

'Tis the season to be THANKFUL

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Regularly reflecting on what's good in your life can boost contentment, optimism and wellbeing. So here are seven reasons why your body will thank you for saying thanks!

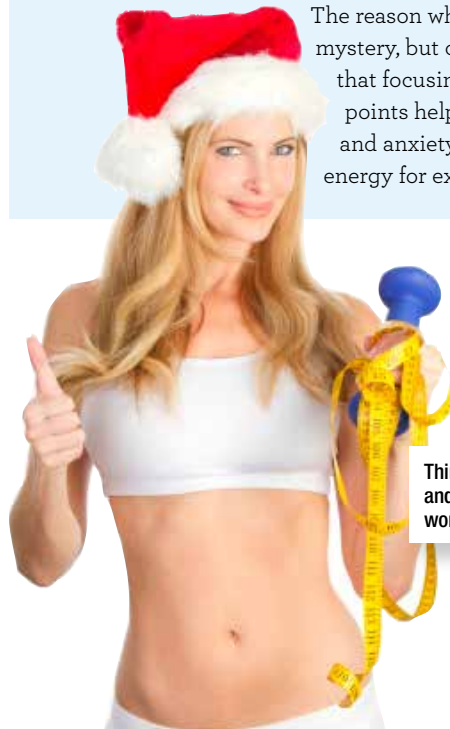


Counting your blessings is not just for Christmas. Regular appreciation, whether it's big picture stuff (having healthy children or great friends) or smaller scale (the sun shining as you walk to work), will boost feelings of contentment and optimism by 25 per cent, according to research. But cultivating an attitude of gratitude does more than make you happier - studies show it could improve your wellbeing in ways you'd never have guessed.

1 A FITTER BODY

Top American gratitude researcher Professor Robert Emmons found an unexpected side-effect of counting your blessings - it can motivate you to exercise. In his study, a group of people told to keep a gratitude journal for 10 weeks were active for one and a half hours more a week than a group of non-journalers.

The reason why remains a mystery, but one theory is that focusing on the plus points helps reduce stress and anxiety, which frees up energy for exercise.



Think positive
and boost your
workout

2 A HEALTHY HEART

Imaging techniques have shown that people who often experience positive emotions like appreciation tend to have a more toned vagus nerve, which connects the heart to the brain and abdomen. The better its tone, the less risk there is for cardiovascular disease. Feeling grateful has also been shown to lower blood pressure by 10 per cent, and may help to regulate glucose levels and immune responses. 'People who have a grateful mindset are less likely to have a heart attack, and when they do, they recover more quickly,' says psychologist Dr Ilona Boniwell, author of *Positive Psychology in a Nutshell: The Science of Happiness*.





Could you stop at just one?



3 MORE WILLPOWER

If you need help with New Year resolutions, think positive! In a recent study, after writing about an event that made them feel grateful, neutral or happy, participants were offered cash on the spot or a larger cheque by post. Most of the gratitude group chose the cheque, suggesting a link between gratitude and thinking of the big picture.

GET THE gratitude habit

- ❖ Bring back thank you notes. Writing a letter of appreciation to someone who has made a difference to your life, then handing it to them in person, will boost your mood for up to a month afterwards, according to one study. But you'll also reap benefits from sending quick notes, texts and emails.
- ❖ Take time to savour. The more you appreciate the good things, however small (like a great cup of tea, a clear blue sky or a shared joke), the more you increase your capacity to notice them.
- ❖ Pin down grateful thoughts. Try jotting them down in a gratitude App like Gratitude Journal or Attitudes of Gratitude (free from iTunes or Google Play), then simply scroll through whenever you need a boost.
- ❖ Use the negative. You don't have to focus solely on what went well - try imagining what might have happened if you hadn't met your partner, bought your home, had your children, changed career, or lost weight - it helps counteract the tendency to take benefits for granted.
- ❖ Watch a sad film. A tale of tragedy can give you an enhanced sense of gratitude for your own life, according to research.
- ❖ Make gratitude a bedtime habit. Studies show it's easier to stick to a new habit if you link it to something you already do regularly. So when you brush your teeth at night, ask yourself, 'What is good in my life today? What went well?' □

4 BETTER SLEEP

According to research from the University of Manchester, developing a grateful way of thinking improves sleep quality. Researchers found that people who mentally ran through what's going right in their life last thing at night fell asleep more quickly, and woke feeling more refreshed than those who just thought about their day in general.

7 FEWER COLDS

More and more research suggests that feelings of gratitude trigger physiological changes that boost immunity and improve physical health. According to a Swiss study, gratitude makes you healthier in two ways: it reduces stress, which boosts the immune system, and motivates you to take better care of yourself. 'Gratitude heals, energises and transforms lives in myriad ways,' says Professor Emmons.

5 GREATER RESILIENCE

When you're facing serious challenges, like illness, relationship difficulties or financial strain, it can be difficult to see the bright side. But finding things to be thankful for when times are tough can really pay off. A study of people caring for relatives with Alzheimer's disease found that noting these positive feelings down every day reduced their levels of stress, depression and physical symptoms.

6 FEWER ACHES AND PAINS

People who write a one-page letter every two weeks, thanking someone who has had a positive influence on their lives, report an improvement in both symptoms of depression and physical aches and pains after just eight weeks - even if they don't send the letters, according to research by Professor Emmons. 'Something happens when we put feelings into words,' he says. 'Our brain begins to change. Recent neuro-imaging studies suggest the possibility of a gratitude-driven neuroplasticity.'



Sleep easy: say goodbye to stress



Drink in those simple pleasures