

LOOK WHAT I HAVE

FROM MEDITATION STUDIOS TO INSTAGRAM, WE ARE TOLD TO BE GRATEFUL FOR ALL THAT LIFE HAS TO OFFER – AND RECEIVE A MOUNTAIN OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS IN RETURN. BUT, WHILE SOUND IN THEORY, SEEING THE GLASS AS HALF FULL IS PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT ON THE DAYS YOU ARE LITERALLY CRYING OVER SPILT MILK. **MADELINE NEALE** SHOWS YOU HOW TO FEEL BETTER ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE.

Thanks. It's a word that gets thrown around on a day-to-day basis. To your boss, to the checkout chick at the supermarket, the same bartender who has served you for the past three weekends in a row (guilty). It began when we were kids, always taught to say 'ta' when someone did something for us, but what exactly is the power of saying thank you?

The term 'thank you' dates back to the 14th century and is basically a

shortening of the term 'I thank you.' Historically, gratitude has been a focus of many religions and ancient philosophers, including Cicero and Seneca, who believed appreciation was a crucially important virtue for successful civilisations. Today, we mainly use platitudes such as thanking someone to build upon social relations and make new ones, and motivate ourselves to make the most of every situation.

"Gratitude is a state of grateful appreciation and thankfulness of what is meaningful to us as individuals," says educational and development psychologist Stephanie Lau (theholidaypsychologist.com). "It cultivates positive feelings of engagement with our environment, ourselves and the people around us. It is an awareness and ability to reflect and be thankful for all the goodness in our lives."

It's no surprise that thankful people are generally more optimistic in everyday life. According to Dr Robert A. Emmons, PhD, a leading scholar on the science of gratitude, there are two stages to acknowledge in order to be the 'glass half full' kind of girl. The first is saying yes to life: we must affirm that life is good and is worth living to the fullest potential. The second stage is recognising who to thank for the goodness in our lives and what we should direct our gratitude towards; this could be a particular person or the world in general.

"Gratitude is related to optimistic thinking, which is correlated with positive emotional, social and physical health outcomes. Positive thinking is known to enhance physical and social-emotional wellness and motivation. As such, gratitude then helps us lead more productive and happier lives by being better connected to the positive things we can be thankful for within ourselves and our relationships," says Lau.

Of course, it's not all sunshine and roses 24/7: there are those days (or even

weeks) where it seems nothing is going right. And you're not alone. Research from beyondblue estimates around one in six Australian women will experience some level of depression in their lifetime, on average. In these times, it can be hard to find something to practice the gratitude we so often preach.

Nikki Thomas, performance coach and founder of Gratitude Café. Life (Gratitudecafe.life), helps those working in the corporate world to create a balanced life. She has found that gratitude is needed more than anything to remind us of what we have achieved and what we already have. "It is not saying you can't want for more, but if you are never happy or grateful for what you currently have, you'll spend your life striving and wanting instead of actually having," she says.

"If something 'unfavourable' happens to us, we are very quick to think of the negative. Instead, breathe, and then think of the positives – the things you are grateful for – take back control of the situation."

BENEFITS

SO WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE ALL SAID 'THANK YOU' A LITTLE MORE OFTEN? MANY STUDIES HAVE PROVEN THAT BEING MORE GRATEFUL CAN HAVE POSITIVE EFFECTS ON THE HUMAN BODY, BOTH PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY.

THINK: Overall Happiness: feeling more grateful on the daily enhances good feelings on the off chance an uncontrollable negative event occurs. Dr Emmons has found that practising gratitude on a daily basis can increase happiness by 25 per cent. Gratitude reduces a range of toxic emotions, including envy, resentment, frustration and regret.

PHYSICAL HEALTH: grateful people can cope with stress more effectively, have stronger immune systems and are more likely to take care of themselves by exercising often. A 2012 study published in *Personality and Individual Differences* discovered that thankful people experience fewer aches and pains than those opposed,

and are more likely to attend regular check-ups with their GP, which can contribute to a longer life span.

SLEEP BETTER: a 2011 study published in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* found that writing in a gratitude journal before bedtime improves the quality of sleep. Swap the iPad for a diary tonight and spend 15 minutes jotting down one to two grateful sentiments before you hit the hay.

SELF-ESTEEM: being thankful for what you have is proven to reduce social comparisons. Rather than ridding yourself to others who you think have a better body, more money or higher position at work than you do, grateful people are able to appreciate other people's accomplishments instead of tearing themselves down because of them.

