


# THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON GRATITUDE



A short and practical ebook from **Happy Brain Science**.

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## GRATITUDE: IT'S NOT JUST FOR THANKSGIVING ANYMORE!

Sitting down at the dinner table one night, my daughter said:

“I am grateful for my water, my milk, my spoon, my green stuff, my soup that I am not going to eat, and my bread.”

Little did she know that in addition to making my wife and me bust up laughing, she was also rewiring her brain.

This ebook is about simple ways you can rewire your brain for more happiness through gratitude.

Gratitude is obviously very present in our personal lives this time of year, but it takes more than one holiday weekend of experiencing and expressing gratitude to spark lasting, physical changes in our brains.

In the following short chapters I will outline three simple practices that can extend the benefits of gratitude into your everyday life - including your work life - over the coming weeks and months.

## THIS JUST IN: YOUR BRAIN IS NOT ON A STEADY DECLINE AFTER ALL.

When I was studying Cognitive Science at Vassar College, I was essentially told that we were born with all the brain cells we will ever have, that our brains stopped changing at a pretty young age, and from there on we would be losing neurons and connections for the rest of our lives. Good luck to you.

The picture we get from neuroscience these days is much more encouraging. We have learned that our brains have the ability to change throughout our lives, and that we add neurons and connections with everything we do intensely, repeatedly, and rewardingly enough.

“Intensely” means that we need to focus our rapt attention on the activity.

“Rewardingly” means that we need to feel the positive effects of progress or successful completion of the activity.

Several studies have found physical changes in the brain after just a few weeks of intense, repeated, and rewarding practice.\*

\*For example: See the 2006 study by Draganski and colleagues published in the Journal of Neuroscience: <http://www.jneurosci.org/content/26/23/6314.full>.

## WHY GRATITUDE?

When it comes to happiness, gratitude just works. Over the past decade, numerous studies have researched the effects of gratitude in both adults\* and youth.\*\*

Those who practiced gratitude were in better moods, more optimistic, and more satisfied with their lives overall, showed fewer symptoms of illness and even exercised more. They also earned more money.\*\*\*

Putting gratitude into action is easy. You don't have to change anything about your life circumstances, learn new skills, or read tons of books before you can get started (although there are some great books that cover gratitude - check out the resources list at the end of this ebook).

"HAPPIER PEOPLE ARE MORE PRODUCTIVE, RESILIENT, SOCIABLE, COOPERATIVE, SUCCESSFUL, AND CREATIVE."

## WHY BE HAPPIER?

To me, happiness is valuable in itself. But science has also shown that happier people are more productive, resilient, sociable, cooperative, successful and creative. They are also healthier and live longer. Happier people do better work - and help build better organizations.

\* Emmons et al. 2003: <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/84/2/377>

\*\*Froh et. al., 2001: <http://www.springerlink.com/content/21616624m5621673/>

\*\*\*<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704243904575630541486290052.html>

## WHAT DO I MEAN BY “HAPPY”?

Not surprisingly, “happy” and “happiness” are both terms that are too fuzzy for scientists. They use the term “subjective well-being.”

### “Subjective”

“Subjective” gets at the fact that it’s how people feel that’s important. If someone feels happy, they probably are. Long scientific story short, we know this by correlating self-reports of happiness with independent measurements of brain activity.

### “Well-Being”

“Well-being” gets at the fact that we are talking about more than just feeling good. Positive emotions and affect are part of happiness. But they tend to be short-lived. “Well-being” also hints at the fact that scientists are studying life satisfaction and meaning. Feeling that your life has meaning turns out to be very important to your happiness.

### “Happy/Happiness”

When I use the terms “happy” and “happiness” I mean all of the above - they are just easier to read than “subjective well-being.”

Gratitude can help with both positive emotions and life satisfaction. So let’s get to it!

## ACTION #1: GRATITUDE JOURNAL

Keeping a gratitude journal is a very straightforward exercise for your brain. All you do is record things you recently experienced for which you are grateful. You can do this in a fancy paper journal, on a blog, with the help of an app, or on some stapled-together scrap paper. You can write, sketch, make lists, compose haikus, or do whatever else fits your style.

Record whatever you notice, however it suits you.

