



Tammy Stellanova

# STUMBLING TOWARD GRATITUDE

New research suggests gratitude is a key to health and happiness, but **Catherine Price** wanted to find out for herself.

I HAVE A CONFESSION: WHEN I GO to a bookstore, I like hanging out in the self-help section. I don't know if it's because I think I'll find a book that will solve all my problems, or if seeing all the books on problems I don't have makes me feel better about myself. But whatever it is, I keep going back.

On recent visits, I've noticed a trend: The market has been glutted by books promising the secrets to happiness. That might not seem new (isn't happiness the point of the entire section?), but these aren't touchy-feely self-help titles—they're books by scientific researchers, who claim to offer prescriptions based on rigorous empirical research. It's all part of the "positive psychology" movement that has spilled out of academic journals and into best-selling books, popular magazine articles, and even school curricula.

As I glanced through a few of these titles, two things quickly became clear. First, positive psychologists claim you can create your own happiness. Conventional wisdom has long held that each of us is simply born with a happiness "set point" (meaning that some people are constitutionally more likely to be happy than others). That's partially true—but according to positive psychologists Sonja Lyubomirsky and Ken Sheldon, research now suggests that up to 40 percent of our happiness might stem from intentional activities in which we choose to engage.

Second, in trying to explain which activities might actually help us cultivate happiness, positive psychology keeps returning to the same concept: gratitude. In study after study, researchers have found that if people actively try to become more grateful in their everyday lives,

they're likely to become happier—and healthier—as well.

So how do positive psychologists recommend that you increase your level of gratitude—and, therefore, happiness? They endorse several research-tested exercises. These include keeping a "gratitude journal," where you record a running list of things for which you're grateful; making a conscious effort to "savor" all the beauty and pleasures in your daily life; and writing a "gratitude letter" to some important person in your life who you've never properly thanked.

These gratitude exercises all sounded pleasant enough, but would they work for me? While I'm not currently depressed, I'm very aware that depression runs in my family: I'm the only person—including the dog—who has not yet been on Prozac. So I decided to indulge in all three of these

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exercises over a six-week period, risking the possibility that I might become an insufferably happy and cheerful person.

I emailed University of Miami psychologist Michael McCullough, a leading gratitude researcher, to ask what he thought I could expect as a result of my gratitude overdose.

"If you're not experiencing more happiness and satisfaction in your life after this six-week gratitude infusion," he wrote back, "I'll eat my hat!"

## Getting grateful

My first step was to get a gratitude journal. Luckily, a year earlier my recently retired father had stumbled across a bookstore that sold "quotable journals"—blank books with inspiring quotes on their covers. My father, always a sucker for inspiration, sent me seven of them. I settled on one with a cover that said, in all caps, "Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself." Given my experiment in manufactured happiness, this seemed appropriate.

Journal at my side, I decided to start by taking a happiness inventory (available, along with a bunch of other quizzes, at [authentichappiness.org](http://authentichappiness.org), the website run by positive psychology guru

Martin Seligman). I scored a 3.58 out of 5, putting myself ahead of 77 percent of participants, but still leaving plenty of room for improvement—as evidenced by my first journal entry.

"It's been a somewhat depressing day," starts my gratitude journal. "Or, rather, week."

At first, it felt a little awkward to keep a journal specifically for gratitude—I felt as if I should plaster my car in cheesy bumper stickers ("Happiness is") and call it a day. But even on that first downbeat afternoon, my journal did make me feel a little better about things. Listing things I was grateful for made me feel, well, grateful for them—and since I'd also decided to jot down moments each day that had made me happy (another positive psychology-endorsed exercise), I had a concrete list of cheerful experiences to look back on when I was feeling down. Thanks to my journal, I know that on January 18th I was happy because I'd exercised, had a good Chinese lesson, and spent 15 minutes dancing around my room to Shakira's "Hips Don't Lie." On January 30th, I was grateful for my perseverance, the Pacific Ocean, and the fact that I have really, really good cholesterol.

