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Thankful

For...

Shifting your mind-set to one of gratitude has the power to transform every aspect of your life.

by Stacy Baker

**GIVING THANKS ISN'T JUST FOR THANKSGIVING ANYMORE**—it's one of the trendiest and most effective ways to improve your health, your relationships and your outlook on life. Unlike some health fads, this one has roots in science and has been shown to actually change how our brains are wired.

"Gratitude enhances performance in every domain that's been examined—psychological, relational, emotional, physical," says Robert Emmons, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis and author of *The Little Book of Gratitude* (Gaia, 2016).

Stacy Chang, a Pilates teacher at Pilates on Purpose in Costa Mesa, CA, turned to a daily gratitude practice after she hit rock bottom following a number of life-changing upheavals: In the span of a week, she quit her job, broke up with her boyfriend and moved from Northern to Southern California. "I was devastated, heartbroken and terrified, as I was blind to what the future would look like with all these changes," recalls Chang, who's also a Reiki master.

Shortly after her move, her sister gave her Wayne Dyer's book, *Inspiration: Your Ultimate Calling* (Hay

House, 2007), which talked about starting a daily gratitude practice. So each morning, Chang started waking up and naming 10 things she was grateful for, a habit she continues today. "At first, I thought it was silly and would never work," she says. "But I started feeling the effects within a week. I began to see a lot of things change, especially inside me. I became aware of feelings such as deep compassion, love and a calm that soothed my soul. The negative mind shifted to seeing things in the light." She likens it to finally putting on a pair of glasses and beginning to see a positive world.

Now she still uses gratitude when experiencing flare-ups, blocks or physical pain. "I know that even pain can be transformed," she says. "I've experienced excruciating knee pain that has been transmuted into complete blissful energy. The mind is so powerful and capable of so much more than we can fathom."

"Gratitude is medicine! It's like fertilizer for the mind, spreading connections and improving brain function in nearly every realm of experience," says Dr. Emmons. He says that's because the thoughts that flow through our minds sculpt our



**"Gratitude is medicine! It's like fertilizer for the mind, spreading connections and improving brain function in nearly every realm of experience,"** says Dr. Emmons.

brains. "Rest your mind upon worry, sadness and annoyance, and it will begin to neurally take the shape of anxiety, depression and anger," he adds. "Ask your brain to give thanks, and it will get better at finding things to be grateful for and begin to take the shape of gratitude."

Read on for a few of the ways that a gratitude practice—or even just a grateful mind-set—can change your life.

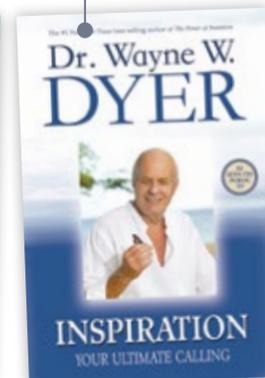
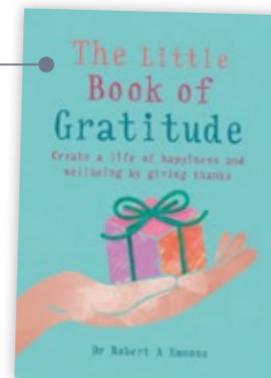
**IT MAKES THE GOOD IN YOUR LIFE EVEN BETTER.**

The more grateful you are, the more you have to be grateful about. "Like a microphone or amplifier, gratitude

pumps up the volume on the good in our lives," says Dr. Emmons. "The good that we see in ourselves, the good that we see in others, and the good that we see in the world are multiplied and magnified through a grateful outlook."

**IT CAN RESCUE YOU FROM A RABBIT HOLE OF NEGATIVITY.**

"Left to their own devices, our minds tend to hijack each and every opportunity for happiness," says Dr. Emmons. "Whether stemming from our own internal thoughts or the daily news headlines, we are exposed to a constant drip of negativity." The



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New research from Northwestern University found that *gratitude* can improve the quality of life even for those faced with a life-threatening illness.

best weapon for this barrage of gloom? Remembering your own good fortune. Say you're listening to the news about a natural disaster; shift your focus to feeling grateful that you're safe and in a position to donate. By constantly replacing negative thoughts with grateful

ones, you'll be able to appreciate the good in your life.

**IT INCREASES YOUR LONGEVITY AND QUALITY OF LIFE.** New research from Northwestern University found that gratitude can improve the quality of life even for those faced with

a life-threatening illness. This makes sense, explains Todd Keeley, a life coach and founder of Miami-based Fruition Strategies, because apathy, anger, fear and grief can break down the body on a cellular level. "A mind-set that focuses on moving through these limiting emotions and breaking through these mental states involves reframing one's life and circumstances," he says. "And one of the fastest ways to reframe is gratitude."

**IT EASES ANXIETY.** Being thankful also reduces stress, experts say. "Instead of running loops in the mind of what's wrong or fear of the future, practicing gratitude builds new

neurotransmitters and weakens those old thought patterns," explains Keeley. You worry less because you're living in the moment.

**IT ENHANCES YOUR LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS.**

"Gratitude is the moral cement, the all-purpose glue, the emotional spackle that squeezes into the cracks between people, strengthening and solidifying these relationships," says Dr. Emmons. A 2017 article in *The Review of Communication* backs him up: It found that expressing gratitude for your partner has surprisingly long-lasting effects—up to six months. Another study published in

the journal *Emotion* in 2013 showed that loved ones who received thanks were more responsive to their partner's needs and happier in their relationships. Lauren Thompson, owner of Thrive Pilates and a counselor in Kansas City, agrees that showing gratitude is a game-changer in relationships. "My husband and I both journal every night on the topic of gratitude and what we are grateful for about each other," says Thompson. "In all honesty, there are some nights that it's really challenging to go to a place of gratitude. However, once we get ourselves there, it helps deescalate whatever disagreement we're having at the time."

