

Practices to Cultivate Gratitude

THREE GOOD THINGS

This first gratitude practice is one of my favorite skills. It's so simple, yet powerful...*if* we stick with it, that is. But before telling you how to do it, let me first tell you how *not* to do it—again, something I learned the hard way. When I was a graduate student in clinical psychology, I was fascinated by the up-and-coming field of positive psychology. The problem was that there wasn't a whole lot out there on the topic at that time—no classes I could take, no teachers or mentors to guide me, just a few books and studies that were starting to emerge. I did a lot of reading on the side, trying to learn all I could about this new science of happiness. Before long, I was eager to share what I'd been learning with the clients I was treating as an extern at the local VA medical center.

Unfortunately, one of my Achilles' heels in life has always been my attention to detail; rather, my *lack* of attention to detail. (I like to say that I'm more of a big picture guy.) While I'd been reading up on the impressive research on gratitude, I hadn't paid as much attention to the fine print. While working with one of my clients who'd been struggling with depression for some time, I thought to myself, *Why not try using some of this gratitude stuff I've been reading about?* So I pitched it to my client: "How about, at the end of each day for the next week, you write down three things you're thankful for? And then we can meet again in a week and see how you're feeling."

My client seemed skeptical but was at least open to the idea, and he agreed to give it a try. Better yet, he showed up the next week and had completed the assignment. I felt my optimism growing—perhaps little old me, a lowly psychologist-in-training, had figured out something to help this man overcome his decades-long depression! But those hopes were quickly dashed when he proceeded to read me his gratitude list from the past week.

"Okay," he began. "Day 1: I'm grateful for my wife, my dog, and my kid."

I nodded along, waiting for him to continue.

“Day 2: I’m grateful for my wife, my dog, and my kid. Day 3: My wife really ticked me off, so she’s off the list. Day 4: We made up, so she’s back on the list. So I was again grateful for my wife, my dog, and my kid.”

Now, you don’t need to be an expert on gratitude or positive psychology to have a good sense that this exercise didn’t do a whole lot to help my client at the time. But a few minor tweaks can make a huge difference in allowing this exercise to spark a change. What we do in “Three Good Things” may be seemingly simple on the surface, but it can be nothing short of life-changing if we stick with it. The instructions are simple:

- Each day, write down three good things that happened *that day* (starting from the time you wake up to the time you do the exercise), people you love, or things you are thankful for.
- Take a moment to reflect on *why* those good things happened. For example, was it simply being in the right place at the right time, something you contributed to, or due to the generosity of another person?
- For the next 21 days, *never* repeat an item on your list.

When you commit to this practice, you’ll probably find that the first few days come pretty easily. And yes, you *can* say your wife, your dog, and your kid on day 1 if you really want to. However, as you continue, you’ll start to notice things changing. While it might be straightforward on day 1, or day 3, or even day 5, think about what happens when you get to day 10, day 15, or day 21. Suddenly, it’s no longer such a simple practice when you’re having to come up with good thing #30, #45, or #63. At this point, the practice forces you to seek out things you’re thankful for and subtly encourages you to be constantly on the lookout for good things in your life. In other words, it’s the complete opposite of how the brain tends to focus on the negative, especially when you’re depressed or anxious.

Remember, the good things on your list don’t have to be earth-shattering; they can be the small things we often overlook or are too busy to pause and appreciate. Whether it’s waking up on a soft bed, having a coworker check in

on you, experiencing a moment of connection with a loved one, or anything else, remember that it's not about coming up with seemingly bigger and better things to put on your list—in fact, your “good things” will likely become the *smaller* moments of your everyday life as the exercise goes on. Regardless of what you're grateful for, the overall goal is to notice the good that's around you most of the time.

GRATITUDE FOR YOUR BODY

As I type this sentence, I'm fighting a head cold, complete with a cough and runny nose. But soon, hopefully in a few days, I'll feel like myself again. At this very moment, my immune system is kicking into gear—white blood cells are rushing in to help, cytokines are sounding the alarm, the whole works. While the unpleasant cough and the low-grade fever certainly aren't fun, they are signs that my body is trying to fight this illness. Before I know it, it'll be like the cold never happened.

It's easy to get frustrated with our bodies sometimes, particularly as we age. We struggle with various aches and pains, and we can't always do the things we once could do. For some of us, there are things we wish were different about our bodies, and we can fall into a bit of a love/hate relationship with it. But pausing to take stock of all that's required of our body each and every moment of the day can change our perspective a bit. Right now, as you're reading this, you have millions of processes occurring simultaneously in your body, communicating seamlessly like some incredible supercomputer. Your heart beats over 100,000 times in a single day, and your body produces 20 million new cells each second. In all the moments of life, including the difficult ones, your body is working hard to keep you going. Most of the time, it's working so hard that we don't even realize that it's doing any work. Remembering this allows you to feel a deep sense of gratitude for what you have in your imperfect yet amazing human body.



