

# Gratefulology is not totally a real word

## Ologies Podcast

### November 19, 2018

Oh heeey, it's your neighbor raking leaves who wears one of those marshmallow parkas that goes down to her ankles, Alie Ward, back with the first-ever rerun of *Ologies*. Listen, I'm going to be quick because this already has an introduction, but this is a timely episode. It was originally released last November when *Ologies* was just a tiny baby infant podcast, so many of you may have missed it. And I just listened to it, and the refresher course on this topic was helpful as hell. So, it might be worth your 15 minutes. Maybe have a relisten. Okay, here we go.

[*singing to self, as if on an old record*] Alie Ward... You're going to record... a minisode. Maybe people will like it. Maybe they won't! So what. Okay.

Hiiii! It's a long weekend here in America and y'all might be on trains, or buying butter, or talking to your aunt, so I made you a short episode so you can listen while hiding in the bathroom in case you need some alone time. [*bathroom door creaking and closing*]

Also, one fun offshoot of this podcast is making and selling cool merch. Boy howdy, is there a sale you're going to want to get up in! Starting on Black Friday, which is the day after turkey day, all weekend until 11:59pm on Cyber Monday, ready for this? 30% off sale. 30% off! [OlogiesMerch.com](http://OlogiesMerch.com). There's enamel pins, totes, shirts, mugs, some insane, sciencey, holiday sweater-patterned shirts, leggings. All of it 30% off. I can't even deal.

You'll need a discount code. I'll say it at the end of this minisode so that you have time, right now, to find a crusty pen in your parents' junk drawer. You can write it on the back of a receipt for potatoes, so standby. You're gonna want the code. I'm just going to give it to you now also. It's BlackFridology. BlackFridology. Got it? Great. I'll say it again at the end of the episode.

First, the minisode. Let's do some free association. I'm going to say the word "Thanksgiving." What do you think of first? "Thanksgiving?" You got it? I myself, I think of gravy. You say, "Thanksgiving," I immediately conjure an image of a hot gravy dish that's kind of growing skin by the moment. Maybe you thought about layovers in a crowded airport or an itchy turtleneck.

I can tell you that one of the last things I think about, to be honest, is gratitude because [*annoyed sigh*] I felt like garbage this week and I don't know. I don't know... maybe I had the flu. And I've just been feeling like if you took a burlap sack and you sighed heavily into it, but it had eyes and hair, that would be me.

I was going to make a mini-episode this week, just a quickie about how cells recognize each other, but I was in such a bad mood. I googled, "Is there a science of gratitude?" and an article written by a husband-and-wife team of clinical psychologists, Drs Blair and Rita Justice popped up. It was called *Grateful-ology*. And I rolled my eyes so hard, I think I sprained one. [*resigned sigh*] Then I read on because, clearly, I was being a little bitch.

This episode is a quickie about what dumb holidays are supposed to be about. Thanksgiving and gratitude, and why it's not just a thing that Oprah uses to sell blank journals, [*clip of Oprah: "16 years ago, I started a gratitude journal, and I have to say, it was the single most important thing, I believe, I've ever done."*] but why neuroscientists say it's a good way to be less annoyed, less unhappy, and overall live longer. If you're into that kind of thing.

Just buckle up. I promise you it's worth it. Just me and you chitchatting privately about this. You don't even have to tell anyone that you listened to this. Okay? So: Gratefulology. Heavy air quotes.

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First off, the players. The main players in the science of, "Does being thankful for the life you have actually make you happier" are Drs Blair Justice, Professor of Psychology at the University of Texas School of Public Health, and Rita Justice, who is a psychologist in Houston. They wrote this article called *Gratefulology*.

It's like 10 years old, so I googled to make sure that they haven't been arrested, or divorced, or appointed a cabinet position in the White House. Sadly, Dr. Blair Justice has since passed away. [*exasperated sigh*] But he and Rita were married over 40 years, and that's amazing and adorable, so they were doing something right. And together they were huge advocates for gratitude in general, and they also studied the effects of mood and emotional well-being on physical well-being. They wrote books on it.