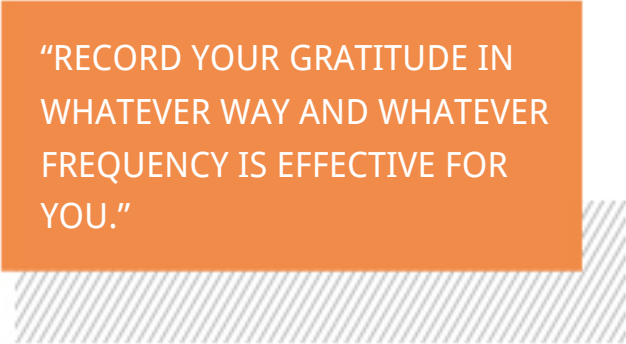
There is no expectation as to how much you record, or what kinds of things you record. Your entries may vary from the obvious (having food and shelter) to the geeky (that awesome hack you just learned), from the mundane (getting the last piece of spinach quiche at the deli) to the grandiose (the beauty of the universe.)

Science suggests: once a week.

Really, you can't do it wrong. But studies have found that some approaches bring better results. For example, studies by Sonja Lyubomirsky et. al. have shown that the practice is typically more effective once a week than when you do it every day. The reason may be that you may find yourself repeating yourself a lot, or not having anything significant to record on a given day, which makes the practice seem dull. If you do it once a week, you might find yourself looking forward to it and having more interesting and meaningful things to record.

## Experiment!

As always, keep in mind that studies produce average results across large groups of people, and your experience may vary. You might want to start with once a week, but experiment to find the most helpful frequency for you. You may find that writing down three things you are grateful for every day produces the most happiness in you.



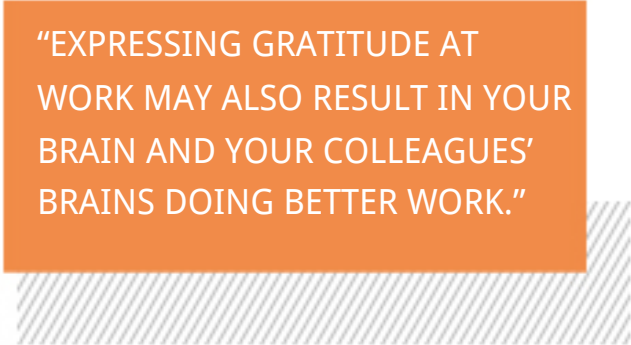
“RECORD YOUR GRATITUDE IN  
WHATEVER WAY AND WHATEVER  
FREQUENCY IS EFFECTIVE FOR  
YOU.”

## ACTION #2: EXPRESS GRATITUDE AT WORK.

When I was working at Intel, I learned about studies\* that had found that work meetings are more productive, enjoyable, and creative when the ratio of positive to negative comments is 3:1 or higher. A positive comment would be something as simple as “great,” “good job,” or “I appreciate that.” An example of a negative comment would be “That idea is not going to work.”

I was so fascinated by the study that I decided to try it out with my own team. At the next opportunity, I explained that from now on we would start staff meetings with recognitions - simple statements of gratitude to others in the room.

I asked if anyone had one to share. Crickets. It took weeks of repetition - and me berating my team with the science of happiness - before everyone was participating the way I initially hoped. But after a few weeks, the participation and the effect were great. Both our meetings and our relationships improved.



“EXPRESSING GRATITUDE AT WORK MAY ALSO RESULT IN YOUR BRAIN AND YOUR COLLEAGUES’ BRAINS DOING BETTER WORK.”

\*Sources include Frederickson, Barbara (multiple publications), and Losada, M. & Heaphy, E. 2004: The role of positivity and connectivity in the performance of business teams: A nonlinear dynamics model. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47 (6), pp. 740-765.



## Gratitude overcomes “fight or flight.”

The scientific explanation is fairly straightforward. We are almost always in a mode of either minimizing risk or maximizing reward. You may have also heard these referred to as the “away” and “towards” states. When we are minimizing risk our brains head into “fight or flight” mode, to one degree or another.

In this state, our limbic systems - amygdalae and more - basically take over, suppressing activity in our uniquely human prefrontal cortex that’s responsible for “executive functions” and more creative thinking. Our limbic system and our fight or flight response see only a few options under stress. Our prefrontal cortex can imagine all kinds of solutions.

In a positive environment, brains feel safe, allowing prime brain real-estate to come online. Expressing gratitude at work will not only make you feel happier, it may also result in your brain and your colleagues’ brains doing better work.

