

## A Surprising Way to Stay Resilient

By Elizabeth Bernstein

As a lifelong athlete and former pro basketball player, David Gardner has always focused on his health, being careful to eat right, drink a lot of water, get enough sleep and stay active.

But since the pandemic started, he's added another healthy habit: Reminding himself why he's grateful.

When Mr. Gardner starts to feel frustrated or annoyed these days—that he can't meet with his employees in person, take a trip, or see a friend—he interrupts his thoughts with a question: "What is the gift in this situation?"

"Focusing on the positive helps me better absorb the negative," says Mr. Gardner, a 37-year-old owner of a branding firm in Chicago.

It is an important strategy, especially now. Reminding ourselves what we're grateful for is one of the most powerful ways we can boost what mental-health experts call the psychological immune system. Researchers use the concept to describe a set of emotional processes that help protect our mental health, just as the physiological immune system aims to safeguard our physical health. A strong psychological immune system keeps us mentally resilient.

Many things we do to strengthen our physical immune system also support us mentally, such as eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep and finding time for pleasurable activities in our day. Typically, our psychological immune system kicks in naturally, although it is sometimes compromised in people who suffer from depression or another mental illness, who have low self-esteem, or who ruminate a lot, mental-health experts say. But right now, as we're battered with coronavirus stress, it's important we all try to actively strengthen it.

"Our psychological immune system is like a cellphone battery—we drain it more quickly in a crisis because we use it more," says Jacqueline Sperling, a psychologist and director of training and research at the McLean Anxiety Mastery Program at McLean Hospital in Cambridge, Mass. "So it's important to continue to recharge it."

To boost it, we need to take active steps to regulate our emotions, says Elizabeth Pinel, a professor in the department of psychological science at the University of Vermont. Experts recommend focusing on what you can control. Acknowledge that life is tough right now, and don't beat yourself up for feeling bad.

Challenge negative thoughts, asking yourself if they are true. Reframe them in a way that is more positive and helpful. (Replace "I hate not seeing my friends and family" with "I look forward to seeing my loved ones eventually.") Calm yourself through breathing exercises. Be mindful—pay attention to the present moment.

Research shows that gratitude is a huge psychological booster. Studies show that people who practice being grateful report significantly higher levels of happiness and psychological well-being than those who do not. They are less depressed—with fewer, and shorter, episodes—and have lower levels of stress hormones and reduced cellular aging. They sleep better. They have more success at work. And they have better relationships.



Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, says gratitude is not a feeling that can be willed easily. But performing grateful motions, such as saying thank you, can help trigger real gratitude.

Photo: UC Davis News and Media Relations

The best way to start practicing gratitude is to keep a journal to identify things in your life for which you are grateful each day, says Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, and a leading researcher on gratitude. Refer to them as gifts, which will underscore their importance as something positive. And take the time to truly reflect. “Don’t hurry through this exercise as if it were just another item on your to-do list,” he says. “Be aware of your feelings and how you relish and savor each gift.”

Feelings of gratitude activate three main areas in the brain: the brain stem region that produces dopamine, the primary reward chemical; the reward center, where dopamine is released; and the anterior cingulate cortex, which helps us focus on information that is relevant and communicates between the brain’s thinking and emotional circuits, says Alex Korb, a neuroscientist. “Your psychological well-being depends less on the things that happen to you and more on the things you pay attention to,” says Dr. Korb, author of “The Upward Spiral: Using Neuroscience to Reverse the Course of Depression, One Small Change at a Time.” “Gratitude will shift your brain’s attention.”

It is a perfect coping skill for the Covid-19 era, when so much of life feels out of control. Gratitude gives us something we can change: our thoughts. We don’t need good things to happen to us to be grateful, we need to reframe our thoughts about what has happened. Think of the Irving Berlin song, “Count Your Blessings.” Mr. Berlin wrote it after his doctor recommended that he try counting his blessings as a way to deal with his stress-induced insomnia, according to Benjamin Sears, editor of “The Irving Berlin Reader.”

Sherry Belul, 55 years old, an author and life coach in San Francisco, credits gratitude with helping her get over a depression years ago. She writes “love lists,” cataloging the qualities she appreciates in people. She makes recordings of things she’s grateful for—a song that makes her smile or a bird outside her window. She writes thank you letters to strangers, such as favorite authors or store clerks who were helpful. And she practices something she calls “reappreciation”—she thanks people for something she has already thanked them for, such as a present or a piece of advice. “I learned that when I am in a state of gratitude—and literally writing it out—there is no way to be depressed,” she says.



