

PRACTICING GRATITUDE



How often do you feel thankful for the good things in your life? Studies suggest that making a habit of noticing what's going well in your life could have health benefits.

Taking the time to feel gratitude may improve your emotional wellbeing by helping you cope with stress. Early research suggests that a daily practice of gratitude could affect the body, too. For example, one study found that gratitude was linked to fewer signs of heart disease.¹

The first step in any gratitude practice is to reflect on the good things that have happened in your life. These can be big or little things. It can be as simple as scoring a good parking space that day or enjoying a hot mug of coffee. Perhaps you feel grateful for a close friend's compassionate support.

Next, allow yourself a moment to enjoy that you had the positive experience, no matter what negatives

may exist in your life. Let positive feelings of gratitude bubble up.

"We encourage people to try practicing gratitude daily," advises Dr. Judith T. Moskowitz, a psychologist at Northwestern University. "You can try first thing in the morning or right before you fall asleep, whatever is best for you."

Moskowitz has been studying the impact of keeping a daily gratitude journal on stress relief and health. Practicing gratitude is part of a set of skills that her research team encourages people to practice. These skills have been shown to help some people increase their positive emotions. Her team is trying to better understand how a daily boost in positive

emotions can help people cope with stress and improve their mental and physical health.

"By practicing these skills, it will help you cope better with whatever you have to cope with," Moskowitz explains. "You don't have to be experiencing major life stress. It also works with the daily stress that we all deal with. Ultimately, it can help you be not just happier but also healthier."

While practicing gratitude seems to work for some people, it doesn't for everyone. That's why Moskowitz's research team teaches other skills, too. These include meditating and doing small acts of kindness.

Her team has been developing and testing these skills with people who have illnesses like advanced cancer, diabetes, HIV infection, and depression.^{2,3} She's also worked with people who care for others with serious illness.

When you make gratitude a regular habit, it can help you learn to recognize good things in your life despite the bad things that might be happening. Moskowitz says that when you're under stress, you might not notice all the moments of positive emotion that you experience. With her research program, she's trying to help people become more aware of those moments of positive feelings.

"Put some effort into experiencing gratitude on a daily basis and see how it goes," Moskowitz advises. "It might just surprise you that—despite how bad things are—there are things you feel grateful for alongside it." Feeling grateful may help improve both your mind and your body.

GRATITUDE TIPS

Create positive emotions by being thankful every day:

- » **Take a moment.** Think about the positive things that happened during the day.
- » **Journal.** Make a habit of writing down things you're grateful for. Try listing several things.
- » **Savor your experiences.** Try to notice positive moments as they are happening.
- » **Relive the good times.** Relive positive moments later by thinking about them or sharing them with others.
- » **Write to someone.** Write a letter to someone you feel thankful toward. You don't have to send it.
- » **Make a visit.** Tell someone you're grateful for them in person.

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