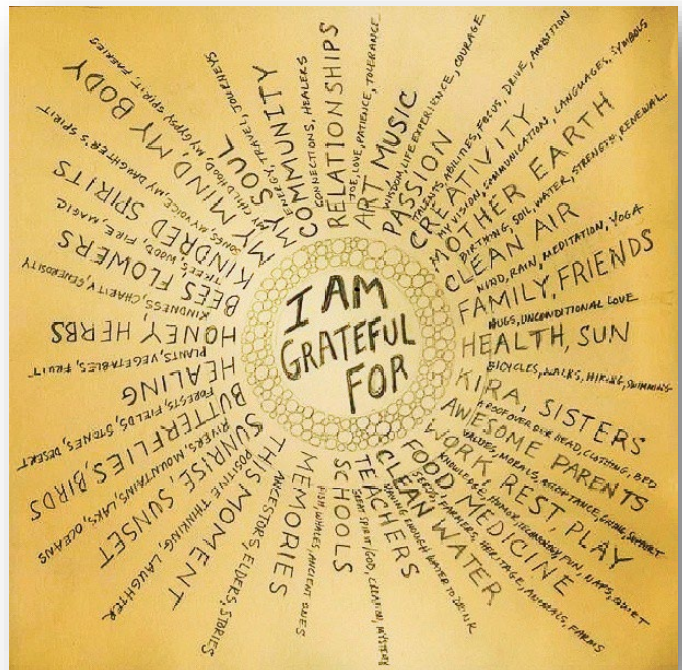


GRATITUDE: the amazing power of changing your lens on life

When I worked for a large asset manager I was very involved in their wellbeing programmes, one of which was our healthy, free canteen meals. Occasionally there would be an entitled comments regarding our offerings. I remember one day drafting a group wide email in response to one of these requests, laying out the rationale for the healthy meals and the huge cost incurred per annum by the company. I luckily mentioned this to my COO who stopped me from sending out the email. Instead he came up with a much wiser solution: we would bring our own lunches for a week and the cost of the company meals would be donated to charity. The logic being that when we had to make our own lunches, people would quickly appreciate the nutritious warm meals provided daily. He was spot on and we got the additional win of community outreach as well. That's why he, not I was COO. But it talks to a deeper issue around gratitude, and that is we often experience gratitude begrudgingly (like the email I almost sent), when its best served with heart-felt sincerity. It is also sometimes weaponized to make people feel guilty about what they are genuinely struggling through, when an acknowledgement and processing of these underlying feelings could be helpful to growth.



How gratitude actually works at a physiological/psychological level:

In [2008](#), [scientists](#) first used fMRI to study gratitude. They found that gratitude causes synchronized activation in multiple brain regions and lights up parts of the brain's reward pathways and the hypothalamus. In short, just like Prozac, gratitude can boost the neurotransmitter serotonin and activate the brain stem to produce dopamine.

In 2009, [National Institute of Health](#) researchers found that subjects who showed more gratitude overall had higher levels of activity in the hypothalamus. This is significant because the hypothalamus has a major influence on your metabolism and stress levels. By reducing the

stress hormones and managing the autonomic nervous system functions, gratitude significantly reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety. At the neurochemical level, feelings of gratitude are associated with an increase in the neural modulation of the prefrontal cortex, the brain site responsible for managing negative emotions like guilt, shame, and violence.

On a psychological level, a grateful mindset is more likely to encourage help-seeking behaviour. "Grateful people are more likely to seek support, utilise the resources available to them and approach problems directly and with a positive outlook. They also try to find the potential for learning and growth." says [Dr. Nejad](#). "Because grateful people use effective coping skills, they are less stressed when problems arise."

Gratitude amplifies the savouring and appreciation of the good events gone by (their intensity, their frequency, and the tag lines the memories have), and rewriting history by forgiveness loosens the power of the bad events to embitter (and actually can transform bad memories into good ones).

Why gratitude helps us thrive?

Notwithstanding my gratitude bumbles, gratitude changes the aperture through which we see the world, allowing us to savour things, leading to a range of benefits at an individual, group and organization level...

