

**Gratitude**

Exercise



10 min



Client



No



## Replacing Non-Grateful Thoughts With Grateful Thoughts

While gratitude is basic human emotion, ungratefulness has been described as the solvent of social bonds and an assault on flourishing human life [1]. To be ungrateful is a failure to recognize and appreciate the gifts, lessons, and benefits we receive, no matter how small or insignificant they appear to be. When we become weighed down by ungrateful thoughts, relationship satisfaction decreases, social connections are weakened [2], and we are left feeling unhappy, bitter, and dissatisfied with what we have [3]. We can, however, choose to view the world through the lens of gratitude.

Gratitude is not simply being thankful when things go well. It entails recognizing what we have and understanding that our experiences have meaning and value even when things go wrong. While gratitude is not a panacea that will make the bad times disappear, a grateful outlook encourages a more balanced perspective and serves as a reminder that life offers many gifts even in difficult times [4]. Indeed, grateful people tend to be more satisfied with what they have and less susceptible to negative emotions, such as envy, resentment, greed, and bitterness [5].

Practicing gratitude has shown a consistent, robust relationship with happiness and a greater appreciation of life [6] and improved relationships, health, and overall well-being [5]. Moreover, grateful people tend to cope more effectively with everyday stress and enjoy more positive emotions, such as joy, enthusiasm, love, and optimism [7]. This exercise will help clients become aware of their ungrateful thoughts and replace them with grateful alternatives.

### Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



### Goal

This exercise aims to help clients practice gratitude by increasing awareness of ungrateful thoughts and replacing them with more grateful alternatives.



## Advice

- Gratitude is not a one-off activity. It is a practice. Clients should be encouraged to complete this exercise regularly to become more aware of their ungrateful thoughts and consider grateful alternatives with greater ease. When clients familiarize themselves with this exercise, they can then repeat the steps when they notice ungrateful thoughts.
- As clients become accustomed to the process, they may choose to continue the practice of writing down their grateful thoughts, or they may prefer to think of grateful alternatives silently in their minds. However, grateful thoughts should be written down in the initial stages so that they can be revisited at a later time to aid reflection.
- Remind clients that this exercise is not about toxic positivity or expressing gratitude for the extraordinary things that happen to them. Rather, it is about becoming aware of ungrateful thoughts, looking for the beauty or lessons learned from the situation, and replacing ungrateful thoughts with more grateful alternatives.



## References

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4. Worthen, V.E., & Isakson, R.L. (2007). The therapeutic value of experiencing and expressing gratitude. *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*, 31, 5.
5. Emmons, R.A., & Afshar, M. (2021). Gratitude as the foundation for joy. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 20, 5-21.
6. Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2009). Achieving and sustaining a good life. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4, 422-428.
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## Replacing Non-Grateful Thoughts With Grateful Thoughts

Having ungrateful thoughts does not make you a bad person - we all tend to pay more attention to the bad rather than the good things that happen in life. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that every person on the planet has ungrateful thoughts at times.

Ingratitude can show up in many different ways: perhaps you never feel satisfied with what you have, maybe you find yourself complaining excessively, feeling envious of others, or expecting the worst, for example.

Having ungrateful thoughts is a sign that you have overlooked the good aspects of your life, which can leave you feeling negative. Grateful people understand that life does not have to be perfect for them to appreciate what they have.

Even when things go wrong, gratitude can help you feel happier, be more optimistic about the future and cope with the challenges life throws your way. This exercise will help you practice gratitude by paying attention to your ungrateful thoughts and formulating more grateful alternatives that acknowledge life's diverse gifts, benefits, and valuable lessons.

### Step 1: Identify an ungrateful thought

When you consider the average person has more than six thousand thoughts every day, it is hardly surprising that many of them will be less than grateful. Ungrateful thoughts can be so automatic that we may not even realize we have them. Therefore, the first step in replacing ungrateful thoughts is to recognize that you have them in the first place.

What does an ungrateful thought look like? Perhaps you find yourself complaining about a colleague, your family, or even the weather. Maybe you have angry, resentful, or jealous thoughts directed at another person or are envious of his/her success. Additional examples of ungrateful thoughts are provided in Appendix.