I've always kept a journal, but once my initial excitement about my new project had passed, my writing schedule felt a bit contrived—I often had to force myself to stay awake for a few minutes before bedtime so that I wouldn't miss an entry. But I quickly found that encouraging myself to focus on the good in my life instead of dwelling on the bad was helping me gain a bit of perspective on things. "The actions in my day-to-day life are actually quite pleasant," I wrote on January 21st, in a moment of insight. "It's anxieties that get me derailed."

It was also good to get in the habit of countering bad things in my day with reflections on the good. For example, on February 1st—which I described as "having a lot going against it"—I wrote that I "spent a bunch of the day cleaning my room and trying to get my new phone to work, went on fruitless errands, ripped out part of a sweater I was knitting, and when I emailed the pattern designer—who goes by 'Yarn Boy'—to ask if he could help me figure out where I'd gone wrong, he sent me an email back telling me to 'take it to a yarn shop.' Thanks a lot, Yarn Ass." And yet the entry ends as follows: "But I did

## Four Ways to Give Thanks

BY CATHERINE PRICE

Research in positive psychology has identified several ways that practicing gratitude can boost people's health and happiness. Here are four of these research-tested "gratitude interventions."

- 1. Write a gratitude letter.** Research by Martin Seligman, Christopher Peterson, and others has shown this one to be particularly effective. Write a letter to a mentor, family member, or some other important person in your life whom you've never properly thanked. Deliver it in person. Read it out loud. Bring tissues.
- 2. Keep a gratitude journal.** Studies by psychologists Michael McCullough, Robert Emmons, Sonja Lyubomirsky, and others have backed up this exercise, which involves keeping a list of things for which you're grateful—anything from your children or spouse to the beauty of the tree outside your window. Doing so helps you focus on the positive things in your life—a practice that's been shown to increase happiness.
- 3. Savor.** Take the time to notice beauty and pleasures in your daily life. Loyola University psychologist Fred Bryant has shown that savoring positive experiences can heighten your positive responses to them. A key to savoring is what Bryant calls "thanksgiving," or expressing gratitude for the blessings that come your way, large and small.
- 4. Think outside the box.** It's fairly obvious why we might feel grateful for grandmothers, lovely sunsets, and anything else that has provided comfort or beauty in our lives. But what about thanking the homeless people who come to the shelter where you volunteer? "Individuals who do volunteer work sometimes speak of the benefits they receive from service," writes Robert Emmons in his forthcoming book, *Thanks!* "Since service to others helped them to find their own inner spirituality, they were grateful for the opportunity to serve." If we look hard enough, he argues, we can find a reason to feel grateful for any relationship—even when someone does us harm, as that person helps us appreciate our own vulnerability. Emmons claims that such highly advanced forms of gratitude may actually increase the level of goodness in the world by inspiring positive acts in ourselves and others.

get my phone set up and cleaned my room a bit. Chinese went well. I got cute new barrettes. I worked out even though I didn't feel like it, then I savored the feel of my calf muscles."

That might not sound like much, but trust me: It's an improvement.

Despite my calf muscle appreciation, I wasn't exactly sure how to practice my "savoring" exercise, so I emailed Todd Kashdan, a psychology professor at George Mason University who teaches an immensely popular class called "Science of Well-Being and Character Strengths." Kashdan, who worked on the floor of the stock exchange until a late night revelation on a golf course made him realize he'd rather spend his life studying creativity and happiness, wrote back quickly.

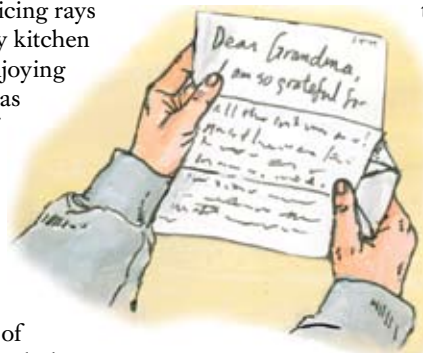
**"I remember you singing me to sleep when I was little," I wrote. "And quizzing me on spelling while I tried to do handstands in the living room."**

"You can do something simple, such as stop and notice an instance of natural beauty, e.g., a sunrise, a flower, a bird singing, a couple gazing at each other," he suggested. "Or start keeping a journal of beautiful moments in which you write down each day the most beautiful things you saw and then return to it before you go to sleep."

