersonal relationships, increases empathy, and reduces aggression.⁷

Studies also indicate that practicing gratitude reduces social comparisons. Rather than resenting others for having a better job or more money, grateful people are more likely to support others' accomplishments.⁸ In addition to physical and emotional health, gratitude is also good for the workplace.⁹ Grateful workers are more efficient, productive, and responsible. They volunteer for more projects, bond better with colleagues, and work well as a group.¹⁰ There are physical, mental, and emotional benefits of practicing gratitude. Let's take a closer look at what happens in the brain when we recognize all there is to be thankful for, even during the most challenging times.

How does having an awareness of good things in our lives impact the brain? When gratitude is expressed, a surge of dopamine—a neurotransmitter that plays a role in attention, motivation, and pleasure—is released.¹¹ Put in simpler terms, gratitude helps us feel good! When we feel good, we are more likely to project happiness into

the world and help those around us feel good, too. Not only does gratitude lead to increased dopamine, but it also results in increased serotonin production. Serotonin is often referred to as the "happiness chemical" due to its stabilization of moods and resulting feelings of relaxation.¹² It's a natural stress reliever for the body. By practicing gratitude, we can train our brains

Try This Tip from LJAP: Take a Breather

Did you know that you can decrease stress just by using your breath? By learning and practicing breathing techniques, you can combat stress, depression, and anxiety. Get into a comfortable position, close your eyes, and put your attention on your breath. Avoid chest breathing, which can lead to muscle tightness and headaches, and breathe from your diaphragm, which leads to feelings of relaxation. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other on your stomach. Inhale deeply through your nose and feel your diaphragm fill with air. After a short pause, exhale slowly. Take three or four more deep breaths. Repeat daily or more frequently, if needed. Deep breathing techniques provide immediate relief by triggering the body's relaxation response but can also provide lasting effects such as regulating the autonomic nervous system. When you find yourself stressed or anxious, remember that you have a powerful tool that's free and easy to use.

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to focus on the positive instead of the negative. In fact, UCLA's Mindfulness Awareness Research Center explains that gratitude not only offers short-term benefits, but long-term benefits as well. Ongoing gratitude practices can result in changes to neural structures in the brain.¹⁵ Contemplating more positive experiences than negative ones can shift the brain's focus and successfully combat stress.

Just as learning a new skill takes practice, so does cultivating gratitude. Shifting to a world view of thankfulness means appreciating ourselves and those around us. Develop an *attitude of gratitude* by practicing these three simple exercises:

1. **Keep a gratitude journal:** Spend time each day noting what you're thankful for. This can be a great way to start or end the day. Whether in a list format or more of a narrative, this simple practice can result in lasting change.
2. **Send a thank-you note once a week or even once a month:** We often appreciate someone, but how often do we relay our thanks? Are you thankful for your child's teacher and the ongoing work they put in to teach remotely (or in-person) during a pandemic? What about expressing appreciation for your mail carrier for delivering packages to the door in cold weather? Perhaps a friend did something to make your day special or a neighbor offered their assistance in a small, but meaningful, way. Let those around you know they are valued. Make it a practice to send thank-you notes. Doing so makes others feel good and makes you feel good, too.
3. **Find a gratitude buddy:** Reach out to a friend, spouse, child, or colleague. Find a few minutes each week to talk with your buddy about all the things for which you are grateful. Make it a scheduled practice. Involving another person increases accountability.

Practicing gratitude takes time and effort; it won't result in change overnight. It doesn't mean that you'll only experience happiness from this point forward and it won't take away everyday challenges or stressors. What

gratitude *does* is enable us to identify what we can control, accept those things we cannot, and focus on the good things in life instead of fixating on the bad. Practicing gratitude daily can result in increased happiness, reduced anxiety, improved sleep, and a significant improvement in overall well-being. It allows us to put kindness and positivity into the world and feel thankful. Take the gratitude that comes along with the holidays and push it forward into the new year. ■

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ENDNOTES

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