

13 Most Popular Gratitude Exercises & Activities



The power of gratitude is really quite extraordinary.

We usually show our gratitude to others when we feel indebted to them, when we have benefited from their actions, and when we want to make our feelings towards them known.

Showing gratitude is sometimes a required or expected thing, and at other times a spontaneous “**thank you**” to someone who has unknowingly made our day. On most occasions, we show gratitude to bring some of the good feelings we have been gifted back to the gifter.

While it is admirable to want to share our gratitude and good feelings with others, we rarely stop to think about what giving others our gratitude does for us.

As it turns out, it does quite a lot!

Gratitude has been shown to:

- Help you make friends. A study found that thanking a new acquaintance makes them more likely to seek a more lasting relationship with you.
- Improve your **physical health**. People who show gratitude report fewer aches and pains, a general feeling of health, more regular exercise, and more frequent checkups with their doctor than those who don't.
- Improve your psychological health. Grateful people enjoy higher well-being and happiness and suffer from reduced symptoms of depression.
- Enhance empathy and reduces aggression. Those who show their gratitude are less likely to seek revenge against others and more likely to behave in a prosocial manner, with sensitivity and empathy.
- Improve your sleep. Practicing gratitude regularly can help you sleep longer and better.
- Enhance your self-esteem. People who are grateful have increased self-esteem, in part due to their ability to appreciate other peoples' accomplishments.
- Increase in mental strength. Grateful people have an advantage in overcoming trauma and enhanced **resilience**, helping them to bounce back from highly stressful situations. (Morin, 2014).



Having learned of all of these benefits to practicing gratitude, your next question is probably “How do I do it?”

If so, you’re in luck!

Read on to discover some of the most popular gratitude exercises and activities, as well as tips to cultivate your own gratitude practice.

14 Most Popular Gratitude Exercises and Activities

There are nearly infinite ways to show our gratitude to others, to ourselves, and to a higher power or even the universe itself. However, it can be tough to get started without practical suggestions and ideas. These gratitude exercises and activities are some of the most well-known and proven ways to practice and enhance your gratitude.

Journaling

Writing down a few things you are grateful for is probably the easiest and most popular gratitude exercise available.

The purpose of the exercise is to think back on the past day, few days, or week, and remember 3-5 things you are especially grateful for. In this way, you are completely focusing on all the good things that happened to you in a given set of time.

There are varying opinions in the **positive psychology** arena about what is the appropriate amount of **journaling** one should do per week. Some people propose doing it every day while other suggest doing it once per week.

The arguments against doing it every day are that it can be tedious and forced. It becomes a practice you feel you should do or need to do instead of something you want to do. When journaling becomes a banal task and not an enjoyable practice then you need to adjust the amount of journaling you do.

Besides the benefit of zeroing in on the wonderful things you can be grateful for, this practice has been proven to increase sleep quality, decrease symptoms of sickness, and increase happiness and joy (Marsh, 2011).

It is important that you cater your practice to what you need. Perhaps journaling every day for a short amount of time will work, but over time the increased jubilation you enjoy from the daily practice probably won't be manifested.

It is important that you sincerely pay attention to the things you are grateful for. Also, it will behoove you to express your gratitude more for people as opposed to objects.

Imagine your life without the things you are grateful before you begin writing. That should definitely boost your gratitude barometer.

Gratitude Jar

The gratitude jar is a stunningly simple exercise that can have profound effects on your well-being and your outlook on life. It only requires a few ingredients: a jar (a box can also work); a ribbon, stickers, glitter, or whatever else you like to decorate the jar; paper and a pen or pencil for writing your gratitude notes; and gratitude!

Step 1: Find a jar or box.

Step 2: Decorate the jar with your decorating implements. You can tie a ribbon around the jar's neck, put stickers on the sides, use clear glue and glitter to make it sparkle, paint it, or do whatever else you can think of to make it a bright and happy sight!

Step 3: This is the final most important step, which will be repeated every day. Think of at least three things throughout your day that you are grateful for. It can be something as benign as a coffee at your favorite coffee shop, or as grand as the love of your significant other or dear friend. Do this every day, write down what you are grateful for on little slips of paper (bonus points for colored paper!), and fill the jar.

