



Neuro Wellness Spa's Guide to Gratitude

Learn more about how we're reimagining mental health care at NeuroWellnessSpa.com

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Gratitude & Mental Health

Logically speaking, we all have things to help us achieve a state of gratitude. Family. Friends. Love. Health Community. A roof over our heads. Common decency. Hope. Opportunity. Fun memories. Financial stability. Favorite places. Meaningful work. Days off work. The golden age of television. Books. Music. Ice cream. Weekends. A friendly exchange. Something good that happened today. Something bad that didn't happen today. A good cup of coffee.

You may not have everything you want, or even need. Things can always be better, but they can also be worse. Gratitude is a way for us to appreciate what we have in the here and now. A sense of gratitude helps protect us from thinking we can't feel happy or satisfied until every physical, emotional or material desire is met. Gratitude helps us focus on what we have instead of what we lack.

One-time events celebrating gratitude, like Thanksgiving, undeniably make us feel good. However, to really experience gratitude's mood-boosting benefits, thankfulness should be a consistent practice in our life.

Like any skill worth mastering, holding onto gratitude, especially during challenging times, takes practice. To get in better touch with gratitude, all you have to do is find some easy ways to count blessings regularly. It's about exercising your gratitude muscles through simple activities that cultivate and express thankfulness. Although it may feel contrived at first, a grateful mental state grows stronger with use and practice.

THE SCIENCE OF GRATITUDE

Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what you receive, whether tangible or intangible. Being grateful helps you connect to something larger than yourself—whether to other people, nature, or a higher power. There are two key components of practicing gratitude:

1. Affirming the good things you've received
2. Acknowledging the role other people play in providing goodness in your life

You can feel and express gratitude for the past by retrieving positive memories and being thankful for past blessings, for the present by not taking good fortune for granted as it comes, and for the future by maintaining a hopeful and optimistic attitude.

Regardless of your inherent or current level of gratitude practice, science shows gratitude is a quality that you can successfully cultivate. So why try? According to research, gratitude...

- Helps you feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve your physical health and deal with adversity
- Counteracts depression and suicidal thoughts while boosting self-esteem
- Positively changes your brain by boosting dopamine and serotonin, the neurotransmitters responsible for positive mood
- Helps form new relationships and strengthen existing ones. In romantic relationships, gratitude can help partners feel more satisfied with each other
- When expressed by managers and teachers, motivates employees and students to work harder

Science confirms we can train ourselves to experience thankfulness more often simply by paying attention to our lives differently. Attention is like a spotlight in the brain. Whatever we repeatedly attend to becomes stronger and brighter over time.

Here are some ways to cultivate gratitude on a regular basis:

Set Daily Gratitude Reminders

It can help to set reminders or prompts around gratitude. This can be as simple as setting the screensaver or passcode on your phone to be a reminder of gratitude. Perhaps your password is your child's birthday or the screensaver on your phone is a picture of you with a loved one. You can change these regularly to keep refreshing the reminder of some of the things you are grateful for.

You can also set alarms/reminders on your phone to pause and think of something you are grateful for at different times during the day. Mornings, in particular, can help set the tone of the entire day. You can even record your gratitude thoughts on a gratitude journaling app or notepad.

Make a Gratitude List or Jar

Take a couple of minutes in the morning or evening to start or add items to a list of things for which you're grateful. Lists can remind you to feel grateful for the small things you do every day.

Can you write down 20 things you are grateful for in life? 50 ? How about 100? If you need help finding things to be grateful for, think about what you may be taking for granted, like a hot shower, the house you live in, good friends, clean water, your pet, etc. Creating this list of blessings is a powerful exercise because as you write down all that you are grateful for, negative feelings dissolve as happier feelings arise.

If listing items is feeling stale, experiment with new and creative ways, like starting a gratitude jar to track your grateful moments. Any time you experience a poignant moment of gratitude, write it on a piece of paper

and put it in a jar. On New Year's Eve, your birthday, or any other annual occasion, empty the jar and review everything you wrote. When a good thing happens, you may even start to think, "That's one for the gratitude jar!" which can immediately make the moment more meaningful and keep you on the lookout for more.

Send a Thank You Note in Writing

You can make yourself happier and further your relationship with others by writing thank you letters, email or texts. Express your enjoyment spending time with another or your appreciation for a specific person in your life. Remind another why they are special to you and how worthwhile their presence is in the world.

Think of someone who makes your life great, someone without whom your life would be less fun or warm or wonderful. It might be a family member, someone at work, a friend, or someone else. Now draft a message, telling that person that you appreciate them and expressing why. Be specific. What do you value about them? How have they supported you?

Consider sending regular notes of gratitude on birthdays and anniversaries, or spontaneous notes the next time your partner, friend or family member does something you appreciate.

Research has shown that three months after writing a note of gratitude, gratitude writers showed greater activation in the medial prefrontal cortex compared to those who did not write letters of gratitude. This indicates that simply writing down expressions of gratitude may have lasting effects on the brain. Practicing gratitude may help train the brain to be more sensitive to the experience of gratitude down the line, and this contributes to improved mental health over time.

