

# Tips for Keeping a Gratitude Journal

Here's a way to be thankful all year long.

BY **JASON MARSH** | NOVEMBER 17, 2011

Psychology researchers aren't necessarily Thanksgiving experts—they may not know how to make fluffy stuffing, say, or beat the traffic to your in-laws' house—but they have become a fount of wisdom on thanksgiving (with a small "t").

Over the past decade, they've not only identified the great social, psychological, and physical health benefits that come from giving thanks; they've zeroed in on some **concrete practices** that help us reap those benefits.

And perhaps the most popular practice is to keep a **"gratitude journal."** As we've reported many times over the years, studies have traced a range of impressive benefits to the simple act of writing down the things for which we're grateful—benefits including better sleep, fewer symptoms of illness, and more happiness among adults and kids alike. We've even launched our own digital gratitude journal, [Thnx4.org](http://Thnx4.org), here on *Greater Good*.

The basic practice is straightforward. In many of the studies, people are simply instructed to record five things they experienced in the past week for which they're grateful. The entries are supposed to be brief—just a single sentence—and they range from the mundane ("waking up this morning") to the sublime ("the generosity of friends") to the timeless ("the Rolling Stones").

But when you dig into the research, you find that gratitude journals don't always work—some studies show incredible benefits, others not so much.

To understand why, I took a closer look at the research and consulted with **Robert Emmons**, arguably the world's leading expert on the science of gratitude and an author of some of the seminal studies of gratitude journals:

- **Don't just go through the motions.** Research by psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky and others suggests that journaling is more effective if you first make the conscious decision to become happier and more grateful. "Motivation to become happier plays a role in the efficacy of journaling," says Emmons.
- **Go for depth over breadth.** Elaborating in detail about a particular thing for which you're grateful carries more benefits than a superficial list of many things.
- **Get personal.** Focusing on *people* to whom you are grateful has more of an impact than focusing on *things* for which you are grateful.
- **Try subtraction, not just addition.** One effective way of stimulating gratitude is to reflect on what your life would be like *without* certain blessings, rather than just tallying up all those good things.

- **Savour surprises.** Try to record events that were unexpected or surprising, as these tend to elicit stronger levels of gratitude.
- **Don't overdo it.** Writing occasionally (once or twice per week) is more beneficial than daily journaling. In fact, one study by Lyubomirsky and her colleagues found that people who wrote in their gratitude journals once a week for six weeks reported boosts in happiness afterward; people who wrote three times per week didn't. "We adapt to positive events quickly, especially if we constantly focus on them," says Emmons. "It seems counterintuitive, but it is how the mind works."

In looking over this list, what strikes me is how keeping a gratitude journal—or perhaps the entire experience of gratitude—is really about forcing ourselves to pay attention to the good things in life we'd otherwise take for granted. Perhaps that's why the benefits seem to diminish when you start writing more than once per week, and why surprises induce stronger feelings of gratitude: It's easy to get numb to the regular sources of goodness in our lives.

Indeed, Emmons told me that when people start keeping a gratitude journal, he recommends that they see each item they list in their journal as a gift—in fact, he suggests that they "make the conscious effort to associate it with the word 'gift.'" Here are the exact instructions he gives participants in his studies:

**Be aware of your feelings and how you "relish" and "savour" this gift in your imagination. Take the time to be especially aware of the depth of your gratitude.**

"In other words," he says, "we tell them not to hurry through this exercise as if it were just another item on your to-do list. This way, gratitude journaling is really different from merely listing a bunch of pleasant things in one's life."

"Writing helps to organize thoughts, facilitate integration, and helps you accept your own experiences and put them in context," he says. "In essence, it allows you to see the meaning of events going on around you and create meaning in your own life."

Though he does have suggestions for how to keep a gratitude journal, Emmons also stresses that "there is no one right way to do it." There's no evidence that journaling at the start of the day is any more effective than journaling before you go to bed, for instance. And aesthetics really don't matter.

"You don't need to buy a fancy personal journal to record your entries in, or worry about spelling or grammar," says Emmons. "The important thing is to establish the habit of paying attention to gratitude-inspiring events."

Some other ways to keep a gratitude journal:

- Think it! If you're lying awake at night and can't sleep, start processing what you are grateful for, it always makes me sleepy as it really calms your nervous system down
- Write it on a chalk board

- Stick it on a post it note
- Type it into your phone
- Send yourself an email
- Have a special little book to write in

Pop each one into a box/tin or equivalent, and take out the notes you've written to yourself at special times of the year or when you'd like to remind yourself what the good things are 😊

