

## Student Activity | Be Thankful

# Happiness Skill: Gratitude

### Time

Two 45–60-minute sessions

### Overview

In this activity, students create their own gratitude journal as they explore the benefits of being thankful. After discussing the meaning of gratitude, students will design a collage on their journal's cover that illustrates the positive ways others have contributed to their lives. Students will then begin their journal by creating a list of different acts of kindness that they have experienced. Next, students will select one of these instances, reflect on it in more detail, and describe how it made them feel. Finally, students will write a thank you note to someone on their list, and they are encouraged to deliver it to that person. The activity will culminate with a review of how students felt during these expressions of gratitude, the brain science behind gratitude, and how gratitude contributes to overall happiness.

### Objectives

Students will:

- Explore the meaning of gratitude.
- Reflect on the positive effects of their relationships with others.
- Write a thank you letter to express gratitude.
- Consider the connection between gratitude, brain science, and sustainable happiness.

### Materials

- Scrap paper, one piece per student
  - Gratitude Journal handout, one per student
  - Notebooks (one per student) and glue sticks (to share)
- or**
- 15–20 pieces of lined paper (per student) and staplers (to share)
  - Writing to say *Thank You* handout, one per student

### Standards

#### National Health Standards

- Standard 2: Students will analyze the influence of family, peers, culture, media, technology, and other factors on health behaviors.
- Standard 4: Students will demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal communication skills to enhance health and avoid or reduce health risks.

### Next Generation Science Standards

- MS-LS1 -8 From Molecules to Organisms
  - Structures and Processes: LS1.D: Information Processing: Each sense receptor responds to different inputs (electromagnetic, mechanical, chemical), transmitting them as signals that travel along nerve cells to the brain. The signals are then processed in the brain, resulting in immediate behaviors or memories

### English Language Arts Common Core State Standards

- Writing:
  - W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Speaking and Listening:
  - SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

### Resources

- [How Gratitude Changes You and Your Brain](#)
- [How to Cultivate Gratitude](#)
- [Giving Thanks Can Make You Happier](#)
- [LG Experience Happiness: Gratitude](#)
- [The Science of Gratitude](#)
- [How Gratitude Actually Changes Your Brain and is Good for Business](#)

### Procedure

#### Session 1:

1. Begin by engaging students around the definition of gratitude:
  - Challenge each class member to record what they believe gratitude means on a piece of scrap paper. They may use words or pictures to express its meaning.
  - Next, instruct students to find a partner, share their definition with each other, and develop a new definition together.
  - Finally, ask each pair to partner with another pair. The pairs should share their definitions and then create a final definition together that incorporates all of their ideas.
2. Bring the class back together and encourage groups to share their work with the class. Ensure students understand that gratitude is the feeling or state that comes from being thankful and appreciating the goodness that others contribute to their lives. Explain that while the feeling of gratitude is predominantly directed toward other people who have done something kind for us, you can also experience gratitude toward nature, things we own, circumstances, etc.
3. Go on to explain that gratitude is one of the six sustainable happiness skills (gratitude, positive outlook, human connection, mindfulness, purpose, and generosity). Tell students that for the rest of class, they will work on expressing gratitude *and* investigating why it may contribute to their happiness.

4. Explain that one way to build our gratitude is to keep a Gratitude Journal. Pass out one Gratitude Journal handout to each student, and explain that students will be creating their own. This handout will be the cover.
5. Encourage students to spend a few minutes filling their cover with words and sketches that illustrate people and things for which they are grateful.\* It may be helpful to give a few different examples such as: I'm thankful for my friends for making me smile. I'm thankful for my clothing for keeping me warm. I'm thankful for the opportunity to go to school so I can learn.  
  
