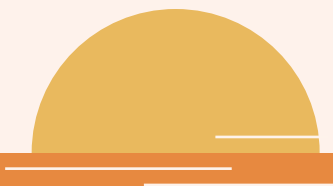


MY HAPPY PLACE

Vol. 1



Guided Gratitude Journal

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

Hello and welcome to *My Happy Place*, a journal series designed to help you feel more positive about yourself and your life. This PDF is an excerpt from *My Happy Place Vol. 1* to support your gratitude journey if you begin with *My Happy Place Vol. 2* or *Vol. 3*.

This excerpt gives you the basic information about how a gratitude practice can improve the quality of your life and how to tailor your practice to reap the greatest benefits. I encourage you to read the information in this PDF before diving into *My Happy Place Vol. 2* or *Vol. 3*.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at:
aileen@cococumba.com

Happy journaling!
Aileen



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BY CULTIVATING GRATEFULNESS, WE ARE FREED FROM
ENVY OVER WHAT WE DON'T HAVE OR WHO WE ARE
NOT. IT DOESN'T MAKE LIFE PERFECT, BUT WITH
GRATITUDE COMES THE REALIZATION THAT RIGHT NOW,
IN THIS MOMENT, WE HAVE ENOUGH, ARE ENOUGH.

Robert Emmons

PERSONAL MESSAGE

Better, faster, prettier, thinner! The constant pressure to perform and the steady flow of information in our society keep raising our own expectations of what we have to do and who we should be. This array of expectations is almost unattainable and gives us a constant sense of failing. We think that we are not good enough, productive enough, pretty enough, thin enough, ... Never being where we want to be makes us unhappy. We lose touch with what we have already achieved and experienced; with who we already are.

Moreover, everyday life seems monotonous and like a life of obligations. We feel like we are treading water, with little time and energy left for what is important to us. Everything seems to be too much and it weighs on us mentally and emotionally. We are worried, want to please everyone, and see no escape from the hamster wheel.

In addition, there is a general negativity in our society. Negative news dominates the media, people around us complain, our own thoughts revolve around our worries. Not to mention job dissatisfaction, toxic behavior from others, personal crises, and more. The list goes on. All of this drains our energy and daily joy.

With this gratitude journal I want to create more balance. Unpleasant things exist, and to hide them would not only be wrong, but also unrealistic. But there are also the good things in us and in our lives that we often pay only little attention to. What would it be like to feel more joy by realizing what we have already achieved and experienced; who we already are? What would it feel like being happier and more content by giving more emphasis to the good? How would that affect your well-being?

In no way do I want to create unrealistic expectations in you. Gratitude will not eliminate all your worries. Yet, gratitude can be the beginning for more contentment, which then translates into more energy and strength to tackle things. I've found that being more content has helped me have greater drive and energy for what's important to me. I feel more joy and ease in my daily life because with gratitude I have been able to calm mental challenges such as crushing self-criticism, personal dissatisfaction, and feeling easily overwhelmed. I have found greater inner peace, become more optimistic, and learned to trust.

Nowadays, all information is freely available to us. We consume more every day. Be it news, social media, books, online articles or videos. One day I realized that too much information was making me anxious. It either overwhelmed me or caused me to subconsciously compare myself to an unrealistic ideal. It was just

showing me what I don't have or be yet. I realized that I needed to consume less information and practice more.

But how? For instance, I had already read a lot about gratitude, but despite applying it, I didn't feel the desired effect. The application was too shallow and I lacked a clear structure to practice. I came up with the idea of creating a small journal for myself. This guided me through my practice and I quickly noticed a positive change. Thus, I made it my mission to share this journal with you.

Before you start your journal, I want to leave you with two thoughts:

1. Gratitude is not positivity. I don't want to make you feel like you should cover up your feelings with positivity. Instead, gratitude offers a way of being mindful and accepting in the present moment, while focusing on what is going well in your life.
2. When I talk about bad days or negative thoughts in this journal, I mean small events in everyday life, dissatisfaction with certain situations, with oneself or others. I am not talking about severe strokes of fate. These require special attention and should be processed with professional help.

Let me conclude by sharing a few words of wisdom from the book "The Pursuit of Perfect" by Tal Ben-Shahar.

"The word 'appreciate' has two meanings. The first meaning is 'to be thankful,' the opposite of taking something for granted. The second meaning is 'to increase in value' (as money appreciates in the bank).

Combined, these two meanings point to a truth that has been proved repeatedly in research on gratitude: when we appreciate the good in our lives, the good grows and we have more of it. The opposite, sadly, is also true: when we fail to appreciate the good - when we take the good in our lives for granted - the good depreciates."

