

# HOW GRATITUDE CHANGES YOUR BRAIN

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Discover The Many Benefits Of  
Gratitude And Boost Your Wellness

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# Introduction

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There is a lot of talk these days about how gratitude is good for your mindset and your happiness, and there is plenty of evidence to support these claims. But what you may not know is that actively appreciating your life and the positive aspects of it can change your brain and even improve other aspects of your health, including making your heart healthier. That's right! What you think can influence your body!

If you are on the fence about whether all this gratitude stuff is just a way to sell some notebooks, then you definitely need to keep reading.

Scientists, researchers, and mental health professionals have all be asking some really interesting questions about gratitude's effects on our minds and bodies, and this guide will share with you all the latest evidence that says being grateful is, in fact, great for your health.

# What Is Gratitude

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Understanding what exactly is meant by gratitude is necessary if you want to enjoy the full benefits that this practice can offer to your life. To have gratitude, you must first appreciate something, which requires that you recognize that it is valuable to you in some way.

The second part of gratitude is that we can accept that these things are given freely to us, by others, by the world, and by ourselves. Being grateful goes beyond just saying “thanks” for something. It is a reflection on how this blessing enhances your life, and that you accept its gift without reservation.

Gratitude is not just an emotion that we feel. It is an act, one that must be done intentionally, to recognize the positive aspects of our lives, the things that bring us joy or make our lives complete. It is an attitude or disposition, and it is something you must purposefully do to get the most benefit.

When you practice gratitude, it starts a virtuous cycle in your mind that influences how you think and see the world. You focus on the positive things in your life, and then you notice there are more positive things than you previously realized. Then, you become more grateful for these, and you see more for which you have appreciation. When you practice gratitude, your brain releases hormones that encourage this cycle to continue, as well.

# How Gratitude Changes Your Brain And Affects Your Health

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While it is true that gratitude can improve your mindset and help you to be happier, it also can enhance your physical health and actually changes how your brain works. Recent research has explored how practicing gratitude influences brain function, and we are learning a lot about how this type of positive attitude and outlook can change how your brain works. Here are some of the many influences that gratitude has on your mind.

## Activates Reward Pathways

Using an fMRI to measure participants' brain activity while they were experiencing different emotions, researchers in 2008 discovered that those who were feeling appreciative or grateful had increased activity in their hypothalamus and the other parts of the brain's reward pathways (X). These areas of the brain are responsible for releasing "feel good" neurotransmitters, like serotonin and dopamine. When you feel grateful, you experience synchronized activation of many parts of your brain, giving you positive effects.

The following year, researchers explored how gratitude influences the hypothalamus again, since this area of the brain controls many essential body functions necessary for good health, including sleep, eating, and drinking (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3010965/>). The hypothalamus impacts your stress levels and metabolic rate, which can control your weight and overall health, as well.

When you experience gratitude, this has a positive effect on this region of the brain, indicating that regular practice of this emotion can help to regulate many behaviors and functions that contribute to your health and well-being.

The significance of gratitude on the hypothalamus and reward pathways cannot be overlooked. When your brain releases dopamine, you feel good. It is something you want to do again. Dopamine also plays a significant role in initiating action, making it more likely that you will

repeat the positive behaviors. This can help you engage in many healthy activities that enhance your physical and mental health.

## **Improves Mental Strength**

Keeping a daily gratitude journal or regularly thinking about your appreciation can help to make you more determined and focused on your goals. In 2003, researchers from UC Berkeley examined the effects of daily gratitude journaling on psychological and physical well-being.

Participants were divided into groups, and while one kept a gratitude journal, the other wrote instead about how their lives were better than others or about the hassles they experienced each day. Compared to the other groups, the gratitude group tested higher on attention, enthusiasm, energy, and determination, all of which are necessary for overcoming obstacles and remaining resilient in the face of adversity.

This study also highlighted the need for gratitude to come from a genuine appreciation for your own gifts and blessings rather than a simple comparison to others' lives or a realization that you have it better than others. Gratitude is about acknowledging and enjoying the positive aspects of your life and situation, appreciating what you have.

