

The Power of Gratitude

In a new book, Deborah Norville marshals medical studies to advance her argument that a little bit of ‘thank you’ goes a long way toward happiness.

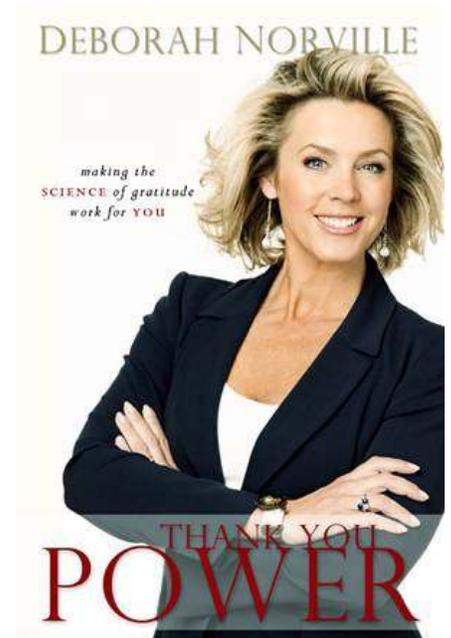
Web Exclusive

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Oct. 3, 2007 - Psychology has long concerned itself with what ails the human mind. Since the days of Freud, the field has been synonymous with terms like “neurosis” and “repression.” Over the past decade, a new and growing branch of this established field has been trying to answer an opposite, but equally elusive question: what makes us happy? According to those who study “positive psychology”—fame and fortune don’t even play a bit part, and genes may play only a supporting role. But one ingredient that does turn up in study after study is gratitude. In dozens of randomized, controlled experiments, people who focused on the things they were grateful for were happier, healthier and more successful. In her new book, “Thank You Power” (*Thomas Nelson*), TV journalist and author Deborah Norville marshals this research to advance the argument that a simple but consistent expression of gratitude can carry us a long way down the road to happiness. NEWSWEEK’s Jeneen Interlandi spoke with Norville about why she believes two little words may be the key to a fulfilling life. Excerpts:



NEWSWEEK: What led you to write this book?

Deborah Norville: I noticed that when I focused on what was going well in my life—as opposed to fixating on the problems that crept up—I was happier and things worked out better for me. And I began to think maybe I was just playing a mind game with myself, like when my kid wears his lucky jersey on game day because he thinks it will help him win. So I started looking into whether anyone had tried to answer the question scientifically. And it turns out that there’s a ton of research that does in fact quantify the benefits of being thankful—and those benefits are many.

How does “Thank You Power” differ from what people have been saying for years about the “power of positive thinking”?

Positive thinking simply involves thinking. In Thank You Power you have to do. You have to not only count your blessings but write them down. A positive mind-set in and of itself doesn’t necessarily lead to positive results; you need to follow up those thoughts with action, and Thank You Power is an active endeavor.

How does Thank You Power work? What are the essential steps?

It’s magically simple. Thank You Power can be ignited by the regular practice of finding something in your day that was meaningful and beneficial to you. Maybe it was an e-mail from a long-lost friend, or the magic of all the traffic lights going green when you were late getting to work. They’re not necessarily headline-making events. In fact, experts in this field say it’s usually the more banal moments that, on reflection, are the most meaningful in our lives. I actually have a Thank You list—pretty much everyday I jot down three or four things that I am grateful for in a little fabric covered notebook. Focusing on these moments is an incredibly effective way to put yourself in “positive affect,” which is the scientific term for feeling good—seeing the glass as half full instead of half empty.

Your book uses equal measures of science and religion. What role does each play in Thank You Power?

I think that’s by design that I use both. The practice of gratitude is part of every major religion. But the great thing about Thank You Power is that you need not be religious to receive its benefits—atheists and agnostics can still enhance their lives with the practice of gratitude. That’s maybe one of its more attractive points. I am a religious person, but a lot of what’s on my thank you list is the same as any atheist might have. All of that being said, Thank You Power is ultimately based in research. The book cites tons of academic studies, so it’s not something you need to take on faith.

What will Thank You Power accomplish? Is it just a matter of being happier?

The list of benefits reads like an infomercial. Practicing gratitude activates the dopamine receptors in the cerebral frontal cortex—the place in the brain where reasoning and logic take place. And activating that actually makes you smarter. In one study, they took three groups of little kids—and asked the first group to focus on a happy moment that made them so happy they wiggled in their seats. The second group was asked to think of a happy moment that just made them smile. And the third group wasn’t asked to think of anything in particular. Then they taught all of the kids some new material and tested them

on it, and the kids who had the wiggly happy memories did better; they were smarter. I think that's amazing. Dozens of other studies have shown that being in positive affect makes you a better negotiator and a faster learner. According to the research, you will live longer, exercise more and have fewer headaches and allergy attacks.

But aren't healthier, smarter people simply more likely to be happier in the first place?

In short, yes. But gratitude can also be used as the catalyst to create happiness. Thank You Power is a proven way to initiate the cycle of positivity.

What won't the practice of gratitude accomplish?

Thank You Power won't put rose-colored glasses on you. It won't skew your vision so that things look better than they are. What it does is call the good things into sharper focus.

Aren't some people just genetically predisposed to be happier?

The scientists who study positive psychology compiled a list of 24 attributes that typify happy people—what they call “signature strengths.” And, sure some of those have a genetic component. But of those 24 characteristics—the most vibrant ones being love, hope and gratitude—the one that you have the most control over is gratitude. It's the easiest one to cultivate.

Are people inherently pessimistic? Why do we always seem to have to work at being happy?

I don't think we're inherently pessimistic, but I do think we're conditioned to look at the aberrant—to focus on the things that don't work. And I think we relish discussing the misfortunes and bad choices of others, perhaps because it gives us a sense of superiority. We look at Britney Spears or Lindsay Lohan and think that if we had been blessed with their looks, and fame and fortune, we'd have done a better job with it. But I wonder if the Lindsay Lohans and Britney Spears of the world had some Thank You Power training, if they wouldn't find their own lives better to live.

What do you say to the skeptics?

Give it a shot. It costs you nothing to try. What have you got to lose?