

Gratitude Part 1: What is it and how do I include it in my life

Jodi Schulz, [Michigan State University Extension](#) - May 1, 2018

Gratitude is an amazing emotion! Discover what it is and how to include it in your life.

Have you ever heard others talk about gratitude, but you're not really sure what it is? You're not alone. In this series of [Michigan State University Extension](#) articles, we're going to explore what gratitude is and ideas for including gratefulness in your life, [how to write a gratitude letter](#), [health benefits of gratitude](#) and the [differences between gratitude and thankfulness](#).

[Gratitude](#) is an emotion expressing an appreciation for what one has, as opposed to what one wants, according to [Psychology Today](#). Furthermore, [Harvard Medical School](#) offers that [gratitude](#) is a thankful appreciation for what one receives – tangible or intangible – as they acknowledge the goodness in their lives.

It's simple! To be grateful you just need to consider what you have in your life that you appreciate and intentionally acknowledge that. If you're someone who feels like it may not really be that simple, let's prove that it can be that easy.

The best part about gratefulness is that you can use it on yourself and others. Everyone can do it – kids and adults! Regardless of any label (mom, boss, volunteer, old, student, etc.) you may put on yourself or others, when you choose to appreciate the things you have in life, you can integrate gratefulness into your life.

The [University of Minnesota](#) offers [ten tips](#) to fit gratitude into your life.

- **Every day, say aloud three good things that happened.** This can be a fun activity to do with your kids when you tuck them in, or around the dinner table with family, but it's also extremely powerful to express gratitude aloud when you're alone.
- **Keep a gratitude journal.** Jot down the small things from your day that mattered to you, like the few minutes of quiet time you had on your drive to work, or the fact that this afternoon's rain storm didn't flood your basement. If you're having a particularly rough day, you can look back through the pages of accumulated blessings in your life.
- **Say thanks to your partner.** Couples who express gratitude toward one another set up a powerful feedback loop of intimacy and trust, where both partners feel as if their needs are being met.
- **Cool a hot temper with a quick gratitude inventory.** One of the quickest ways to dispel the energy of a stormy mood is to focus your attention on what's good. So when you're about to lash out at someone, take a moment to

do a quick inventory of five things you're thankful for in the moment. It could be your good health, clean air, or even the recent switch to a cheaper cell-phone bill—these details will help you relax and avoid saying something you'll later regret.

- **Thank yourself.** Gratitude doesn't always need to be focused on what other people have done for you! Make sure you give yourself a thank-you for the healthy habits you've cultivated in your own life, such as eating plenty of veggies or giving yourself enough time for rest each night.
- **Use technology to send three gratitude messages a week.** Find yourself tethered to your cell phone or the internet for hours each day? Harness the power of this technology to send out some good vibes, such as a text or Facebook comment, to tell your friends why you appreciate them.
- **Savor the good moments.** If you notice you're feeling happy, stop what you're doing and pay attention for a few minutes. Notice exactly how you feel, including the sensations in your body and the thoughts you're having. Later, when you're trying to inspire gratitude, you can remember this moment and experience the benefits all over again.
- **Check for silver linings.** Even the most difficult life challenges come with some benefit—you just have to look to find them. Being sick draws the compassion of friends. Making a mistake teaches you a lesson. When things feel hard, ask yourself: What's good here?
- **Look outward, not inward.** Robert Emmons says people are more likely to feel grateful when they put their focus on others, rather than getting caught up in their own inner narratives about how things should have gone. Empathy for others can trigger a sense of gratitude, and people who have an outward focus tend to experience stronger benefits.
- **Change your perspective.** If you struggle to come up with something to feel grateful for, put yourself in the shoes of someone who is experiencing misfortunes greater than your own. Recalling a colleague who has a debilitating physical condition, for example, will inspire gratitude for your own healthy body, which you may have taken for granted otherwise.

It's pretty easy after all! And the key to gratefulness is simple too - it's practice. The more you integrate gratefulness into your life, the easier and more routine it will become. It won't take long for you to notice a change in yourself and others.

Other articles in series

- [Gratitude Part 2: Writing a gratitude letter](#)
- [Gratitude Part 3: Health benefits](#)
- [Gratitude Part 4: Gratitude versus thankfulness](#)

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Gratitude Part 2: Writing a gratitude letter

Jodi Schulz, [Michigan State University Extension](#) - May 2, 2018

Writing a letter of gratitude is a great way to show appreciation for someone that made a difference in your life.

