

An Attitude of Gratitude

Gratitude has different meanings depending upon who's using the word. In everyday life, most of us associate it with saying thank you — an action. In science, however, gratitude isn't just an action. It's a positive emotion that gives that action purpose. Positive psychologists say it's a deeper appreciation of someone or something that produces longer lasting positivity. Social psychologists say it's a social emotion that signals our recognition of receiving something good.

For our use, gratitude is an appreciation of what's valuable or meaningful, and is a general state of thankfulness. The purpose of gratitude is to:

- Improve relationships, form new social relationships or make your current relationships better
- Apologize or make amends
- Be an internal reward process — being grateful for your life is a great way to seize the day

Studies show that people with higher levels of gratitude show:

- Physical benefits, such as:
 - Stronger immune systems
 - Less bothered by aches and pains
 - Lower blood pressure
 - Exercising more and taking better care of their health
 - Sleeping longer and feeling more refreshed upon waking
- Psychological benefits, such as:
 - Higher levels of positive emotions
 - More alert, alive, and awake
 - More joy and pleasure
 - More optimism and happiness
- Social benefits, such as being:
 - More helpful, generous, and compassionate
 - More forgiving
 - More outgoing
 - Feeling less lonely and isolated



Train your brain for gratitude

Gratitude doesn't come naturally to most people. According to positive psychologists and other researchers, our minds are wired to focus on the negative as a survival instinct. This evolutionary wiring was good back in caveman days to help our ancestors avoid danger like a saber tooth tiger or poison berries. It's beneficial to us now because it will keep us from touching the hot stove, eating rotten food and causes us to prepare for storms.

Negativity is easy because it's all around. Think about how many times we hear negatives and spend time complaining. We see negativity in the news. When you turn it on at night, what are the stories? When we see all these negative things — even if they're far away or a one-in-a-million event — we start to believe we are in danger and the world is a horrible place and there's nothing to be grateful for. Our inborn negative default is fed and what we feed grows. This default can keep us from seeing good around us and keep us from being grateful for our family, friends and life.

Thankfully, we can train our brains to look for the good and be grateful. According to researchers from the University of Minnesota and the University of Florida, writing down a list of positive events at the end of the day lowered participant's stress levels and gave them a greater sense of calm. You can "rewire" your brain to be happy by simply recalling three things you're grateful for every day for 21 days. Other strategies that may enhance feelings of gratitude include:

- Journaling about things for which you are grateful
- Thinking about someone for whom you are grateful
- Writing a letter to someone for whom you are grateful
- Practicing saying "thank you" in a sincere and meaningful way
- Focusing on intention; considering how someone tried on purpose to bring goodness to your life
- Modeling and teaching gratefulness to your children, if you have them



Meditation is another way to help you focus on expressing gratitude. Try this:

1. Find a comfortable seat and close your eyes.
2. Take a few deep breaths and try to clear your mind.
3. Think about the things you're truly grateful for.
4. Expand on the positive by further visualizing this memory.
5. Keep that experience in mind longer than usual to deeply embed positivity into the brain
6. Continue building a list of positive experiences and memories

Sources: fastcompany.com*, goodthinkinc.com*, greatergood.berkeley.edu*, positivepsychologyprogram.com*, tckpublishing.com*, clarejosa.com*

Join us for our next weekly meditation session on your computer or mobile device:

Topic: Body Scan Meditation

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