Count What Counts

What the Research Says About Gratitude, Wellbeing and Relationships

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2026 Edition | Free chapters 1 to 3

Chapter 1: Counting Blessings

The best-known gratitude exercise is simple: write down what you are thankful for. One of the first experiments to test it compared it with writing about hassles and about neutral things.

WHAT THE STUDIES DID

The authors examined the effect of a grateful outlook on psychological and physical well-being. In the first two studies, people were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: writing about hassles, listing things they were grateful for, and either neutral life events or social comparison. They then kept weekly (Study 1) or daily (Study 2) records of their moods, coping behaviours, health behaviours, physical symptoms and overall appraisals of life. In a third study, people with neuromuscular disease were randomly assigned to a gratitude condition or a control condition (Emmons and McCullough, 2003, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology).

WHAT THEY FOUND

The gratitude groups showed higher well-being on several, though not all, of the outcome measures across the three studies compared with the comparison groups. The effect on positive feelings appeared to be the most robust finding. The authors suggest that a conscious focus on blessings may have emotional and interpersonal benefits.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

The key phrase is several, though not all. Gratitude lists helped some measures and not others, and the clearest gain was in positive feelings. The study compared gratitude with several kinds of other writing, which is a stronger test than comparing with nothing.

LIMITS

The abstract gives no sample sizes or effect sizes. The effects were in some measures only, and the third study involved people with one particular illness. Self-reported mood is not a medical outcome. This book is general education and not treatment. Later chapters report reviews that test this early finding more strictly.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the studies.

Write a short gratitude list. Three to five items.

Be specific. "My neighbour fixed my gate" beats "my neighbours".

Do it at a regular time, such as the evening.

Rate your mood from 1 to 10 before and after, for two weeks.

Compare with a week of listing what annoyed you, if you are curious.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A woman writes three things each evening for two weeks: a colleague's help, a good meal and a message from her sister. She rates her mood 5 on the first evening and 6 by the end. She also notes it was a quiet fortnight. It is her own record, not a study result.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Tonight, list three specific things you are grateful for and why each happened. Rate your mood from 1 to 10 before and after.

KEY POINTS

In three experiments, people who listed blessings showed higher well-being on several, though not all, measures than comparison groups, and the clearest effect was on positive feelings. The abstract gives no sample sizes.

Chapter 2: Do Happiness Exercises Last?

A fair test of any exercise asks whether the benefit lasts. A well-known study tested five happiness exercises against a plausible control.

WHAT THE STUDY DID

The authors review the growth of positive psychology and the classification of character strengths. They then describe a study of psychological interventions that increase individual happiness: a six-group, random-assignment, placebo-controlled Internet study in which they tested five purported happiness interventions and one plausible control exercise (Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005, American Psychologist).

WHAT THEY FOUND

Three of the five interventions lastingly increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms. The authors conclude that positive interventions can supplement traditional interventions that relieve suffering.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Not every exercise worked: three of five did. The effects were described as lasting, and the study had a placebo-style control exercise, which makes it more convincing than a simple before-and-after.

LIMITS

The abstract does not name the five interventions, the number of participants or the length of follow-up, and it does not say whether a gratitude exercise was among the three that worked, so we do not claim it. The participants took part over the Internet, and may differ from the wider population. The depressive symptoms measured were scores on a questionnaire. Exercises like these do not replace treatment. If you are depressed, a doctor or counsellor can help.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the study.

Try an exercise for a fixed trial period, such as two weeks, then judge it.

Choose one that suits you. Not all work for everyone.

Compare with a plain control. Writing about your day is a fair comparison.

Check again after a month to see whether the gain lasts.

Keep a note of your mood on the same days each week.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A reader tries a one-week gratitude list, then a week of plain daily summaries. Her mood scores are 6 and 5. She decides to repeat the list for another two weeks and score again. It is her own comparison, not the study.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Pick two simple exercises. Do each for a week, scoring your mood daily. Choose the one you prefer.

KEY POINTS

A six-group randomised, placebo-controlled Internet study found three of five happiness interventions lastingly increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms. The abstract does not name them or give sample sizes.

Chapter 3: A Meta-Analysis With a Reality Check

Early gratitude studies were small and often compared with nothing. A meta-analysis went back to ask what happens when the comparison group is fair.

WHAT THE ANALYSIS DID

The authors noted that an earlier qualitative review had cast doubt on how well gratitude interventions work, and had pointed to the need to look hard at the quality of comparison groups. They ran a series of meta-analyses comparing gratitude interventions with a measurement-only control, or with an alternative activity, on three outcomes: gratitude, anxiety and psychological well-being. Each analysis covered 4 to 18 studies and 395 to 1,755 people (Davis, Choe, Meyers, Wade, Varjas, Gifford, Quinn, Hook and colleagues, 2016, Journal of Counseling Psychology).

WHAT THEY FOUND

Against a measurement-only control, gratitude interventions did better on psychological well-being (d = .31; interval .04 to .58; 5 studies) but not on gratitude itself (d = .20; interval -.04 to .44). Against an alternative activity, they did better on gratitude (d = .46; interval .27 to .64; 15 studies) and on psychological well-being (d = .17; interval .09 to .24; 20 studies) but not on anxiety (d = .11; interval -.08 to .31). Looking only at well-being against an activity-matched comparison, the figure was d = .14 (interval .01 to .27; 18 studies). Gratitude interventions did as well as, but not better than, a psychologically active comparison (d = -.03; interval -.13 to .07; 9 studies).

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

The gratitude effects were small. Against doing nothing, well-being rose a little. Against another sensible activity, the gain was close to zero for well-being (d around .14) and absent for anxiety. Against a psychologically active alternative, gratitude was equal, not better.

LIMITS

Each analysis rested on a small number of studies, and many of the intervals are wide or include zero. The abstract does not name the activities used for comparison. The d values are small by the usual reading, where .2 is small. This does not show gratitude is useless; it shows that it is about as good as other positive activities.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the meta-analysis.

Treat gratitude as one good activity among several.

Choose the activity you will keep doing.

Do not expect a big change. Aim for a small, steady one.

Compare with another activity you enjoy, such as a walk or a call.

Keep your own scores.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A man compares a week of gratitude lists with a week of a short evening walk. His mood scores are 6 and 6. He keeps both, since each is cheap. It is his own comparison, not a study.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Compare gratitude lists with another pleasant routine for two weeks each, scoring mood daily.

KEY POINTS

Meta-analyses found small gains in well-being against a measurement-only control (d = .31) and against activity-matched comparisons (d = .14), none in anxiety, and no advantage over a psychologically active comparison (d = -.03). The comparison group matters.

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