Acknowledge the Good in Others

If someone opens the door for you on your way into a coffee shop, there can be a natural reflex to say sorry and look down at the floor. Instead, try incorporating gratitude into these small and daily interactions. Rather than apologize, place the attention on the person extending themselves by saying ‘thank you’. Not only will this make you feel better, it will make the person in front of you feel good about what they’ve done and they’ll likely be encouraged to continue the behavior.

If saying thank you comes easily with co-workers or grocery store employees, how often do you express thanks to your family? It may be more of a stretch to say thank you to your spouse for cooking a lovely dinner or to your children for listening to something you told them to do. Try saying thank you for the little things and see the positive effect this gratitude has on your life and those around you.

The next time you see or talk to someone—a family member, colleague, a relative you see once a year, someone you’re meeting for the first time—set your intention to notice one thing about them you appreciate. Maybe it’s their enthusiasm, something they’re wearing, how they make you feel, their sense of humor, their fantastic art of ordering lunch, anything goes. When you begin your interaction by focusing on something you appreciate, not only do you feel better about your interaction, but you allow yourself and the other person to have a more human, open connection.

Find a Gratitude Buddy

Find someone to share your daily practice of gratitude with—your spouse, your child, or a friend. Set aside a few minutes a few times a week to share what you are grateful for.

There are many strategies that can help. Roses, Thorns & Buds (or RTB, among its devotees) is one way to bring gratitude to the dinner table. It's quite simple: Everyone takes turns sharing "roses," which are positive things and happy-making moments from their day; "thorns," which are the opposite of that; and "buds", which are something they're looking forward to and even anticipate will be a rose.

While reflecting on "thorns" doesn't necessarily increase gratitude—it's still useful from a family discussion, empathy and problem-solving perspective. And if you can fix a thorn, a rose may grow in that thorn's place.

There are many effective variations on this technique. If the metaphor is too flowery for you, pick another. Home runs, strikeouts and on deck? Highs, lows and ahas? The important thing is to connect with others to share your gratitude.

Express Self-Appreciation

One simple, fast and effective way to connect with yourself and tap into your inner strength is a body scan. Start at your feet and work your way up to the top of your head, paying attention to and acknowledging each part of your body. To turn this into a moment of gratitude, thank each part of your body as you notice it.

Before your morning walk or evening yoga class are great times to express self-appreciation and gratitude for the blessing of being able to be healthy and active.

It's important to remain mindful that gratitude doesn't become fuel for guilt. That can happen when your mind uses gratitude to minimize your

painful experiences by thinking, “I don’t have a right to be sad. I have so much to be grateful for. What’s wrong with me?”

The resulting guilt is unnecessary and undeserved. Gratitude doesn’t negate challenge or pain. You can be both hurting AND grateful. You can use gratitude as a lifeline to keep you from drowning in the negative mental habits that intensify your pain but not to eliminate pain completely.

For example: In this moment, I am anxious about some upcoming transitions AND I am grateful for my friends’ support.

Keep a Gratitude Journal

Keeping a gratitude journal is one of the most common ways people practice. Pick a time every day or every week to sit down and write about your blessings—reflect on what went well or what you are grateful for. Sometimes it helps to pick a number—such as three to five things—that you will identify each week. As you write, be specific and think about the sensations you felt when something good happened to you.

When you write about how grateful you are to others and how much other people have blessed your life, it might become considerably harder for you to ruminate on your negative experiences. As you write, here are eight important tips:

Be as specific as possible. Specificity is key to fostering gratitude. “I’m grateful that my co-workers brought me soup when I was sick on Tuesday” will be more effective than “I’m grateful for my co-workers.”

Go for depth over breadth. Elaborating in detail about a particular person or thing for which you’re grateful carries more benefits than a superficial list of many things.

Get personal. Focusing on people to whom you are grateful has more of an impact than focusing on things for which you are grateful.

Try subtraction, not just addition. Consider what your life would be like without certain people or things, rather than just tallying up all the good stuff. Be grateful for the negative outcomes you avoided, escaped, prevented, or turned into something positive—try not to take that good fortune for granted.

See good things as “gifts.” Thinking of the good things in your life as gifts guards against taking them for granted. Try to relish and savor the gifts you’ve received.

Savor surprises. Try to record events that were unexpected or surprising, as these tend to elicit stronger levels of gratitude.

Revise if you repeat. Writing about some of the same people and things is OK, but zero in on a different aspect in detail.

Write regularly. Whether you write every other day or once a week, commit to a regular time to journal, then honor that commitment.

Practice Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness helps you tune in to the present moment. It is possible that if you are a grateful person, you are more mindful of others’ gestures. The more often you tune into your awareness, the greater the chances you will notice all the good that surrounds you, which can then bring satisfaction and happiness.

The ability to pick up on the beauty of nature, kindness from one another and the little joys in life requires being cognizant of yourself and your surroundings. Often, the key to gratitude is simply noticing.

