

Practice Gratitude

To gain control over your mind, it is important to bring your attention to the things you are grateful for in your life. Modern research reveals that being consistently grateful will have a positive effect on your health.

Your attitude matters!

In a study from UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento, the effect of a grateful outlook on psychological and physical well-being was examined. Participants were randomly assigned to 1 of 3 experimental conditions. They kept weekly or daily journals and were asked to write about hassles, gratitude, or neutral events. They also kept records of their moods, coping behaviors, health behaviors, physical symptoms, and overall life appraisals. The grateful group exhibited heightened well-being across several of the outcome measures.

Focusing on gratitude actually helps your brain work better.

Psychologist Noelle Nelson in her book *The Power of Appreciation* described a study where she had a brain SPECT scan twice. The first time she was scanned after 30 minutes of meditating on all the things she was thankful for in her life. Then she was scanned several days later after focusing on the major fears in her life. After the “appreciation meditation” her brain looked very healthy. The scan taken after she focused on her fears looked very different. Rather than look healthy, she had significantly decreased activity in two parts of her brain. Her cerebellum, in the back part of the brain completely shut down. The cerebellum, also called the little brain is known to be involved in physical coordination, such as walking or playing sports. New research also suggests that the cerebellum is involved in processing speed, like clock speed on a computer and is involved with thought coordination or how quickly we can integrate new information. When the cerebellum is low in activity people tend to be clumsier and less likely to think their way out of problems. They think and process information slower and get confused easier. When she saw this, Dr. Nelson thought that this was why negative thinking is involved in athletic slumps. If an athlete thinks he will fail, it’s likely he will. The other area of the brain that was affected was the temporal lobes, especially the one on the left. The temporal lobes are involved with mood, memory and temper control. Problems in this part of the brain are associated with some forms of depression, but also dark thoughts, violence, and memory problems. In Dr. Nelson’s scans, when she practiced gratitude, her temporal lobes looked healthy. When she focused on her fears, her temporal lobes became much less active.

Negative thought patterns change the brain in a negative way.

Practicing gratitude literally helps you have a brain to be grateful for.

We want you to do this very helpful exercise in your journal: write down 3 things you are grateful for every day. The act of writing down your grateful thoughts helps to bring your attention to them to enhance your brain. Research from University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman demonstrated that when people did this exercise they noticed a significant positive difference in their level of happiness in just 3 weeks. Other researchers have also found that people who express gratitude on a regular basis are healthier, more optimistic, make more progress toward their goals, have a greater sense of well-being, and they are more helpful to others.

See the Journal Daily Exercise