**IT SPEEDS RECOVERY FROM INJURY.**

When patients and doctors show gratitude toward each other, the recuperation process can be shorter, according to Karena Wu, DPT, a Pilates instructor, physical therapist and owner of ActiveCare Physical Therapy in New York. She makes a point of expressing thankfulness to her clients when they follow her recommended exercise prescription. "I find that it helps them physically as well as psychologically in understanding their injury and their course of care," she says. "It can help them progress more efficiently and more quickly when we demonstrate gratitude in the dual participation in their rehabilitation." She also says gratitude helps patients comply with treatments—and they are more likely to keep

their appointments and show up on time.

**IT CAN HELP YOU GET THROUGH A TOUGH WORKOUT.**

Melissa Engelland, a Pilates teacher at Core Pilates Studios Las Vegas, starts all of her classes by giving gratitude to students for showing up and giving their best. "Your mind is the most amazing tool—it can help you through anything," To help them persist through the tougher exercises, she recommends they focus on someone or something they're grateful for. "It's about

shifting your mind-set to something you're happy about rather than a painful or tough moment. If you're having a hard time, tell yourself, *I can do anything for five more seconds.*" Besides having a healthier body, "you'll be better able to work through things beyond Pilates."

**IT HELPS YOU ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS.**

Making gratitude a habit is key to a more productive, successful life, says Keeley. By taking stock in what's working in your life and the gifts

around you, you can pivot from being stuck in challenges and adversity. "Gratitude is a shift in mind-set that produces physical energy, mental clarity and a more open mind," he explains. "Motivation, inspired thought and creativity follow. Working towards reaching goals becomes easier, and you overcome obstacles at a more rapid pace." **PS**

Flip to page 92 for some easy ways to practice gratitude.



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# 8 Ways to Practice Gratitude

Incorporating thankfulness into your life is easy—and fun.

OF COURSE, YOUR ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO MAKE IT A LIFESTYLE, like Dr. Emmons, a psychology professor, does.

"Asking about my gratitude practice is like asking if I have a breathing or a walking practice. Every moment is an opportunity for gratitude," he explains. "When I started to live this way, everything changed. I began to see opportunities where I once saw problems and began to see abundance where I once saw deficits. Looking at life through a grateful lens shapes our reality."

If you're new to being thankful, try these small ways to show thanks.



## 1. Make a list of what you typically take for granted.

suggests Dr. Emmons. Instead of thinking of them as "for granted," think of them as "as granted," to remind yourself that most people in the world don't have as much as we do. Repeat every month or so to make sure you stay on track.

## 2. Substitute positive for negative thoughts.

"Identify nongrateful thoughts, for example, thinking you deserve better circumstances, that other people are better off...that things have not turned out the way you wanted," Dr. Emmons says. Instead, reframe using language that expresses thankfulness, like "gifts, givers, receivers, favor, fortune, fortunate, blessed, lucky." For instance, if someone else gets a promotion you think you deserved, rather than complain, be grateful that you will have more personal time you can devote to friends and family.

## 3. Try what Dr. Emmons calls the "George Bailey effect," and imagine how different your life would be if a certain person wasn't in it, or if a specific event or circumstance had never occurred.

When you subtract something good from your life, it triggers feelings of thankfulness for what you have.

**4. Create a gratitude board.** "I cut out pictures or words of gratitude I feel from magazines or online, and put them all together," says Pilates teacher Stacy Chang. "This way I can see all the things I'm grateful for and be reminded of how sweet life truly is."

**5. Go back to the basics of manners and kindness,** suggests Dr. Karena Wu, a physical therapist. "Taking the time to ask someone how they are doing and actually attend to the person's answer, saying thank you, holding a door or elevator

open, or asking if someone needs help...can have a major impact and help overcome doubt and bring a cohesiveness to our fractured world," says Dr. Wu.

"When we are givers, we reflect more clearly on what it is like to be a receiver," adds Dr. Emmons. "Also, we are grateful for the opportunity to give, knowing that giving brings happiness to ourself and others."

## 6. Write an old-school thank-you note.

"There's something very intimate and powerful about hand-writing a letter to someone," says Lauren Thompson. "How often do you get a letter or a card in the mail? I'm guessing not very often, but when you do get one, it's an exciting moment." It can be someone who's done something nice for you recently—or someone from your past whom you never had a chance to thank properly. In a 2005 study in *American Psychologist*, subjects who wrote gratitude letters to people who'd helped them at a key moment in their lives experienced a positive glow for a month afterward.

## 7. Express gratitude in the a.m.

Pilates teacher Melissa Engellard sets the tone for her family's day by showing them she's thankful for them. "I used to be stressed and in a hurry most mornings, which wasn't good for anyone," she explains. "Now I choose to be grateful for each day, by starting with 'good morning,' asking how everyone is, and letting them know I'm happy to see them. Everything is so much smoother now."

## 8. Get yourself in nature,

recommends life coach Todd Keeley. Observe the beauty around you, and breathe in the gratitude. "Shout, 'thank you' aloud toward a lake, river, mountain or tree," he says. "Be a freak *in* nature, not a freak *of* nature."