Over time, you will find that you have a jar full of a myriad of reasons to be thankful for what you have and enjoy the life you are living. If you are ever feeling especially down and need a quick pick-me-up, take a few notes out of the jar to remind yourself of what is good in your life.

Gratitude Rock

This exercise may sound a little silly. You may be thinking, “A rock? How can a rock help me practice gratitude?”

The secret to this exercise is that the rock is just a symbol, a physical object you can use to remind yourself of what you have.

The instructions are about as simple as instructions can be: just find a rock!

Make sure to pick one you like whether you like it because it's pretty, because it is smooth, or has an



interesting texture, or because you picked it up from a special place. If you have another small object you'd rather use instead, feel free to substitute that for the rock.

Carry this rock around in your pocket, leave it on your desk where you will see it throughout your day, or even wear it on a chain around your neck or your wrist.

Whenever you see it or touch it, pause to think about at least one thing you are **grateful** for. Whether it's something as small as the sun shining down on you in this moment or as large as the job that allows you to feed yourself or your family, just think of one thing that brings you joy or fulfillment.

When you take the stone out of your pocket or off of your body at the end of the day, take a moment to remember the things that you were grateful for throughout the day. When you put it on or in your pocket again in the morning, repeat this process to remember what you were grateful for yesterday.

Not only will this help you remember the things you are grateful for, it can also trigger a mini-mindfulness moment in your day. It will bring you out of your head and into the present moment, giving you something to focus your attention on. It can also act as a switch to more positive thinking. When you flip this switch multiple times a day, you will likely find that your average day has become much more positive.

Gratitude Tree

This is a great activity for children, but it can also be effective for youthful-minded adults who are open to experiencing a childlike sense of fun and wonder.

You will need several double-sided colored sheets of paper, string or ribbon, scissors, twigs or tree branches, some stones or marbles, a vase, and a sense of gratitude.

Step 1: Make one or more leaf cutouts to use as a template for your leaves. You can use [this PDF](#) for templates, find another you like, or even create your own design. Trace your leaves on your colored paper using your template(s).

Step 2: Cut out the leaves, punch a hole at the top of each leaf, and loop your string or ribbon through each hole.

Step 3: Put the stones or marbles in a vase and stick the tree branch or twig in the middle.

Step 4: Have your (or your child) draw or write things that you (or your child) are grateful for on the leaves. You can also use photographs if you'd like.

Step 5: Hang the leaves from the branches, and behold your gratitude tree!

This activity is fun, easy, and results in a pretty reminder of the things that bring you or your child joy throughout your daily life. It may be intended for kids but there is no age limit on finding creative ways to cultivate your gratitude, so get to drawing!

Gratitude Box

The gratitude box is a thoughtful way to share your feelings with loved ones and cultivate your own sense of gratitude.

This is another easy activity that requires only a box, some paper, and a pen or pencil to write down gratitude messages. You can make the box yourself or buy one, the prettier the better!

On the paper, write down a heartfelt message of gratitude to your loved one. If you're not sure how to start, here are some suggestions to begin your message:

- 1) "Thank you for..."
- 2) "What I love about you..."
- 3) "My holiday wish for you..."

You can also collect messages from others about your loved one, to pack the box with multiple messages of gratitude and love.

Place the message(s) into the box, wrap it up or put a bow on it, and give it to your loved one as a special gift, to both your loved one and yourself.

Gratitude Prompts

Gratitude prompts are a great way to get started, continue your practice, or kick-start a stalled gratitude practice. This is also a relatively simple exercise, with only one instruction: fill in the blank!

These prompts provide several ways to begin a gratitude statement, with infinite possibilities for completion. They cover multiple senses, colors, people, and things. The goal is to **identify** at least three things in each category that you are thankful for.

The prompts include:

- I'm grateful for three things I hear:
- I'm grateful for three things I see:
- I'm grateful for three things I smell:
- I'm grateful for three things I touch/feel:
- I'm grateful for these three things I taste:
- I'm grateful for these three blue things:
- I'm grateful for these three animals/birds:
- I'm grateful for these three friends:
- I'm grateful for these three teachers:
- I'm grateful for these three family members:
- I'm grateful for these three things in my home:
- I'm grateful for these three people who hired me:
- Etc.

Gratitude Walk

This exercise is easy to try out, and only requires your sense of gratitude and a pair of feet! The gratitude walk is a simple way to find the things you are grateful for in your life.

