

MINDSHIFT

# How Writing Down What You're Thankful For Can Be Good For Mental and Physical Health



A growing body of research shows that writing down what you are thankful for can lower stress, help you sleep better and could even reduce the risk of heart disease. (Kristen Uroda for NPR)

Over this past year, lifestyle blogger Aileen Xu has kept a monthly gratitude list.

Sometimes it was the big stuff: "I'm grateful that my family is so understanding. I'm grateful so many people care."

And sometimes it was life's little blessings: "July 2018: I'm grateful for good hair after I shower."

Xu started making such lists when she was in college, "at a point when I was just not in a very good place in my life." Now, the 28-year-old [lifestyle blogger](#) and YouTuber recommends the practice to her nearly 750,000 subscribers.

It wasn't a hard sell.

SPONSORED BY

<b>Stanford</b> Summer Session		<b>Discover Your Potential H</b> 📌 PROGRAMS FOR: High School, Under and Graduate Students 📅 PROGRAM DATES: June 22–August 18
-----------------------------------	--	---

"I think just over the last few years there's been more of a trend to focus on gratitude," says psychologist [Laurie Santos](#), who teaches a course on the science of well-being and happiness at Yale.

Gratitude is being endorsed by [wellness blogs](#) and [magazines](#). You can buy different kinds of specific gratitude journals, or download apps that remind you to jot down your blessings.

"Those types of products can remind us to take time to be grateful," Santos says. "But it's also important to remember that gratitude is free."

And noting your gratitude seems to pay off: There's a [growing body of research](#) on the benefits of gratitude. Studies have found that giving thanks and counting blessings can help people [sleep better](#), [lower stress](#)



and improve interpersonal relationships. Earlier this year, a [study](#) found that keeping a gratitude journal decreased materialism and bolstered generosity among adolescents.

In [another study](#) from August, high school students who were asked to keep gratitude journals also reported healthier eating. There's also some evidence it could [lower your risk of heart disease](#) and [lower symptoms of depression](#) for some people.

That's why gratitude features heavily in Santos' happiness class. "It's one of the practices that really wins out from the field of positive psychology," she says, because it takes very little time, and "the benefits are so powerful."

Making gratitude lists is one way of accessing those benefits. You could thank God or the universe. You could keep your gratitude private or share it with others. The best way of accessing and expressing gratitude may be different for each person.

Santos' students, in addition to keeping gratitude journals, are asked to write a thank you letter and then read it out loud to the recipient. "I can show measurable improvements in well-being even [a month after](#) you've done this," Santos says.

What works for some people may not work for others. To find your best method, "[r]eally think about what

feels right and what feels natural or meaningful to you," says [Sonja Lyubomirsky](#), a professor of psychology at the [University of California, Riverside](#), who studies happiness and gratitude.

Some may find that a daily dose of gratitude in the morning can be transformative. "It helps me feel awake and abundantly joyful," says [Sam Khazai](#), a 38-year-old actor based in New York, who uses a journal that prompts him to list three things he's grateful for each day.

"I know it sounds kind of meta," he says. "But practicing gratitude, it brings me so much gratitude in and of itself."

There have been times, however, when he has skipped a day or even several days when he's felt especially down. "Or if I don't skip those days, I've straight up lied to my own gratitude journal ... I've filled it with things I hoped to be grateful for," he says — but he didn't feel grateful, and forcing it felt bad.

"Gratitude is a very rich emotion, but it's also kind of a complicated one," notes Lyubomirsky. "Sometimes when you express gratitude, you could also feel humbled or indebted or embarrassed. So it doesn't always feel pleasant."

In one [study](#) Lyubomirsky and her colleagues found that counting blessings once a week boosted

happiness, but doing so three times a week didn't. "That suggests that for most people, at least on average, three times a week was too much," she says. "And too much gratitude can sort of backfire."

There's also a lack of research on how gratitude exercises affect people with clinical depression, anxiety or suicidal tendencies, Lyubomirsky says. "If you're depressed, and you're asked to express gratitude ... you might have trouble thinking of what you're grateful for, or you may feel really guilty you haven't paid back that person you're grateful for."

Indeed, for all the research on the broad benefits of expressing gratitude, [there's also evidence](#) that it isn't for everyone. And it isn't a panacea — it can't make injustice, loss, or pain disappear.

What gratitude can do is give us hope. "The research shows that focusing on the positive, in addition to the negative, can boost our mood more than we expect," says Santos.

In Oakland, Calif., 31-year-old mental health counselor [Zeyda Garcia](#) agrees. During really tough times, like when she'd lost a job and was sleeping on her friend's mom's couch — she felt like she was reaching for reasons to be grateful.

But she still tried to find some. "Even if it's just — I'm grateful for the sun that's shining or being able to



wake up," she says. It felt hokey, and "kind of fake, a little bit."

SPONSORED BY



But ultimately, it helped. "It allowed me to ground myself," she says. "It allowed me to remember what was going well, in a world full of chaos."

Copyright 2018 NPR. To see more, visit <https://www.npr.org>.

SEE COMMENTS

# Mind Shift

## Want to stay in touch?

Subscribe to receive weekly updates of MindShift stories every Sunday. You'll also receive a carefully curated list of content from teacher-trusted sources.

Enter Email Address

**SIGN UP**

COPYRIGHT © 2019 KQED INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. | [TERMS OF SERVICE](#) | [PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [CONTACT US](#)

---