

MAGAZINE - CULTURE

Is the Secret to Happiness Having a Gratitude Practice?

Even spending just a few minutes a day practicing gratitude can facilitate better sleep and lower blood pressure, according to research. How to get in on the healthy, easy wellness routine.



ILLUSTRATION: HOLLY STAPLETON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

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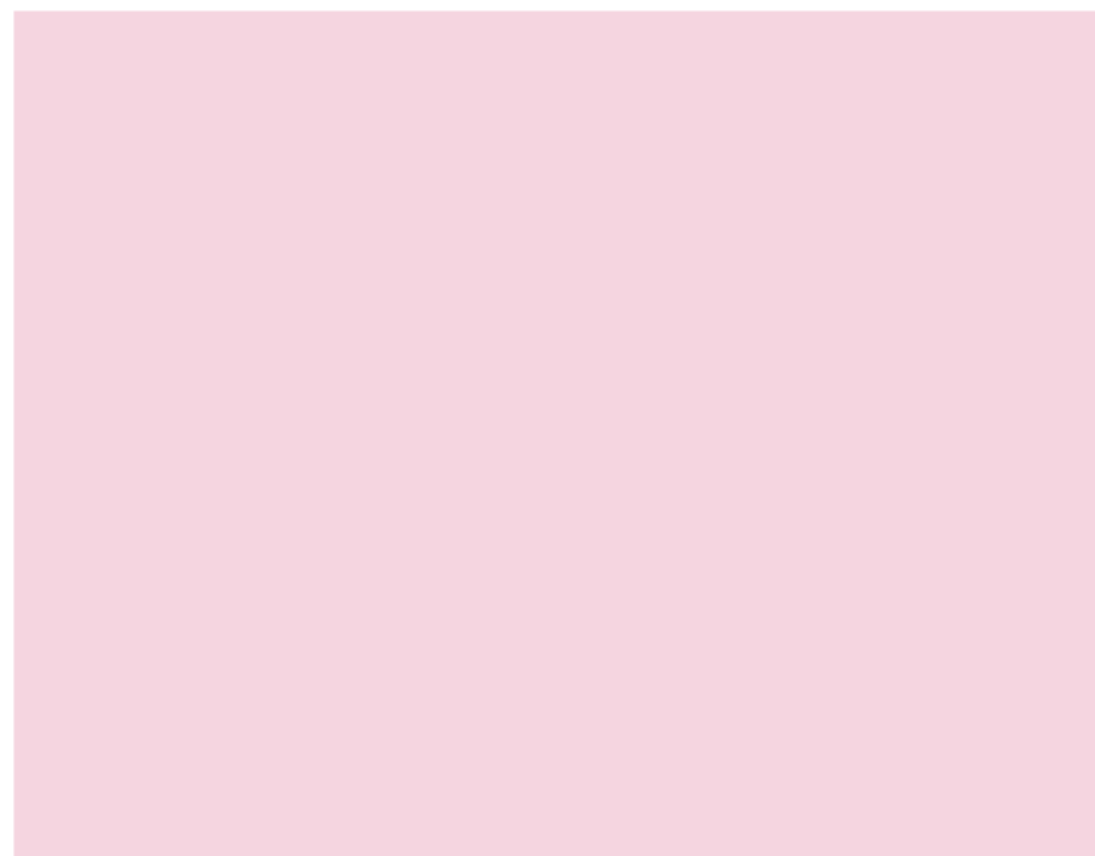
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A surprising unifier has emerged over the last year in *WSJ*'s My Monday Morning column, which chronicles the routines and productivity secrets people use to start their weeks: gratitude.

Before author Stephen King gets out of bed in the morning, he [runs through a mental inventory](#) of the things he's grateful for. So does actor [Tracee Ellis Ross](#). Musician and director Questlove [writes a 15-item gratitude list](#) every Sunday. Nike CEO John Donahoe [spends time meditating](#) on questions like, "What am I grateful for in the broad sense of my life? What am I grateful for in the previous day?" Actor Kate Hudson [re-started her gratitude journaling](#) after a reflective Thanksgiving car ride. Model Bella Hadid [likes listening](#) to a daily gratitude meditation every morning.

Gratitude isn't a new concept or a practice that's exclusive to celebrities. For one, it's a tenet of most major religions. In modern times, it was popularized in 1990s self-help books like *Simple Abundance: 365 Days to a Balanced and Joyful Life*, a bestseller for which its author Sarah Ban Breathnach also created an accompanying *The Simple Abundance Journal of Gratitude*. Oprah Winfrey has extolled the virtues of gratitude journaling—writing down things she's grateful for, which she's been doing since 1996—numerous times over the years.