Learning to focus on your gratitude can help see you through very troublesome times, as well. Those who experience tragic events, such as a shooting or serve during wartime are more likely to be more positive and to overcome post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than those who dwell on the negative.

## Gratitude Can Change Your Behaviors

This same group of researchers also examined older adults to determine if gratitude practice was effective with all age ranges. In this study, participants were asked to keep weekly gratitude journals, and they were measured to determine their optimism as well as the effect on their behavior (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14769085>).

Not only did writing about their gratitude help them to feel more positive, but the participants also reported exercising more regularly and had fewer physical ailments, as well. One of the benefits of being grateful is that you appreciate your life more and want to enjoy it to its fullest, which can often lead to engaging in behaviors that allow you to live longer and be healthier.

In a study from earlier this year, researchers examined the effects of gratitude on motivation to eat more healthfully among participants

(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103117308569>). When the subjects engaged in some type of gratitude activity every day, they were much more likely to abstain from unhealthy eating habits and to improve their overall eating behaviors over time. This study and others suggest that mindset is a strong predictor of eating patterns and that changing your thinking is the best way to alter your behaviors.

Giving thanks and being appreciative can also help you develop other, positive and prosocial behaviors, as well. In 2010, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania explored how expressing gratitude influences other behaviors

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20515249>).

They found that, when people are thanked for their efforts, they are much more likely to help not only the person who thanked them but also other people. These effects are believed to be the result of higher levels of self-efficacy, self-worth, and agency that people feel when others recognize their efforts.



## Reduce Mental Health Symptoms

When you have depression or anxiety, one common symptom is disrupted sleep. Researchers in China wanted to explore the effect of gratitude on sleep quality among those who suffered from depression and anxiety (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22412082>).

What they found was that those with higher levels of gratitude also slept better while also reporting reductions in feelings of depression and anxiety. The researchers wondered if being grateful or the improved sleep improved the mental state because these results were striking in their outcomes.

After further analysis, the researchers concluded that just the act of practicing gratitude was enough to improve depression scores, regardless of how much sleep the participants experienced.

There was less effect on anxiety when controlling for sleep, which indicates that gratitude can help you sleep better, which then helps with anxiety, but it had little direct influence on this mental health symptom. For both groups, the fact that gratitude improved sleep quality is a significant outcome, though.

The connection between gratitude and sleep has been explored in numerous scientific studies, and the influence that sleep has on mental health should not be ignored. Getting enough sleep is highly correlated to pain, stress, and your immune system as well as your overall mental health, happiness, and well-being.

## Gratitude Makes You Happier

Numerous studies have confirmed that practicing regular gratitude exercises can help you feel more optimistic and happier. In 2005, researchers noted that keeping a gratitude journal was helping in lowering depression (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16045394>), and many other studies show similar results on those with and without a history of mental health disorders

or symptoms (<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/pdfs/GratitudePDFs/2Wood-GratitudeWell-BeingReview.pdf>).

Researchers have found that gratitude activities can bolster the results of traditional psychotherapy or other mental health interventions, as well. A 2018 study placed participants receiving counseling into one of three groups (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10503307.2016.1169332?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=tpsr20>).

One group just received counseling, one was asked to write about their stressful experiences, and one was asked to write letters of gratitude. The group that expressed their gratitude had higher levels of happiness, were more likely to be more positive, and have significant positive changes in their behavior. This group was better equipped to handle negative emotions, such as guilt while behaving in ways that showed kindness, empathy, and helpfulness.

When you express gratitude to others for the help you receive, you are perceived as friendlier and kinder, which means that people are more likely to be nicer to you and to help you in the future. And when you see acts by others as generous and kind, instead of viewing them with skepticism, you realize that you are worthy of such acts of kindness, helping you to develop your sense of self-esteem, another critical component of happiness.

## Being Grateful Guides Your Morals and Values

There are many religions that place a high value on gratitude, and we know from many research studies that being grateful is correlated with improved happiness, better relationships, and improved mental health.