Stephanie Freeman says gratitude has helped her cope with family tragedy and job stress resulting from the pandemic. “Gratitude makes me realize that things are not nearly as bad as I made them out to be initially,” she says.

Photo: Derrick Yellock

Stephanie Freeman, a 50-year-old humanities professor in Raleigh, N.C., turned to gratitude two years ago after her husband and father both became critically ill, and the stress made her sick. “My doctor said if I wanted to get better I needed to strengthen my mindset,” she says. So she learned to try to stop her negative thoughts immediately and focus on the good in the situation.

It is tougher now, during the pandemic. Three family members have died of Covid-19. Her husband lost his job as a software support technician. She has more work, training colleagues to teach online. And the couple’s refrigerator and washing machine broke. But Dr. Freeman keeps at it, reminding herself she is grateful for her job, her savings, the credit card that allowed her to buy a new fridge, and the fact that her husband is now healthy. “Gratitude makes me realize that things are not nearly as bad as I made them out to be initially,” she says.

Mr. Gardner helps to keep his psychological immune system healthy by writing in a journal twice a day. He leaves it open on his desk and makes entries before he starts work in the morning and when he turns off his computer at night. Each time, he follows a series of five writing prompts, posed as questions, including, “What is your big task for the day?” “What is your 90-day goal?” “What was your big win?” “What lessons did you learn?”

But one question is more important than all the others, and so he starts and ends his day with it: “What are you grateful for?” Sometimes his answers are simple: sunshine, a bird chirping or a long walk. But often his answers are bigger: the slower pace of life, quality time with his wife, the baby the couple is expecting.

“There is a lot of change coming our way and that can be disorienting and knock people off course,” Mr. Gardner says. “Gratitude makes me resilient.”

## How to be Grateful

**Prepare yourself.** Spend time in nature. Listen to relaxing music. Slow down and pay attention to your surroundings. You need to start in the right frame of mind, says Elizabeth Pinel, a psychology professor at the University of Vermont. “Gratitude can’t be forced.”

**Keep a gratitude journal.** Write down things you are grateful for each day. Think of them as gifts. Reflect on your feelings and the depth of your gratitude. “Writing things down helps you focus on the details and makes the feeling more tangible,” says Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, and author of “*Gratitude Works!: A 21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity*. ”

**Give back.** Find ways to use your strengths and talents to help others. “We become more grateful when we become a giver rather than a receiver,” Dr. Emmons says.

**Think about the bad.** Recalling the worst times in your life can make you grateful you made it through, grateful for what you learned in the process and how it made you stronger, and grateful, hopefully, that things aren’t as bad now.

**Go through the motions.** Gratitude is an attitude, not a feeling that can easily be willed, Dr. Emmons says. But by performing grateful motions, you may be able to trigger real gratitude. Smile. Say thank you. Fake it till you make it.

**Watch your language.** Grateful people use thankful words: gifts, blessings, fortune, abundance. “Less-grateful people are preoccupied with burdens, curses, deprivations and complaints and their words reflect this focus,” Dr. Emmons says. Tell yourself you “get to do this” rather than you “have to do this.”

**Practice the three S’s.** Be open to **surprise** each day; surprise amplifies positive feelings. Be **specific**—dwell on the concrete ways in which you are supported and sustained by other people. Pay attention to **scarcity**. Is there a benefit or silver lining to the current situation that you will not have in the future?

**Write a letter.** It feels good to make someone else feel good. But research shows that even if you don’t send the letter you will benefit because you have strengthened the brain’s gratitude circuitry and activated the region of the brain that produces dopamine.

**Say thank you.** A lot. Especially to the people you’re living with right now. It will make you both feel better.

**Take action.** This may help you focus on your positive feelings longer. Take a photo. Seek out experiences that make you feel grateful. “By taking action, we are telling our brain this matters,” says Alex Korb, a neuroscientist. “And then that feeling gets highlighted by the brain’s circuitry, instead of floating away like a random thought.”

**Think of happy memories.** This increases the production of serotonin, a feel-good neurotransmitter, in the brain, Dr. Korb says.

**Focus on the future.** Think of the reunions. Imagine how good it will feel to eat at your favorite restaurant or get back to your favorite hobby. This will help prevent you from taking things for granted in the future.

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