4.

Practicing Gratitude and Positive Thinking

It is a truism that how you *think*—about yourself, your world, and other people—is more important to your happiness than the objective circumstances of your life. “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven,” John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost.* The three happiness-increasing activities in this chapter all aim to transform the way we think about our lives: making a heaven of hell, finding something to be glad about, and not sweating the small stuff.

Philosophers, writers, and great-grandmothers of times past have long extolled the virtues of the three happiness activities I describe here, expressing gratitude, cultivating optimism, and avoiding overthinking and social comparison. Such exhortations as “Try to be more optimistic,” “Don’t dwell on it too much,” and “You’d feel better if you were more appreciative” have been around for generations. So what makes them important for us today? Why should you spend your valuable time and energy in learning them, in turning them into habits? Furthermore, how do we know, first, that these habits are even learnable (as opposed to inborn) and second, that even if you could train yourself to do them, you’d be happier? The answers to these questions are found within these pages. I have selected for this book only those activities (from among many) that have been shown to be successful through science, rather than conjecture. What’s more, I describe *why* these strategies work and *how* precisely

they should be implemented to maximize their effectiveness using evidence from the latest research. In every grandmotherly bit of advice lies a kernel of truth. I've chosen the biggest kernels, established what the data show, and sought to determine for whom these truths might work best and how and why. Apply these activities to your own life, and you will harness the promise of the 40 percent solution, for such is the amount of wiggle room you have to remake yourself.

Happiness Activity No. 1: Expressing Gratitude

The expression of gratitude is a kind of metastrategy for achieving happiness. Gratitude is many things to many people. It is wonder; it is appreciation; it is looking at the bright side of a setback; it is fathoming abundance; it is thanking someone in your life; it is thanking God; it is "counting blessings." It is savoring; it is not taking things for granted; it is coping; it is present-oriented. Gratitude is an antidote to negative emotions, a neutralizer of envy, avarice, hostility, worry, and irritation. The average person, however, probably associates gratitude with saying thank you for a gift or benefit received. I invite you to consider a much broader definition.

The world's most prominent researcher and writer about gratitude, Robert Emmons, defines it as "a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life."[1] You could strive to feel grateful by noticing how fortunate your circumstances are (and how much worse they could be), by calling an old mentor and thanking him for guiding you through one of life's crossroads, by relishing moments with your child, or by recalling all the good things in your life at present. By definition, the practice of gratitude involves a focus on the present moment, on appreciating your life as it is today and what has made it so.

Expressing gratitude is a lot more than saying thank you. Emerging research has recently started to draw attention to its multiple benefits. People who are consistently grateful have been found to be relatively happier, more energetic, and more hopeful and to report experiencing more frequent positive emotions. They also tend to be more helpful and empathic, more spiritual and religious, more forgiving, and less materialistic than others who are less predisposed to gratefulness. Furthermore, the more a person is inclined to gratitude, the less likely he or she is to be depressed, anxious, lonely, envious, or neurotic.[2] All these research findings, however, are correlational, meaning that we cannot know conclusively whether being grateful actually causes all those good things

(or inhibits bad things), or whether possessing traits like hopefulness, helpfulness, and religiosity simply makes people feel grateful. Fortunately, several experimental studies have now been done that solicit expressions of gratitude from unsuspecting individuals and then record the consequences.

In the very first such set of studies, one group of participants was asked to write down five things for which they were thankful—namely, to count their blessings—and to do so once a week for ten weeks in a row.[3] Other groups of participants participated in the control groups; instead of focusing on gratitude every week, these individuals were asked to think about either five daily hassles or five major events that had occurred to them. The findings were exciting. Relative to the control groups, those participants from whom expressions of gratitude were solicited tended to feel more optimistic and more satisfied with their lives. Even their health received a boost; they reported fewer physical symptoms (such as headache, acne, coughing, or nausea) and more time spent exercising.

Other studies have prevailed on both students and adults with chronic illnesses to try the count your blessings strategy, with similar results. These studies have shown that on the days that individuals strive to express their gratitude, they experience more positive emotions (that is, feelings like interest, excitement, joy, and pride) and are more likely to report helping someone, to feel connected with others, and even to catch more hours of quality sleep.