## Say thank you more often.


Beyond kicking off meetings with recognitions, you can also simply remind yourself to say thank you more often. Acknowledge your coworkers’ support, skill, and attitude. One coaching client of mine decided to adopt a technique I had heard about and mentioned to him. He put ten coins in his left pocket each morning. He moved a coin to his right pocket every time he made a positive comment. He didn’t let himself go home each evening until all ten coins were in his right pocket.

### Begin and end your work day with gratitude,

Another good routine is to make the first and last email, instant message, or phone call of your work day a thank you. No need to write a novel or give a speech; a line or two are enough to be effective. If you vary what you say and how you say it you will experience more happiness benefit. If you express gratitude the same way each day, you will quickly adapt and the practice will not result in much benefit.

### Relationships and happiness.

Science suggests that quality relationships are a primary factor in happiness. Surveys back this up, with good relationships ranking high on the list of factors that contribute to our job satisfaction and happiness at work. Expressing gratitude is one way to promote positive relationships in your workplace.



“SAY THANK YOU MORE OFTEN,  
BEGIN AND END WITH  
GRATITUDE, AND PROMOTE  
POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AT  
WORK.”

## ACTION #3: SAVORING

Savoring positive moments is a close cousin to gratitude. Those who savor the good things in life tend to be happier and more satisfied with their lives. Remember that scientists define happiness as including both positive emotions and life satisfaction. Scientists\* have found that those who “positively ruminate” - that is, replay good moments over and over in their head - enjoy more positive emotions. And those that tell others about good moments experience more life satisfaction.

So you might experiment with savoring as well. Try these and other ideas:

### Enjoy lunch with your colleagues.

When you eat lunch, sit down at a table (not your desk) with other people, and savor the entire experience. Slow down and really taste the food you are eating. Enjoy the company of other people - generally, the more the merrier.

### Celebrate success.

When success comes to you or a colleague, really take the time to celebrate it. Savoring good times with others is a great way to build relationships as well as happiness.

\*<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886910001820>

## Give your attention.

When you meet one-on-one with another person, give them your undivided attention. Appreciate the good things about that person. You won't be working with him or her forever. Savoring them now will increase your positive emotions, and help you ensure you'll have good memories of your time with them long after you finish working with them.



"ENJOY LUNCH WITH COLLEAGUES,  
CELEBRATE SUCCESS, AND GIVE  
YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION."

## TAKE ACTION, AND SHARE.

None of these practices will have any effect on your brain unless you put them into action. Science has shown that we are more likely to follow through and take action when we share our intentions with others. Research also recommends saying specifically where and when you will take action. You are more likely to follow through if you get specific.

So I highly recommend you share your specific intentions to practice more gratitude. In addition to talking with friends and family about your intentions, you can choose one or all of the following:

- Post them on the Happy Brain Science Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Happy-Brain-Science/244551702277956>
- Send me an email at [Scott@HappyBrainScience.com](mailto:Scott@HappyBrainScience.com).
- Use the hashtag #gratitude on Twitter.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

For monthly insights and news on brain science and happiness, sign up for my newsletter at <http://eepurl.com/fKIQo>.

For a list of great books on happiness, gratitude, and brain science see my Recommended Reading list at <http://www.happybrainscience.com/recommended-reading/>.

For questions, feedback, and conversation contact me at [Scott@HappyBrainScience.com](mailto:Scott@HappyBrainScience.com) or on Twitter at @ScottCrab.

I would be grateful and happy to hear from you.

## GRATITUDE.

Of course I have to end my ebook on gratitude with some heartfelt thanks.

My thanks go to many that have supported me in my career. First of all, to my wife Sarah and daughter Althea, who had great patience as I spent long hours writing, researching, editing, and traveling to share the science of happiness with you and many others.

I'm grateful to all of my family and countless friends who encouraged me as I embarked on a new career focused on helping others apply the science of happiness to work.

Bill Hefferman was instrumental to my career, especially in the beginning. Bill helped me hone my presentation "The Science of Being Happy and Productive at Work" into something valuable for Intel and other organizations. He pointed me to helpful studies.

Dr. Robert Biswas-Diener has been a great coach and mentor to me. I also want to thank the many brilliant scientists whose work forms the foundation of mine. Most of these scientists and their books can be found on my recommended reading list: <http://www.happybrainscience.com/recommended-reading/>.

Finally, I am grateful to Andrea Bailey of Lightbox Communications for the design of this ebook.