



# Life is Good

## Best Friends!

Show her you care with the gift of an experience—say, a hike or dinner out together. It's the ultimate thank-you.

*We're no Pollyannas. But it turns out that appreciating what you've got—a stellar best friend, the perfect latte, a partner who laughs at your jokes—can help you survive, and even thrive, through imperfect times. Be thankful for the science of gratitude.*

BY ELLEN SEIDMAN



I felt several flashes of gratitude today, and it wasn't even Thanksgiving or Ben & Jerry's free cone day. First my husband, Dave, got me iced coffee without my asking. Then my 8-year-old presented me with a handmade Rainbow Loom bracelet. And my new comforter felt amazingly soft and luxe when I fell into bed at night. *Ahh...*

As I grow older, I'm getting more appreciative of the people and creature comforts that make me feel loved and contented. One study estimated that for every 10 years of life, gratitude increases by 5 percent. And that, the research suggests, is beneficial to our bodies and minds: People who are regularly grateful—who acknowledge the goodness in life and the sources of it—are generally healthier and happier. And their husbands like them more! OK, I made that up, but I'll bet it's true.

"When people are grateful, they feel more alert and alive," says Robert Emmons, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, and author of *Gratitude Works!* "The expression of gratitude is important, too—it strengthens relationships."

Perhaps like me, though, you find your bursts of thankfulness to be just that: fleeting thoughts that quickly dissolve in the chaos of the day. Between our busy lives and the bigger stressors we've been facing (hello, unemployment and government shutdowns), it's no wonder our country suffers from Gratitude Deficit Disorder, as Emmons calls it. Still, this is one problem that's very curable.

## Feel the Love

➔ Don't worry if you're a cynical grump: "Gratitude is the most changeable character strength because it's about mindfulness—something *anyone* can do," says Giacomo Bono, PhD, adjunct professor of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Studies show that while genetics account for half our happiness level, the other half is under our everyday control. "The benefits can be almost immediate," Emmons promises me.

There can be long-term health payoffs, too: lower blood pressure, a stronger immune system, better sleep and fewer bouts of depression. This is mainly because appreciating life buffers stress, experts believe, so we're less likely to fall prey to its perils. After hearing all this, I'm raring to give the pros' be-thankful tactics a go. What I learn:

### post it!

At Emmons' suggestion, I put up sticky notes around the house about what I'm happy for: little things ("That plumber was awesome to come over last night to fix the leak"); big things ("12 years of marriage and we're still going strong"); little-big things ("The kids' freckles are so cute"). It feels kind of dippy writing notes to myself, but it is nice to come upon them.

### care deeply for stuff

You get the most bliss from feeling gratitude for people rather than things, Emmons tells me. That said, whether it's your new TV or the Kate Spade dress you (OK, *I*) bought on sale, consider how objects add value to your life. Easy: The dress makes me feel slimmer and so confident. *Danke schön, Kate!*

### record your appreciation

Psychologists pretty universally recommend keeping a gratitude journal (research shows that people who do so routinely are up to 25 percent happier than those who don't), whether it's in a notebook once a month or on your iPhone every morning. So I try twice a week to type out, in a Word document, my life's assets: my husband, my kids, our babysitter, our lovingly renovated 1912 colonial. When I do so, and reread what I've journaled, it's impossible not to think, *I am a lucky woman.*

### forget your blessings

The challenge, of course, is keeping good feelings going when life isn't so great. Enter the Bailey Effect, named after the character in *It's a Wonderful Life* who sees what the world would have been like had he never been born. This strategy works well for me. One day, I'm stuck on a train en route to work. When I consider how hard my life would be without a train—a reality after Hurricane Sandy—my commute starts to suck a whole lot less.



Want more praise?

Just ask for it. Say, "I cleaned the bedroom—doesn't it look nice?" Also effective: Letting him know how much his appreciation means to you.

## Show the Love

➔ *Feeling* gratitude is only half the equation—you need to express it to get the full benefits. I say thank you as much as the next decent person, but I could take more time to show it, even if people start to think I've contracted some terminal disease.

### dole out thanks daily

Charity begins at home, and I can't think of a more appreciation-deprived person than my husband. I'm more likely to chide Dave for the seaweed-sheet crumbs he leaves around than praise him for trying to get us to eat healthier. Thing is, expressing gratitude is key to a strong relationship, says renowned sociologist Arlie Hochschild, PhD: "Give

immediate feedback—he chopped the onions? Great! Straightened the newspapers? Thanks!"

I start sprinkling more kudos into Dave's days. I text, too, stealing a tactic from my pal Cindy, who once gushed to her spouse: *Tx for cleaning up the cat puke have a good day.*

It's hard to resent your partner when you are focused on praising him. One day, when I say, "Thanks for picking up the kids!" he responds, "Thanks for noticing, lovey-love. I try." I can't remember the last time he called me "lovey-love."

### share details

"Being personal and specific about gratitude is more important than expressing lots of it," Emmons notes. After a friend forwards along info about an event, I tell her I appreciate how she always gets us to go out. "I wish we

could hang out more," she says, and suddenly we're having ourselves a props party.

### write a letter

Penning a note helps us reflect on people's goodness—and shows recipients how adored they are. I write my mom a letter detailing the things I love about her: her kindness, her creativity. I recall her feeding lunch to Peter, a neighborhood kid whose parents were often AWOL. Mom calls a few days later. "You got the letter?" I ask. "I did!" she says. "I don't think his name was Peter." *Wha?!* We debate this until I can't take it anymore. "Mom! Did you like the letter?" I ask. She responds, "Honey, I loved it!" I wonder about that. But on my next visit, I see she's taped it to a kitchen cabinet. And she doesn't say one word about what's-his-name. ■

## Top 5 Things Americans Are Thankful For



1 Our families



2 The freedoms of living in America



3 Good health



4 Close friends



5 Ability to practice religion

Source: The John Templeton Foundation

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