

GRATITUDE LETTER

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **3X/WEEK** | Duration: **10 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Feeling gratitude can improve your health and happiness; expressing gratitude also strengthens relationships. Yet sometimes expressions of thanks can be fleeting and superficial. This exercise encourages you to express gratitude in a thoughtful, deliberate way by writing—and, ideally, delivering—a letter of gratitude to a person you have never properly thanked.

TIME REQUIRED

Budget about 10 minutes for writing the letter and at least 30 minutes for the visit, if you choose to deliver your letter in person.

HOW TO DO IT

Call to mind someone who did something for you for which you are extremely grateful but to whom you never expressed your deep gratitude. This could be a relative, friend, teacher, or colleague. Try to pick someone who is still alive and could meet you face-to-face in the next week. It may be most helpful to select a person or act that you haven't thought about for a while—something that isn't always on your mind.

Now, write a letter to one of these people, guided by the following steps.

- Write as though you are addressing this person directly (“Dear _____”).
- Don't worry about grammar or spelling.
- Describe in specific terms what this person did, why you are grateful to this person, and how this person's behavior affected your life. Try to be as concrete as possible.
- Describe what you are doing in your life now and how you often remember their efforts.
- Try to keep your letter to roughly one page (around 300 words).

Next, you should try if at all possible to deliver your letter in person, following these steps:

- Plan a visit with the recipient. Let that person know you'd like to see them and have something special to share, but don't reveal the exact purpose of the meeting.
- When you meet, let the person know that you are grateful to them and would like to read a letter expressing your gratitude; ask that they refrain from interrupting until you're done.
- Take your time reading the letter. While you read, pay attention to their reaction as well as your own.
- After you have read the letter, be receptive to their reaction and discuss your feelings together.
- Remember to give the letter to the person when you leave.

If physical distance keeps you from making a visit, you may choose to arrange a phone or video chat.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). [Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions](#). *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410.

When researchers tested five different exercises, writing and delivering a Gratitude Letter showed the greatest benefit to people's happiness one month later; however, six months after, their happiness had dropped back down to where it was before. This is why some researchers suggest doing this exercise once every six weeks or so. Participants in this study were largely white, middle-aged adults with college degrees.

Froh, J. J., Kashdan, T. B., Ozimkowski, K. M., & Miller, N. (2009). [Who benefits the most from a gratitude intervention in children and adolescents? Examining positive affect as a moderator](#). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(5), 408-22.

Adolescents who often don't experience positive emotions showed a significant boost in positive emotions two months after writing and delivering a Gratitude Letter. Nearly 70% of the adolescents in this study were Caucasian, with the rest identifying as Asian American, African American, Hispanic, or "other."

Research suggests that while there are benefits simply to writing the letter, you reap significantly greater benefits from delivering and reading it in person.

Who Has Tried The Practice?

Additional research has engaged members of other groups:

- [Asian American adults in Southern California](#) felt more satisfied with life after writing weekly Gratitude Letters for six weeks.
- Indian people [decreased in negative emotions](#) and Taiwanese people [increased in positive emotions](#) after writing Gratitude Letters for 15 minutes. [Asian Americans and white Americans](#) all increased in positive emotions.
- [American high school students](#) who were mostly of Asian and Latino descent felt lower negative emotions and developed healthier eating habits after writing weekly Gratitude Letters for four weeks.
- [Indian adolescents](#) reported gains in well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness after writing and delivering a Gratitude Letter as part of a program that also included [Three Good Things](#), [Best Possible Self](#), and [Use Your Strengths](#).

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

The letter affirms positive things in your life and reminds you how others have cared for you—life seems less bleak and lonely if someone has taken such a supportive interest in us. Visiting the giver allows you to strengthen your connection with them and remember how others value you as an individual.

SOURCES

[Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D.](#), University of California, Riverside

[Kristin Layous, Ph.D.](#), California State University, East Bay

[Martin Seligman, Ph.D.](#), University of Pennsylvania

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