Individual benefits:

Gratitude improves physical health.

- [Grateful people sleep better](#). Hypothalamic regulation triggered by gratitude helps us get deeper and healthier sleep naturally every day. [Gratitude practices](#) reduce cardiac diseases, inflammations, and neurodegeneration significantly.

Gratitude promotes psychological health.

- Gratitude improves self-esteem. Studies have shown that gratitude reduces social comparisons. Rather than becoming resentful toward people who have more money or better jobs, a major factor in reduced self-esteem, grateful people can appreciate other people's accomplishments. A [study](#) showed that participants who felt more grateful and practiced gratitude journaling, were found to be happier and emotionally stronger than others. Gratitude may enhance peace of mind, reduce rumination and [depressive symptoms](#).

Gratitude increases resilience.

- A [study](#) found that gratitude was a major contributor to resilience following the terrorist attacks on September 11 2001. Recognizing all that you have to be thankful for, even during the worst times, fosters resilience. Another [study](#) found that participants who felt grateful showed a marked reduction in the stress hormone cortisol. They had better cardiac functioning and were more resilient to emotional setbacks and negative experiences.

Group benefits:

- Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression. Grateful people are more likely to behave in a prosocial manner, even when others behave less kindly. Research suggests that more grateful people may also have more neural hallmarks of altruism. A [recent study](#) found that people with more trait gratitude appeared to have more altruistic brains, as shown by the response of their VMPFC and other brain areas associated with feelings of reward, when they were told that a charity would receive money.

Organisational benefits:

- [Grateful workers](#) are more efficient, more productive, and more responsible. Expressing gratitude in the workplace is a proactive step toward building interpersonal bonds. Gratitude research at work indicates people have [more positive emotions](#), [less stress and fewer health complaints](#), a [greater sense that we can achieve our goals](#), [fewer sick days](#), and [higher satisfaction with our jobs](#) and [our co-workers](#).

[Melody Beattie](#) summed it up nicely: "Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, and confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow." The same can be said for my recent article on [Spiritual Fitness](#).

What stops us from expressing gratitude?

[Dispositional gratitude](#) was found to be negatively associated with both materialism and envy. Because envy and materialism involve dwelling on what we do not have, they may be antithetical to gratitude, making it difficult for people to be grateful and envious at the same time. Narcissism may be another potent inhibitor of gratitude. Another factor that may prevent people from feeling gratitude as often is "headwind/tailwind asymmetry." Seven studies

showed that when people are more aware of the barriers they have faced (their so-called headwinds) than the benefits that they have enjoyed (their tailwinds), they experience less gratitude.

In the corporate world I have heard a variety of excuses for non-recognition (and by extension not exhibiting gratitude), which include:

"The workplace is tough, and it will lose its meaning if I recognise too much." At a rugby game/soccer match do we applaud at the end or when someone scores? There is a reason the home team normally wins (because someone is cheering for them.)

"I don't have time to recognise and it won't make a difference anyway." It's a key part of your job, we are all busy. Do you feel good when recognised? So will they! The reality is that [people](#) who practice expressing gratitude at work are more likely to volunteer for more assignments, be more willing to take an extra step to accomplish their tasks, and happily work as a part of the team. Also, managers and supervisors who feel grateful and remember to convey the same, have a stronger group cohesiveness and better productivity. They recognize good work, and actively communicate with their team members.

OR a variation of the previous theme: *"Professionals do not need recognition, if I need to recognise them then I have hired the wrong people."* Intrinsic motivation is key, but people need extrinsic proof of accomplishment. It's a competitive market, recognition costs almost nothing but is highly valued. Gratitude makes a leader compassionate, considerate, empathetic, and loved. Not a bad outcome, if you believe leadership requires followership!

"It's awkward and people say they would be embarrassed if I recognise them." Vast majority of people like gratitude, it meets a universal need (thinks Maslow's top 3 hierarchy of needs into self-actualisation, esteem, love and belonging). If we are brutally honest, the reason why sometimes we resist providing gratitude is because we are already feeling guilty as we know we should have been doing this more often, and are now on the defensive!!

