

# Gratitude Journals: A Closer Look

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As one of the most studied topics in the current research surrounding **happiness**, there is no doubt that practicing **gratitude** can improve a person's **well-being** in many ways. If you are new to the science of gratitude and the benefits it can offer, I would highly recommend visiting the **Positive Psychology Program section on gratitude** and exploring the many articles there. You can get a great overview of why gratitude is so effective and the many ways that you can incorporate it into your life.

There are so many ways to cultivate gratitude, and the most effective interventions are always the ones that resonate with you the strongest and fit with your lifestyle. However, as one of the most popular, studied, and validated methods, the gratitude journal is one you can't go wrong with. Using it can help you increase your personal levels of gratitude and thereby gain a plethora of other benefits, ranging from increased happiness to better sleep quality (Emmons, McCullough, Lyubormirsky).

## What Is A Gratitude Journal

The gratitude journal is one of the quickest and easiest methods to increase your day to day levels of happiness and access the benefits of having more gratitude in your life. Conceptually, the gratitude journal is fairly simple. Keep a journal, either online or physical, and write own things that you are grateful for on a regular basis.

It is extremely effective as it allows you to focus on the positive things in your life and opposes our natural tendency to only notice the things that are not going well. A useful analogy to consider here is riding a bike. When you are riding against the direction of the wind, this headwind is very noticeable as it is consistently hindering your progress. Conversely, the tailwind, which pushes in your direction, is pleasantly welcomed at first, but soon forgotten as it fades out of your attention.

This phenomenon is similar to what typically happens in our life experiences and a gratitude journal simply helps us to acknowledge the tailwind which is constantly pushing us forward. With that said, it is useful to know how to set up a gratitude journal so that you can get the most use out of it.

## How to Use It

Before starting, it is important to understand that there is no "right way" to keep a gratitude journal. It will take a bit of experimentation to figure out what works best for you, and these are simply guidelines based on what research by experts have found to work for the greatest amount of people.

The first thing to do is to find a place where you can consistently record your sentiments of gratitude. I provide some recommendations below, but for now, let's assume you are using a traditional notebook. Then, set aside about 15 minutes when you can do this exercise undisturbed. You may finish much faster, but it is important to remember to not just go through the motions

u may finish much faster, but it is important to remember to not just go through the motions with this exercise. It is the emotional connection to what you write that brings out the true power of this exercise. When you are ready, write down five things that you experienced in the last week that you are grateful for. You can write about anything, ranging from minor occurrences such a good song playing on the radio, to profound acts of kindness.

It is typically recommended to keep your entries brief in the following format:

I am grateful for/that/to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

The method is fairly straightforward, but here are some tips to help you get the most out of your experience.

- Be specific and detailed. Though the entries are meant to be kept brief, recounting a specific moment really helps in feeling gratitude as it allows you to visualize much more clearly. For example, instead of saying "I am grateful for my family because they are always there for me", say "I am grateful that my mom supported my decision to change majors even though she doesn't agree with it because it let me know that she will be there for me no matter what".
- Focus on people instead of things. It is alright to mention things and occurrences, but gratitude focused towards others usually yields the greatest benefits. It is alright to mention certain people more than once, but make sure to draw a distinction between the things you are grateful to them for.
- Remember the bad things that you avoided. These are typically the easiest to forget and can be some of these "dodged a bullet" moments can be our biggest blessings.
- On the same note, think about how your life would be different without certain things. This can also reveal how many of the things that you take for granted may be far more important than you realize.
- Think of the things that were unexpected. These are usually the quickest to come to memory and are the things that bring out the strongest feelings of gratitude.

## An Example

Here is an entry of mine from a few days ago to help you get started:

1. I am grateful that my friends traveled all the way to Los Angeles to visit for the long weekend even though we have not been in touch because it shows me that they still value my friendship.
2. I am grateful that I did not get a parking ticket even though I parked longer than the maximum time on the meter because the financial burden from a ticket could interfere with my upcoming vacation plans.
3. I am grateful that my friend helped me set up my business website because it would have taken me a lot longer without his support and because it shows me that he cares about my success.
4. I am grateful that my life circumstances provide me with the opportunity to freely pursue my dreams and create the life that I want because so many people do not have that privilege.
5. I am grateful to my barber for being so inspired by what he does because it rekindled my passion for my current pursuits.

## Resources

You are free to keep a gratitude journal in whatever format is most comfortable to you. Most people opt for either a physical notebook or a series of notes on their computer/phone. The Greater Good Science Center, based in Berkeley, California conducts and consolidates a lot of the research on gratitude and has created a great tool for new practitioners. **Thx4** is an online, shareable gratitude journal, which sends you automatic reminders and asks questions before each session to help assess your mindset going into the session.

For those who are motivated by accountability, KindSpring holds a 21-day gratitude challenge, which can be a great way to start practicing with others.

Furthermore, the free edX course "The Science of Happiness" offers an in-depth look at the gratitude journal, including a lot of the actual research showing its benefits.

## Concluding Notes

One of the most argued points about gratitude journals is how often you should use them. While the truest answer is to find what works for

you, which can make it difficult to choose a starting point.

Prominent studies have been conducted by leading researchers in the field studying the benefits of writing in a gratitude journal once a week and three times a week over the course of 10 weeks, as well as daily over the course of 2 weeks. The results show that the greatest benefits were seen when doing this exercise either once a week, or every day.

Three times a week was found to be too many and produced diminishing returns, as the students tested became bored, ran out of things to say, or just started going through the motions. However, a daily practice was still effective, perhaps as it became ingrained into a way of thinking or possibly because the study was only for two weeks.

With some experimentation, it should be pretty easy to see what works for you. This is a very powerful practice and as long as you are remembering to be grateful on a consistent basis, I'm sure you will see results pretty quickly. Good luck on your gratitude journal and post your experiences in the comments below!

## References

*Marsh, Jason. "Tips for Keeping a Gratitude Journal." Greater Good. N.p., 17 Nov. 2011. Web. 25 Jan. 2016.*

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