How gratitude can change your life



From our guest contributor, Michael Josephson.

Confession: When I was younger, practicing gratitude as a way to find inner peace, contentment, and lasting happiness seemed ridiculous to me. It was too simplistic, too cliche. I wanted to dismiss it, but I couldn't. I needed help. So I decided to follow the research and see where it led me; for a few months, I would practice gratitude intentionally and regularly.

My first step was to write down three good things about my day. I did it every day, even on days when this was a struggle. In one study participants who were asked to do this for 21 days reported feeling more optimistic, less anxious, and even slept better – immediately after and three and six months after the study. Another study showed that participants who kept a gratitude journal for 10 weeks reported having fewer health problems and spent more time exercising.

My second step was making a rule to say thank you at least

once a day. I wasn’t a rude person, just always in a hurry, and now I would make a point of actually pausing to say thanks. Expressing gratitude to others has been shown to do everything from improving romantic relationships to increasing happiness and depressive symptoms. One of the most powerful ways to do this is by writing a gratitude letter to someone, but I found a simple text message to a friend has similar benefits if you mean it.

New research has shown that positive interactions with strangers leads to feeling more cheerful and increasing your sense of belonging. So saying thank you to a barista who makes your coffee can lead to feeling happier just like saying thank you to friend does.

My third gratitude habit was to pause and savor something once a day. It sounds silly to have to learn to do this, but I realized the stress of my early life had made pausing and savoring moments seem like another luxury I couldn’t afford. Ever since I could remember, I’d rushed through every experience in my life instead of being there. But I made a deal with myself to try to be more present, so I tried. I stopped eating while standing up. I would literally stop to smell the flowers I’d bought for our kitchen. In one study students were instructed to savor two pleasurable experiences per day and reflect on each for a few minutes. They showed significant increases in happiness and reduction in negative feelings.

There are three steps to savoring: Anticipate the experience, be present during it – no checking email while drinking your coffee – and then reflect on it for a few minute to extend its positive effect. Anticipation is key; studies have shown that planning a vacation makes you feel happier than actually taking it.

Here’s the punch line: Despite my extreme skepticism, practicing gratitude changed my life.

It didn’t turn me into some happy-go-lucky person I was never meant to be (or, frankly, *wanted* to be). But I developed a fundamentally different way of thinking and moving through life, one in which I stopped taking for granted all the tiny good moments that were already part of it. *I stopped looking for happiness out there and learned to find it right here.* I felt more connected to friends, family, and my colleagues, and even on the toughest days, I managed my stress better (which research shows is a long-lasting effect of practicing gratitude).

My advice? Give gratitude a shot.

This is Michael Josephson reminding you that character counts.



Michael Josephson is an influential and internationally renowned champion of character education for youth and ethical conduct in business, government, policing, journalism, sports, healthcare and law. He is credited by many as the person most responsible for reviving and professionalizing the character education in school and youth-serving organizations. In 1992, under the auspices of the Josephson Institute he created CHARACTER COUNTS!, the world’s most widely implemented character development initiative based on a common language of shared values – the Six Pillars of Character) and Pursuing Victory With Honor (1996), a companion program promoting ethics in sports.

Learn more about character education.