

WHY THANK YOU

BEING GRATEFUL IS ABOUT MORE THAN THE OCCASIONAL THANKS. IT'S AN ATTITUDE THAT HELPS YOU FEEL CONTENTED IN EVEN THE MOST CHALLENGING OF TIMES

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Besides the thanks that you deliver automatically when someone holds the door open for you or hands you a cup of tea, when did you last say “thank you” in a meaningful way? When did you last let appreciation for life make you feel happier?

While we might accept that, generally speaking, we have a lot to be thankful for, just feeling it isn't the same as really embracing it as an attitude. Dr Lauren Tober, psychologist and founder of Capturing Gratitude, a global photographic project, says, “Being thankful orients our hearts and minds to what's already good, rather than focusing on what's wrong.” By cultivating a grateful attitude we can change how we feel about many aspects of our lives.

THE POWER OF THANKS

Gratitude isn't an airy-fairy idea or a new trend. Buddha referred to it as “gladdening of the heart”. Roman philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero considered gratitude to be the parent of all virtues. Rigorous scientific studies have tested the effects of gratitude and prove what extraordinary benefits (when practised deliberately) it has. Robert Emmons at the University of California is a leading authority on gratitude. In a study conducted with Mike McCullough of the University of Miami, he found where participants were asked to write three things they were thankful for each day, the benefits were noticeable after just three weeks.

Participants felt more joyful, enthusiastic, interested, attentive, energetic, excited, determined, stronger, compassionate and generous.

At this time of year gratitude is a useful tool for helping us to keep calm and to rein in perfectionist tendencies (and our spending) when we get bogged down in creating the Pinterest-perfect festive season. Dr Mark Williamson, director of Action for Happiness, says, “When we're grateful, we take more notice of the people and activities that matter. At Christmas, this can help us to look beyond the consumption, materialism and busyness, and reconnect with what's important in life.” Move your attention from the ‘stuff’ of Christmas to what's really important and joy-giving – being with friends and family, having a break from routine and a chance to recharge yourself.

LIVING FOR NOW

With our lives increasingly lived out on social media we're in need of gratitude and its benefits more than ever. Comparisonitis – comparing yourself to those around you, as well as to strangers on the internet – erodes how satisfied you feel. Gratitude counteracts this negativity by reminding you of all the things that are already good about yourself and your life, from the friends you have, to the positive feedback you got at work, to having a warm, safe space to call home.

Being thankful for your life doesn't mean being complacent. A drive to try new things and to pursue goals is important for self-development, but believing



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that you'll be happier when (...you have more friends, a new job, or move house) leads to feelings not just of dissatisfaction but even resentment for the life you have. When you do reach that next target, you feel an initial bump in your happiness then come back down to your original baseline. Very quickly you look ahead to what will make you happy next. Dr Robert Holden, author of *Happiness Now!*, calls this pursuit “destination addiction” because you think that success, happiness and a better life are around the next corner. And then the next corner. Taking notice of what's good in your life *right now* helps lessen the need to be constantly striving for the next target.

SEEING THE BRIGHT SIDE

Gratitude can even help you to find a positive in life's trying moments. Dr Lauren Tober says, “When I'm faced with everyday challenges, I reflect on what I'm grateful for, both in relation to the challenge, but also in general. For example, I had flu recently, and even though it disrupted my carefully laid plans, I felt

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grateful for the time to rest and for my family and friends who supported me to do so.”

Practising gratitude helps in our relationships, too. Janice Kaplan, author of *The Gratitude Diaries*, began her year of grateful living by focusing on her marriage: “I said ‘thank you’ more, I focused on positives instead of problems. The change in our relationship was one of the most dramatic transformations that occurred during the year.”

With world leaders running amok and the political world going from one upheaval to the next, gratitude not only allows us to value the privileges we enjoy, but also spurs us into action to address and challenge the injustices we see in the world around us. In his study, Robert Emmons found that people practising gratitude daily were more compassionate and generous, they were more likely to engage with and offer support to others. Gratitude is powerful stuff. 🙏

HOW TO BE GRATEFUL

As gratitude has become more mainstream, the ways to practise it have become more varied. Writing down gratitudes is crucial, as the act of putting pen to paper fixes the gratitude more firmly in your long-term memory rather than simply thinking or saying it, and regular practice is where the benefits lie.

TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Write in a journal If you like any excuse for new stationery there are a several gratitude journals. Try the Year Long Gratitude Journal (thegreengables.co.uk), The Daily Greatness Journal (dailygreatness.co.uk), a planner that helps you to organise your entire life and features gratitude prompts. Or *Be Great Be Grateful*, by Anna Murray and Grace Winteringham of design studio, Patterntivity, is a journal which encourages you to see the unseen in everyday life.

Send a letter Robert Emmons found that writing letters expressing how thankful you are had a strong positive impact not only on the writer but also the person receiving the letter.

The Personalised Letters of Gratitude to Mum envelope book (andsotheymade.co.uk) makes a great gift. Little Notes of Gratitude Notecard Set (wearebreadandjam.co.uk) contains appreciative messages as well as space to add your own.

Do it digitally What's Good is a daily gratitude app that tracks your happiness over time and has a calming breath animation. Then there's the Happijar app, a virtual jar where you store happy memories, ready to shake up, tip out and revisit on your phone, whenever you need a lift.

Take a snap If writing it down doesn't appeal, take pictures of things you're grateful for. If you'd like to share, there are several gratitude hashtags [#capturinggratitude](https://twitter.com/capturinggratitude) [#thisjoyfulmoment](https://twitter.com/thisjoyfulmoment), [#thehappynow](https://twitter.com/thehappynow) and [#savouringhappiness](https://twitter.com/savouringhappiness).