This may be difficult at first, but you'll soon find a nearly endless list of things to be grateful for.

When you are going through a particularly rough time try cleansing your mind and your soul with a gratitude walk. Just as the combination of meditation and gratitude can combat stress or increase feelings of well-being, walking with a gratitude focal point can offer the same remedy.



Walking is therapeutic in itself. It has many health benefits such as increased endorphins that decrease stress, increased heart health, and circulation in the body, decreased lethargy, and decreases in blood pressure. Couple this healthy activity with a grateful state of mind and you are bound to nurture a positive mind and body (Rickman 2013).

The goal of the gratitude walk is to observe the things you see around you as you walk. Take it all in. Be aware of nature, the colors of the trees, the sounds the birds make, and the smell of the plants. Notice how your feet feel when you step onto the ground. Hopefully, it will be easy to express gratitude for all the things that you are experiencing in the present moment.

The effects are more potent when you can enjoy a gratitude walk with your partner or a friend. In this way, you can show them an appreciation for being able to spend the time walking together.

Gratitude Reflection

Reflection is an important part of mindfulness meditation and the cultivation of a sense of self-awareness. These practices can lead to an enhanced sense of well-being, among other benefits, although enhanced well-being is enough of a benefit for most of us!

To practice gratitude reflection, follow these steps:

1. Settle yourself in a relaxed posture. Take a few deep, calming breaths to relax and center. Let your awareness move to your immediate environment: all the things you can smell, taste, touch, see, hear. Say to yourself: "For this, I am grateful."
2. Next, bring to mind those people in your life to whom you are close: your friends, family, partner.... Say to yourself, "For this, I am grateful."
3. Next, turn your attention onto yourself: you are a unique individual, blessed with imagination, the ability to communicate, to learn from the past and plan for the future, to overcome any pain you may be experiencing. Say to yourself: "For this, I am grateful."
4. Finally, rest in the realization that life is a precious gift. That you have been born into a period of immense prosperity, that you have the gift of health, culture, and access to spiritual teachings. Say to yourself: "For this, I am grateful." (Still Mind, 2014)

Gratitude Flower

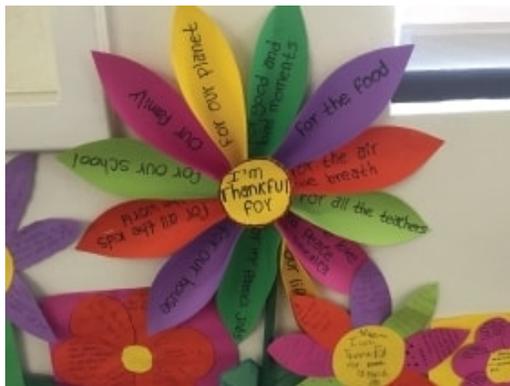
The gratitude flower is similar to the gratitude tree, except that instead of creating leaves of gratitude, we create flower petals of gratitude.

Start by cutting out a circle from colored paper. Yellow is a popular color for this piece since it will be the center of the flower.

On the circle, write "Things I'm Thankful For" or write your name or family name, or even an overarching thing you're grateful for (i.e., "my family").

Next, use a template or freehand cut to create flower petals. You can use several different colors for a bright and vibrant flower, or the same color for a more uniform looking flower.

On the flower petals, write down things you are grateful for. These can be things like the sunny weather, having wonderful parents, or a promotion at work.



Glue or tape these petals to the center to create a flower. This is your gratitude flower!

Gratitude Letter or Email / Gratitude Visit

This is perhaps the most powerful gratitude exercise there is. Write a hand-written letter to a person you are particularly grateful to have in your life.

Be detailed. Express all the wonderful qualities about this person, and how they personally have affected your life for the better. If you have the time personally deliver this letter to the person yourself.

Do it unexpectedly. Your level of gratitude should skyrocket, as you observe the bliss the receiver gets from your generous act. It will probably be one of the greatest gifts you will ever receive.

The positive effects of this gratitude exercise were researched and carried out by Kent State professor Steve Toepfer, associate professor in Human Development and Family Studies.

In his 2007 study, his undergraduate students experienced enhanced **levels of life satisfaction** and happiness, as well as decreased symptoms of depression. Toepfer's goal of this study was to determine the psychological benefits, if any, for the authors of these gratitude letters (Vincent, 2007).