These investigations show for the first time that expressions of gratitude are causally linked to the mental and physical health rewards that we have seen. However, the goal of this research has been to determine the extent of gratitude's *real-time* influence on positive affect and health—that is, whether you feel happier on a day that you are trying to be more grateful. My laboratory, by contrast, is interested in the question of how people can become happier over time. When my graduate students and I were deciding what to do for our very first happiness "intervention" (that is, an experiment aimed to make people happier), testing the strategy of counting one's blessings seemed like the obvious choice. Building on these findings, we conducted a new experiment, in which we measured participants' happiness levels, then implemented our gratitude intervention, and, once it was over, measured their happiness levels again immediately. The gratitude intervention was very similar to the one I just described. We directed our participants to keep a sort of gratitude journal—that is, to write down and contemplate five things for which they were grateful. Their

exact instructions were as follows: “There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. Think back over the events of the past week and write down on the lines below up to five things that happened for which you are grateful or thankful.” Five blank lines followed, headed by “This week I am grateful for:”

The participants engaged in this happiness exercise over the course of six weeks. Half of them were instructed to do it once a week (every Sunday night), and half to do it three times a week (every Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday). The things that our participants recorded covered quite a wide range, from “mom,” “a healthy body,” and “having a Valentine” to “getting tested on only three chapters for my midterm” and “AOL instant messenger.”

As we expected, our simple exercise was effective in producing higher levels of thankfulness and appreciation. More important, those participants who counted their blessings on a regular basis became happier as a result. Compared with a control group (i.e., people who did not practice any kind of exercise), the gratitude group reported significantly bigger increases in their happiness levels from before to after the intervention. Interestingly, this effect was observed only for those who expressed gratitude every Sunday night. The participants who counted their blessings three times a week didn’t obtain any benefit from it. This finding might seem puzzling at first, but we believe there is an explanation: The average person made to express his or her gratitude every Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday appeared to have become bored with the practice, perhaps finding it a chore, whereas the person made to express gratitude only once a week likely continued to find it fresh and meaningful over time. We’ll return to this specific finding later; it has important implications for *how* to carry out the gratitude activity—or any happiness-increasing activity for that matter—with success.

Eight Ways That Gratitude Boosts Happiness

It may sound corny, but the research clearly demonstrates that you *would* be happier if you cultivated an “attitude of gratitude.”[4] However, instead of your following this advice blindly, it’s important to understand why and how expressing gratitude works to make you happier. Indeed, there are no fewer than eight reasons for why I advise people to practice it.

First, grateful thinking promotes the savoring of positive life experiences. By

relishing and taking pleasure in some of the gifts of your life, you will be able to extract the maximum possible satisfaction and enjoyment from your current circumstances. When my first child was only a few months old, an older woman approached me while I was struggling with the stroller. “Your baby is so beautiful,” she said. “Appreciate this age; it goes by so fast!” At the time I was feeling overwhelmed and sleep-deprived and, to be honest, didn’t much appreciate her glib intrusion, but it had a powerful effect. Taking time to feel grateful for this small child allowed me to step outside the dreariness of my long days caring for her and to savor the magic of the small moment I shared with my daughter.

Second, expressing gratitude bolsters self-worth and self-esteem. When you realize how much people have done for you or how much you have accomplished, you feel more confident and efficacious. Unfortunately, for many people, it comes more naturally to focus on failures and disappointments or on other people’s slights and hurts. Gratefulness can help you unlearn this habit. Instead of automatically thinking, “Woe is me,” in response to any setback, the practice of gratitude encourages you instead to consider what you value about your current life or how you are thankful that things aren’t worse.

Third, gratitude helps people cope with stress and trauma. That is, the ability to appreciate your life circumstances may be an adaptive coping method by which you positively reinterpret stressful or negative life experiences.[5] Indeed, traumatic memories are less likely to surface—and are less intense when they do—in those who are regularly grateful.[6] Interestingly, people instinctively express gratitude when confronted with adversity. For example, in the days immediately after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, gratitude was found to be the second most commonly experienced emotion (after sympathy).[7]