Have you ever heard others talk about gratitude, but you're not really sure what it is? You're not alone. In this series of [Michigan State University Extension](#) articles, we're going to explore [what gratitude is](#) and ideas for including gratefulness in your life, how to write a gratitude letter, [health benefits of gratitude](#), and the [differences between gratitude and thankfulness](#).

In this article, we're going to explore how to write a gratitude letter. But before we begin, let's take a quick moment to review what gratitude is. [Gratitude](#) is an emotion expressing an appreciation for what one has, as opposed to what one wants, according to [Psychology Today](#). Furthermore, [Harvard Medical School](#) offers that [gratitude](#) is a thankful appreciation for what one receives – tangible or intangible – as they acknowledge the goodness in their lives.

Now let's look at writing a gratitude letter. If you've never done it before, that's okay! This information will help you get started right away.

Sometimes it can be difficult to start practicing gratitude by looking at ourselves and the good things in our own lives, but we can easily identify the good in others. This is a great place to start: writing a letter of gratitude to someone that made a difference in your life will bring out the strongest positive emotions within you and the person to which you're writing.

Begin by thinking about someone that has done or said something (tangible or intangible) that made a difference in your life. It can be a relative, colleague, significant other, volunteer, service worker or friend. [UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center](#), in collaboration with [HopeLab](#), launched [Greater Good in Action](#), which collects research-based methods for a happier, more meaningful life. They suggest that you take the following [steps](#) to write a gratitude letter:

1. Write as though you are addressing this person directly, ie. "Dear _____."
2. Don't worry about perfect grammar or spelling.
3. Describe in specific terms what this person did, why you are grateful to this person, and how this person's behavior affected your life. Try to be as concrete as possible.
4. Describe what you are doing in your life now and how you often remember his or her efforts.
5. Try to keep your letter to roughly one page (approximately 300 words).

Next, you should try to deliver your letter in person, if at all possible. To do this, consider the following steps:

1. Plan a visit with the recipient. Let that person know you'd like to see him or her and have something special to share, but don't reveal the exact purpose of the meeting.
2. When you meet, let the person know that you are grateful to them and would like to read a letter expressing your gratitude. Ask that he or she refrain from interrupting until you're done.
3. Take your time reading the letter. While you read, pay attention to his or her reaction as well as your own.
4. After you have read the letter, be receptive to his or her reaction and discuss your feelings together.
5. Remember to give the letter to the person when you leave.
6. If physical distance keeps you from a personal visit, try to arrange a video chat.

You may be wondering what the difference is between being grateful (writing a gratefulness letter) and being thankful (writing a thank you note). Although similar, being grateful implies that you have been affected by another person or thing, just as it is in your life. Remember that being grateful is about appreciating what one has, as opposed to what one wants. Being thankful or thanking someone often implies that you are acknowledging your thanks for something that someone has given you.

Remember that the key to gratefulness is simple - it's practice. The more you integrate gratefulness into your life, the easier and more routine it will become. It won't take long for you to notice a change in yourself and others.

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Gratitude Part 3: Health benefits

Jodi Schulz, [Michigan State University Extension](#) - May 16, 2018

The health benefits you can experience through gratitude can be amazing.

Have you ever heard others talk about gratitude, but you're not really sure what it is? You're not alone. In this series of [Michigan State University Extension](#) articles, we're going to explore [what gratitude is and ideas for including gratefulness in your life](#), how to write a [gratitude letter](#), health benefits of gratitude and the [differences between gratitude and thankfulness](#). In this article, we're going to explore some health benefits of displaying gratitude.

So often we feel those benefits at the holidays, which is when we are most likely to desire opportunities to display our gratitude. However, to feel those health benefits all year long, we must practice gratitude throughout the year. According to [Time Health](#), there are [seven health benefits of gratitude](#) that may surprise you:

1. **Gratitude can make you more patient.** [Research](#) from Northeastern University has found that people who felt grateful for little, everyday things were [more patient and better able to make sensible decisions](#) compared to those who didn't feel very gracious on a day-to-day basis.
2. **Gratitude might improve your relationship.** According to a [study in the *Journal of Theoretical Social Psychology*](#), feeling grateful toward your partner—and vice versa—can improve numerous aspects of your relationship, including feelings of connectedness and overall satisfaction as a couple.
3. **Gratitude improves self-care.** In a [study published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*](#), researchers asked people to rate their levels of gratitude, physical health and psychological health, as well as how likely they were to do wellbeing-boosting behaviors like exercise, healthy eating and going to the doctor. They found positive correlations between gratitude and each of these behaviors, suggesting that giving thanks helps people appreciate and care for their bodies.
4. **Gratitude can help you sleep.** Research in the [Journal of Psychosomatic Research](#) has found that feeling grateful helps people sleep better and longer.
5. **Gratitude may stop you from overeating.** “Gratitude replenishes willpower,” says Susan Peirce Thompson, a cognitive scientist who specializes in the psychology of eating. The concept is similar to the Northeastern research that found a connection between gratitude and patience: Thompson says cultivating feelings of gratitude can boost your impulse control, helping you slow down and make better decisions.
6. **Gratitude and help ease depression.** Thompson says [experiments have shown](#) that people who partake in the “[three good things](#)” exercise—which, as the name suggests, prompts people to think of three good moments or things that happened that day—see considerable improvements in depression and overall happiness, sometimes in as little as a couple weeks.

