The benefits of practicing gratitude are nearly endless. People who regularly practice gratitude by taking time to notice and reflect upon the things they’re thankful for experience more positive emotions, feel more alive, sleep better, express more compassion and kindness, and even have stronger immune systems. And gratitude doesn't need to be reserved only for momentous occasions: Sure, you might express gratitude after receiving a promotion at work, but you can also be thankful for something as simple as a delicious piece of pie. Research by UC Davis psychologist Robert Emmons, author of Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier, shows that simply keeping a gratitude journal—regularly writing brief reflections on moments for which we’re thankful—can significantly increase well-being and life satisfaction.

You’d think that just one of these findings is compelling enough to motivate an ingrate into action. But if you’re anything like me, this motivation lasts about three days until writing in my gratitude journal every evening loses out to watching stand-up comics on Netflix.
Here are a few keys I’ve discovered—and research supports—that help not only to start a gratitude practice, but to maintain it for the long haul.

**Freshen Up Your Thanks**

The best way to reap the benefits of gratitude is to notice new things you’re grateful for every day. Gratitude journaling works because it slowly changes the way we perceive situations by adjusting what we focus on. While you might always be thankful for your great family, just writing “I’m grateful for my family” week after week doesn’t keep your brain on alert for fresh grateful moments. Get specific by writing “Today my husband gave me a shoulder rub when he knew I was really stressed” or "My sister invited me over for dinner so I didn’t have to cook after a long day." And be sure to stretch yourself beyond the great stuff right in front of you. Opening your eyes to more of the world around you can deeply enhance your gratitude practice. Make a game out of noticing new things each day.

**Get Real About Your Gratitude Practice**

Being excited about the benefits of gratitude can be a great thing because it gives us the kick we need to start making changes. But if our excitement about sleeping better because of our newfound gratitude keeps us from anticipating how tired we’ll be tomorrow night when we attempt to journal, we’re likely to fumble and lose momentum. When we want to achieve a goal, using the technique of mental contrasting—being optimistic
about the benefits of a new habit while also being realistic about how difficult building the habit may be — leads us to exert more effort. Recognize and plan for the obstacles that may get in the way. For instance, if you tend to be exhausted at night, accept that it might not be the best time to focus for a few extra minutes and schedule your gratitude in the morning instead.

Make Thankfulness Fun By Mixing It Up

University of Rochester partners in crime Edward Deci and Richard Ryan study intrinsic motivation, which is the deep desire from within to persist on a task. One of the biggest determinants is autonomy, the ability to do things the way we want. So don’t limit yourself—if journaling is feeling stale, try out new and creative ways to track your grateful moments. (Happify offers an endless variety of gratitude activities to choose from.) My fiancée Michaela decided to create a gratitude jar this year. Any time she experiences a poignant moment of gratitude, she writes it on a piece of paper and puts it in a jar. On New Year’s Eve, she’ll empty the jar and review everything she wrote. When a good thing happens, she now exclaims, “That’s one for the gratitude jar!” It immediately makes the moment more meaningful and keeps us on the lookout for more.

Be Social About Your Gratitude Practice

Our relationships with others are the greatest determinant of our happiness. So it makes sense to think of other people as we build our gratitude. Robert Emmons suggests that focusing our gratitude on
Men in long-term relationships are significantly more likely to say that the relationship will continue after learning that their girlfriends have selected a desired gift for them.

**SPEND ON THOSE CLOSEST TO YOU**

Buying gifts for your boss won’t give you as much of a happiness boost as picking something up for your bestie.

Research shows that we derive more happiness from spending money on people with whom we have strong ties than on those we don’t.

**PARENTS, LISTEN UP!**

The more you give kids today, the more supportive they’re likely to be as you age.

(This doesn’t mean spoiling them rotten! Spending more time with them is what they really want...at least deep down.)

In a UnitedHealth Group survey of people who’d volunteered in the last year:

- **76%** felt physically healthier
- **94%** said volunteering improves their mood.
- **78%** felt less stressed

In his book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, Stephen Post reports that giving to others has been shown to increase health benefits in people with chronic illness, including HIV, multiple sclerosis and heart problems.

**WHY GIVING BACK IS LIKE A BIG GIFT FOR YOU**

Doing volunteer work is associated with high levels of overall life satisfaction.

In **120 out of 136** countries, people who donated to charity in the past month reported greater satisfaction with life. (This is true for poor and rich countries alike.)

**YES, IT’S THIS POWERFUL!**

Across the **136** countries studied, donating to charity had a similar impact on happiness levels as doubling household income.

**MORE CONNECTION, MORE JOY**

Spending money on others—or giving money to charity—leads to the greatest happiness boost when giving fosters social connection.

Donate to an organization where a friend or relative volunteers.

Enlist a “volunteer buddy” to join you for a few hours at your local homeless or animal shelter.

**HOW GIVING MAKES YOU HEALTHIER**

**BEING STINGY WILL STRESS YOU OUT**

What’s worse, the more shame you feel about being a Scrooge, the more stressed you’ll feel.

**GENEROSITY MAY BECOME INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT AS WE AGE**

Research shows that those who provided practical help to friends, relatives, or neighbors, or gave emotional support to their spouses, had a lower risk of dying over a five-year period than those who didn’t.

25% of Americans volunteered through or for an organization at least once in the past year, according to a 2013 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report.
people for whom we are thankful rather than circumstances or material items will enhance the benefits we experience. And while you’re at it, why not include others directly into your expression of gratitude? One activity involves writing a gratitude letter to someone who had an impact on you whom you’ve never properly thanked. You could also share the day’s grateful moments around the dinner table. The conversations that follow may give you even more reasons to give thanks.

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