

Happiness Book Review:

Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier

Julia Houk

Robert Emmons is widely known as one of the leaders in the Positive Psychology movement, and is a leading researcher of gratitude—both in its cultivation and the effects of its practice. In his book, “Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier”, Emmons embarks on a quest to illustrate what exactly gratitude is, how it’s beneficial, and why it is so frequently overlooked as a key to happiness.

Dr. Emmons was in fact the first psychologist to recognize the complexity of the emotion gratitude. Though giving thanks and feeling gratitude appear very obvious and straight forward, Emmons proved through his research findings that gratitude is far more complicated a process. Firstly, gratitude requires the acknowledgement that goodness lies outside of oneself, and that a person is not in fact self-sufficient or worthy of all (or even any of what) they receive. The illusion of self-sufficiency is in fact one of the largest obstacles in the way of a gracious attitude. Gratitude does not surface naturally for the majority of people, and therefore requires a conscious effort to a) recognize that you are the beneficiary of someone else’s kindness, b) the benefit has been provided intentionally, and c) the benefit has value in the eyes of the beneficiary (Emmons 5). Creating and maintaining gratitude is an extremely effortful and conscious practice. By accepting gratitude in this way we’re admitting our unworthiness of the benefits we reap, since that attitude is the ground from which the best form of gratitude can germinate. The purpose of this attitude, of course, is not to degrade the grateful person into feeling they are worthless, but instead to remind us that we often take too much pride in and responsibility for the graces we’re given in life and therefore cannot perceive the grace around us.

Emmons argues that gratitude is key to finding happiness in life. Through his various experiments dealing with gratitude journals, Emmons discovered that adults who regularly document their gratitude exercise more regularly, suffer from fewer illness symptoms, feel better about their lives as a whole, and are more optimistic about the future (11). Not too bad, eh? Consciously choosing to treat life as a constant string of gifts does not rack up the negatives, not to mention it allows a person room to apply meaning to their lives and in many cases inspires a positive ripple of altruism among social groups. Psychologists have argued for many years that happiness is 50% dependent on a set-point of happiness, a biologically determined level of reachable happiness, 40% is based on intentional activities, and 10% is due to mere circumstance (23). Emmons spent several years studying the effects of the ‘gratitude attitude’ on three different groups of participants who were all told to keep journals. One group was encouraged to feel indirect gratitude, one group was encouraged to be indirectly negative, and the last group was neutrally treated and served as a control group (27). After examining the brief daily journal entries from each group Emmons was able to conclude that the participants who were put under the ‘gratitude condition’ felt a reported 25% happier than the other groups (30). This proves that

the set-point can be elevated with a conscious grateful attitude.

Gratitude is an attitude that's both humbling and demanding. Not every experience is as enjoyable as getting a free gift from a friend or finding the perfect parking spot, but nonetheless the point of gratitude is to view every detail in life as a meaningful gift, especially when life is unpleasant. Gratitude can be for anything from the ability to pay for food and a good home or just the ability to have two working legs. It's commonly expressed through religious prayer, but even if that does not fit the personal bill, expressing gratitude in general teaches loyalty, thankfulness, philanthropy, truthfulness, honesty, and justice, to name a few perks (101). On an even brighter note, new neuroscience research has found that "the areas responsible for processing negative information show decreased activity with age while maintaining or even increasing reactivity to positive information" (129). Practicing gratitude may in fact become easier as time passes! In the 1980's social psychologist Shula Sommers studied the differences in attitudes towards gratitude between Americans, Germans, and Israelis. What she discovered was that "American men in particular, tended to view the experience of gratitude as unpleasant. Some, in fact, found gratitude to be a humiliating emotion" (130). This relates back to the human struggle to accept our own dependency on the support of others.

In the last thirty pages of the book Emmons finally discloses how exactly the average Joe should set about achieving an attitude of gratitude by detailing a wordy list of top ten ways to be grateful. Number one: "Keep a gratitude journal" (189). This continually reinforces a positive attitude of gratitude and helps contextualize positive experiences as they appear (189). The most important thing to keep in mind with this is to record fresh ideas and experiences so as to avoid suffering from what Emmons calls "gratitude fatigue" (190). Number two is "Remember the bad" (191). This at first seems counter-productive, but in fact enumerating unpleasant times allows us to create a comparison in our minds, creating "fertile ground for gratefulness" (191). Number three is "Ask Yourself Three Questions" includes reflecting on the gifts given to you by others, focusing on what you've given to others, and lastly acknowledging how our words, deeds and thoughts negatively affect those around us (192-193). Number four is offering prayers of gratitude, since offering thanks is universally agreed upon as important (194-195). The last four ways to practice gratitude include using quotes and other visual prompts to remind us to be grateful, make a vow or promise to actually keep up the gratitude attitude, use positive language to influence positive thoughts and actions, practice gratitude even when it's forced (fake it until you make it), and lastly be creative with the aspects of life you express gratitude for (198-206). Though each piece independently may not offer a huge shift in levels of gratitude, Emmons adamantly subscribes to his own idea that a combination of the above can guarantee dramatic positive results.

The content of the book was overall impressive and uplifting, though taking into account the length of the book and excruciating detail used to describe every imaginable aspect of gratitude, I was rather bored at times. What would have made a fantastically engrossing ten page paper was somehow stretched and beaten out into a two hundred page book. The references to

the personal thoughts of other great writers, philosophers and psychologists alike did add some helpful dimensions to the discussions, however if all the little unnecessary anecdotes and allusions were deleted from the text the book would have shrunk substantially and have been more enjoyable.

Work Cited:

Emmons, Robert A. *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007. Print.