Q: How can I begin to live a life of gratitude?

A: Gratitude is defined as a feeling of thankfulness, and it has been proven to positively affect our relationships, health, careers, and overall well-being. Robert Emmons, a leading scientific expert in the field of gratitude, states there are two key components to being grateful:

1. Gratitude opens the door to more relationships. Not only does saying “thank you” constitute good manners, but showing appreciation can help you win new friends, according to a study published in Emotion. The study found that thanking a new acquaintance makes them more likely to seek an ongoing relationship.

2. Gratitude improves physical health. Grateful people experience fewer aches and pains and report feeling healthier than other people, according to a study in Personality and Individual Differences. Not surprisingly, grateful people are also more likely to take care of their health. They exercise more often and are more likely to attend regular check-ups.

Here are seven scientifically proven benefits:

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the future and we delay happiness until we have achieved certain goals. (“When I lose this weight, get this promotion, get married, buy a home, etc., then I will be happy.”) This keeps happiness forever out of reach because when we reach our goals, we quickly make new ones, propelling happiness even further down the road.

When we finally stop looking forward, we look back with regret for the moments we missed. When we take a moment to reflect on the goodness in our life, it allows us to celebrate the present moment and to savor the goodness that is available to us right now.

2. **We recognize that the source of goodness is outside of ourselves.** When we acknowledge the people, resources, and gifts that have helped us achieve the goodness in our lives, it helps to strengthen our relationships, to see how we’ve been supported and affirmed by other people, and to feel more connected.

It’s important to note that being grateful does not mean we turn a blind eye to the difficulties in life or minimize or ignore our struggles. Life can be very challenging at times, and we need to acknowledge the struggles and work through the challenges. But even in hard times, there is always something to be grateful for, even if we must dig deep to find it. When we recognize the good while going through the bad, it actually helps us to feel more hopeful, more resilient, and less alone.

A few years ago, when I was going through some very stressful, sad times, I began to keep a gratitude journal, and I noticed that on the most challenging days, my gratitude list was usually longer, as well. This practice helped me to not turn a blind eye to the difficulties in life or be so laser-focused on just the challenges and grief and was the subtle whisper of goodness and connection that kept me going.

Here are some simple steps that can help you get started on living a life of gratitude:

- **Make a commitment to begin and maintain a gratitude practice.** It can be so much easier to complain and be negative, and you will find a lot of people ready to join you under your dark cloud. Make gratitude a priority and resist the temptation to go low.

- **Take gratitude breaks throughout the day.** Take a moment to breathe, be present, and mentally list the things you are grateful for: your health, your job, the loved ones in your life, gas in your tank, food in the fridge, a place to call home … you get the idea.

- **Write it down.** There is a power in writing down the things we are grateful for and taking time to really notice them. Schedule a time of day to do your gratitude list. If you know you’ve made a commitment to write down a list daily, you’ll start to notice more readily the joys of the day and make a mental note of them to record later.

- **Notice and redirect your thoughts.** When you catch yourself complaining, challenge yourself to find the good and see how it shifts your attitude.

- **Allow yourself to be human.** Sometimes we are just looking through a dark lens and it’s hard to see the good. During those times, be kind to yourself, take care of yourself, and don’t give up! Reach out for support, and keep looking for the good, because we find what we’re looking for, and gratitude, like a warm hug, is always there waiting for us to invite it in.

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**Gratitude improves psychological health.** Gratitude reduces a multitude of toxic emotions, from envy and resentment to frustration and regret. Research by Robert Emmons, a leading gratitude researcher, confirms that gratitude effectively increases happiness and reduces depression.

**Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression.** Grateful people are more likely to behave in a pro-social manner, even when others behave less kindly, according to a study by the University of Kentucky. Study participants who ranked higher on gratitude scales were less likely to retaliate against others, even when given negative feedback. They experienced more sensitivity and empathy toward other people and a decreased desire to seek revenge.

**Grateful people sleep better.** Writing in a gratitude journal improves sleep, according to a study published in Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being. Spend just 15 minutes jotting down a few grateful sentiments before bed, and you may sleep better and longer.

**Gratitude improves self-esteem.** A study in the Journal of Applied Sport Psychology found that gratitude increased athletes’ self-esteem, an essential component to optimal performance. Other studies have shown that gratitude reduces social comparisons. Rather than becoming resentful toward people who have more money or better jobs, grateful people appreciate the accomplishments of others.

**Gratitude increases mental strength.** For years, research has shown gratitude not only reduces stress, but it may also play a major role in overcoming trauma. A study published in Behavior Research and Therapy found that Vietnam War veterans with higher levels of gratitude experienced lower rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. A study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology found that gratitude was a major contributor to resilience following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

We all have the ability and opportunity to cultivate gratitude. Rather than complain about the things you think you deserve, take a few moments to focus on all that you have. Developing an “attitude of gratitude” is one of the simplest ways to improve your satisfaction with life.

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