

LIVE  
MORE

Happy

GRATITUDE

Dr Darren Morton

## Look to the positive

If you were put in an empty room and given the task of making yourself feel down, how long would it take? Thinking negatively comes easily for many of us, perhaps because we have been practising it for many years. It is hardly surprising that repetitive negative thinking, such as worry and ruminating on negative things, makes people more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

The trick for combating negative thinking is to replace negative thoughts with positive ones. But this requires us to be intentional. At least a third of our thought flow each day is undirected, which means that if we don't take care to lead it to a positive place we can unwittingly find ourselves in a negative one. Because our brain doesn't stay idle for long, we can't expect it to stop thinking about negative things without giving it something else to think about—otherwise, it might start thinking about something even worse! So what positive things should we think about?

To really engage our brain in positive thinking, questions are the answer. Questions have the ability to really get the cogs turning in the frontal cortex of our brain, as they force it to focus. There are three questions in particular that can direct us

toward a happier mindset and they relate to how we look to the positive in relation to the past, present and future.

### **Question 1: What am I truly grateful for?**

What are three things you are truly grateful for? Don't just give a trite answer. Pause for a moment, give the question your full attention, and really think about it. If you were to take the time, how long a list could you compile?

Most of us don't take the time to think regularly about what we are grateful for. This is to our detriment, because expressing gratitude is now known to have many benefits, both mental and physical. While expressing gratitude has been promoted by faith traditions for millennia, it is only more recently that its ability to lift us emotionally has been scientifically documented.

In 2003, researchers from the University of California and Miami conducted several "gratitude experiments" and concluded that consciously focusing on blessings, as compared to burdens, had both emotional and interpersonal benefits. A few years later, other researchers reported that when people participated in a "gratitude visit," which involves writing and delivering a letter of gratitude to someone who had been especially

significant to them, the giver's level of happiness increased and remained elevated for one month afterward.

Practising gratitude has been repeatedly shown to help people of all ages feel more emotionally well, including children, early adolescents, college students, and middle-aged and older adults. Practising gratitude is one of the most robust strategies in positive psychology for increasing happiness.

So why is being grateful so uplifting? Dr Martin Seligman explains that gratitude “amplifies good memories about the past,” which puts us in a positive frame of mind. And that positive mindset can help us look to the positive in the present and future. As the old saying goes, “If a fellow isn't thankful for what he's got, he isn't likely to be thankful for what he'll get.”

## **Question 2: What went well today?**

In a fascinating study, participants were asked to complete a short writing activity called “Three good things” before they went to sleep every night for one week. The task involved them writing down three things that went well that day and why they went well. The participants benefitted so much from the activity that many of them stuck

with it, but what was truly remarkable is that their happiness progressively increased for the next six months. Normally in studies like this, we see a “treatment effect,” which gradually dwindles to nothing over time, but in this instance the effect gradually grew!

### **Question 3: What am I looking forward to?**

What do you have coming up in the near future that gives you a warm fuzzy every time you think about it? If you are struggling for a good response—and something vague like “the weekend” is inadequate—you had better do something about it.

The excitement of looking forward to something can be all it takes to pick us up when we are feeling down. One of the possible reasons children are, for the most part, upbeat and happy is they have an innate capacity to get excited. A tragedy of ageing is that we are expected to “grow up” and put this behind us. But how good was life when we counted down the number of sleeps until Christmas or our birthday?

Another way we can look positively to the future is to be hopeful. Numerous studies show that people with hope are happier, and suffer less depression and stress. So do you have hope?

Dr Victor Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist who survived the holocaust. As a prisoner in a death camp, he endured unspeakable atrocities, but as a doctor, he found himself caring for—and observing—his fellow prisoners. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, he tells of how a disproportionate number of his fellow prisoners died in the week after Christmas, 1944. At first, it seemed inexplicable. There had been no change in work conditions, rations, the weather or anything else that added to the hardship they were enduring. After much thought, the “cause of death” became apparent to him—there had been rumours in the camp that the Allies were coming to liberate them and that they would be home by Christmas. With their hopes dashed, the people perished.

Anne Frank was correct when she penned, “Where there is hope, there's life.” Hope is literally life-giving. Hope is one of my favourite words. It makes me happier and is a great source of comfort, especially when things are not going well. As the quote attributed to John Lennon puts it, “Everything will be OK in the end. If it's not OK, it's not the end.” That is hope speaking. It is a wonderful expression of looking to the future with positivity.

## Putting it into action

### 1. *What went well?*

Take 10–15 minutes at the end of each day to think about and write down three things that went well that day and why they went well. You might find that doing this activity shortly before you go to bed will also help you sleep better.

### 2. *Gratitude visit.*

Think about someone who has had a significant positive impact on your life and write it down in a few paragraphs. Now the hard part: Share it with the person, ideally face-to-face.

### 3. *Mark it in your diary!*

Do you in need something to look forward to? Mark something in your diary that will give you an eager sense of anticipation every time you think about it.

**Dr Darren Morton is a Fellow of the Australasian Society of Lifestyle Medicine and Director of the Lifestyle and Health Research Centre at Avondale University College in Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia. His research has been published in leading medical and scientific journals, and *Live More Happy* is his third book.**

Find more scientifically proven ways to **lift your mood** and **your life** in Dr Darren Morton's book, *Live More Happy*.



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