

The New Science of Thank You

The two most important words you'll say today can change your life, and research is proving it.

By Deborah Norville, From *Thank You Power: Making the Science of Gratitude Work for You*

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Making Progress

Some days, you just want to stay in bed and hope the world forgets you exist. David Patrick Columbia was having one of those days. New to New York City, he was worn down by the hustle and bustle, no longer excited and proud about relocating to Manhattan, as he had been weeks earlier. He'd imagined himself a hot young talent taking the magazine world by storm, only to end up doing grunt work as a low-level assistant on a barely-making-it salary. He couldn't afford his own place and felt uncomfortable sponging off a friend.

"I was rethinking everything—my ability as a writer, my career choice," he recalls. That Saturday morning, he wanted to stay in bed. But no, he had to fetch a photo for work.

It was cold, gray and damp when David headed across town. "I don't know what possessed me, but I decided to start counting things along the way that made me happy," he says. "I just wanted to see how many pleasing things I came across."

First on his list: a mother walking her baby, all bundled up in a stroller. "That little face just made me smile," he says. Then he saw a jet in the sky. "Flying has always captivated me." And so it went. From the sizzling smells at bistros to eye-catching store-window displays, David acknowledged one thing after another that brightened his mood. By the time he picked up that photo, he was feeling *thankful* he'd made the move to the Big Apple.

"I was reminded that I lived in an exciting, interesting and invigorating place," he says. "Whenever I'm feeling down, I do this. It makes me feel better." It's been more than 20 years since David took his "walk of thanks" across Manhattan. Now he's a successful entrepreneur in the media business and says his gratitude stroll helps him stay focused to this day.

What if, instead of wallowing in our misery, we all chose to focus on being valued by a dear friend, for example, or the memory of a colleague's face when she receives a surprise birthday cake at work, or the smooth ride we've had to work in the past week? As science is now proving, feeling grateful can actually make us healthier, literally. Practicing gratitude, acknowledging the blessings in our lives and making it a point to recognize the good things can change us positively. We'll sleep better and exercise more. We'll feel more optimistic. We'll be more alert and active. And if we do this over a

period of time, we'll realize that we're making progress toward our life goals.

A Higher Quality of Life

What David Patrick Columbia discovered in his own life, Robert Emmons, PhD, has proved in his lab. A professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, Emmons has long been interested in the role gratitude plays in physical and emotional well-being.

Along with psychology professor Michael McCullough of the University of Miami, Emmons took three groups of volunteers and randomly assigned them to focus on one of three things each week: hassles, things for which they were grateful, and ordinary life events. The first group concentrated on everything that went wrong or was irritating to them, such as “the jerk who cut me off on the highway.” The second group homed in on situations they felt enhanced their lives, as in “My boyfriend is so kind and caring—I'm lucky to have him.” And the third group recalled recent everyday events, as in “I went shoe shopping.”

The results: The people who focused on gratitude were just flat-out happier. They saw their lives in favorable terms. They reported fewer negative physical symptoms such as headaches or colds, and they were active in ways that were good for them. They spent almost an hour and a half more per week exercising than those who focused on hassles. Plain and simple, those who were grateful had a higher quality of life.

Others around them recognized that too. “They noticed that these people had more joy, more energy. They could see that they were becoming more optimistic,” says Emmons. The grateful group “even seemed to be perceived as more helpful toward others, going out on a limb to help people.” Emmons was surprised by this result. “This is not just something that makes people happy, like a positive-thinking/optimism kind of thing. A feeling of gratitude really gets people to do something, to become more pro-social, more compassionate.” This did not happen in either of the other two groups.

Emmons and McCullough took their study, published in 2003, one step further. Rather than focus on hassles or blessings on just a weekly basis, they rounded up college students to do it every day. The researchers asked for specific personal details as well: how many alcoholic drinks the volunteers had, how many aspirin or other pain relievers they took, the quantity and quality of their sleep. They also asked volunteers to compare themselves with others: Are you better or worse off?

If you were going to have dinner with anyone, you'd want someone from the gratitude group at your table. Right off the bat, Emmons and his team recognized that there was something powerful about a regular gratitude check. And in a follow-up study, those who found something to appreciate every day were less materialistic— less apt to see a connection between life satisfaction and material things. They were more willing to part with their possessions. The bumper sticker that reads “The one with the most toys wins”

was unlikely to be found on any of their cars.

Amplify Positive Feelings

The grateful people were less depressive, envious and anxious, and much more likely to help others, a fact not lost on those around them. When others were asked their impressions of the daily-gratitude students, they generally judged the students as empathetic, helpful and pro-social, more likely to put themselves out for others. The study found that the people who were consciously grateful:

- Felt better about their lives.
- Were more optimistic.
- Were more energetic.
- Were more enthusiastic.
- Were more determined.
- Were more interested.
- Were more joyful.
- Exercised more.
- Had fewer illnesses.
- Got more sleep.
- Were more likely to have helped someone else.

