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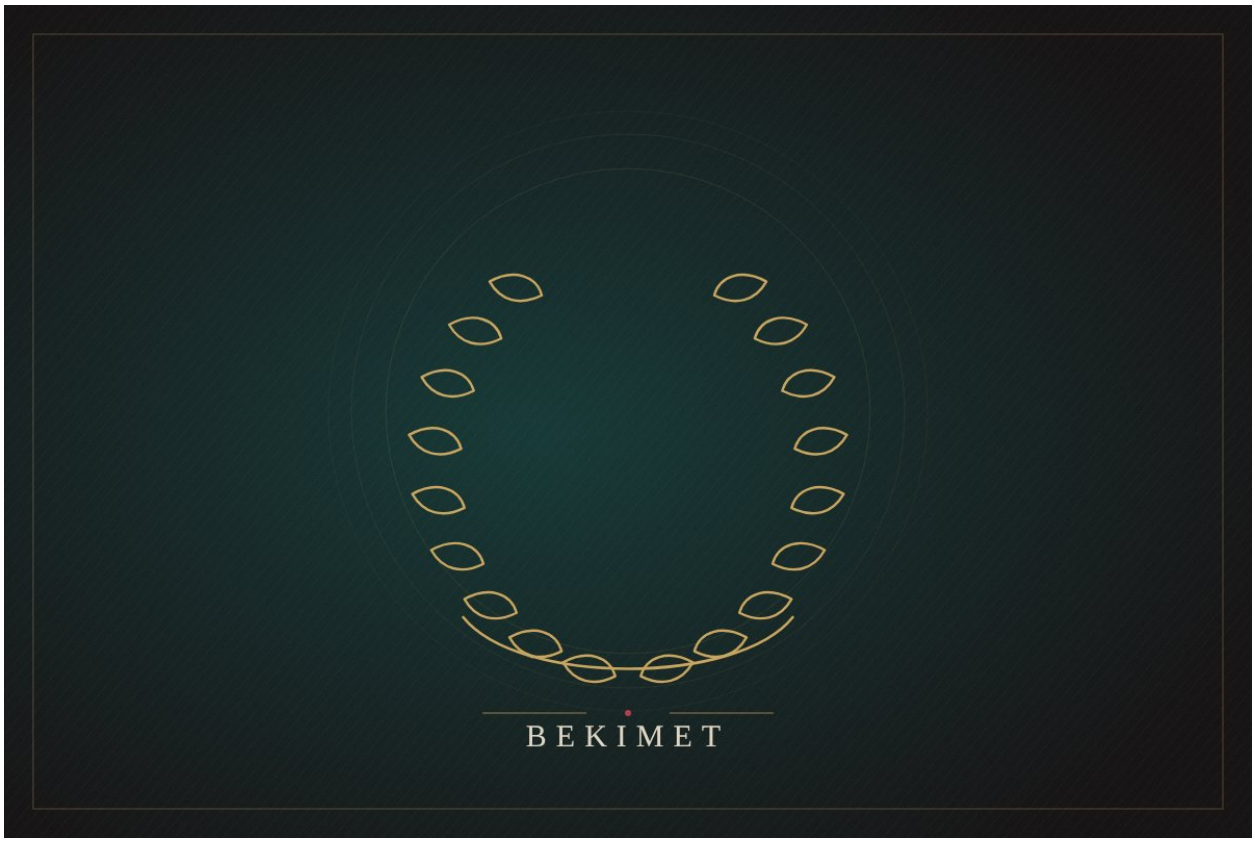
Awareness

Count blessings, not burdens: the experiment by Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough

Three groups, ten weeks, a short list each week: what changed for those who wrote about gratitude (2003), what later meta-analyses say and how to do it without turning it into a chore

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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In 2003 the psychologists Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough published a series of experiments with a simple title: "Counting blessings versus burdens". The question was whether writing regularly about the things we are grateful for affects well-being.

The first experiment

University students were randomly divided into three groups. For ten weeks, once a week, one group wrote down up to five things they were grateful for. The second group wrote down five hassles or annoyances of the week. The third group simply wrote five events that had affected them, without rating them as good or bad.

At the end, the gratitude group felt better about their lives as a whole and was more optimistic about the coming week. Participants in this group also reported fewer physical symptoms and that they had exercised more, about an hour and a half more per week than the hassles group.

In people with chronic illness

In another study, with adults who had neuromuscular diseases, participants who kept a daily gratitude journal for three weeks reported more positive emotions, more life satisfaction and better sleep. Their partners also noticed positive changes.

> *Gratitude does not deny what is hard. It simply does not let it take up all the space.*

How big is the effect?

Later studies have given a more measured picture. A 2016 meta-analysis by Don Davis and colleagues found that gratitude exercises improve well-being, but the effect is small when compared with other active exercises, such as writing about one's day. In other words, gratitude helps, but it is not magic. For some people, especially during severe depression, it may feel impossible or burdensome. In that case professional support comes first.

How to do it

1. **Once a week is enough.** Some studies suggest that writing too often can turn the exercise into a routine without feeling.
2. **Be specific:** not "my family", but "my sister who rang me on Wednesday when I was tired".
3. **Include small things:** a good coffee, a conversation, the morning light.
4. **Do not force it.** If one week you do not feel grateful, write that honestly too.

Sources

Emmons, R. A. & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 377–389. PubMed

Davis, D. E., Choe, E., Meyers, J. et al. (2016). Thankful for the little things: A meta-analysis of gratitude interventions. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 63(1), 20–31. PubMed

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