

## THE BIG IDEAS

**Want a 25% Boost?**  
Bust out a gratitude journal!

**Cultivating Gardens**  
Of gratitude.

**Practice Tips**  
Remember: "For granted" vs. "as granted."

**#1 Obstacle = Entitlement**  
Remedy = Humility.

**Memento the Privilege**  
Turning bad to good.



# Gratitude Works!

A 21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity

BY ROBERT EMMONS · JOSSEY-BASS © 2013 · 208 PAGES

“Because it is a virtue, gratitude, at least initially, requires mental discipline. Virtues do not come easily, and in some sense, we need them as they act as a counterpart to our natural tendencies. This is the paradox of gratitude: although the evidence is clear that cultivating gratitude in our life and in our attitude to life allows us to flourish, it can be difficult to accomplish. Developing and sustaining a grateful outlook on life is easier said than done because the choice for gratitude rarely comes without some real effort. We can put the science of gratitude to work for us, however. A number of evidence-based strategies, including self-guided journaling, reflective thinking, letter writing, and gratitude visits, have shown to be effective in creating sustainable gratefulness. We will explore all of these practices in the chapters that follow. They will help you become good at gratitude. You will find that each time you make the choice for gratitude, the next choice will be a little easier, a little more automatic, a little freer. In doing so, we open ourselves up to the limitless possibilities for a fullness that life has to offer.”

~ Robert Emmons from *Gratitude Works!*

I'm grateful for Robert Emmons.

He's dedicated the last three decades of his life to understanding the science of how to boost our well-being. In the process, he's conducted ground-breaking research on the power of gratitude. In fact, he's basically THE researcher we have to thank for understanding \*just\* how powerful gratitude journaling is.

Robert has also served as a founding editor and editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. And, he was the past president of the American Psychological Association's division on the Psychology of Religion. (<- How cool is that?)

We featured his first book called *Thanks!* I heard about this one when I was reading Mark Sisson's new book *Keto for Life*. (So, thanks to Mark for connecting us to this book! :)

I was telling Alexandra that this book is affecting me in a similar way that Barbara Fredrickson's *Love 2.0* changed my life. Barbara's book challenged me to exit my "cocoon of self-absorption" in my day-to-day interactions with people in my community. I now deliberately seek out little micro moments of positivity resonance and that's made a big difference in my life.

I consider myself a *reasonably* grateful guy but this book has opened my eyes to JUST how powerful gratitude is. And, to just how important it is to DELIBERATELY PRACTICE it. We were already planning to expand our core fundamentals to include "Be grateful!" and this book has given me the underlying science of why and how to best do that.

I HIGHLY recommend it. (Get a copy [here](#).)

Of course, it's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share a few of my favorites but... Before we jump in I'd like to say, "Thanks."

*"Gratitude is important not only because it helps us feel good, but also because it helps us do good. Gratitude heals, energizes, and transforms lives in myriad ways consistent with the notion that virtue is its own reward and produces other rewards."*

~ Robert Emmons

Seriously. THANK YOU for being part of our Optimize community and for supporting me and our team. I think of you and thank you every day for making our work possible. And, I'm more committed than ever to doing everything we can in the years and decades (*Deo Volente*) ahead to help you and your family Optimize. I wish I could reach through this page and give you a hug.

So... Virtual HUGS. HIGH FIVES. LOVE. And one more time: THANK YOU.

## THE WHY OF GRATITUDE (REMEMBER: +25%!!!)

*"All in all, science confirms that the life-giving practice of gratitude broadens our lives by enabling healing of the past, providing contentment in the present, and delivering hope for the future."*

~ Robert Emmons

"As showcased in my previous book *Thanks!*, groundbreaking research has shown that when people regularly cultivate gratitude, they experience a multitude of psychological, physical, interpersonal, and spiritual benefits. Gratitude has one of the strongest links to mental health and satisfaction with life of any personality trait—more so than even optimism, hope, or compassion. Grateful people experience higher levels of positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, love, happiness, and optimism, and gratitude as a discipline protects us from the destructive impulses of envy, resentment, greed, and bitterness. People who experience gratitude can cope more effectively with everyday stress, show increased resilience in the face of trauma-induced stress, recover more quickly from illness, and enjoy more robust physical health. Many of these effects are quantifiable. Consider these eye-popping statistics. People are 25 percent happier if they keep gratitude journals, sleep one-half hour more per evening, and exercise 33 percent more each week compared to persons who are not keeping these journals. ... Experiencing gratitude leads to increased feelings of connectedness, improved relationships, and even altruism. We have also found that when people experience gratitude, they feel more loving, more forgiving, and closer to God."

Wondering whether or not "Gratitude Works"?!

Well... The science is UNEQUIVOCAL. Grateful people are, on basically EVERY measure, healthier and happier than less grateful people.