Expressing gratefulness during personal adversity like loss or chronic illness, as hard as that might be, can help you adjust, move on, and perhaps begin anew. Although it may be challenging to celebrate your blessings at moments when they seem least apparent to you, it may be the most important thing that you can do. In one of my recent courses, I had a severely disabled older student named Brian. He has some mobility, but not much, in his hands and is able to control a wheelchair by pressing on a lever located near his shoulder with his bent right hand. One day the class was going around the room and talking about their happiest moments in life. This is what Brian said: “My happiest moment is kind of a perverse one. It was the day that I came home from the hospital, after my

accident. I felt *defiant.* I said, 'Ha! I'm still alive! I beat you!' I don't know who exactly I beat. But I felt grateful that I was home. It seemed like a little thing, but being home from the hospital after four months was so good." Echoing this perspective, sixty-seven-year-old Inger, who had been given a short time to live, described her illness this way: "When you can hear the minutes ticking and you know the buzzer is going to go off in any minute and your time will be up, you see things so clearly. You just know without a doubt where your values are and why you're alive, and you're so grateful for each moment."[8] Inger and Brian have a remarkable capacity for gratitude, a capacity that undoubtedly serves them well in both sickness and health.

Fourth, the expression of gratitude encourages moral behavior. As I mentioned earlier, grateful people are more likely to help others (e.g., you become aware of kind and caring acts and feel compelled to reciprocate) and less likely to be materialistic (e.g., you appreciate what you have and become less fixated on acquiring more stuff). To wit, an Auschwitz survivor was once described this way: "His life was rooted in gratitude. He was generous, because the memory of having nothing was never far from his mind."[9] In one study, people induced to be grateful for a specific kind act were more likely to be helpful toward their benefactor, as well as toward a stranger, even when the helping involved doing an unpleasant, tedious chore.[10]

Fifth, gratitude can help build social bonds, strengthening existing relationships and nurturing new ones.[11] Keeping a gratitude journal, for example, can produce feelings of greater connectedness with others. Several studies have shown that people who feel gratitude toward particular individuals (even when they never directly express it) experience closer and "higher-quality" relationships with them.[12] As Robert Emmons argues, when you become truly aware of the value of your friends and family members, you are likely to treat them better, perhaps producing an "upward spiral," a sort of positive feedback loop, in which strong relationships give you something to be grateful for, and in turn fortifying those very same relationships. In addition, a grateful person is a more positive person, and positive people are better liked by others and more likely to win friends.[13]

Sixth, expressing gratitude tends to inhibit invidious comparisons with others. If you are genuinely thankful and appreciative for what you have(e.g., family, health, home), you are less likely to pay close attention to or envy what the Joneses have.

Seventh, the practice of gratitude is incompatible with negative emotions and may actually diminish or deter such feelings as anger, bitterness, and greed.[14] As one psychiatrist has argued, "gratitude…dissolves negative feelings: anger and jealousy melt in its embrace, fear and defensiveness shrink."[15] Indeed, it's hard to feel guilty or resentful or infuriated when you're feeling grateful. My friend's sister is one of the few working moms I know who feel not an ounce of guilt. The reason is that she is a prodigy at asking friends and family for help and thanking them so profusely and sincerely afterward that they feel like rock stars.

Last but not least, gratitude helps us thwart hedonic adaptation. If you recall, hedonic adaptation is illustrated by our remarkable capacity to adjust rapidly to any new circumstance or event. This is extremely adaptive when the new event is unpleasant, but not when a new event is positive. So, when you gain something good in your life—a romantic partner, a genial officemate, recovery from illness, a brand-new car—there is an immediate boost in happiness and contentment. Unfortunately, because of hedonic adaptation, that boost is usually short-lived. As I've argued earlier, adaptation to all things positive is essentially the enemy of happiness, and one of the keys to becoming happier lies in combating its effects, which gratitude does quite nicely. By preventing people from taking the good things in their lives for granted—from adapting to their positive life circumstances—the practice of gratitude can directly counteract the effects of hedonic adaptation.

How to Practice Gratitude

If you learned in Chapter 3 that gratitude is one of the happiness activities that fit you best, you already have a leg up—that is, you're already motivated and willing to put in the effort and commitment it takes to become more grateful. How exactly you accomplish this is up to you; what's needed is simply to select at least *one* activity from the array of possibilities below.