Too often, people focus gratitude on material things associated with status, like a fancy car or piece of clothing. Being glad you have those items isn't necessarily a bad thing, but materialism has been linked to lower life satisfaction and a diminished ability to actually feel grateful. To keep focused on the simplest yet profoundly valuable aspects of our lives, consider practicing mindfulness by engaging your five senses.

Slow down and really notice your senses—the ability to touch, see, smell, taste, and hear. When you practice mindfulness, you gain an appreciation of what it means to be human and of what an incredible miracle it is to be alive. Seen through the lens of gratitude, the human body is not only a miraculous construction, but also a gift.

Look down, look up, and from side to side. Appreciate how much effort must have gone into anything at all you own or use. Someone conceived of the need and many people worked on the details of the design. Much care even went into the packaging to deliver your item to you safely. What do you feel when you let yourself be grateful that all that talent went into making your life a little easier?

Meditate

Meditation involves focusing on the present moment without judgment. Although people often focus on a word or phrase (such as "peace"), it is also possible to focus on what you're grateful for (the warmth of the sun, a pleasant sound, etc.). Our minds are so easily pulled to busyness. Bring particular attention to feeling your breath, or something in your body, as you orient your attention toward gratitude.

Meditate on your relationships with parents, friends, siblings, work associates, children, and partners using these three questions:

1. “What have I received from _____?”
2. “What have given to _____?”
3. “What troubles and difficulties have I caused _____?”

In almost all levels of existence, there are opportunities to be optimistic about the present and the future. Having the freedom to pursue your goals and dreams is something to be grateful for and proud of. If you look deeper, you'll see that you now have things you hoped for in the past.

Pray

People who are religious can use prayer to cultivate gratitude. Establish a regular practice in which you remind yourself of the gifts, grace, benefits and good things you enjoy. Recalling moments of gratitude associated with ordinary events, your personal attributes, or valued people in your life gives you the potential to interweave a sustainable theme of gratefulness into your life.

Go for a Nature Walk

Smell the roses. Figuratively and literally, stop and appreciate the nature around you. Too often, technology can be all consuming – ipads, video games, TV, and computers. Putting technology aside to notice the beauty of nature by going for a walk, a hike or even a drive is good for the soul. The ocean, trees, flowers, and animals can all have a calming effect and help you feel connected to something bigger than yourself.

Heading outside for a walk through nature is a great way to get in touch with your sense of gratitude. The sun, trees, plants, and animals are all

reminders of how big and beautiful the world is. Go for a nature walk to foster your sense of thankfulness and boost your mental health.

As you walk or sit in nature, tune into your senses. Can you notice any aromas? What about that glorious or interesting or subtle smell is making you smile? It could be gratitude for something familiar: a scent that brings comfort, upliftment; or maybe it's something you've never smelled before, and it just piques your curiosity, ignites you, enlivens you.

Allowing the world of smell to gently recede into the background, on an in-breath, shift your attention to your ears and the world of sound. Maybe notice what it feels like to really listen. How many sounds can you notice? Can you feel grateful that you're able to experience sound, if you are? What can you notice about these sounds—far away? close? Perhaps you could play a piece of music that brings you joy, and have gratitude that it's so available? Or maybe it's the sound of children laughing, the sound of a loved one breathing, or the sound of your own heart beating.

Use Gratitude as an Antidote

In the world of habits, there's a treatment approach called Habit Reversal Training. A key component of HRT is the use of a competing response, which is an action that is incompatible with the habit you are trying to break. For example, if you're trying to break a nail biting habit, you might clasp your hands as a competing response when you feel the urge to bite. It's really difficult to clasp your hands AND bite your nails at the same time. Consistently using a competing response trains your body to replace the undesired habit with the new one.

Rumination, worry, complaining, and negativity are mental habits, and ones with far worse consequences than nail biting. These mental habits involve stewing on negative thoughts, indulging them in a repeating and amplifying loop with the effect of dragging down your mood and pulling

you out of the present moment.

Try using gratitude as a competing response—an antidote—for these mental habits. It's surprisingly difficult to tap into gratitude—really tap into it—and also get stuck in negativity.

When something stresses you out—too much traffic, an annoying colleague, etc—use it as a reminder to practice gratitude. You don't have to be grateful for whatever is stressing you out. But use it as a nudge to pause, take a breath, and think of something, however small, that you are grateful for in that moment. When you do this, you prevent your brain from going into a negativity spiral, where one annoying thought brings on another, and another.

When you find yourself getting wrapped up in those negative thoughts or starting down a spiral, challenge your mind to find something in that moment to be grateful for. In doing so, you're combating the negative content of your thoughts AND bringing your mind into the present.

Just be sure you don't go through the motions, though. You have to try to really get in touch with a sense of appreciation, gratitude, or beauty in the here and now. The goal is to truly activate grateful feelings to help buoy you against the negativity and to help keep you grounded in the present moment.