Researchers at the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles wanted to examine the influence of gratitude on the areas of the brain associated with moral cognition and value judgment, so they used fMRI to view participants brain activity during an induced gratitude activity (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4588123/>).

Participants were told stories of survival from victims of the Holocaust, including ways that other people helped them, and they were then asked to place themselves in this context and imagine how they would feel if they had received such gifts or assistance.

They rated their feelings of gratitude. All of this occurred while the fMRI was recording brain activity. When they felt gratitude, the medial prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex were activated, and these are areas of the brain strongly associated with morals and values.

## **Gratitude Makes You Less Materialistic**

A study from 2018 explored the connection between gratitude and materialism, which is becoming a more prevalent concern among adolescents and younger consumers (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2018.1497688?journalCode=rpos20>)

. Researchers explored the connection between materialism and gratefulness in two different ways.

First, they examined survey data that indicated that those children and adolescents who were more grateful in their disposition were less materialistic, which lead to further questions about this mechanism. So, they then examined experimental data that showed that increasing gratitude through journaling significantly reduced materialism among participants. Participants who regularly reflected on their gratitude were more generous to others, too.

## **Focus Less on Negative Emotions**

Being grateful does not just help you focus more on the positive aspects of your life. It also can help you to focus less on the negative things, too. It turns out that, while being more positive is good, being less negative is better. And those who regularly express gratitude are more likely to have more positive things to say as well as fewer negative things, which equates to more happiness over time.

Your brain has difficulty focusing on both positive and negative things at the same time, so when you make the effort to fill your thoughts with gratitude, it uses up the mental energy you would normally use to think about less positive things that are happening in your life.

## Strengthens Your Relationships

There are many ways that practicing gratitude can improve your connections with others. When you willingly show your appreciation to others, you are more likely to make new friends and to retain older friendships, as well. In a recent study published in *Emotion*, researchers studied how giving thank-you notes influenced relationships

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25111881>). They discovered that expressing gratitude to colleagues or people you have previously not know well makes it much more likely that you will establish a stronger bond with that person and develop a friendship. Being grateful, then, can help you develop new relationships.

And in existing relationships, gratitude can help to strengthen bonds and increase the positive feelings others have toward you. When you tell or show others that you appreciate them, they are much more likely to communicate honestly with you and to express relationship concerns when they arise, allowing you to find solutions to problems before they become larger issues that cannot be resolved. Spouses who show gratitude toward one another, then, are more likely to communicate about their needs and work through issues more readily, leading to longer-lasting ties (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21401225>).

Gratitude can even help you feel and behave more positively toward others. When you are more grateful you are less likely to feel empathy for others, and you are less likely to retaliate against people or to act aggressively

(<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1948550611416675>). Gratitude, it seems, creates more sensitivity for the struggles of other people, which can help you be a better friend, colleague, or partner.

## Increase Likelihood Of Success

When you regularly practice gratitude, your mind believes that you are capable of accomplishing goals and achieving your dreams. In fact, those who exercise gratitude regularly are more likely to achieve goals, make progress on a regular basis to attaining milestones, or to set loftier goals for themselves.

When you focus on the positive aspects of your life, this helps you see more possibilities and paths toward achievement than when you focus on the negative aspects instead.

Focusing on gratitude helps to keep anxiety and worry at bay, which can help you stay more focused on your present situation. When you are worried about the future or dwelling on the past, you are much more likely to be distracted and use your mental resources in unproductive ways, but gratitude allows you to remain focused on the future, which in turn can lead to more productivity. Focusing on the positive leaves you with the mental capacity to attend to your goals and focus on problem-solving, which helps you achieve more, too.

# Other Health And Wellness Benefits Of Gratitude

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Expressing gratitude and appreciation does not just change your brain. It can even have a lasting impact on the rest of your body, too, helping you to be healthier and stronger. Here's how.

## Gratitude Can Help You Reduce Stress

Not only is gratitude good for your brain, but it also helps improve the health of your heart and overall nervous system. Stress can have severe effects on the body, including raising blood pressure, causing hormonal imbalances, disrupting sleep, and leading to unhealthy behaviors that lead to weight gain. Helping your body to lower stress can have a positive influence on all these factors.