Now, think back over the past week and bring to mind an ungrateful thought you had. Alternatively, you may consider an ungrateful thought that is often present in your mind.

Write the ungrateful thought in the space below.



How does this ungrateful thought make you feel?

### Step 2: Formulate a grateful alternative

In this step, you will take the ungrateful thought detailed above and think of a grateful alternative. Before you begin, let's take a look at an example of how you can formulate grateful alternatives to ungrateful thoughts. If required, additional examples are provided in Appendix.

#### Example:

**Ungrateful thought:** Imagine that you have boarded a plane. You and the other passengers sit for over an hour with no sign of taking off. You think to yourself, "This is terrible service! I've been sitting here for an hour, and no one offered an explanation."

**Grateful thought:** In this example, you can think of things you can be grateful for despite the current situation. For example, "I know we have been delayed, but I am grateful that I have the time and finances to take this flight," "I am thankful that the flight was only delayed for an hour, at least it wasn't canceled," or "I have this extra time to rest/read/relax."

In essence, to rethink an ungrateful thought and replace it with a more grateful one, ask yourself one simple question:

- What can I appreciate or learn from this moment?

What grateful alternative will replace the ungrateful thought detailed in step 1? Write it in the space below.



### Step 3: Replacing the ungrateful thought with the grateful thought

This step is about paying attention to the feelings generated by this new grateful thought. Now that you have formulated a grateful alternative close your eyes and repeat the grateful thought in your mind.

Allow yourself to reflect on this new thought for a moment, paying attention to how you feel as you repeat it in your mind. When you are ready, consider the question below and write your response in the space provided.

What positive feelings are you experiencing right now?

### Step 4: Translating positive feelings into action

This step involves taking action and doing something to put those positive feelings to good use. Now that you have taken some time to reflect on the positive feelings generated by the grateful alternative, you can translate these feelings into action.

What you choose to do is entirely up to you. You might embrace those good feelings and do something nice for another person or yourself, pay someone a compliment (and mean it), or pay it forward at your local coffee shop and buy a stranger a drink, for example.

In what ways can you translate these positive feelings into action? Write your response in the space below.

In the future, when you notice yourself having a thought that is less than grateful, you can put what you have learned today into action and continue to reap the rewards of practicing gratitude.



### Step 5: Reflection

- What was it like to complete this exercise?
- How did it feel to think about grateful alternatives?
- What lessons did you learn while completing this exercise?
- What did you find most challenging about this exercise? How did you overcome this challenge?
- In what ways has this exercise helped you rethink ungrateful thoughts?
- How will you use what you have learned in the future?

**Appendix:** Examples of ungrateful thoughts and grateful alternatives

UNGRATEFUL THOUGHT	GRATEFUL ALTERNATIVE
It's too cold and always raining! It's so unfair.	It might be cold and wet, but that means the flowers in my garden will be watered, and I have an excuse to light a cozy fire this evening when I get home.
I hate my job, and the hours I work are so inconvenient.	I might hate my job right now, but it gives me the experience I need to improve my career prospects. This will allow me to move on to better things.
The train journey home is so long and boring.	The journey home might be long, but it doesn't need to be boring! I can use this time to read my book or call my brother.
This meal my partner cooked is terrible.	He/she might not be a great cook, but he/she tried. I'm lucky to have someone who cares for me.
My internet is down. Why do things like this always happen to me?	I'm lucky to have access to technology that allows me to keep in touch with distant friends and family.
The electricity bill is how much?! This is ridiculous!	I am glad to have access to utilities like electricity as they allow me to live comfortably.
My work colleague was promoted, and she didn't deserve it. It should have been me.	At least I have a job that allows me to provide for my family.
I am so annoyed I had to finish that project myself. No one ever offers to help me with anything!	I surprised myself by finishing the project alone. I didn't know I had it in me, and I learned some useful skills.
The house is a mess, and the kids are driving me crazy.	I have a roof over my head and two beautiful children that love me.
I lost my job and have moved back home with my parents. I don't know why this had to happen to me!	I'm grateful that I have supportive parents who understand my circumstances and want to help me during this difficult time.