How grateful are you?

The preeminent gratitude researchers, Emmons and McCullough define gratitude as: *"Associated with a personal benefit that was not intentionally sought after, deserved, or earned but rather because of the good intentions of another person."*

So how grateful are you?

This Gratefulness Questionnaire was developed by Michael McCullough and Robert Emmons. Using the scale below as a guide, choose a rating for each statement to indicate how much you agree with it.

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = slightly disagree 4 = neutral
5 = slightly agree 6 = agree 7 = strongly agree

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.							
2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.							
3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.							
4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.							
5. As I get older, I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.							
6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.							

Scoring instructions:

I.	Add up your scores for items 1, 2, 4 and 5.
II.	Reverse your scores for items 3 and 6. That is, if you scored a "7" , give yourself a "1", if you scored "6" give yourself a "2".
III.	Add the reversed scores for items 3 and 6 to the total from Step 1. This is your total score. This number should be between 6 and 42.

Based on a sample of 1224 adults, here are some benchmarks. If you scored below 35 you are in the bottom quarter, between 36-38 you are in the bottom half, if you are between 39-41 you are in the top quarter, and if scored above 42 you are in the top eighth of the people who took the survey.

For some of you your scores will be surprising (and not in a good way). However, self-awareness is not enough. You need to convert this awareness into tangible actions and repeat over time for these gratitude habits to become embedded.

Creative ways to express gratitude

I remember several years back I was standing in the check-out queue of my local supermarket and I spied my high school athletics/history teacher. I proudly told my kids how hard he drove us at practice. I must have been talking too loudly, because he overheard my comments and said: "Is that what you remember?" It wasn't, he had shown real belief in me, helping me succeed both on the sports field and in the classroom, by expecting a lot but putting a lot in as well. I got hold of his email address and wrote him a long, heartfelt letter of gratitude, from a boy who had no father. As luck would have it, I bumped into him a couple of weeks later by accident, and when he saw me this hard as nails Afrikaner eyes welled up....it's never too late to show gratitude to those that have helped you on your journey.

If showing gratitude is difficult then progressively build your comfortableness. Below is a graduated progression that you can apply as you ease into it...

- **Mindful gratitude:** start and end the day with a gratitude ritual. Expand your awareness of your inner thoughts. Listen to them as they drift by but let them keep on drifting right out of your mind. Observe as new thoughts come in, and refrain from judgement or "should"-ing. Cultivate gratitude for your awareness, for your thoughts, and for the incredible ability to think. Expand your awareness to include your 5 senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight. Notice what each sense picks up independently, savour them. Whilst this exercise is a great way to start and end the day, you can do it anytime, its simple, quick and not geography dependent, and that's its super-power.
- **Gratitude journal.** Be detailed, focussing on the people involved and less on things, savour the surprises and look for new things/or new aspects in your daily life. When capturing your ideas ask yourself these questions:
 - Three good things that happened to me in the last couple of days were...
 - Something good that I saw someone do
 - I have had fun in the last couple of days... ..
 - Something I accomplished in the last couple of days....(plus who helped you.)

[Research](#) seems to indicate that we get maximum benefit when we complete our gratitude journal three times a week not every day, as we savour the surprises and don't become numb to the experience.