Gratitude journal. If you enjoy writing, if you are good at it, or it feels natural to you, then a promising way to practice this strategy is with a gratitude journal, much like that used by my gratitude intervention participants. Choose a time of day when you have several minutes to step outside your life and to reflect. It may be first thing in the morning, or during lunch, or while commuting, or before bedtime. Ponder the three to five things for which you are

currently grateful, from the mundane (your dryer is fixed, your flowers are finally in bloom, your husband remembered to stop by the store) to the magnificent (your child's first steps, the beauty of the sky at night). One way to do this is to focus on all the things that you know to be true—for example, something you're good at, what you like about where you live, goals you have achieved, and your advantages and opportunities.[16] Don't forget specific individuals who care for you, have made contributions to or sacrifices for you, or somehow touch your life. The results of my laboratory's gratitude intervention suggested that on average, doing this once a week is most likely to boost happiness, and that's my recommendation to the majority of people. However, *on average* means that some individuals—and those may include you—may benefit most from doing this strategy on an entirely different timetable, perhaps even daily or three times a week or twice a month. You need to determine the ideal timing tailored to your lifestyle and disposition. (See Chapter 10 for more about timing.)

Paths to gratitude. The particular means by which you go about counting your blessings will depend on your individual personality, goals, and needs. Instead of writing, some of you may choose a fixed time simply to contemplate each of your objects of gratitude and perhaps also to reflect on why you are grateful and how your life has been enriched. Others may choose to identify just one thing each day that they usually take for granted and that ordinarily goes unappreciated. Alternatively, some may want to acknowledge one ungrateful thought per day (e.g., "my sister forgot my birthday") and substitute a grateful one (e.g., "she's always been there for me").[17]

Friends and family can also help foster your appreciation. One idea is to procure a gratitude partner with whom you can share your blessings list and who prompts and encourages you if you lose motivation or simply forget. Chapter 10 describes the power and potential of social (buddy) support in greater detail. Another idea is to introduce a visitor to the things, people, and places that you love. Show off your comic book collection, your favorite park, or your favorite niece. Doing this will help you see the ordinary details of your life through another person's eyes, affording you a fresh perspective and making you appreciate them as though you were experiencing them for the very first time.

Keep the strategy fresh. Another important recommendation is to keep the

gratitude strategy fresh by *varying* it and not overpracticing it. My research suggests that variety—the spice of life—is extremely important.[18] (Again, consult Chapter 10 to find out more.) For example, if you count your blessings every single day—in the exact same way, in a nonvarying routine—you may become bored with the routine and may cease to extract much meaning from it. You might instead pause to express gratitude only after particular triggers—for example, after enduring a hardship or when you are most needful of a boost. Or you may choose to write in a journal some weeks, talk to a friend other weeks, and express gratitude through art (photography, collage, watercolor) during other weeks. On the other hand, you may purposefully want to vary the domains of your life on which to focus—for example, alternately counting your blessings with respect to your supportive relationships or work life or past events or your physical surroundings or even to life itself. These techniques will help make the expression of gratitude a meaningful practice, such that it continues to bolster happiness instead of hitting a plateau.

Express gratitude directly to another. Finally, the expression of gratitude may be particularly effective when done directly—by phone, letter, or face-to-face—to another person. If there's someone in particular whom you owe a debt of gratitude, express your appreciation in concrete terms. Perhaps it's your mom, favorite uncle, or old friend; perhaps it's an old coach, teacher, or supervisor. Write him or her a letter now, and if possible, visit and read the letter out loud in person, on either a special day (birthday, anniversary, or holiday) or a random one. Describe in detail what he or she did for you and exactly how it affected your life; mention how you often remember his or her efforts. Some people find it uplifting to write gratitude letters to individuals whom they don't know personally but who have influenced their lives (such as authors or politicians) or made their lives easier (such as their postal carriers or bus drivers).

A person close to me shared this letter that he had sent to his high school English teacher, more than thirty years after being in her class. I'd like to think that this chapter on gratitude (which he had freshly read) inspired him to write it:

The main thing I want to tell you is that you were, without question, the most influential teacher I encountered at Deer Park High School, and that I am extremely grateful for the interest you took in me. You seemed to think I had something on the ball, and trust me on this, that was a minority opinion among

the school faculty. Your estimation of my abilities, inflated as it may have been, translated into a certain degree of self-confidence that served me well, I think, in the years that followed.

Perhaps more importantly, you treated me—a pretty unsophisticated 17–18 year old—as an adult, and there is nothing on earth more empowering, to a teenager, than that. Even allowing for the fact that the 1970s were very different times than these, I sometimes find myself thinking "What was she thinking?"