It is my deepest desire for you to grow the good in your life. You have been my inspiration for designing this journal, and I am beyond grateful that you have chosen this path of cultivating a gratitude attitude. This journal is meant to accompany you on your journey, and if you want to exchange thoughts personally, feel free to write to me at: aileen@cococumba.com

Gratefully, Aileen

INTRODUCTION

This journal is designed to:

- ♥ Increase your levels of joy, love, and happiness
- ♥ Increase your levels of resilience and self-worth
- ♥ Improve your relationships with yourself and others
- ♥ Enhance your chances for success in any area of your life
- ♥ Improve your physical and mental health, including your sleep

Several studies have shown these positive results for people who regularly practice gratitude.¹ This journal helps you to cultivate a gratitude practice, which will allow you to experience these benefits yourself.

There is the universal assumption that good things need to happen for us to be happy. For example:

- ♥ ‘When I am successful, then I will be happy.’
- ♥ ‘When I lose this excess weight, then I will be happy.’
- ♥ ‘When I am in a loving relationship, then I will be happy.’

Research has proven the opposite. Happiness comes first and promotes positive outcomes. When we are happier, we are more successful in achieving personal goals, have healthier relationships, and show greater productivity.² But how can you become happier if you are dissatisfied? This is where gratitude comes into play.

Leading gratitude researcher Robert Emmons found that participants in his studies who kept a gratitude journal were 25% happier. They felt better about their current lives and were more optimistic about the future than those who didn’t actively practice gratitude.² (*Figure 1*)



Figure 1: Happiness without and with gratitude journal

Imagine you have a basic level of happiness. This level:

- ♥ Drops when something bad happens
- ♥ Rises when something good happens
- ♥ Soon returns to its natural level (*Figure 2*)

One factor of influence for this basic level of happiness is the ratio of positive to negative emotions. People who are happier experience more positive emotions to every negative one.³ With gratitude, we focus on what goes well and thus create more positive emotions. It holds the opportunity to elevate your positivity ratio and thus your basic level of happiness.

Of course, gratitude isn't the solution to everything that goes wrong. It is recommended to feel and accept negative emotions too. Instead, gratitude offers a long-term approach to balance negative experiences and emotions by giving the positive things that surround us more attention, time, and energy. It is about seeing the whole picture and knowing that there are things worthy of gratitude amidst the chaos of life.

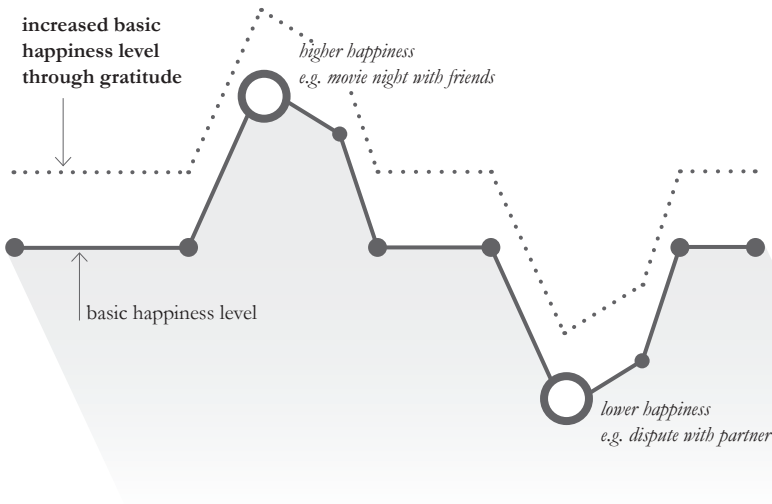


Figure 2: Basic happiness level

EXPERIENCE THE DIFFERENCE

Different thoughts create different feelings. With the following exercise you can directly compare the difference between positive and negative thoughts. There are two scenarios. Observe how your body changes in each of the two scenarios. Pay particular attention to the following points:

- ♥ How do you feel?
- ♥ Do you feel loved or hated?
- ♥ Do you feel relaxed or tense?
- ♥ Do you feel connected or disconnected?
- ♥ Do you feel a sense of abundance or lack?
- ♥ Does it fuel your energy or does it deplete it?
- ♥ Do you feel a sense of belonging or loneliness?
- ♥ How is your body posture?

For the first scenario, think of something negative, something that frustrates, annoys or bothers you. Go deep and hold the thought until you feel the negativity. While directly experiencing the negativity, answer the questions above.

Then, let go. Breathe and shake off the negativity. Once you reach a neutral mood, think of something pleasant. What makes you happy? What brings you joy? Once you are in a happy place, review the questions above.