- **Gratitude jar:** three times a week write in your gratitude journal what you are thankful for. Then every week remove and place these insights in a large jar. Noting how the jar fills up. Once every 2 months open-up the gratitude comments and read them. Start the jar afresh.
- **Gratitude tree:** have a living tree where you hang gratitude notes on the branches. Get the whole extended family/friends involved at a weekend lunch to add to the tree. As an extension of the gratitude jar exercise, you can take those thoughts and add to the gratitude tree and start the jar afresh...you get a double win of the experiences as you unfurl them, re-read them and then place them on the tree. The tree can also be a handmade poster, with real oak leaves (due to their size they work well), then you pin them on the poster, refresh as and when you like.
- **Gratitude chats:** connect either in person or over WhatsApp, Zoom etc. with a gratitude buddy once a week. It can be your spouse, your kid, or your friend(s) at work. Set aside time where you sit together and discuss the things you are thankful for. Ask probing questions of each other and open-up informally. Sharing thoughts of gratefulness with someone is a great way to sustain motivation and strengthen your emotional skills.
- **Gratitude gifting.** Help others by giving something away. Society sets great store on material possessions as a hallmark of success. Unfortunately, we become defined and weighted down with our possession obsessions. Liberate yourself, give away something of value to somebody in need, with no expectation of favour. Anonymous giving can be especially powerful.
- **Gratitude letters and visits:** you write, and hand deliver a letter of gratitude to someone truly deserving whom you had never properly thanked. Recall and write down what the person did in great detail, how they said it, how they behaved towards you. Remember how it made you feel then and how it makes you feel now. Harness this gratitude as you write the letter. In the letter explain in detail what they did for you, what it meant to you, and what the outcome was. It doesn't matter if the person knows your personal circumstances well. Handwritten notes are more personal. Read it to them. A [number of studies](#) have tested variations of the gratitude letter/visit intervention. This exercise can be very emotional and can have a significant impact on both people, embrace it!
- **Gratitude visits for people that are no longer here.** The person expressing the gratitude sits across from an empty chair. They express their gratitude verbally to a recipient as if that person were sitting in the chair. This could be for example someone who has passed away. Then, in a bit of role-playing, the person giving the gratitude then takes

on the role of the recipient. This exercise is also great in a group setting because multiple people can experience the positive sense of elevation flowing through the room simultaneously. We get buoyed by this and are moved emotionally.

How to implement gratitude company-wide

The practice of gratitude, and its close sibling, appreciation, has started to permeate [workplaces](#), from new [software companies](#) to older institutions like Campbell Soup, whose former CEO [wrote 30,000 thank you notes](#) to his employees.

Cultivating gratefulness at work can be a challenging undertaking, but [Prof Ryan Fehr](#) (2019) has *three research-backed tips for a grateful workplace*. They are:

1. Build a gratitude habit (rituals, practices, etc.)
2. Draw from many resources (appreciation programs, interventions, helping others, others helping us, building skills etc.)
3. Guard against negative emotions (envy, excessive pride, and anger)

Some practical work gratitude ideas:

Grateful start-up meeting. Instead of starting a meeting with introductions or project updates, ask people to share something they are grateful for. This not only helps people get to know each other, they will also become more present and less stressed because it actually shifts our biology, lowering blood pressure and releasing dopamine and oxytocin.

High tech to no tech: use online tools or smartphone apps for co-worker appreciation. Or use the notice board to really get NOTICED, by stocking it with colourful note paper, pics and pens for ongoing expression.

Old school handwritten notes: by using thank-you notes. Written notes are so rare these days that they have become highly valued. I did this in my previous asset management company and those cards were still displayed months later on people's desks, no file 13 for them!

Connect the dots: leaders should talk about the successes of the organization and the impact it's having in the world. One way to do this is through "voice of the customer" programs, which can be as simple as posting customer letters on a bulletin board to creating elaborate video documentaries about customer stories.

Be the difference: organizations can support employee volunteerism and demonstrate real corporate responsibility through participation events. The goal is to help every employee see the good work they participate in. We did Habitat for Humanity builds in disadvantaged

neighbourhoods. It was the most memorable non-work, talked about event on teams calendars, way more than the paid weekend-aways, spa treatments and fancy dinners we lavished on them. In fact, gratitude and kindness seem to form a positive loop in the workplace. Just as gratitude leads to altruistic behaviour, research suggests that the opportunity to help others and serve a cause is one of the major sources of gratitude at the office.

In conclusion:

Pioneering psychologist Abraham Maslow, identified self-actualizers (the highest level in his hierarchy of needs) as having the capacity to "appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life with awe, pleasure, wonder and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others." Before his death in 1970 he wrote that he despaired at the lack of gratitude he saw in society. People's lives were getting better, Maslow wrote, and yet most seemed to be taking their blessings for granted. We need to genuinely embrace the power of gratitude, after all.....