Not wanting to start another journal, I instead tried to take more time to appreciate my surroundings. On an eight-mile run on a fire trail, I stopped at a bench on top of a steep hill to give myself a chance to "savor." I felt a bit like I was cheating—after all, the real reason I'd stopped was that if I hadn't, I'd have thrown up—but as my heart rate slowed I allowed myself to appreciate what was around me: the view of San Francisco, the warmth of the sun, the cool breeze, and the sounds of the birds. It made me feel nice, and since it didn't involve jogging, I continued to savor for 20 minutes before forcing myself back on the trail.



Surprisingly, that exercise made me want to try to savor other small things in my day: watching a mechanic on break from work crack open a beautiful ripe pomegranate, noticing rays of light outside my kitchen window—even enjoying the feeling, weird as it might sound, of brushing my own hair. These were all small, private moments, but consciously trying to find things to savor was kind of like looking for manhole covers on the street: Once you start paying attention, they're everywhere.



## Negativity bias

Halfway through my experiment, I was running into problems. I had been trying to appreciate happy moments in my life, but that didn't stop me from getting into a verbal fight with a mechanic, who became so angry that he threatened to have me arrested. I had delivered my gratitude letter to my grandmother, which did make us both happy, but also made her think I was writing her eulogy; she told me, pointedly, that she wasn't planning to die yet. And when I tried to savor a beautiful afternoon by taking a hike along the coast with my boyfriend, we got poison oak.

What's more, I noticed that when I was particularly stressed or angry or feeling down, I didn't *want* to reflect on things I was happy or grateful for. During those moments, thinking about reasons my life was good just made me more anxious.

I decided to call Julie Norem, professor and chair of the psychology department at Wellesley College, for reassurance. She told me my reaction made sense.

"If you're trying to be grateful all the time but are in a really sucky situation," she said, "then you set yourself up for feeling like things are even worse than they were before because you didn't get cured by this gratitude thing that was supposed to make you happy."

Granted, Norem has her biases. She's the author of a book called *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking* and believes that for some people, whom she calls defensive pessimists, trying to be constantly positive and optimistic can lead to more stress. But apparently I'm biased, too, because as I read through her website, I could feel myself identifying with it.

"Defensive pessimists lower their expectations to help prepare themselves for the worst," says her website. "Then they mentally play through all the bad things that can happen. Though it sounds like it might be depressing, defensive pessimism actually helps anxious people focus away from their emotions so they can plan and act effectively."

Intrigued, I took the quiz on Norem's website titled "Are you a defensive pessimist?" and scored exactly in the middle between optimism and defensive

For my gratitude letter, I decided to write one to my grandmother back in New York for her 84th birthday. It took me three weeks to build up the emotional energy to do it (something about putting all that emotion down on paper made me procrastinate), and, as expected, as soon as

I started writing, I began to cry.

"I remember you singing me to sleep when I was little," I wrote. "And helping me with my math homework and quizzing me on spelling while I tried to do handstands in the living room, and picking me up from the school bus, and coming into school for grandparents' day—I was always so proud to have you there." I told her how lucky I felt to have her in my life, how much I respected her for having raised my mother on her own, and how much it meant to me that we were so close. By the time I finished writing the letter, I was exhausted—and when I called to read it to her (since she lives across the country, I couldn't do it in person), we both ended up in tears.

pessimism—which makes sense, given the fact that I do try to be positive about things, but use negativity to cope. It goes along with a saying I learned from my grandmother: “Hope for the best; expect the worst.”