Research in 1998 showed that gratitude was shown to decrease cortisol levels, which is the most common stress hormone (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9737736>). This lowered hormone level led to improvements in heart rate variability among participants, as well.

## Being Grateful Can Improve Your Heart

When considering the biological effects of stress and depression, some researchers have sought to understand if gratitude could influence the body as well as the mind. In 2017, researchers from Boston examined how appreciation and other psychological constructs affect heart markers like inflammation, endothelial function, and myocardial strain (<https://insights.ovid.com/pubmed?pmid=27749683>). The 164 participants were measured for physical signs of heart diseases and function as well as for gratitude, optimism, depression, and anxiety. Those with higher indications of gratitude also had lower heart-related symptoms and markers, and the positive psychological constructs were also correlated to improved endothelial function. Those with more depressive symptoms had more myocardial strain and inflammation as well.

## Gratitude Creates Vitality and Energy

As you release stress, get better sleep, and feel more optimistic, you will likely also experience an increase in your energy levels over time. Improved sleep leads to a healthier and strong immune system, which provides more vitality. And when your heart is working better, you will feel more energetic, too.

Plus, being positive and optimistic gives you hope for the future, which provides motivation for accomplishing goals and working hard. When you think good things will or can happen, you are more likely to engage in challenging tasks or take risks, which can be exciting, too.

# How to Practice Gratitude

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Learning to be grateful requires regular practice. Your brain is very adaptable, and it gets used to certain things easily, which means that you can quickly start taking certain things for granted in your life.

For example, we may learn to appreciate modern conveniences like running water and electricity during a natural disaster, but we soon begin forgetting this gratitude when normality is restored. So, it takes consistent effort to remain focused on the positive aspects of your life and to stay grateful for what you have.

Learning to be more grateful takes practice, just like developing any other skill. It is not enough to do it once or twice a year. It is something that should be part of a regular routine, and it does not take much effort to build this into your life. Here are just a few simple ways that you can practice gratitude in your life.

- Keep a gratitude journal and make a new entry each day. Take just five minutes to contemplate what you are grateful for today and write it down.
- Tell someone you know or work with how much you appreciate them.
- Meditate for five minutes and think about the positive aspects of your current life.
- Write a thank-you note for something you appreciate in your life. It does not even matter if you send it. The act of writing it will have the same benefit for you.
- Keep a gratitude list and add to it every day.
- Look at yourself in the mirror and tell yourself what you love most about you.
- When something goes wrong in your life, list a few good things that came from this occurrence.
- Use an object, just as a rock or small talisman to remind you to be grateful. Every time you see it, spend just a moment thinking of all the things for which you are appreciative in your life.



One of the easiest ways that many people start in their gratitude practice is to write in a gratitude journal. This activity takes just a few minutes and is best done at the start or end of each day. Sit in a quiet place, clear your mind of worries and negative thoughts, and reflect on what you are most grateful for about yourself and your life.

Write a few paragraphs about your gratitude, being sure to focus on why these things are important to you, as well. Keeping a daily gratitude journal is a fantastic way to reflect, and it gives you something to look back on when you are going through harder times.

When it comes to gratitude, effort matters more than perfection. Even just trying to think about what you are grateful for is beneficial to your health and well-being. The act of considering your appreciation releases the same hormones that make you feel happier. So, do not worry if you are getting it “right” or not. Just do it!

# Final Thoughts

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Gratitude is indeed an incredibly positive habit to learn and one that can help to change your life as well as your brain. Because it is a habit, not just an emotion, it does require regular practice to maintain, but once you learn how to focus on gratitude, you will notice improvements in many areas of your life.

It may seem hard sometimes to think about gratitude, especially when times are very tough. But, recognizing that you have many things for which to be grateful is possible, if you give it time and attention. Start small of think of all the things that others may take for granted, and you will soon see that you have much in your life to appreciate.

Practicing gratitude helps you be happier, healthier, and stronger over time. And once you start practicing, you will soon see that you may be grateful just for being able to contemplate and acknowledge your appreciation in life.