SOCIAL WELLBEING: gratitude is a social emotion and can strengthen relationships by requiring us to notice the support and backing we have from those around us. Now that's something we can say thanks to!

#BLESSED, #THANKFUL, #LUCKY

It has become a popular practice to boast only the best parts of our lives on social media. Think perfectly positioned food shots or the time you sucked your belly in so hard trying to take that 'effortless' selfie. On Instagram alone, the hashtag #blessed has been used over 80,000,000 times as part of captions! But before you post a #thankful tweet or inspirational quote via Facebook as a way of showing gratitude, ask yourself if you really want to share such thoughts openly on a media platform you have little control over.

Pedro Diaz, founder and CEO of Workplace Mental Health Institute (wmhi.com.au), says it is up to the individual on what to post but believes there can be a nasty side to the online world. "There are people on social media that either enjoy rubbishing other people's efforts or wins or react negatively to other people feeling well. This can feel like rejection and it can be painful. It would be a shame to pollute what is intrinsically a really good exercise for your brain, nervous system and your whole body with other people's negative comments and reactions."

Lau agrees.

"Expressing your gratitude towards someone can be, and at times should be, an intimate exchange. While social media can be one way of sharing and publicising your gratitude, the public nature of this display can take away from the intimacy and private nature of gratitude sharing. It is important to consider how this may be perceived by others and whether social media helps or takes away from the intimacy of this exchange," she says.

It's no lie that we are spending more and more time online than ever before: the Australian Sensis Social Media Report for 2016 revealed that 56 per cent of us use the internet more than five times a day! And although the internet has bought us plenty of positive feelings (think the thrill of online shopping),

it's also leaving us with some pretty negative thoughts too. A report by the University of Copenhagen unveiled that excessive scrolling through social media leaves users feeling envious and can lead to a more depressed state. The study showed that lusting after celebrities or 'Instafamous' influencers who seem to 'have it all' leaves gratitude left for dust.

"We need to stop always wanting what someone else has, without enjoying what we already have in our lives. It's the main issue with happiness. People thinking they need to find it rather than realising it's within us all along," says Thomas.

To avoid social media jealousy, try reconnecting with your (actual) friends and make their posts your priority.



HOW TO BECOME MORE THANKFUL



» **USE A GRATITUDE DIARY** to reflect on the wonderful things in your life: relationships, financial freedoms, professional opportunities, personal strengths, physical health and wellbeing. "Re-evaluate and reflect on your entries," says Lau. "I like to do this with the change of each new season to track my personal and professional development."

» **MAKE SURE TO NOTICE THE LITTLE THINGS IN LIFE.** Example: 'I'm grateful for the softness of my sheets', 'I loved that I found a parking spot straight away', 'I'm thankful for this perfectly ripe avocado ready for my breakfast'.

» **DON'T AVOID THE NEGATIVE.** This may seem counteractive but remembering the bad things that have happened can help us feel more positive about where we are now. If you can look back and think of the worst times in your life, then remember that you made it through and survived, you will be able to push forward and feel more thankful for what's happening in the present. "Sometimes, circumstances may be difficult and it cannot always be possible to look on the sunny side and express gratitude for things that aren't going well," says Lau. "Developing an objective outlook and recognising where change is required is part of a balanced approach to social and emotional problem solving, and is helpful and healthy."

» **SHARE GRATITUDE** by telling someone how they have made a positive contribution to your life and what you are grateful for. This could be done in person, via email or why not try the old-fashioned way and write down your feelings in a thank you card.

» **DAILY MICRO-REFLECTIONS:** reflect on one good thing that has happened each day to use gratitude to increase feelings of positivity and happiness.

Diaz believes the best way to feel more grateful is to practise daily and use the positive feelings as motivation. "The more you practise gratitude, the more the parts of your brain that scan for good things in life get activated, while those parts of your brain that look for negative things shrink. In a literal sense, a brain trained in gratitude loses some of its ability for negativity and permanently gains the benefits that come from a more optimistic outlook," he says.

For Lau, simple acts can enhance our general wellbeing and assist in stress management. "For example, by embracing a positive outlook and reflecting on the things we can be grateful for, we are less likely to adopt negative thinking patterns which bias the way we interpret our environment, relationships and daily stressors. By controlling our thoughts and developing positive, helpful thinking patterns, we can improve our overall feelings of happiness." ■