

How saying “thank you” can  
have positive effects on your health  
and the well-being of others

# The Power of Gratitude

BY LISA FIELDS

**LAST YEAR, I FELT COMPELLED** to bake brownies for complete strangers to say thank you.

I’d had to call 911 because I found my partner unconscious on the floor. Within minutes, a police cruiser and ambulance arrived, filled with first responders who whisked my partner away to the emergency room, where he received the critical care that he needed. ➤➤



A week later, still marveling at the impact of a handful of strangers, I wrote thank-you notes to those helpful first responders and baked for them. It was a small gesture with a big impact. When I dropped off still-warm brownies at the police station and firehouse, they thanked me for delivering gifts. Thanking me? All I'd done was bake; they'd saved a life.

I drove away feeling light and happy, partly because I'd done a good deed, but mostly because I was amazed that there are selfless people who do life-saving work and expect nothing in return.

Later, I realized that my natural high might have been more than what it seemed. Research has shown that

sharing thoughts of gratitude and performing acts of kindness can boost your mood and have other positive effects on your health.

"We know from studies in the literature that gratitude does have a good impact on happiness, that it increases life satisfaction," says Willibald Ruch, a psychology professor at the University of Zurich who does research on the effects of character strengths like gratitude and humor. "It's among the top five predictors of happiness."

You can make positive changes in your own life by choosing to embrace

gratitude. Here's how:

### A good-for-you sentiment

When you feel thankful for things you've received or something that's happened, that's gratitude. It's impossible to feel it in a vacuum; others are always responsible, whether they're loved ones, strangers or a higher power. "Gratitude is how you relate to

others, when you see yourself in connection with things larger than yourself," Ruch says.

Today, many people don't stop to appreciate what they have, much less express gratitude. Our instant-gratification lifestyle may be to blame.

"With commercial and social media, everything is speeding

the younger generation to make them feel that they are the center of the universe," says Tamiko Zablith, founder of the London-based etiquette consulting firm Minding Manners. "If it's all about them, why thank others?"

Why not thank others? Studies have shown that people who express gratitude increase their happiness levels, lower their blood-pressure levels, get better-quality sleep, improve their relationships, have a positive impact on their depression levels and are less affected by pain. And gratitude's positive effects are long-lasting. Canadian



researchers found that people who wrote thank-you letters or performed good deeds for a mere six-week period were able to improve their mental health, decrease their bodily pain, feel more energetic and accomplish more daily tasks for up to six months.

Because gratitude is a relatively new field of study, researchers are still trying to identify its cause-and-effect relationship with various health benefits.

"We know that people who have

own legs, still being alive and living by themselves," says study author Helena Hörder, a researcher at the University of Gothenburg. "Maybe it's some kind of confidence that you can cope with this and focus on the right things."

### Making someone else's day

What about gratitude recipients? Research has confirmed that people who receive messages of thanks or acts of kindness experience positive emotions when they're singled out. "Those are



*Gratitude is how you relate to others, when you see yourself in connection with things larger than yourself.*

higher levels of gratitude also report sleeping better, but we don't really know why," says Alex Wood, professor of psychology and director of the Behavioural Science Centre at the University of Stirling in Scotland. "Is gratitude leading to better sleep? Is sleep leading to more gratitude? Or could it be some third variable that leads to both gratitude and improved sleep?"

Gratitude can benefit people during all stages of life. Swedish researchers have found that people aged 77 to 90 who choose to be thankful for what they have are less likely to dwell upon the chances that they may grow frail.

"When they can't change something, they choose gratitude and focus on what's good: Walking on their

happy surprises—you're not expecting coffee or for someone to hold the door open for you," says Jo-Ann Tsang, associate professor of psychology at Baylor University in Texas, who does gratitude research. "You're more likely to feel grateful if you receive help that's unexpected. It's different if a doorman holds the door than a stranger, because that's not their job."

When someone is the recipient of unexpected kindness or gratitude, he's more likely to return the favor or pay kindness forward. One study found that when someone is thanked, it more than doubles his chances of being helpful again, likely because he enjoys feeling socially valued.

Zablith likes the reaction she gets

when she rewards a stranger who holds the door open for her at Starbucks with his rightful place in line in front of her. "The look on his face is shock," Zablith says. "He'll be nicer to the cashier, the next person he sees at work. There's a trickle-down effect."

The give-and-take of gratitude can also deepen relationships. Studies show that when your partner regularly expresses gratitude, making you feel appreciated, you're more likely to return appreciative, grateful feelings and stay committed to each other.

ning you write them down, you experience those things more intensively. Gradually, your brain gets trained into a more appreciative mode, so the sense to be grateful increases.

"Even when our training is over, people still continue with this exercise, because they find it so rewarding. People enjoy looking up what happened a few weeks ago. It becomes a book of nice memories."

Samuel Coster of St. Louis began keeping a gratitude journal three years ago. When he was diagnosed with lym-



***If you share grateful thoughts with the person who helped you, it has the potential to bring you two closer together.***

One study found that sharing gratitude with a partner makes you feel more responsible for his well-being and more satisfied with the relationship.

"You feel closer to the other person, and they feel closer to you," Tsang says. "That creates an upward spiral."

### **Gratitude 101**

If you aren't particularly grateful, you can learn to be. People who are instructed to keep gratitude journals, in which they write down three positive things that happen to them each day, cultivate gratitude over time.

"People at the beginning have some difficulty with what good things happened," Ruch says. "But if every eve-

phoma a year later, it helped carry him through his illness.

"Gratitude training certainly came to my aid during the dark times," Coster says. "Did I get cancer? Yep. Did I also get to hang out with my family way more, gain a greater appreciation for life and get a few cool scars? Yep. And that's the part I focus on."

### **Expressing gratitude to others**

When you share grateful thoughts with the person whom you're thankful for, everyone benefits. And the effects will last longer than you'd expect: Researchers found that people who write thank-you notes to people whom they

haven't properly thanked may boost their happiness levels and improve interpersonal relationships for up to six months.

"If you keep gratitude to yourself in a journal, it will make you happier, but if you share it with the person who helped you, it has the potential to bring you two closer together," Tsang says.

John Kralik of California experienced this first-hand. He'd been feeling depressed and discouraged whenever he took account of his life: He'd been divorced twice. He wasn't as close with his children as he wanted to be. His law practice wasn't earning money despite the grueling hours he devoted to work. At a particularly low point, he remembered his grandfather telling him, decades earlier, about the importance of gratitude. He decided to write 365 thank-you notes over 365 days, hoping for a positive change.

Immediately, he noticed his attitude and situation begin to improve. At the end of his thank-you note year he wrote a memoir about his experience, *A Simple Act of Gratitude: How Learning to Say Thank You Changed My Life*.

"I didn't need a scientific study to know that if you are grateful to people and if you learn how to accept gratitude well from other people, your life will be enriched," Kralik says. "The first effects are that you realize that you have a much better life than you thought."

I'd experienced such positive feel-

ings after writing thank-you notes to those first responders, I decided to try again. This time, inspired by Kralik, I chose someone from my past whom I'd never thanked before: The high school English teacher who had encouraged my writing more than any other teacher I'd ever had. I hadn't seen him in 25 years, so I wasn't sure if I'd be able to locate him, but I did. He's in his 80s, living in a warm retirement town.

I spent an evening honing my letter, thanking him for the guidance and support that he'd given me years earlier. I may never hear back from him, but that isn't the point. By taking time to put into words the impact that my teacher had on my life and my career, I became infinitely more grateful and appreciative of what I've achieved in life, and I've been riding that burst of positivity for weeks. ■