Related studies have found other benefits as well, all of which could arguably be linked to a grateful mind-set: clearer thinking, better resilience during tough times, higher immune response, less likelihood of being plagued by stress, longer lives, closer family ties, greater religiousness.

Along with thinner thighs and six-pack abs, this is a fairly comprehensive list of what most of us would wish for in life. “I have studied a lot of topics in the nearly 25 years since I’ve been in graduate school, and no topic has gotten more interest from people than this. It’s exciting,” says Emmons.

But the science doesn’t stop there. After being given a little bag of candies, doctors in a study conducted by psychologist Alice M. Isen, a Cornell University professor, were better able to process the facts of difficult medical cases and to think outside the box about what might be causing the ailments. It turns out that this way of being thanked—by receiving a small sweet—had a big payoff.

“The doctors who got the candy didn’t jump to conclusions,” Isen says. “They realized quickly what the domain of the illness was, and they were correct. But they continued to check their diagnosis against new information as it came in.” The doctors who received no candy at all were less likely to be as methodical.

Isen’s hypothesis is that the good feelings generated by something as simple as an expression of appreciation intervene in the release of dopamine, the chemical in the brain

associated with happiness. As Isen explains, dopamine is released when people are feeling good or are excited by a challenge. It activates the parts of the brain in which complex thinking and conflict resolution are thought to be headquartered.

Isen has also found that positive emotions make people more helpful to others. And since helping someone else makes people feel good about what they've done, the positive feelings continue and even amplify, creating more good feelings.

The Power of Gratitude

So how do we use all this science of gratitude in our lives? The power of gratitude takes just a few minutes a day. But it requires consistency and an open mind—and dedication. Says Emmons, “I think gratitude is a demanding quality, a rigorous quality. It’s a discipline, an exercise.” It may not come easily, but it can be developed. Here’s how:

Record your thanks.

Take a moment during the day—right before bedtime is usually best—to jot down three things that happened that day for which you are grateful. Anything that made you feel uplifted, that brought a smile to your face or your heart, or will contribute toward your future happiness, works.

After each situation or event for which you feel thankful, write down why this was good for you. Perhaps you received an e-mail from an old school friend who hadn’t been in touch for years, and this reminded you of the good times you had together. It forced you to realize that people think of you even though you’ve had no contact with them, which must mean you’re a pretty special person.

Also, make a note of who, if anyone, played a role in what you’ve recalled for the day and how that person had an impact on your life.

None of this sounds hard, right? Given the choice between this exercise and 50 sit-ups plus 25 push-ups, you’re much more inclined to pick up a pen, aren’t you?

The gratitude journal makes you look at life in a positive, concrete way, reminding you of its interconnectedness in a fast-paced, impersonal world and how much others add to the quality of your life. It forces you to focus on what went right instead of the inevitable things that went wrong. And it enhances your self-esteem.

See the patterns.

Over time, you’ll notice a consistency within the list of items you’re grateful for. Many entries will underscore the importance of people in your life. Others will highlight meaningful experiences. Still other items will be things that began with you, things you created that you can point to with pride and say, I made that happen. It’s called eudaemonia, the happiness or fulfillment that comes from the action itself, not the result of it. Any other benefits that come along—someone is grateful, your project is a

success—are icing on the cake.

Catch the boomerang.

Gratitude, when expressed to others, almost always comes back around. People who feel appreciated are more willing to make an effort for those who make them feel valued. In one study, waitresses who simply wrote “thank you” on the check before handing it to their customers received, on average, 11 percent more in tips than those who didn’t. Waitresses who wrote a message about an upcoming dinner special on the checks also received higher tips—on average, 17 to 20 percent higher. In a world where personal connections seem increasingly limited, and sometimes stressful when they do occur, gratitude resonates.

Seize the moment.

Look around you: What’s right with your world? If you have a hobby, practice it. If you don’t, find one. Reach out to others; share something. A small gesture toward another individual costs you little but can bring many benefits. All these actions increase your opportunities to feel grateful.

Says Barbara Fredrickson, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina, “Gratitude has the potential to change everything from its ordinary state to being a gift.”

Now, that’s saying a lot.

Grace Notes

The etymology of the word *gratitude* helps explain it. *Gratitude* originates from the Latin word *gratus*—meaning “thankful, pleasing”—which has its roots in *gratia*, which means “favor, pleasing quality or goodwill.” Derivatives of the Latin root can be found in many other languages. In Lithuanian, *gririu* means “to praise or celebrate.” In the 13th century, the short prayer before a meal came to be called *grace*. *And in Greek, the word for “grace” is charis—the root of the word charisma.*

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