

# The Healing Benefits of Gratitude

## Practicing Gratitude

### What is Gratitude?

“an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we’ve received.”

“recognition that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves. ... 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.”

-Robert Emmons

### Why is it Hard to Be Grateful?

Because of how our brains work, we tend to over-focus on painful and negative events while under-focusing on pleasant experiences. Actually, the more pain we experience, the less we are naturally inclined to notice opportunities for gratitude.

Gratitude is a powerful tool...since what you rest your attention upon is what will shape your brain the most. That’s because “neurons that fire together, wire together.” Gratitude shifts your attention away from resentment, regret, and guilt – and therefore stops you from building up the neural substrates of these known factors of mental and physical health problems. –Rick Hanson

Developing a mindset of gratitude does not mean we are meant to ignore our moments of suffering. When life has hard moments, we can:

- notice them *without* dwelling on them
- allow others to care for us *instead of* pushing others away
- let go of suffering *versus* becoming despondent

### Rick Hanson’s H-E-A-L model

#### *H – Have an experience*

Activate the memory of a good experience you are grateful for. It could be anything that fills you with a pleasant sensation, like a scene from nature, someone’s smile, a spiritual encounter, or a happy memory.

#### *E – Enhance the experience*

Duration: Stay in the memory as long as possible. The longer the neurons fire together the more they wire together to form new neuropathways. The more intensely the neurons fire, the more likely they wire.

Multi-modality: Use your five senses to keep the neurons firing intensively over time.

#### *A – Absorb the experience*

Notice what is enjoyable and rewarding about the experience (being alert releases norepinephrine and anticipating a reward releases dopamine; both promote synaptic formation and hardwire the beneficial experience).

#### *L – Link the experience*

Linking involves an awareness of two things at once. I hold a positive memory and a negative memory at the same time. If the positive is more prominent than the negative, the positive “will gradually ease, soothe, and eventually replace the negative material.”

## Benefits of Gratitude[i]

- It increases **optimism** [ii] and reduces negativity.
- It relieves **stress**. Stress can make both health and pain worse, so anything that can relieve stress can also relieve some of the negative health effects that stress causes.
- It can give your **immune system** a boost. This is due in part to gratitude increasing optimism—which has been shown to improve immune function. This can be especially beneficial for anyone trying to bounce back from injury.
- It can improve **relationships**. Couples who express gratitude can find more positive feelings toward each other and toward the relationship. It can increase your satisfaction with the relationship.
- It can help you **sleep better** [iii] by allowing you to fall asleep more peacefully. When having trouble falling asleep at night, think of a few things that you are grateful for. This seems to really work.
- It can make you feel **happier**, both immediately and over time. This can reduce feelings of depression and anxiety as well.

Gratitude can have a huge impact on perceived happiness and it can even actively reduce stress levels and help us deal with stresses. Research shows that being grateful can directly and indirectly reduce our pain and ability to handle pain. These can lead to improvements in overall well-being.

## Practicing Gratitude

Here are the most effective ways to practice gratitude, according to research.

**Keep a Gratitude Journal.** This is a place where you write down what you're grateful for and what is good in your life. Write down 3-5 things on a daily or weekly basis.

**Write a Gratitude Letter:** Write a letter expressing thanks, and deliver it in person.

**Savor** the good in your life - Practice Rick Hanson's **HEAL model**

Here are a few more examples of ways to be more grateful in daily life [iv]:

- **Three Good Things** - Make a list of all of the things in your life that you're happy about and grateful for. Focus on anything you may have been taking for granted. Some people find it helps to pick a set number of things to identify that they are grateful for either daily or weekly. Others find it helpful to post this list somewhere visible as a reminder [v].
- **Meditate.** Meditating gives you the time to sit calmly and think without interruption. You can use this time to focus on what you're grateful for.
- **Silver Linings - Practice reframing negative thoughts.** When facing frustrations, try to see the positive aspects. Look for ways that any situation can be beneficial. Look for ways to learn from or benefit from the challenges you face.
- Take time to **say thank you** to people in your life. If possible, do this verbally or in a written note. If that's not possible, at least take the time to thank them mentally, which will still help.
- **Pray.** If you're religious, prayer can be uplifting and allow you to time to give thanks for the positive things in your life.
- **Help someone else.** Not only will this help you gain perspective, you'll get a boost of good feelings by helping someone else in need.

Cultivating gratitude takes practice- the more we do it, the better we get at it, and the better we start to feel. Thankfully this is something we can all work toward.

What are some things you feel grateful for...

- In nature?
- About your family?
- About your health?

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[i] <http://www.webmd.com/women/features/gratitude-health-boost>

[ii] <http://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

[iii] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/feeling-it/201406/13-ways-gratitude-will-significantly-improve-your-life>

[iv] <http://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

[v] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/out-the-darkness/201407/the-power-appreciation>

[vi] <http://pain.about.com/od/painandmentalhealth/fl/Can-Gratitude-Reduce-Chronic-Pain.htm>  
<http://ggia.berkeley.edu/>