Now, other players in the scientific field of appreciating your shit are Dr. Robert Emmons, he goes by Bob, [*"Hi, Bob!"*] of the University of California Davis. He wrote a book called *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. And Dr. Michael McCullough of the University of Miami, together these two doctors did just a dump truck worth of research – and I mean that in a good way – about how taking stock of the good stuff can help you be less miserable.

Dr. McCullough and Dr. Emmons did one study that had three sets of participants; those who were asked to write down weekly the things they were grateful for or compose a letter of thanks to a person. They didn't have to send it. They could eat it. It didn't matter. Another group wrote down their hassles of the week. And then another just jotted down neutral events. They found that those who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more regularly. Which is super weird. They reported fewer physical ailments. They felt better about their lives as a whole, like 25% happier, which is, [*squibbles*] you know. And they were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared to those who recorded hassles or neutral life events.

Participants who kept gratitude lists were more likely to have made progress toward important goals over a two-month period compared to the other subjects. So how does it do this? How does saying, [*high-pitched voice*] "I really like mustard," or "This flower smells good..." How does this help keep you healthy? How does it help you reach your goals? What's the deal?

According to UCLA neuroscience researcher, Dr. Alex Korb, the benefits of gratitude start with the dopamine system. He says, "Feeling grateful activates the brain stem region that produces dopamine." [*"amazed crowd: Oooh!"*] He also says that gratitude can boost serotonin and trying to think of things you're grateful for makes you focus on positive aspects of your life. And that increases serotonin production in the anterior cingulate cortex, [*"amazed crowd: Ah!"*] which is something that is bobbing around in your skull. He also said that it's not finding gratitude that matters most. It's remembering to look.

It's just remembering to look that's important. So even if you're like, "What's something I'm grateful for?" And then there's just like a long pause and then you say, [*redneck accent*] "Horseshit. Nothin'!" that's still better than not thinking. Isn't that great?

They found that just looking for things to be grateful for actually affected neuron density in certain parts of the brain. And it suggests that as emotional intelligence increases, the neurons become more efficient. With higher emotional intelligence, it takes less effort to be grateful and it has some lasting effects.

How much of all of this is weird fringe research? [*theremin woo-woos followed by record scratch*]

It's actually not. UC Berkeley has a whole arm dedicated to positive psychology. It's called the Greater Good Science Center at Berkeley. And they have also found that people who practice gratitude consistently have stronger immune systems, less depression, more joy, optimism, happiness. They have better relationships, and they have less feelings of isolation or loneliness.

They gave out \$3 million in research grants a few years ago on the topic and there were 14 winners and they went on to use that money to study.

Here are some of the papers that they published. "Cultivating Gratitude in a Consumerist Society;" "The Impact of Gratitude on Biology and Behavior in Persons with Heart Disease;" "A Model of Bullying Based on Gratitude and Its Effects on Social Bonds." Even Frans de Waal, noted primatologist, used some research money and studied "Gratitude and Partner Preference in Chimpanzee Cooperation." So, people are working on it. People are like, "Yeah, there's something to this. You've got to force yourself to look on the bright side."

Now, Dr. Emmons, we talked about him before, says that the choice of gratitude doesn't come without effort. You gotta put in some effort. But each time we make the effort, it does get easier because, remember, we're making those neural highways more efficient. He also says there's two types of gratitude. There's relational and conditional. Relational is focused on the giver and conditional on the gift, and relational is more potent. So, "Hey, thanks for being so thoughtful for the thing you did" is more important than, "Thank you for this bag of bees that you gave me." [*Not the bees!!*] Assuming that you liked bees. I myself, if you gave me a bag of bees, I'd be like, "Woo!" That might not be you. Anyway, but you know what I'm saying?