7. **Gratitude gives you happiness that lasts.** Lots of things, from a compliment to a sugary treat, can bring little bursts of happiness. Instant gratification also goes away quickly, which leaves you craving more. Gratitude is a frame of mind that if you regularly take time to express gratitude, then you're more likely to see results.

There are many ways to practice gratitude where you'll see the health benefits. Explore "[The benefits of practicing gratitude](#)" by Kris Swartzendruber, [MSU \(Michigan State University\)](#) Extension educator, where you'll see three examples of actions you can do to improve your mood and increase your overall happiness. Additionally, Karen Pace, [MSU \(Michigan State University\)](#) (Michigan State University) Extension educator, writes about "[Practicing gratitude has positive impacts on our health and well-being](#)," where she outlines the mental and physical health benefits of practicing gratitude all year long.

Remember that the key to gratefulness is simple- it's practice. The more you integrate gratefulness into your life, the easier and more routine it will become. It won't take long for you to notice a change in yourself and others.

[Michigan State University Extension](#) offers programs such as [Stress Less with Mindfulness](#) and [RELAX: Alternatives to Anger](#) that focuses on using your mind to improve stress and chronic conditions. For more information, [contact your local MSU Extension office](#).

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Gratitude Part 4: Gratitude versus thankfulness

Jodi Schulz, [Michigan State University Extension](#) - May 16, 2018

Do you know the difference between gratitude and thankfulness? Read more to find out.

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Before we begin, let's take a quick moment to review what gratitude is. [Gratitude](#) is an emotion expressing an appreciation for what one has as opposed to what one wants, according to [Psychology Today](#). Furthermore, [Harvard Medical School](#) offers that [gratitude](#) is a thankful appreciation for what one receives—tangible or intangible—as they acknowledge the goodness in their lives.

Although the words grateful and thankful are often used interchangeably, they are actually different. In an earlier article, you may have read about the difference when you're writing to someone to let them know of your appreciation for them or something they have done: grateful (writing a [gratitude letter](#)) and being thankful ([writing a thank-you note](#)). Although similar, being grateful implies you have been affected by another person or thing, just as it is in your life.

Remember that being grateful is about appreciating what one has, as opposed to what one wants. Being thankful or thanking someone often implies you are acknowledging your thanks for something that someone has given you.

If it still seems confusing, consider these suggestions.

Thankful tends to be an automatic response like when someone holds open a door—most people automatically say thank you. Or if you drop something at the grocery store and someone picks it up for you, automatically you say thank you. Gratefulness tends to be an emotional response to reflection of an occurrence or series of occurrences that have made a difference in your life. An example might be a mentor at work who has provided support and guidance to you as you become familiar with your new position and the organization.

Actions surrounding thankfulness only last a moment. Consider when you're at a restaurant and the wait staff brings your dinner to you. Typically you say thank you and then continue in your conversation with your dinner guests or just begin eating. Gratefulness happens at a much deeper level and has feelings attached to

it. Gratefulness grows over time. You may be grateful for a friend who encouraged you to meet your goal of going back to school and then supported you as you took classes. You can also gain a sense of gratefulness for a neighbor who said they would help you on the weekend to cut down a tree in your yard and they followed through on their commitment to helping you.

Your words and actions show thankfulness. Giving a high five to a youth who just crossed home base at a baseball game or waving to a neighbor who stopped their car to let you cross the street. Even yelling thank you to the mail delivery person as they place envelopes in your mailbox. Your words and actions can also show gratefulness, but with gratefulness it isn't an expected response to an action. For example, maybe you "pay it forward" at the fast food drive through because you felt grateful for the raise you just received. Or you make a meal for a neighbor who had some struggles in their life lately. Grateful words and actions happen because a feeling and a willingness to act occurred within you.

Remember that the key to gratefulness is simple—it's practice. The more you integrate gratefulness into your life, the easier and more routine it will become. It won't take long for you to notice a change in yourself and others.

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