



Gratitude IS GOOD FOR YOU

Even when it's hard to be positive, being thankful is a great way to feel better

For many of us during lockdown, the highlight of our week was every Thursday, when we said thank you to our carers by stepping out of our front doors, smiling and clapping.

But gratitude isn't just about saying thank you to a particular person or group of people; it can encompass everything in our lives. 'Practising gratitude trains the mind to tune into the good things,' says psychologist Miriam Akhtar.

Gratitude is good for us, both emotionally and physically, she explains. 'It's associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, hope and forgiveness, and lower levels of anxiety and loneliness.'

In one study, participants were asked to write a few sentences each week. One group wrote about things they were grateful for, one group wrote about things that had annoyed them, and a third group wrote from a neutral point of view. After 10 weeks, the grateful group felt better about their lives and visited the doctor less than those who'd written negative things. Here are five ways to feel more grateful.

1 Harness the power of three

Have you ever spent ages worrying about one negative remark, while forgetting all the compliments you've received? Positive psychologists talk about a 'negativity bias', where negative thoughts are stronger than positive ones. A good way to change this is doing the 'three good things' exercise. Ask yourself every day: 'What's good in my life? What am I grateful for? What's going well?' Akhtar points out that in this tumultuous year, gratitude can be a powerful antidote: 'We've lost a lot, including our autonomy – and autonomy is one of the fundamental needs for wellbeing – but practising gratitude helps us notice what we still have.'

TRY IT 'Ask yourself the "three good things" questions at a set time every day or incorporate it into a routine, and it'll become a habit,' says Akhtar.

OUR EXPERTS



MIRIAM AKHTAR

is a psychologist. She is the author of *Positive Psychology for Overcoming Depression* (Watkins Publishing).



DEBORAH SMITH

is a psychologist, speaker and teacher of mindfulness meditation. She is the author of *Grow Your Own Happiness* (Aster).

2 REFRAME YOUR PAST

While you're thinking about what you're grateful for, it's natural for your thoughts to begin to wander to negative events or emotions. 'Rather than avoiding those things, it's best to acknowledge them, then refocus your attention on the good stuff in life,' says Akhtar. 'As the saying goes, what you focus on grows. The more you invest your time and effort in growing the positive, it feels like the negative emotions are starting to shrink.'

TRY IT Rather than labelling events in your past as 'good' or 'bad', try to reserve judgement and really reflect on those things. Sometimes, we realise that something we labelled bad at the time led to positive events later. You may have lost out on your 'dream job' or 'perfect house', but then found one that was much better suited to you down the line. The key to being positive is looking at things in a mindful way.

4 Pay it forward

Concentrating on everything you have to be grateful for might sound like you're being self-absorbed or complacent. But it can be a powerful way to connect to wider society. 'Being positive increases our resilience and also our ability to help others,' says psychologist Deborah Smith. 'It's like when the oxygen masks drop down in the aeroplane and you're told to put yours on first – if we are in a good place we can help others, but if we're worrying about others and feel anxious and depressed, we're all going down!'

Smith points out that gratitude is closely linked to reciprocity – when someone does something lovely for

3 Think visually

If you're more of a visual person, a gratitude board is a great idea.

Collect photos and cut pictures out of magazines, then stick them inside a large picture frame. Think about what you've been grateful for this year – whether it's your family, your home and garden, local beauty spots or hobbies you've enjoyed. You can stick anything on your board, from dried flowers to paintings by children and grandchildren. As Smith points out, 'A lot of social media this year has been people posting pictures of their daily walks and being grateful for nature. People are more aware of things they might have taken for granted before.'

TRY IT Make or buy a pinboard to be your gratitude board. For a quicker, more adaptable version, try fixing a whiteboard to the wall or using your fridge door. Simply attach pictures with magnets, and scribble on things that you're grateful for that day.

5 WRITE IT DOWN

Once you've got into the habit of thinking more positively, try writing a gratitude journal. Smith says, 'It's especially important to practise gratitude when we're all having a tough time and the news is bleak because it's really easy to get overwhelmed. So we need to compensate consciously for that and not be half-hearted about it.' Research suggests we should try to have at least three positive thoughts to outweigh every negative thought, and at the end of your day, write down a few things that you're grateful for. But Smith recommends you only write three to four times a week, rather than every night, as it won't have the same effect if it starts becoming a chore. Take the opportunity to look back at previous entries too.

TRY IT 'Don't allow yourself to repeat things in your journal,' says Smith. 'If you avoid repetition, you stretch your ability to see the more subtle things to be grateful for. That's when it goes onto a deeper level.'