I laughed as I typed that out realizing that I'm basically a virtue salesman. (Hah.) Constantly selling you on the fact that VIRTUE is where it's at if we want to win the ultimate game of life.

So... Continuing my "sales" efforts, let's recap those EYE-POPPING (!!!) stats and add a few more to the bucket.

First: This is definitely worth a re-read: "People are 25 percent happier if they keep gratitude journals, sleep one-half hour more per evening, and exercise 33 percent more each week compared to persons who are not keeping these journals."

Want to be TWENTY-FIVE PERCENT happier? Keep a gratitude journal.

Want to sleep more? Be grateful. One to move more? Be grateful.

*"But as the ancient sages and contemporary research tells us, becoming aware of one's blessings actually leads to having more to be grateful about."*

~ Robert Emmons

Pulling the fundamental thread a bit more: I'd be willing to bet that grateful people ALSO eat better, breathe more deeply (and experience more calm, energized tranquility vs. enervated anxiety), are more present and go forward with more hope.

Robert also tells us: "Dozens of research studies with diverse participant groups have also revealed that the practice of gratitude leads to the following:

- Increased feelings of energy, alertness, enthusiasm, and vigor
- Success in achieving personal goals
- Better coping with stress
- Bolstered feelings of self-worth and self-confidence
- Generosity and helpfulness
- Improved cardiac health through increases in vagal tone
- Greater sense of purpose and resilience"

*"The genetic programming here is not strong. We can all have [more gratitude] and we can have more of it if we systematically train ourselves to pay attention to what is going right in our lives, to see the contributions others make in those good things, and express gratitude verbally and behaviorally."*

~ Robert Emmons

So... Yah... **Gratitude**. It does a mind body soul good.

P.S. Positive psychologists arm wrestle a bit about the top virtues. In [The Power of Character Strengths](#), another leading virtue researcher and educator Ryan Niemiec tells us that the Top 5 include Zest + Hope + Gratitude + Curiosity + Love—with Zest and Hope occupying the Top 2 slots. Robert tells us that Gratitude is even more powerful than Hope.

And, I love the way he puts it here: *"All in all, science confirms that the life-giving practice of gratitude broadens our lives by enabling healing of the past, providing contentment in the present, and delivering hope for the future."*

So... Here's to getting ALL our virtues on, especially the Big 3 of Zest + Gratitude + Hope.

## THE HOW OF GRATITUDE (THINK: CULTIVATING A GARDEN)

*"This is a book of practices. It is all about the concrete things you can do to grow your mind and direct your actions toward gratefulness. I have found the organic metaphor of *growing gratitude* to be a powerful way of conveying basic truths about the nature of this quality. It is about *cultivating* a grateful disposition, which is an inclination that can become deeply ingrained. Through practice, giving thanks *grows* from the *ground* of one's being. Grateful feelings, once *buried*, can *surface* if we take the time to notice and reflect. A Russian proverb says that 'gratitude waters old friendships and makes new ones sprout.' Gratitude is like fertilizer for the mind, spreading connections and improving its function in nearly every realm of experience. ...*

*My hope is that this book will give you all of the gardening tools that you need to shape and grow your grateful thoughts and to weed-whack the ungrateful ones."*

The theoretical research on WHY we would be wise to cultivate our gratitude is beyond compelling. Now it's time for HOW. It's time to PRACTICE.

This book features a bunch of specific, scientifically rigorous practices—including a "21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity."

Before we jump into a few of my favorite practices and get to work on our gratitude gardens, I'd like to step back for a moment and reflect on the gardening metaphor for a moment longer.

Whenever I think of virtue-gardens, I think of Pema Chödrön's reminder not to pour concrete all over it. In [The Places That Scare You](#) she tells us: *"This is the path we take in cultivating joy: ... learning to appreciate what we have. Most of the time we don't do this. Rather than appreciate where we are, we continually struggle to nurture our dissatisfaction. It's like trying to get flowers to grow by pouring cement on the garden."*

I'm reminded of Tal Ben-Shahar's wisdom on gratitude and appreciation. In [The Pursuit of Perfect](#) he tells us: *"The word appreciate has two meanings. The first meaning is 'to be thankful,' the opposite of taking something for granted. The second meaning is 'to increase in value' (as money appreciates in the bank). Combined, these two meanings point to a truth that has been proved repeatedly in research on gratitude: when we appreciate the good in our lives, the good grows and we have more of it. The opposite, sadly, is also true: when we fail to appreciate the good—when we take the good in our lives for granted—the good depreciates."*

So... Want a gratitude garden? Let's focus on what's awesome and quit pouring concrete all over our potential flowers by complaining and taking people and things and life for granted. TODAY.