Perhaps ironically, thinking about pessimism made me feel better, especially when University of Michigan psychologist Christopher Peterson admitted to me that even positive psychologists like himself are not always brimming with joy. “I’m not a Pollyanna,” he said when I called to ask how positive psychology had affected his life. “And obviously, someone who’s unrelentingly cheerful can be a pain in the ass.”

## Happy meal

But how about unrelenting gratitude? To celebrate finishing my experiment—not to mention filling up my journal—I took my boyfriend out for dinner at a restaurant here in Berkeley called Café Gratitude. It’s a place that is anathema to my cynical New York roots: cheery waitresses who call everyone “darling,” posters on the walls that ask questions like, “Can you surrender to how beautiful you are?” and, worst of all, a menu of organic, vegan dishes, all named with life-affirming sentences. For example, saying to your server, “I am fabulous” means that you would like some lasagna. “I am fun” indicates that you want some toast. Unfortunately, there is no organic, vegan interpretation of “I am about to vomit.”

My boyfriend and I settled on being generous, fulfilled, and accepting (guacamole, a large café salad, and a bowl of rice), and in honor of my experiment, I insisted on ordering the “I am thankful” (Thai coconut soup, served cold). To offset the restaurant’s unrelenting cheer, we both ordered alcohol (luckily, even in Café Gratitude, a beer is just a beer).

While nibbling on carrot flaxseed crackers (“I am relishing”), we talked about the past six weeks. McCullough doesn’t need to eat his hat—I definitely had experienced moments of feeling happier and more consciously grateful as a result of the exercises, and by the end of my experiment, my happiness index had gone up to 3.92. But I also found that there are times when I need to allow myself to feel bad without fighting against my negative emotions. And my cynical side continues to dream of opening a rival restaurant next door called the Cantankerous Café, with menu items like “I am depressed” and “I am resentful.”

My biggest question was how long these exercises’ effects would last.

“Sometimes positive psychologists sound like we’re trying to sell miracles to people. There are no miracles. ... There are no long-term quick fixes for happiness,” said Peterson, when I asked him how I could maintain my happiness boost. “So if you become a more grateful person and you add those exercises to your repertoire, you’ll be different six months or a year from now. But if you say okay, I’m done with the story and I’m going back to the way I was, it’ll just have been a six-week high. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s not going to permanently change you.”

Perhaps that’s why, when I got home from dinner, I went straight to my bookcase where I keep stuff my dad has sent me—and picked out another journal.

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## Shallow Gratitude

BY CHRISTI CHIDESTER

In an issue of the journal *Granta* earlier this year, editor Ian Jack railed against a new trend in the literary world: the tendency of young American writers to burden their books with excessively long acknowledgments sections, thanking everyone from their agents to their friends to the baristas at their local cafés. This is all a bit much for Jack.

“Why should the writer imagine we care about any of them?” he writes. “Might it be that he thinks his work is so brilliant that its worth needs some explanation?”

Jack contrasts these American writers with their British counterparts, as well as their American predecessors, who offer short, simple, and even cryptic words of thanks, such as “To H.J.” So what are we to make of these very different displays of gratitude?

One answer is suggested by a 1995 study of gratitude. The researchers asked participants to write about two events in their lives, a major success and a major failure. Half of the subjects were told to write their names on every page of the response sheets and to be prepared to share their stories with six to eight other participants. The other group was instructed to leave their names off the responses and was told their responses would be kept completely confidential.

The major difference between the two groups came in their success stories: Those who expected to share their stories were significantly more likely to mention how other people had contributed to their accomplishments.

The researchers, Roy Baumeister and Stacey Ilko, describe this phenomenon as “shallow gratitude,” speculating that the subjects may not have truly believed that the other people deserved their recognition but felt social pressure to cite their help.

“Had they really felt strongly grateful for the others’ help,” they write, “these acknowledgments would presumably have shown up in their private accounts as well.”

So is today’s literary gratitude actually quite shallow? One way to find out could be to start pulling original manuscripts off writers’ computers and out of their desk drawers. If Baumeister and Ilko’s findings are any indication, we may find that while published acknowledgments go on for pages, first drafts may be thankless.

