



ALTERNATIVE CHALLENGE: GIVE THANKS

The 'core curriculum' of challenges for The Kin Project focuses on what we can do for our planet and those we share it with. However, the alternative challenges focus on what we can do for ourselves. It's hard to do anything for anyone else if you are burned out. These alternative challenges are here to refuel our tanks.

This particular alternative challenge is about the power of gratitude. While this might sound a bit new-agey and woo-woo to some of you, gratitude has some serious science behind it.

PART 1: THE POWER OF GRATITUDE

PATIENCE AND WELLBEING

When people focus on being thankful, they're far more patient¹. How's that for a superpower? They're also more optimistic and physically healthy, because gratitude predicts behaviours such as helping others and exercising². For example, imagine groaning at the chore of cleaning up the mess your kids left behind in the living room and thinking, "I have to clean all this up!". Now invoke a little gratitude, and try thinking, "This mess is here because I have two gorgeous kids who I love very much. How lucky am I?" You're going to be picking up their mess either way, but your mental and emotional state is going to be far better off by invoking gratitude.

¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0956797614529979>

² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15358593.2017.1293836>



HAPPINESS AND SATISFACTION

It's hard to be happy without a solid sentiment of gratitude. Focusing on what you're grateful for reminds you of all that you have and removes the sense of lacking. It's often said that it's impossible to feel both grateful and unhappy at the same time. When your mind is focused on all that you're thankful for, you feel far more joy. You also feel more rooted in the present and appreciate your life right at that moment, exactly as it is. This eradicates yearning and anxiety about the future. Gratitude gives you a sense of satisfaction and contentment or, in other words, happiness.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Grateful people experience fewer aches and pains and report feeling healthier than other people, according to a 2012 study published in *Personality and Individual Differences*³. Grateful people also tend to take better care of their health. They exercise more often and are more likely to attend regular check-ups, which is likely to contribute to further longevity.

MENTAL HEALTH

Gratitude improves psychological health. Gratitude reduces a multitude of toxic emotions, from envy and resentment to frustration and regret. Robert Emmons, a leading gratitude researcher, has conducted multiple studies on the link between gratitude and well-being. His research confirms that gratitude effectively increases happiness and reduces depression.

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/personality>



COMMUNITY

Gratitude is an excellent way to build friendships and community. When people express appreciation, others feel better around them. They're more likely to form positive relationships and invest in connecting with that person⁴. This effect is present in the workplace, too. When people received thanks and appreciation at work, they slept better, had fewer headaches, and even ate better⁵. Expressing gratitude tends to spread positive feelings. You feel good about something and your appreciation makes someone else feel good as well. This has a knock-on effect, creating a positive atmosphere in the entire community.

GET IN THE FLOW

Being thankful creates the right conditions for getting in the flow and experiencing the magic of awe. When you're feeling grateful, you focus more on the bigger picture and less on yourself. This is a reliable predictor of positive experiences like awe and flow because these states are far easier to reach when you are lifted out of yourself. *The Happiness Hypothesis* by Jonathan Haidt finds that awe and flow are linked to a reduction in activity in the parts of the brain that are vigilant and self-focused. Gratitude is how you do that - it reduces that myopic focus on yourself.

BETTER SLEEP

Grateful people sleep better - and who doesn't want that?! Spend just 15 minutes jotting down a few grateful sentiments before bed, and you will likely sleep better and for longer⁶.

⁴ <https://doi.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Femo0000017>

⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439760.2019.1579353>

⁶ 2011 study published in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*



REDUCED AGGRESSION

Grateful people are better able to respond calmly to any form of aggression⁷. Those who are better at gratitude are less likely to retaliate, even when verbally attacked. They experience more sensitivity and empathy toward other people and a decreased desire to seek revenge.

IMPROVED SELF-ESTEEM

Optimal performance is strongly linked to self-esteem, and gratitude can bolster both. A 2014 study published in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* found that gratitude increased athletes' self-esteem. Another benefit for those of us who aren't professional athletes is that gratitude reduces social comparisons. Rather than becoming resentful toward people who have more money or better jobs—a major factor in reduced self-esteem—grateful people are better able to appreciate other people's accomplishments.

MORE RESILIENCE

Research has shown that gratitude not only reduces stress, but helps us to overcome trauma. A 2006 study published in *Behavior Research and Therapy* found that Vietnam War veterans with higher levels of gratitude experienced lower rates of post-traumatic stress disorder. A 2003 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that gratitude was a major contributor to resilience following the terrorist attacks on September 11. Recognising all that you have to be thankful for—even during the worst times—fosters resilience.

⁷ 2012 study by the University of Kentucky



PART 2: PRACTICING GRATITUDE

So this gratitude malarkey sounds great. But what are the best ways to cultivate gratitude? Here are easy ways to get into the state of being appreciative:

1. It's all about intention. Try to start the day by thinking about all you're looking forward to during the day - what do you have to be appreciative of today? Do the same before you turn out the lights at night - a gratitude journal next to your bed is a great reminder to do this.
2. Notice the little things. Make a conscious effort throughout the day to find little things for which to be grateful. Sure, you didn't win the Euromillions, but the cashier at the supermarket was really friendly. Don't take the small stuff for granted.
3. Use the domino effect. Perhaps you're appreciative of your new running shoes. What else can you find to be grateful for? The fact that you can run? That it's sunny out? That beautiful gorse bush you just ran past? Take one small element and spread out from there.
4. Put it in writing. When you write down what you're grateful for, just that simple act in itself can make you happier⁸. It forces you to pause and reflect on all the positive experiences you've had.
5. Share your gratitude. Look for acts from others for which you can express thanks. Thank that coworker for their helpful suggestion during a meeting. Point out something great that you can all be grateful for together - such as the fresh pot of coffee you're sharing.

⁸ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/11/081125113005.htm>



PART 3: SHARE THE LOVE

Take the opportunity to make someone's day. Along with jotting down all that you have to be grateful for in a gratitude journal, try to tell as many people as possible why you are grateful for them.

You can do this via a text message, a phone call, face-to-face, or, bring back that lovely dying tradition of sending a letter. See how many people you can make smile this month simply by telling them why you're grateful for them.