Martin Seligman and his colleagues tested the well-being benefits of expressing gratitude in this way.[19] They investigated a gratitude visit exercise that was completed over the course of just one week. People from all walks of life logged on to the researchers' Web site and received their instructions there. In the gratitude visit condition, participants were given one week to write and then hand deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had been especially kind and caring to them but whom they had never properly thanked. In other conditions, participants were offered alternative self-guided happiness exercises. Those participants who did gratitude visits showed the largest boosts in the entire study—that is, straightaway they were much happier and much less depressed—and these boosts were maintained one week after the visit and even one month after. These findings reveal just how powerful it is to express your gratitude directly to an important person in your life. It's an activity that you can assign yourself to do on a regular basis, perhaps mixing the writing of gratitude letters (directed at the same or different individuals) with keeping a weekly gratitude journal.

There will be times, however, when you will choose to write the letter but not to send it. Indeed, in a recent study from my laboratory, we found that simply writing a gratitude letter and not sending or otherwise delivering it was enough to produce substantial boosts in happiness.[20] Participants were asked to identify several individuals who had been especially kind to them over the past several years. Those who spent fifteen minutes once a week (over eight weeks) writing letters of gratitude to these individuals became much happier during and after the study. The happiness boost was especially pronounced if the study participants were particularly motivated to become happier, if the gratitude letter activity fitted their goals and preferences, and if they put extra effort into the writing task.

For one of the homework assignments in my psychology of happiness class, I regularly ask my undergraduate students to compose a gratitude letter. Every year it's been one of the most potent and moving exercises that they do. Last year Nicole, one of the best students in the class, described for me the experience of writing a gratitude letter to her mom:

I felt overwhelmed with a sense of happiness. I noticed I was typing very quickly, probably because it was very easy for me to express gratitude that was long overdue. As I was typing, I could feel my heart beating faster and faster…. Towards the end of the letter, as I reread what I had already written, I began to get teary eyed and even a little bit choked up. I think my expressing my gratitude to my mom overwhelmed me to such a point that tears streamed down my face.

Nicole then recalled the effects the letter had on her:

Later that week (three days after I initially wrote the gratitude letter), I was sitting in front of my computer writing a paper and I was extremely frustrated. Since I was not having much success with my paper, I felt compelled to open up my gratitude letter. I reread it and even made a few changes. Instantly, I noticed that I had a smile on my face. It was almost strange how fast my mood had shifted. I had not even looked at the letter with the intention of elevating my mood, but rather I was merely bored of my research paper, so I thought I'd just do something else. Similar to my reactions the day I actually wrote the letter, after reading it, I felt much happier and less stressed for the rest of the evening. Overall, I found that the effects of writing such a letter to be quite amazing in that the letter not only elevated my mood, but the changes were lasting.

In sum, there are multiple ways to practice the strategy of gratitude and it would be wise to choose what works best for you. *Select at least one option from this section and give it a go.* When the strategy loses its freshness or meaningfulness, don't hesitate to make a change in how, when, and how often you express yourself.

Spontaneous Gratitude: A Postscript

I am reluctant to reveal this, but although I wholeheartedly recognize its many

rewards, expressing gratitude turns out to be one of the strategies that suit me least. It's no big deal; each of us will wind up with a list of happiness activities that fit and, unavoidably, with a longer list of activities that don't fit. The important fact is that as much of a platitude as counting blessings is sometimes, it is also incredibly effective, as the scientific evidence shows persuasively. The anecdotal evidence is also hard to disregard; I know many (now happy) individuals who report that becoming grateful changed their lives.

So, this having been said, something that happened during the writing of this chapter took me by surprise. One day, after spending long hours reading through the research on gratitude, I spontaneously wrote an e-mail to all my colleagues publicly thanking our department chair for something he had done. He wrote me back immediately saying how much he appreciated my note. It felt great. And it only hit me later what had occurred: Reading about gratitude must have rubbed off, and I had unwittingly written a gratitude letter that day!

Reading Guide

If you benefit from this activity, you may also want to try:

1. Practicing acts of kindness (Happiness Activity No. 4, Chapter 4)
2. Learning to forgive (Happiness Activity No. 7, Chapter 4)

Happiness Activity No. 2: Cultivating Optimism

Looking at the bright side, finding the silver lining in a cloud, noticing what's right (rather than what's wrong), giving yourself the benefit of the doubt, feeling good about your future and the future of the world, or simply trusting that you can get through the day all are optimism strategies. Cultivating optimism has a lot in common with cultivating gratitude. Both strategies involve the habit of striving to make out the positive side of your situation. Building optimism, however, is about not only celebrating the present and the past but anticipating a bright future.