P.S. Right before that passage, Robert tells us: *"There is frequently a divide between what we know we ought to do and how we actually wind up behaving. Psychologists call this the knowledge to performance gap. Similarly, there is a gulf between knowing that we ought to feel grateful and how we usually do feel. The depressing reality is that people often fail to live up to what they know they should do or even want to do."*

*" Angeles Arrien, author of Living in Gratitude: A Journey That Will Change Your Life, describes grateful seeing as 'the ability to look first at what is good and working in our lives without minimizing or denying the hardships that are also present.'"*

~ Robert Emmons

Then he proceeds to quote the Apostle Paul who said (via *Romans 7:15-19*): "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."

Good news and bad news.

Bad news: Closing the "knowledge to performance gap" is a challenge.

Good news: a) We're not alone in our struggle so let's quit beating ourselves up (common humanity/there are no perfect human beings for the win!) and b) We CAN systematically architect more coherence between our ideals and our behaviors—more and more consistently closing the gap as we use our willpower wisely to install those habits that run on autopilot.

How? PRACTICE, of course. Let's get to it!

## PRACTICE #1: DAILY JOURNALING

"One of the best ways to cultivate gratitude is to establish a daily practice in which you remind yourself of the gifts, grace, benefits, and good things you enjoy. When we are grateful, we affirm that sources of goodness exist in our lives. By writing each day, we magnify and expand on these sources of goodness. Setting aside time on a daily basis to recall moments of gratitude associated with even mundane or ordinary events, personal attributes one has, or valued people one encounters has the potential to weave together a sustainable life theme of gratefulness just as it nourishes a fundamentally affirming life stance. ... Gratitude journaling promotes the savoring of positive life experiences and situations so that we can distill the maximum satisfaction and enjoyment from them. This promotes a shift in consciousness from what we are lacking to the abundance that surrounds us. Gratitude leads us to affirm and acknowledge the good things in our lives. ... And because you can't be grateful and negative at the same time, it counteracts feelings of envy, anger, greed, and other states harmful to happiness."

Welcome to practice #1: "Journaling for Gratitude."

Robert and his colleague Mike McCullough were the first researchers to show the astounding benefits of keeping a gratitude journal. Their first study showed a 25% boost in happiness by journaling about 5 things for which you were grateful once a week for 10 consecutive weeks.

Robert gives us ten tips to rock our journaling. Here are a few key things to keep in mind.

First, writing (vs. just thinking about it) is important: "The act of writing down your blessings translates your thoughts into words, and writing has been shown to have advantages over just thinking the thoughts. Writing helps to organize thoughts, facilitate integration, and helps you accept your own experiences and put them in context."

Robert encourages us to take five to ten minutes to write at least every other day. He encourages us to do it daily WHILE avoiding what researchers call "gratitude fatigue" by keeping our reflections fresh. He tells us "Seek gratitude density. Be specific. Go for depth over breadth. Give details for each entry. The journal is more than just a list of stuff."

Another way to keep things fresh is to "include some surprises. What unexpected blessings did you benefit from today? What were you dreading that did not happen?"

He also tells us (many times throughout the book!) to "Use the language of gifts. Think of the benefits you received today as gifts. Relish and savor the gifts you have been given."

And, finally, here's one of my favorite distinctions: "Think about and then write down those aspects of your life that you are prone to take **for granted**. Instead, take them **as granted**."

*" The lessons that religion teach is that suffering can be transformed and difficult experiences can be reversed or redeemed. ... Abraham Maslow noted that 'the most important learning experiences . . . were tragedies, deaths, and trauma . . . which forced change in the life-outlook of the person and consequently in everything they did.'"*

~ Robert Emmons

*"Silent gratitude isn't very much use to anyone."*

~ Gertrude Stein

I love that. Ungrateful people tend to take things (and people!) for granted. For example, we take for granted all of the astonishing modern benefits that make our lives possible: like a warm house, a car, a smartphone, the Internet and all the other magical marvels of modern life.

Robert tells us we'd be wise to move from taking people and things FOR GRANTED to seeing them **AS GRANTED**.

Let's think about that for a moment longer.

We can take the amazing people and goodness in our lives FOR GRANTED or **AS GRANTED**. It's ALL one big GIFT. Making that shift is at the heart of gratitude. In fact, it's so important that we're going to spend another moment on it as we talk about...