The results from this study are quite straightforward. If you wish to increase your gratitude and happiness levels then intentionally script letters to inspiring people in your life.

If you are feeling down and maybe even depressed, you should most certainly give this practice a try. For an even further joy boost hand deliver your letter to the receivers so you can witness the receiver's reactions for yourself.



activity can be either an email or a letter which you can send off in the mail or deliver personally.

Think about a person who has recently done something good for you, to whom you have not yet expressed your gratitude. This person may be a friend, family member, coworker, teacher, or mentor. Try to pick someone who you can visit within the next week if you are practicing the visit component.

Next, write an email or letter to them. Use these guidelines to write an effective and grateful letter:

- Write as though you are addressing the person directly.
- Don't worry about getting your grammar or spelling perfect (unless you are sending the email/letter to them).
- Describe what this person has done that makes you grateful, and how they have impacted your life. Be as concrete as possible here.
- Describe what you are doing in life now, and how frequently you remember their act of kindness or generosity.
- Try to keep your letter to about 300 words or so.

If you are writing an email or a letter to be mailed, go through the letter to make sure it is clear and you get the intended message across. Hit the "send" button or drop it in a mailbox, and follow up with this person after a few days.

If you are delivering your letter in person via a gratitude visit, follow these steps:

- Plan a visit with the recipient. Let him or her know you would like to meet with them to share something, but be vague about what you have to share.
- When you meet this person, let them know that you are grateful and that you would like to read them a letter you wrote expressing your gratitude. Ask that he or she does not interrupt you until you are done reading the letter.
- Take your time reading the letter. While you read, pay attention to the reactions of both you and the recipient.
- After you have read the letter, listen to his or her reaction to the letter and be ready to discuss your feelings together.
- Remember to leave the letter with this person when you leave.
- If you are located far away from this person, you can arrange a phone call or video chat instead.

Meditation

Gratitude meditations are a double-whammy for well-being. You are essentially performing two of the most impactful happiness practice at the same time.

Meditation isn't always easy especially when the mind is aggressively wandering and distracting your attention, but if you practice this kind of mediation consistently be prepared to experience incredible upgrades in gratitude and joy.

Unlike a normal meditation where you attempt to intentionally become aware of your breath and keep your mind clear, during a gratitude meditation you visualize all the things in your life that you are grateful for.

It is important to give each person or item the concentration it deserves. You can take the time to go through all the people you are grateful for or all the physical objects you are grateful for.

I like to simplify this sometimes and show gratitude for the things that are often taken for granted: the ability to breath, hands to touch, eyes to see, legs to walk and run, etc.

There are numerous advantages to meditating. These advantages are magnified when you take the time to target your reasons for gratitude.

Spend some time really taking stock of the things you are grateful for and I am certain you will feel much better afterward. It is a powerful exercise.

Collage

Similar to the gratitude journal except you are going to take pictures of all the things you are grateful for. This gives you the opportunity to visualize your gratitude. This can be more powerful than just viewing it as words on paper.

Try taking a picture of one thing you are grateful for every day for a week. Notice how you feel. Take a look back at the pictures every week. You don't have to find grandiose things to be grateful for. A simple picture of a flower will do.

The more you do this the easier it will be for you to spot out the things you are grateful for. You will no longer take these simple things for granted.

Perhaps you will document multiple pictures in a day. After a given time period put all your pictures together in a collage and simply be grateful for all that you have.

Handy Gratitude Worksheets

If you like easy to follow worksheets, we have several suggestions that can help you get started practicing gratitude. Try one of the following worksheets.

Gratitude Exercises

This handout describes several useful gratitude exercises, some of which are included above, in a short paragraph. Consider this your master list of the best gratitude exercises with a quick and easy explanation.

Gratitude Journal

This worksheet is a quick and easy way to document the things you are grateful for each day. It begins by noting that keeping a **journal** helps to improve your mood. The worksheet then instructs the user to write at least three entries for each day, whether they are simple or extremely complex things to be grateful for.

This simple **worksheet** lists each day of the week with five sections of blank space to fill out with things that make you grateful.

Why I'm Grateful Worksheet

This simple worksheet helps you find things you are grateful for, complete with prompts to get you started. These prompts cover multiple areas of life and dive deeper into your sense of gratitude. Instead of just helping you identify what you are grateful for, this worksheet digs into why you are grateful.