*\* It is important to remember that some children may be living with significant challenges. Children who receive adult support in dealing with these challenges may have a heightened sense of gratitude, while children with fewer support systems may find it difficult to identify life events for which they feel grateful. If students are having a hard time thinking of something to be grateful for, be sure to listen and acknowledge their feelings with empathy. Gratitude cannot be imposed from the outside, and it is important to let children know they are heard so they understand their feelings are real and valid.*
6. Next, lead students in either stapling their new cover to several pieces of lined paper to make their own notebook or gluing their cover to the front of a notebook they already own.
7. Once the Gratitude Journals are assembled, encourage students to share their covers with a peer. If this sharing inspires students to think of new reasons for which they are thankful, they add these ideas. Then challenge each pair to brainstorm different categories that the items on their covers fall into. For instance: Are some ideas about nature? Are other ideas about people?
8. Guide students in elaborating on gratitude they feel towards people. Ask students to open to the first page of their journals and begin a list of some of the different acts of kindness that they have experienced—both big or small. Explain that these should be acts of kindness in which they were the recipient and not the giver.
9. Wrap up the session by asking students to take a mindful moment and silently think about how they feel. Explain that they will be further exploring gratitude's effect on happiness and wellbeing during the following session.

## Session 2:

1. Begin the session with another mindful moment. Once students have silently reflected on how they currently feel, ask a few volunteers to share.
2. Then instruct students to take out their Gratitude Journals, review the list they created on the first page, and select one act of kindness that greatly affected them. Ask them to turn to the next page of their journal and describe this act of kindness in more detail, including: What happened? Why did it happen? How did it make me feel?
3. Once students reflect on this act of kindness individually, have them share a summary of what they wrote with a partner. Then encourage those who feel comfortable to share their experience with the full class.

4. As students finish reflecting on this act of kindness, distribute one *Writing to say Thank You* handout to each student. Encourage students to write a note\* to the person who performed the act of kindness that they just described. In their note, ask students to express gratitude and appreciation for this person and their kind action. If students are unable to write or deliver a letter to this person, they may select another act of kindness from their list.

*\* Some students may come from homes or cultures where the Western way of expressing gratitude is not the norm. Encourage students to share other ways their family or community may express gratitude before students begin to write.*

5. When there are about 10 minutes left in the session, instruct students to fold their notes, place them in a safe place, and deliver them to the person when they are able.
6. Then bring the class back together and conclude with the following discussion points:
  - Ask: How do you feel now that you have spent time expressing gratitude? Do you feel differently in this moment than you did at the beginning of class?
  - Explain: If you do feel differently, science can explain why:
    - Feelings of gratitude can increase serotonin and dopamine production in the brain. Serotonin is a chemical responsible for feelings of wellbeing. Dopamine helps us feel enjoyment, satisfaction, and pleasure. Parts of our brain called *reward pathways* like when we feel this way and will motivate us to act in ways that will result in more of these feelings—which will help us seek out more and more to be grateful for!
    - MRIs (or brain imaging) have shown that when people experience feelings of gratitude, several areas of the brain are activated, including those responsible for reward pathways and the formation of social bonds.
    - People who show more gratitude have been found to have a more active hypothalamus. The brain's hypothalamus is responsible for controlling many important bodily functions, such as eating, sleeping, and stress levels. More activity in the hypothalamus can result in better sleep and decreased depression, which helps explain the correlation between gratitude and feelings of increased wellness.
  - Ask: Based on this science and what you know about your own happiness, why do you think gratitude can contribute to sustainable happiness?
    - Be sure students understand that a combination of factors can help explain how gratitude makes us happier. Since gratitude activates regions of the brain associated with stress relief, gratitude may help us become more relaxed. Because gratitude also activates regions of the brain associated with social bonding, it can reinforce our sense of human connection and our trust that others are there for us.

7. Finally, wrap up with a *Four Weeks of Thankfulness Challenge*. You may assign one of the following challenges to your students, or give them the option to choose the challenge they will partake in over the next month:
  - Challenge Option 1: Every day, try to take a moment to think about the people in your life for whom you are grateful. Then use your journal once or twice a week to describe the gratitude you feel for these people and their actions.
  - Challenge Option 2: Each week, try to perform at least four acts of kindness. (It may be helpful to first brainstorm a list of kindness ideas!) At the end of each week, take a few moments to write about these acts of kindness in your journal.
8. Looking Forward: Try to check in with your students halfway through the challenge and again at the end to hear about their experiences, emotions they felt throughout, and how they feel once it is complete. During each check-in, you can also instruct students to further reflect on their experience in their Gratitude Journal. Questions for students to reflect on individually, in pairs, or as a full class include:
  - Did this challenge affect you? How?
  - Did this challenge affect others? How?
  - Do you think it would be beneficial to continue this challenge (or a variation of this challenge)? Why or why not?

A large empty rectangular box intended for writing or drawing.