What is the difference between those experiences? Before this exercise, you might have been in a balanced state, neither negative nor particularly positive. How has simply thinking about these scenarios influenced how you feel?

This exercise illustrates how our thoughts are directly connected to our feelings. They influence each other. This does not mean that we have to think positive and be happy all the time. Difficult days with challenging feelings are just as much a part of life as beautiful moments. However, we don't have to further complicate difficult times with burdensome thoughts. Gratitude offers a tendency toward acceptance and abundance so we can smooth the waters, learn to navigate difficult times better, and let go little by little to find inner peace.

THE PRACTICE

Practicing gratitude – like many other virtues in life – requires mental discipline before it becomes second nature. One of the best ways to develop gratitude is to maintain a daily practice by reminding yourself of your blessings, positive happenings, things you enjoy, and people you love.

WRITING

Writing your thoughts down has proven to be more effective than just thinking about them. When writing thoughts down, you are engaging with them on a deeper level. It helps to organize your thoughts, reflect on positive experiences, appreciate and acknowledge them, rather than letting them go by unnoticed.¹

Many sources suggest writing down three things you are grateful for each morning or evening. While following this good intention, some people report gratitude fatigue despite the written practice. Gratitude fatigue occurs when the list becomes repetitive. The practice becomes an empty routine that doesn't bring delight into your life anymore. It leads to a feeling of shallowness, and you get tired or just give up.

GO DEEP

Robert Emmons took this into account and found that just writing a simple list of things won't help us feel happier. He recommends deepening your gratitude practice by writing down just one item and explaining why you feel grateful for it in 3-5 sentences. This helps you to dig deeper to better understand the revealed qualities in your journal entry and to truly feel the gratitude.¹

This means that you could write down the same item for several days without experiencing gratitude fatigue, because you are writing it down for different reasons. For example, my partner makes it into my journal regularly. One day he helped me do the dishes, which made me feel supported. Another day, he gave me a hug that made me feel loved. Yet another day, he listened to my struggles, which helped me feel valued and understood.

This deeper gratitude practice encourages us to think about recent moments. Keeping it fresh helps us value the small things in our lives rather than focusing only on the big things. It's often the small daily moments that make a difference.

Two great windows to practice gratitude are in the morning and in the evening. A morning practice helps to start the day on a positive note, which helps you to feel energized. It also holds the opportunity to set an intention for the day before the busyness of the day begins. An evening practice helps you relax and fall asleep easier.

From personal experience, I find it additionally beneficial to do a gratitude exercise when something is going wrong or when I am being frustrated. In this instance, gratitude helps me to feel grounded and reminds me to connect with the present moment.

Emmons's findings are applied within this journal. The daily journaling pages feature a morning and an evening practice that encourages you to look for what you are grateful for in your current life. The journaling prompts are designed to invite you to go deep. They provide you with an opportunity to genuinely think about why you are grateful for what you write down.

KEY FACTORS

- ♥ Keeping it fresh helps to appreciate your current life
- ♥ A written practice is better than a mental practice
- ♥ Going deep helps to truly feel the gratitude
- ♥ Small things make the biggest difference
- ♥ A morning practice helps you energize
- ♥ An evening practice helps you unwind

In the words of Robert Emmons:

“Seek gratitude density. Be specific. Go for depth over breadth. Give details for each entry. The journal is more than just a list of stuff.”



WHEN WE ARE GRATEFUL, WE AFFIRM THAT A
SOURCE OF GOODNESS EXISTS IN OUR LIVES.
BY WRITING EACH DAY, WE MAGNIFY AND
EXPAND UPON THESE SOURCES OF GOODNESS.

Robert Emmons

HELPFUL TIPS

Anticipate days when you don't feel like practicing gratitude. Be understanding and flexible with yourself, no pressuring or judging. It might be more effective on those days to read through your previous journal entries and try again the next day with more energy.



Writing about people can be powerful for cultivating loving relationships and feeling deeply connected to those you care about. Writing about material things and personal experiences helps to acknowledge what we already have. Writing about yourself promotes a sense of self-worth and builds self-esteem. All three topics are included within this journal.



When you write something down, it's extremely effective to imagine first a life without it. For example, how would your life be without coffee or tea, a safe home, your loved ones, your beautiful memories, a hot shower, or access to clean water, etc.? Once we imagine a life without those things, we can see more clearly why we are grateful for them.



If you don't immediately feel the benefits of doing a gratitude practice, I encourage you to keep going! An attitude change (being happy) often comes after a behavior change (practicing gratitude), and it takes time to adjust. Be gentle with yourself and trust the process. Your efforts will pay off and help you reap the benefits in all areas of your life.