Why I'm Grateful

 I am grateful for my family because... _____

 Something good that happened this week... _____

 I am grateful for my friendship with... _____ because... _____

 I am grateful for who I am because... _____

 Something silly that I am grateful for... _____

 Something else I am grateful for... _____

Provided by TherapistAid.com © 2015

The prompts include:

“I am grateful for my family because...”

“Something good happened this week...”

“I am grateful for my friendship with... because...” “I am grateful for who I am because...”

“Something silly that I am grateful for...”

“Something else I am grateful for...”

Simply fill in the blanks on this worksheet to discover more to be grateful for in your life!

Examples of Gratitude Interventions for Adults

Many of the gratitude exercises described above have been used in **interventions** to increase gratitude, with varying results. To find out how gratitude has been put to the test to discover its impacts, check out these studies.

Gratitude as a Psychotherapeutic Intervention

This paper by Robert A. Emmons and Robin Stern describes how gratitude can have a very positive impact on patients and clients in therapeutic **relationships**.

The authors also outline several different methods of **applying gratitude interventions** to adults, including keeping a journal. The article includes a case study of a woman facing severe stress and multiple challenges in her life.

Susanna was suffering from thoughts of leaving her marriage, her husband's motorcycle accident, the reveal of an extramarital affair on the part of her husband, and finding out that her husband had been hiding a gambling addiction that had nearly bankrupted them.

Susanna's therapist worked with Susanna to develop a course of treatment that heavily incorporated gratitude. Her therapist encouraged Susanna to reflect on all of the things she had to be grateful for and helped her "self-right" her perspective to truly appreciate each moment in her daily life while building a new life that better suited her **strengths**, weaknesses, and her circumstances.

This treatment improved Susanna's ability to function and helped her to remain emotionally available to her children and more self-aware.

The authors end by noting the ways that gratitude interventions differ from most other types of interventions.

First, the prosocial and relational nature of gratitude can build unique pathways to happiness and well-being. Gratitude is also a fulfilling practice, facilitating appreciation of both the current moment and one's past.



Using a Gratitude Intervention to Enhance Well-Being in Older Adults

This article utilized the “three good things” exercise to enhance gratitude in adults 60 years and older. This exercise involves writing down three good things you have to be grateful for each day, generally at night.

The study was conducted on a group of 88 healthy adults aged 60 or over and lasted for 45 days. Results showed that this gratitude intervention improved well-being via **flourishing**, at multiple points throughout the duration of the study. Perceived stress also decreased over the first 15 days.

This intervention was effective whether administered via paper or online and showed that gratitude journaling can have a significant positive effect on older adults.

Gratitude and Well-Being: The Benefits of Appreciation

This piece by Randy A. Sansone and Lori A. Sansone explores the effects of gratitude on well-being. The authors describe several studies that have provided evidence of a link between these two constructs.

For example, the authors describe three journaling methods for investigating these effects undertaken by researchers Emmon and McCullough, including one group that journaled about negative events or hassles in life, one group that journaled about things they were grateful for, and one group that journaled about neutral life events. The group focusing on things they were grateful for reported significantly higher well-being than the other two groups.

Another study pitted a group who completed the “counting one’s blessings” exercise, in which participants wrote about things they were grateful for or for which they felt blessed at the end of each week, against a group who identified challenges or hassles in life and a control group. Those who counted their blessings seemed to experience a boost in well-being.

The authors conclude that gratitude can be an effective way to enhance well-being, and suggest **several exercises** that can be used as interventions in therapy, including:

- Journaling about things for which to be grateful
- Thinking about someone for whom you are grateful
- Writing and/or sending a letter to someone for whom you are grateful
- Meditating on gratitude
- The “count your blessings” exercise
- Practicing saying “thank you” and really meaning it
- Writing thank you notes
- If you are religious, incorporating your gratitude in prayer

Gratitude in the Classroom

If you'd like to build gratitude in your children or the children you teach or mentor, try these suggestions:

1) Create a classroom gratitude book for each child to take home and add a page of pictures and descriptions of what they're grateful for. Switch out each week so every child has the opportunity to add a page.

