

**HOW TO CULTIVATE GRATITUDE:  
A KEY TO ABUNDANT LIVING**  
**William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.**  
**Drdoverspike.com**  
**770-913-0506**

Although happiness is often viewed as a state that can be reached by achieving some goal or acquiring some possession (e.g., “I would be happy if only...”), psychological research suggests that happiness is more related to being grateful for what we already have. Practicing gratitude is not only a key to abundance, but it is also a way of combating the vice of *envy*, which Aristotle defined as an emotional pain at the sight of another’s good fortune, stirred by “those who have what we ought to have.” Gratitude also combats a sense of entitlement, shifting our focus from what we think we deserve to what we already have. Gratitude is evidenced in the old adage to “count your blessings.” Gratitude is a subject that has received considerable attention in psychological research. The efficacy of gratitude interventions has been studied in clinical samples (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005), student populations (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006), and general adult populations (Seligman, Steen, & Peterson, 2005).

**Gratitude visit.** In a placebo controlled empirical study, Seligman et al (2005) validated the gratitude visit as a way of increasing happiness. Compared to participants who were instructed to focus on a time in life when they were at their best and to reflect on their strengths, participants who engaged in a gratitude visit reported more happiness for one month after the intervention. Participants were given one week to write and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but who had never been properly thanked. They were instructed to perform the exercise for only one week. The

gratitude visit involves three basic steps: First, think of someone who has done something important and wonderful for you, yet who has not been properly thanked. Next, reflect on the benefits you received from this person, and write a letter expressing your gratitude for all he or she did for you. Finally, arrange to deliver the letter personally, and spend some time with this person talking about what you wrote.

Using another intervention known as “three good things in life,” Seligman, Steen, and Peterson (2005) asked a different group of participants to write down three things that went well each day. In addition, they were asked to provide a causal explanation for each good thing. The participants were instructed to perform the exercise every night for one week. At the one-month follow-up, participants using this exercise were happier and less depressed than they had been at baseline. More importantly, they stayed happier and less depressed at the three-month and six-month follow-ups.

**Gratitude journal.** Empirical studies have shown that those who kept gratitude journals felt better about their lives. Compared to those who recorded hassles or neutral life events, those who kept gratitude journals on a *weekly* basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). A related benefit was also observed in the realm of personal goal attainment. Compared to research participants in the other experimental conditions, participants who kept

gratitude lists were more likely to have made progress toward important personal goals (academic, interpersonal and health-based) over a two-month period.

A *daily* gratitude intervention (self-guided exercises) resulted in more positive effects that did the weekly intervention. A daily gratitude intervention resulted in higher reported levels of the positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness, and energy compared to a focus on daily hassles or a downward social comparison (ways in which participants thought they were better off than others). Compared to participants who were instructed to focus on daily hassles or social comparisons, those who used the daily gratitude intervention were more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or having offered emotional support to another person (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Even a short term intervention can have significant effects. For example, when research participants engaged in a 4-week gratitude practice, the active practice of being grateful was found to reduce stress and increase overall well-being (Rash et al., 2011).

**Suggested steps.** Consider making a gratitude visit to someone who has been especially kind or helpful to you but who you have never properly thanked. Reflect on the benefits you received from this person, write a letter expressing your gratitude, and make arrangements to personally deliver the letter and discuss what you wrote. After making your gratitude visit, start keeping a daily gratitude journal of three things that go well each day. Reflect on three good things that happen each day as well as their possible causes, and write down these things in your gratitude journal at

the end of each day. At the end of a month, review your journal, reflect on how you feel, and identify someone to whom you will make your next gratitude visit.

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