Dr. Robert A. Emmons, a psychologist and professor at University of California Davis who's written several books on gratitude, says the pandemic is likely one of the reasons for the practice's increased popularity right now. "In the face of crises and during troubling times, people rely on positive feelings to cope, and they seem to turn to gratitude more than any other positive emotion," he says.



the people who we work with," she says.



Every day, Amy Denet Deal wakes up at dawn, greets the sun and sets intentions for the day.
PHOTO: DILLON SACHS

Alyssa Bonanno, 28, started her gratitude practice during a point in the pandemic when days started to feel as though they were blurring together. Bonanno, the co-owner of a creative agency in New York City, found that gratitude journaling in the evening was a nice signifier that work was done for the day. She uses a notebook in order to stay away from emails and says the exercise keeps her even-keeled the same way meditation or a workout does. "I also think it's made me more gracious to

"Don't you feel like we're all struggling a little mentally right now because of the surge?" says Amy Denet Deal, 57, the founder of Diné (Navajo) fashion and home brand 4Kinship. Every day, she wakes up at dawn, greets the sun and sets intentions for the day, as well as completing other practices that she doesn't want to disclose publicly because of their sacredness. "Giving back is so helpful on all of these other emotions of fear, of depression, of all the things that have happened during Covid-19. It's taking ownership of, How can I be grateful? How can I give back?"

The photographer, author and podcast host Amanda de Cadenet, 49, says focusing on what she's grateful for tends to override any other negative emotions she might be feeling. Her gratitude practice incorporates social media prompts from the Hoffman Institute Foundation, which holds a week-long healing and development retreat called the Hoffman Process that she attended eight years ago;

exercises from professor and author Kristin Neff, who focuses on self-compassion; and the tools she's gained from her sobriety. "A big part of sobriety and recovery is based around acceptance of life on life's terms," she says. "I look for the small joys, like a neighbor of mine has the most beautiful-smelling roses."

Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman, the director of the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center, says, "Humans are built to attend to the things that go badly in our lives. A lot of the exercises in positive psychology are ways of teaching people to savor and pay attention to what goes well."

The psychologist Dr. Emmons says clinical trials indicate that gratitude practices can facilitate better sleep and lower blood pressure—and that people who keep gratitude journals are on average happier than those who don't.

Benjamin Almeter, 28, the founder of public relations agency Dispatch, says his gratitude practice has allowed him to notice what's made him happy—going on a long walk, taking 40 minutes to cook a meal instead of ordering takeout—and turning those things into patterns.



Susan Korn, the founder of accessories brand Susan Alexandra, uses gratitude as a team-building exercise.
PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHNNY KOMPAR

Some CEOs, founders and executives say their practices have strengthened their leadership at work. Stacey Boyd, 52, founder and CEO of philanthropic shopping site Olivela says she's been practicing gratitude for 16 years and that it's probably the most important thing she does every day. "It always forces me to reflect not only on how I'm powering through my day but as importantly, how I'm interacting with others, and as a manager and leader, how I can do better at inspiring more and better from them." Others, like Susan Korn, 35, the founder of accessories brand Susan Alexandra, uses gratitude as a team-building exercise. "I think it makes people feel like they're doing something special," she says.

A gratitude practice doesn't have to be time-consuming. A few years ago, a friend gave Dianna Cohen, 30, the founder and CEO of hair-care brand Crown Affair, a book called the Five-Minute Journal. Now Cohen starts her mornings

by filling out its prompts, which include writing three things she's grateful for, as well as what she's looking forward to that day. "It's perfect if you're going to the gym or have kids," she says.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How do you work gratitude into your daily routine?

Writer Amanda Fortini, 45, describes her practice as an informal meditation that she does in bed as she's going to sleep. Moving from small things (a meal she ate that day) to large (having shelter), she says she usually only gets to three of them before falling asleep.

Gratitude Adjustment

How different people think about and practice gratitude



Halalah Flynn, 27, marketing professional, thinks through her gratitude list on runs to the Washington Monument.

On Tuesdays, Vera Papisova, 31, journalist, shares her "small wins" on her Instagram story, citing research that Tuesday is the hardest day of the week for most people; she posts her followers' small wins, too.

Bonita Kye, 33, founder of Kye Intimates, practices gratitude on her daily walks to the beach.

Amanda Baudier, 38, general manager of Melissa Wood Health, uses a monitor while she's meditating that tracks her heart rate variability, which she says shows her whether she's in an elevated space where she's feeling emotions like gratitude and joy.

Poppy Jamie, 31, author and entrepreneur, shares three things she's grateful for every day with her partner; he shares his, too.

Corrections & Amplifications

An earlier version of this story did not include credit for a photograph of Susan Korn taken by Johnny Kompar. (Corrected on Jan. 21)