2) Take a picture of each student holding a large piece of paper with one thing they are grateful for written on it, frame the picture, and send it home as a gift.

3) Create a gratitude collage or bulletin board, with pictures of things each student is grateful for.

4) Have each child write down something they are thankful for on strips of paper, and use the strips to create a gratitude chain, which can be hung around the classroom.

5) Hold a "Special Friends Day" before Thanksgiving, in which each student brings someone special to class.



Each pair will write or draw something they are thankful for, which will be posted on a bulletin board.

6) Have the children create gratitude surprise sticky notes. Hand these sticky notes out to students and have them write down something they're grateful for in regards to someone else around the school, then encourage them to "deliver" the note to that person's locker, mailbox, or classroom door.

Gratitude Exercises for Children

The website www.blissfulkids.com also provides some popular gratitude exercises that can help develop gratitude in children. The top three gratitude exercises according to Chris Bergstrom and Blissful Kids are:

The Gratitude Journal. Provide your child with a journal and encourage them to write down five things they are grateful for each day. Bedtime is a great time to practice this exercise since children will have the whole day from which to choose what to write about.

The ABCs of Gratitude. Have your child sit comfortably and close their eyes. Tell them to list things they are grateful for, beginning with “A” and working all the way through the alphabet to “Z.” Don’t be surprised if this exercise gets a little silly – it’s bound to get silly at some point, so just embrace it and enjoy the laughter with your child!

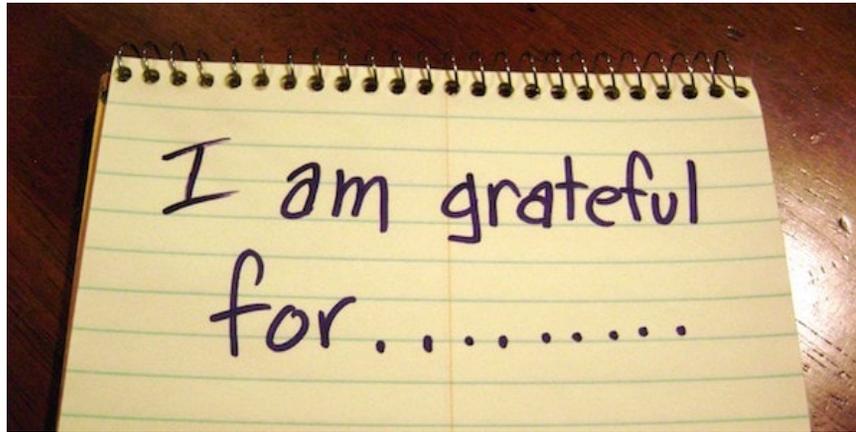
Bedtime Thank Yous. This can be incorporated into the gratitude journal or practiced as a standalone exercise. Help your child to think of happy things that happened to them during their day. They can simply say these things aloud, write them down in their journal, draw a picture of them, or simply think of them. This exercise can ensure that your child drifts off to sleep with a heart full of love and gratitude.

How to Develop Your Own Gratitude Ritual

Creating a gratitude ritual can be tough, just as starting any new habit can be difficult to stick with at first. Like most other practices, the more you do it, the easier it will get.

Try these tips to help you cultivate a fulfilling and impactful gratitude ritual:

1. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and take several slow, deep breaths.
2. Think of something good that has happened to you recently.
3. Think of a person or animal you love.
4. Think of an occasion when you were honored or appreciated by others.
5. Think about your present situation and what is going on in your life. (Rodrigues, 2017)



Finally, Chris Libby from www.livehappy.com provides four rituals that you can implement to build gratitude in your life.

These rituals are:

Amazing Grace. Reflect on what you are grateful for at the dinner table before you begin eating, whether alone or with your family.

Focus on the “Haves.” Instead of thinking about what you are missing, think about what you have. Write down at least three things you are grateful for each night.

The Write Stuff. Write a letter to someone you are grateful to or for, and read the letter aloud to them if possible. you can find more instructions for this exercise earlier in this piece.

Thankful Awareness. Try something new and fulfilling, such as volunteering at a food bank or soup kitchen, or handing out toys at a children’s hospital. Witnessing the trials and challenges of others can often be a spur for you to notice the good things in your own life. (Libby, 2016)

The “gratitude muscle” is like any other muscle, in that it must be flexed periodically to remain strong.