Having even a tiny smile on your face while sitting down for your gratitude practice helps to shift into positive emotional experiences. Several studies show that smiling, even for only a few seconds, nudges the brain chemistry into more positive patterns. Try it out right now. Give yourself a smile! How does it feel?

STAGES OF GRATITUDE

Leading gratitude researcher Robert Emmons discovered three stages of gratitude:

1. Seeing the good by looking for it.
2. Feeling the good by acknowledging it.
3. Sharing the good by giving back to others.

The first stage is noticing positive things. The second one is about savoring them and writing them down to expand on the experience.

The third stage is very powerful; it nurtures helpfulness and generosity within ourselves and those around us. It can be practiced with letter writing, in the form of gratitude letters or thank you notes. Gratitude calls and visits are also remarkable ways to express gratitude.⁴

This journal features steps one and two in-depth. The journaling prompts offer the opportunity to look for the good. They encourage you to dig deep by asking why something makes you feel grateful.

Stage three is introduced with journaling prompts and exercises that inspire action toward sharing the good. You will find more information on gratitude letters on page 73.

THE NEGATIVITY BIAS

Our brain is naturally wired to the negative, as a protective measure. It stems from our evolution.

Our ancestors lived in the jungle with many life-threatening risks. They had to be aware of those risks and anticipate them in order to survive. Thus, the brain developed the tendency to look for threats (the negative).⁵

Although we don't face those life-threatening dangers anymore, the brain's negativity bias is still with us. In fact, 80% of our daily thoughts are negative.⁸ It is what the brain is supposed to do.

The good news is that there is nothing wrong with you. You don't need to blame yourself for thinking negatively. You can show yourself compassion instead, knowing that your brain is only trying to keep you safe.

The bad news is that it takes focus and time to train your brain to think more positively.

Gratitude is perfect in its effects to challenge the negativity bias of the brain. When practiced consistently, gratitude teaches your brain to focus on the good. This naturally shifts your thought patterns to be more positive.

GRATITUDE LETTERS

Sharing gratitude by expressing it to other people is a very effective form of gratitude. Positive psychology researcher and professor, Martin Seligman, introduced gratitude visits with remarkable effects.⁶

Gratitude visits are a step beyond gratitude letters. It's writing a letter to a person and then visiting the person to read the letter out loud. This provides tremendous benefits to the giver, the recipient, and their relationship.

For some it might feel too uncomfortable to deliver the letter personally, and that's just fine. There are incredible benefits in solely writing the letter. Do what feels best for you right now. Only write the letter, send it to the person via mail, or deliver it personally. All options have their benefits.

While a gratitude letter is a fantastic way to boost your own well-being, a lasting effect occurs once you get into the habit of writing them regularly, e.g. once a month. This journal holds two spaces for your gratitude letters. The next page features the first one.

GRATITUDE DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

Feeling grateful might be easy when things are going well. It gets more difficult when we encounter challenges. Knowing that gratitude is a helpful companion, how can we be grateful amidst difficult times?

It starts in times that are going well. Gratitude is like a muscle that grows with training and practice. The more the muscle is trained, the bigger it gets. The bigger the muscle, the more strength we can leverage at any time. When the muscle isn't trained, then it gets harder to access when we need it.

It's the same with gratitude. It gets easier to be grateful in challenging times by practicing it daily when things are going well. This will create a disposition toward gratitude that we automatically tap into. Building the habit of gratitude will help support you through the rough times.

This does not mean you have to wait to practice gratitude when you are in the middle of a crisis. The key to this is finding the balance in our experiences. Pain exists. However, it exists alongside other experiences. We have more than just pain. A helpful question to ask as part of a gratitude practice amidst difficult times is:

What else is there (except my challenges)?

It is this connection we create with the positive parts of our lives that helps us through tough times with greater ease.

REFERENCES

This is a list of references I have used in this gratitude journal. The superscripted numbers you find throughout this journal reference back to the resources listed below.

- 1 Gratitude Works! A 21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity by Robert Emmons; 2013
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- 5 Hanson, R. (2013). Hardwiring happiness: the new brain science of contentment, calm and confidence
- 6 Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being by Martin E. P. Seligman; 2012
- 7 Exercises highlighted with 7 are inspired by InsightTimer course: The Power of Gratitude to Enrich Your Life by Patty Hlava, Ph.D. (AwakenPeace Healing)
- 8 National Science Foundation, 2005 | <https://tlexinstitute.com/how-to-effortlessly-have-more-positive-thoughts>

Humans make mistakes. If I've made one, my deepest apologies! If you believe I have either attributed an idea to the wrong person or not given credit where it is due, please email me at aileen@cococumba.com so I can correct the mistake in subsequent editions.