I was researching this episode and writing today and I wish I had thought of the topic sooner. And I wish I had an interview for you, but I did the next best thing. I gently stalked Dr. Emmons on Twitter, and I lobbed a question at him. He doesn't know who I am. So what? I said, "Hey, this must be the busiest time of year for you, but how can people stay grateful with the deluge of tough news lately?" And he tweeted me back! It was so exciting. It felt like Bette Midler saying hello or something. [*clip of Bette Midler: "Hellloooo!!"*] He said:

Gratitude is undentable joy. Times good? Celebrate. Times tough? Find the opportunity. It's an attitude. *It's not based on circumstances.*

So, snap. Okay, so he was like, "Even though things are garbagy, it's very important to look for things to be appreciative of. Stay aware as you need to be, be as active in the community as you need to be, resist what you need to, but make time to appreciate the good." This is, like, doctor's orders. It'll make you a better fighter of wrong.

So, how do you do this? In his book *Thanks!*, Dr. Emmons suggests keeping a gratitude journal daily and you can record in writing what you're grateful for. [*Oprah: "One time it was just two squirrels eating. I said, 'I better write that down.'" audience laughs*] Come to your senses, count bodily-related things like being able to see, hear, walk, eat, breathe, uh, listen to podcasts. Use visual reminders like pictures of loved ones or scenes of nature and think outside the box. Think of the non-obvious things to be grateful for, like the fact that aliens haven't come down on our planet yet, or maybe they have and you're thankful for them. I don't know.

There's also this site called Thnx4.org. It's the opposite of Twitter. You can just sign up and have a 20-day challenge and just post and write things that you're thankful for. You open it up and just see what everyone's thankful for and it honestly is like a weird *Seinfeld*. [*Elaine from Seinfeld, Bizarro Jerry episode: "Jerry, George, Kramer, this is Kevin, Gene, and Feldman."*] It's like the Introduction to the Opposites sketches.

You can do another thing, which I did and then I neglected it, and I need to get back to it. You can open your own secret, private, Twitter account and have it be locked and not tell anyone that you have it. Then whenever you want to scroll on depressing stuff, you just hop over to your secret, private Twitter and just toss out a bunch of tweets, listing what you're grateful for.

No one has to know about it. You can just look like you're scrolling, but really you're just tweeting things like, "Hmm. Pretzels are pretty good." Then later, you can scroll through them for an instant mood boost. Try and find a couple things a day that you're thumbs-upping about.

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Happy start of the holidays. If you're having a tough time, know you're not alone. It's kind of a weird time of year for a lot of people. It's a weird year for a lot of people. It's weird. And just know that a list of what's good might bring you almost as much joy as a latke. It might change your life even more than a nose hair trimmer in your stocking.

Speaking of gifts, if you're looking to do any shopping, again, blackfridology on [OlogiesMerch.com](https://www.OlogiesMerch.com). That's the code. I told you I'd tell you at the end. BlackFridology. All one word. 30% off your order. I told you I'd tell you. I hope you got a pen.

Thanks to Shannon Feltus aka Urban Farm Foods on Facebook and Boni Dutch on Etsy, an amazing artist, for helping me with merch. Thanks to Hannah Lipow and Erin Talbert for being awesome friends and running the [Facebook group](#), and to my parents and sisters for listening and pretending that the swear words don't bother them.

Go ask smart people dumb questions, maybe even via Twitter, because it's the only way to learn. I'm on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) @Alie Ward and @Ologies on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). So go, I don't know, grab a journal, make a secret Twitter. Jot some stuff down on a gravy-stained paper napkin. Just look for things that are good. It will change your brain. Alright, you got this. Okay.

Bye.

[*record scratch*]

I guess this was before I recorded secrets at the end! Also, it was before I had Steve Ray Morris helping me do all the edits, and I'm grateful for him, so much. Also... Okay, I'm going to give you, for my secret at the end, five things I'm thankful for.

Pine incense. Frozen berries. Dusk and/or dawn. And one of my sisters remembers a movie line from, like, decades ago that I totally forgot about and it kills me dead laughing. And when I hear my parents in another room and they're still giggling at each other's jokes after, like, 50 years of marriage, which is cute as hell. Also, iced coffee.

Okay, berbye.

*Transcribed by Deb Ward*

**Link:**

Learn more about the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley

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