Practices to Cultivate Awe and Wonder

AWE RIGHT NOW

We spend so much of life stuck in our own heads and, as a result, miss out on so much. This tendency to be present in body but not in mind has a number of costs, including increased anxiety and depression. It also pulls us away from the opportunity to find awe in our everyday lives. When we think of awe, we tend to think of the big stuff, like visiting the Grand Canyon or gazing at the Mona Lisa. But opportunities to experience awe are all around us, from the beautiful trees in our neighborhood to the breathtaking architecture in our city to a gorgeous sunset framed in our window. Our challenge is simply to notice the beauty that's right in front of us.

Try setting aside a bit of time each day, even a few minutes, to more fully connect to the here and now while opening your heart and mind to awe. When your mind tries to pull you away, gently redirect your awareness to the present moment. Notice what you see, smell, touch, and hear and be alert to anything that surprises you or anything you would normally not notice. In addition, take a moment to find the beauty in your everyday surroundings—the colors in the sky above, the feeling of the sun on your skin, the beauty of a building in your neighborhood. These everyday things can be awe-inspiring if we only take the time to notice.

EMBRACE NATURE

More than two thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle observed that, “Every realm of nature is marvellous.” He wasn't alone in this sentiment. Over the years, countless philosophers, poets, scientists, and artists have reflected on the benefits of being in nature. In the modern era, perhaps no individual embodies this conviction more than the legendary naturalist John Muir, whose love of nature helped pave the way for future movements around advocacy for and preservation of our natural world.

Many of us have experienced the benefits of spending time in nature. Experiences such as a trip to the coast or a day hike in the woods help lower our stress, restore our sense of balance, and of course give us an opportunity to feel awe. Yet despite how important our connection to nature can be, many of us are becoming increasingly detached from the natural world. Of the 7.8 billion people on earth, more than half live in cities, and the percentage continues to climb each year. Surveys of people living in the United States have shown that we spend over 90 percent of our waking hours indoors. Our modern world of skyscrapers and concrete can often leave us disconnected from the healing powers of nature, particularly since we've spent the vast majority of our time as a species intimately connected with the natural world.

This shift has been particularly unfortunate when it comes to our ability to connect to moments of awe. Surveys have shown, for example, that nature is the most common response when people are asked about when they last felt a sense of awe.

While you can't necessarily drop everything to channel your inner John Muir and head off to Yosemite National Park, you can seek out opportunities to connect a bit more to the natural world around you. Maybe it's noticing a beautiful tree in your neighborhood or spending a bit of time in a nearby park. Perhaps it's taking the opportunity to observe a gorgeous sunset or making a day trip to a lake or beach somewhere. Whatever you choose, give yourself the gift of immersing yourself more in the natural world, and be open to the feelings of awe or wonder that emerge.



Practices to Cultivate Kindness

SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS

In our everyday lives, we perform acts of kindness toward others and receive acts of kindness in turn. Sometimes we may not even be aware that it's happening; nevertheless, these acts can have a powerful effect not only on the well-being of the person we're helping, but also on our own.

Without worrying about scale or scope, take some time in the coming days to consciously engage in five acts of kindness toward others. Examples can include donating blood, feeding a stranger's expired parking meter, or bringing coffee to work for a colleague.

Notice how it feels as you do it, observe what comes up for you, and make note of the afterglow—the feelings that stay with you after the act is complete. If it helps, write these observations down in a journal to better gauge how this practice impacted your mood and sense of self.

SHOW UP FOR OTHERS

When life gets hectic, it's easy to find ourselves sacrificing quality time with people we care about due to all the other demands on our time. Sometimes this means missing out on that visit with family, canceling lunch with a friend, or not being able to go to our kid's soccer game. The pressures of life are real, and sometimes there really isn't enough of us to go around. Still, there's no substitute for quality time with the people we love, and sometimes the best way we can show kindness toward someone we care about is simply by *being there* for them.

Try taking a moment to think about someone you care for deeply, but whom you've lost touch with. How might you show them that you care in a way that requires nothing more of you than your time? In the coming weeks, see if you can carve out an opportunity to show kindness by being there for someone you care about. Notice how it feels to really be present with them, and how it seems to affect them.

REFLECT ON KINDNESS

In addition to focusing on doing more, it's important to also acknowledge what we're doing to show up for the people in our lives. In fact, studies have shown that pausing to reflect on our own kindness can boost our mood, lower our stress, and enhance our feelings of self-worth.

Try to get in the habit of noticing and reflecting on the various ways in which you're there for people when they need you, whether it's strangers or the people you love. Carve out a bit of time each week to write down five examples of kindness you've practiced over the past week. For each one you come up with, take a moment to visualize what you did, how it felt, and how it was received by the other person. Notice how taking the time to do this changes how you feel and how you view yourself.

KEEP A KINDNESS JOURNAL

While it's easy to focus on the negatives in our lives, it's important that we make room for the good stuff, too. In the coming week, try journaling about any acts of kindness that you witness, receive, or give. Whether it's a good deed, a word of support, or anything else you notice, take the time to write down and remember the kindness that surrounds you every day. Include the emotions or feelings that came about during each experience. Allow each instance to serve as a fresh recognition of the good that exists in the world and the best of humanity that's there even amid the struggles.

