How Gratitude Changes You and Your Brain
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New research is starting to explore how gratitude works to improve our mental health. One way to articulate and express gratitude is to write a Gratitude Letter.

What is a Gratitude Letter?

Here are some guidelines to get you started writing a gratitude letter:

- Directly address the person you wish to thank. Start with “Dear _____,” and write the rest of the letter as if you are speaking with them in the same room.
- Describe, specifically, what this person did that you are thankful for.
- Talk a bit about yourself – what are you doing now, and how has this person positively affected your daily life? Let them know how much you think of them.
- Try to limit the letter to around one page. Don’t fret over having perfect spelling or grammar.

In one study, it was found that participants struggling with mental illness who wrote gratitude letters reported significantly better mental health four weeks and 12 weeks after their writing exercise ended than participants who either did no writing exercise, or a negatively-focused writing exercise. This suggests that gratitude writing can be beneficial not just for healthy, well-adjusted individuals, but also for those who struggle with mental health concerns. In fact, it seems, practicing gratitude on top of receiving psychological counseling carries greater benefits than counseling alone, even when that gratitude practice is brief.

And that’s not all. A deeper look at the results showed indications of how gratitude might actually work on our minds and bodies. While not definitive, here are four insights from the research suggesting what might be behind gratitude’s psychological benefits.

1. Gratitude unshackles us from toxic emotions

Not surprisingly, those in the gratitude writing group used a higher percentage of positive emotion words and “we” words, and a lower proportion of negative emotion words, than those in the other writing group.

However, people who used more positive emotion words and more “we” words in their gratitude letters didn’t necessarily have better mental health later. It was only when people used fewer negative emotion words in their letters that they were significantly more likely to report better mental health. In fact, it was the lack of negative emotion words—not the abundance of positive words—that explained the mental health gap between the gratitude writing group and the other writing group.
Perhaps this suggests that gratitude letter writing produces better mental health by shifting one’s attention away from toxic emotions, such as resentment and envy. **When you write about how grateful you are to others, it might become considerably harder for you to ruminate on your negative experiences.**

### 2. Gratitude helps even if you don’t share it

Participants who were assigned to write gratitude letters were told that they weren’t required to send their letters to their intended recipient. But those who didn’t send their letters enjoyed the benefits of experiencing gratitude nonetheless.

This suggests that the mental health benefits of writing gratitude letters are not entirely dependent on actually communicating that gratitude to another person.

**So if you’re thinking of writing a letter of gratitude to someone, but you’re unsure whether you want that person to read the letter, you should write it anyway.** You can decide later whether to send it, but the mere act of writing the letter can help you appreciate the people in your life and shift your focus away from negative feelings and thoughts.

### 3. Gratitude’s benefits take time

It’s important to note that the mental health benefits of gratitude writing in the study did not emerge immediately, but gradually accrued over time. Although the different participant groups did not differ in mental health levels one week after the end of the writing activities, individuals in the gratitude group reported better mental health than the others four weeks after the writing activities, and this difference in mental health became even larger 12 weeks after the writing activities.

**If you participate in a gratitude writing activity, don’t be too surprised if you don’t feel dramatically better immediately after the writing.** Be patient and remember that the benefits of gratitude might take time to kick in.

### 4. Gratitude has lasting effects on the brain

An fMRI scanner revealed that, across participants, when people felt more grateful, their brain activity was distinct from brain activity related to guilt and the desire to help a cause. More specifically, it was found that when people who are generally more grateful gave more money to a cause, they showed greater neural sensitivity in the medial prefrontal cortex, a brain area associated with learning and decision making. This suggests that people who are more grateful are also more attentive to how they express gratitude.
Most interestingly, when comparing those who wrote the gratitude letters with those who didn’t, the gratitude letter writers showed greater activation in the medial prefrontal cortex when they experienced gratitude in the fMRI scanner. This is striking as this effect was found three months after the letter writing began. This indicates that simply expressing gratitude may have lasting effects on the brain. While not conclusive, this finding suggests that practicing gratitude may help train the brain to be more sensitive to the experience of gratitude down the line, and this could contribute to improved mental health over time.

Regardless of whether you’re facing serious psychological challenges, if you have never written a gratitude letter before, it’s a worthwhile exercise. Much of our time and energy is spent pursuing things we currently don’t have. Gratitude reverses our priorities to help us appreciate the people and things we do.