## THE #1 OBSTACLE TO GRATITUDE (+ ITS REMEDY)

"Since the time of the ancient philosopher Seneca or before, having a overly high opinion of oneself has been seen as the chief obstacle of feeling and expressing gratitude. Research has shown that people who are ungrateful tend to have a sense of excessive self-importance, arrogance, vanity, and a high need for admiration and approval. At the more pathological end of the scale are narcissists, people who are profoundly self-absorbed and lack the empathy needed for entering deep, satisfying, mutually enhancing interpersonal relationships. At the more ordinary end of things are people who just feel entitled—to good grades, exemption from having to follow the rules, and special treatment of all kinds. The entitlement attitude says, 'life owes me something' or 'people owe me something' or 'I deserve this.' In all its manifestations, a preoccupation with the self can cause us to forget our benefits and our benefactors or to feel that we are owed things from others and therefore have no reason to feel thankful."

That's from a chapter called "The Biggest Obstacle to Gratitude—and Its Remedy."

To recap: The biggest obstacle to gratitude is a sense of ENTITLEMENT—the belief that the world owes you something. And, because you are entitled to all the awesome things in your life and "deserve" it all, there's no reason for you to feel grateful.

The remedy to entitlement? HUMILITY.

As Robert beautifully tells us: *"The more I contemplate the requirements for cultivating gratitude, the more I am convinced of the necessity of humility. In gratitude and humility we turn to realities outside of ourselves. We become aware of our limitations and our need to rely on others. In gratitude and humility, we acknowledge the myth of self-sufficiency. We look upward and outward to the sources that sustain us. Becoming aware of realities greater than ourselves shields us from the illusion of being self-made, being here on this planet by right—expecting everything and owing nothing. The humble person says that life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed. Humility ushers in a grateful response."*

One more time: We can take the amazing people and goodness in our lives FOR GRANTED or **AS GRANTED**. It's ALL one big GIFT. Making that shift is at the heart of gratitude.

On that note, let's do a gratitude journaling exercise together.

What are three gifts you're grateful for in your life? (Write a sentence describing each in detail.)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

P.S. Right after I typed that two of my precious gifts knocked on the door—giving me an extra-sweet opportunity to cherish their presence in my life as we cuddled and wrestled and did some "acro-yoga" (aka them flying on my upraised feet) as I laughed with grateful joy.



## MEMENTO THE PRIVILEGE

*"I believe that gratitude is the best approach to life. When life is going well, it allows us to celebrate and magnify the goodness. When life is going badly, it provides a perspective by which we can view life in its entirety and not be overwhelmed by temporary experiences. And this is what grateful people do. They have learned to transform adversity into opportunity no matter what happens, to see existence itself as a gift."*

~ Robert Emmons

"A further illustration of the 'bad to good' phenomenon comes from research on confronting one's own mortality. This recent study found that thinking about one's own death could make a person more grateful for the life that he or she has. Researchers asked participants to imagine a 'death' scenario (do not try this idea at a dinner party) where, trapped in a high rise, they are overcome by smoke and perish in a fire. They were then asked to respond to a series of questions concerning their present levels of gratitude. The death reflection condition produced a greater increase in gratitude in comparison to two control conditions. Confronting the possibility of dying may lead a person to realize the accuracy of the British writer G.K. Chesterton's insight that 'life is not only a pleasure but a kind of eccentric privilege.'"

That's from a chapter called "Gratitude, Suffering, and Redemption" in which we learn about the often catalytic power of challenging times.

Of course, we've talked about the Stoic idea of "[Momento Mori](#)" many times. So, when I saw this passage on the research pointing to the power of reflecting on our mortality I had to yank it out.

This "contrasting" of our own mortality with our current aliveness is a powerful way to boost gratitude (and not take things for granted!!). It's an example of what Robert calls the "Bad to good" reflection—which is basically an exercise in [OMMS](#) in which you think about some of the challenging times in your life but focus on the ways those challenges made you stronger.

(This "Bad to good" exercise is the 7th core exercise in the 21-Day Gratitude Challenge. Each of the seven exercises is repeated three times over the 21 days. Others include a version of the "What went well and why?" exercise we talk about in [Flourish](#) and the gratitude letter exercise.)

With the right re-framing, we can be THANKFUL for EVERYTHING—including the hardest times of our lives—while appreciating our current reality even more and, if we're currently going through a dark patch, remembering that we've got what it takes to endure and get stronger and that someday we'll be grateful for our current challenges. (Which begs the question: Why wait?!)

If you feel so inspired, let's take a moment to bring to mind a challenging time from our past. How has this event made you a better person? And... *"How can you be thankful for the beneficial consequences that have resulted from this event?"* ← Grateful OMMS and Let's do this!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Philosopher in Residence*

If you liked this Note,  
you'll probably like...

[Thanks!](#)

[The How of Happiness](#)

[The Myths of Happiness](#)

[The Narcissism Epidemic](#)

[The Upside of Stress](#)

## About the Author of "Gratitude Works"

AUTHOR



Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D., is professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis. He is past president of the American Psychological Association's Division 36, The Psychology of Religion. Emmons is founding editor and editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*.

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at [optimize.me](#).