

the “parent” of all virtues



by **Lea Waters**

As a positive psychologist, I have my pick of positive emotions to study, and I like them all. But after love, gratitude is my favourite for the huge wallop (now there’s a scientific term) of positivity it brings.

Gratitude is about noticing and actively appreciating the good things in your life. It’s a mash-up of attention and savouring—with an extra kick of action. Just noticing a good thing (“Oh, there’s lasagne for dinner”) isn’t gratitude. Noticing and savouring (“Oh, there’s lasagne for dinner and it smells great!”) is the next level.

But the extra kick comes when you add action to the equation: You actively appreciate that good thing

by expressing your appreciation. In this case, it's by saying to whoever's cooking that lasagne, "Yum, thank you for that lasagne. It smells great!"

Think for a moment about what really happened here. You've turned your attention toward a positive focus and provided yourself with the cascade of neurochemistry that good feelings bring. But by expressing gratitude, you've created an environment where someone else can notice that good moment, savour it and experience that same flood of positive sensation, too. Exchanges like these give both parties a huge shot of positive feelings. It's this pro-social aspect of gratitude that makes it so powerful for your family.

We can bring kids and parents into the lab, sit them in front of a computer and do "attentional" training with them every day for a month. They'd dutifully press the little red button every time they saw the number combination that they're supposed to focus on. And they'd get better and better at building their "attentional" muscle.

But it's no fun. Much more fun is to start practising gratitude. Not only are we improving attention skills and boosting our positive emotions, but we're also spreading that improvement to others.

Gratitude can take the form of words—"thank you" being the most obvious and always effective—but you can be more elaborate in commenting on the particular strength

a person is showing, be it cooking skills, thoughtfulness, creativity or any of the strengths. Strength-Based Parenting, a style of parenting I believe in, is a way of raising your child in a manner that shows appreciation and gratitude for who they are and helps them appreciate the strengths in others too.

Your appreciation can also take the form of an action: appreciating that a waitress has to clear hundreds of plates a day and as a family stacking up the plates on the restaurant table to help her clear them; bringing a coworker a cup of hot chocolate because you notice he's having a busy day; saying hi to the new kid at school who's looking a bit forlorn; writing a thank-you note to a teacher. These are little actions of gratitude that say "I see and appreciate you."

Practising gratitude as you go about your daily life models appreciation in action for your child. Praising your child is a beautiful way to show them exactly how wonderful it feels to receive expressions of gratitude.

Gratitude is other-directed: We notice something, it stirs us and we feel compelled to communicate that sensation to another—whether to a person, a spiritual entity or the universe. When we feel appreciation without communicating it, we might call that awe or wonder. In a paper I wrote last year with one of my PhD students, Reuben Rusk,



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and my colleague Dianne Vella-Brodrick, PhD, we called it gratefulness, as distinct from the social quality of gratitude.

We all want to feel noticed and appreciated. When we're truly experiencing gratitude, I feel that we are expressing our higher selves. It costs so little, but it means so much to so many.

gratitude is good for you

Learning how to direct my attention toward gratitude played an important part in my own healing journey from anxiety and depression by helping me reframe events, find and appreciate the lessons, and discover benefits I might not otherwise have discovered.

There's a bucket load of research showing the importance of gratitude for our psychological health. It's linked to a host of positive indicators such as self-discipline, emotional warmth, altruism, positive mood, self-esteem and life satisfaction. People who practise gratitude report feeling less bitterness and depression

over time (I dare you to try to feel bitter and grateful in exactly the same moment).

Alex Wood, PhD, of the University of Stirling, Scotland, has found that people who feel grateful just prior to sleep fall into slumber more quickly, stay asleep longer and report better sleep quality. For my family and me, that study was life-changing.

I used to go to bed with so many things on my mind that I'd repeatedly turn on the light to write items on a to-do list that I kept next to the bed, afraid I'd forget them by the next day. Going to sleep took hours. That was the "pre-gratitude Lea."

But after reading about Dr Wood's work, I started doing a simple exercise to change what researchers call "pre-sleep cognition"—that is, what we think about just before we fall asleep. Instead of thinking about all the things I was worried about, I swapped in a pre-sleep cognition of gratitude by thinking of the many things I'm grateful for: the hug Emily gave me that day . . . the joke Nick told that made the whole

family laugh . . . a good conversation with Matt . . . the roof over my head. Instead of “I haven’t done enough”, the mental message is “Things are OK. Life’s pretty good.”

Aiming and sustaining my attention on things I’m grateful for calms my body and mind. Often I fall asleep in the middle of making my mental gratitude list! It feels lovely. But underneath it all, I’m changing my brain, building a new attentional pattern of noticing the good things. The more I train my brain to see the good, the easier it becomes to see my kids’ strengths and my own.

For years, I’ve done this exercise with Nick and Emily at bedtime, inviting them to tell me some things that made them feel thankful during the day. I want them to be able to cultivate this strength of gratitude because it makes them better as people, and it makes them feel better about themselves.

Gratitude also builds our relationships. Psychologists classify gratitude as a pro-social emotion: it has positive effects on you and others. It’s deeply programmed into us because there was a primal reason for it. Fear makes us flee the predator. Anger makes us fight back. Curiosity makes us search out a new food source. Love makes us bond, mate and procreate to perpetuate the species. Why did gratitude get built into our emotional highway?

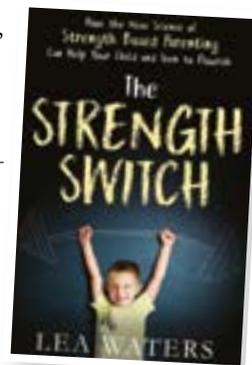
Psychologists suggest that gratitude created a bond between

individuals who weren’t in the same family or genetic circle, building a stronger community by fostering cooperative behaviour.

Suppose you and I are hanging out on the savannah and you offer me some tasty food you’ve gathered. You didn’t have to do that, since I’m not related to you. If I get a warm glow of gratitude and am compelled to share that with you, whether through words or actions—known as reciprocity, or returning the favour in some way—this exchange fosters positive feelings in both of us, making us likely to share resources again. The more we do that, the stronger and more effective our community becomes.

Perhaps that’s why every major discipline that has studied society and humanity has mentioned the importance of gratitude. Every major religion preaches its importance, whether toward God or one another. Sociologists say we cannot function as a society without the cooperative behaviour cemented by gratitude. Roman philosopher Cicero called it “the parent” of all the virtues. 🔄

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