

strongest year ever



How the Science of Gratitude Can Change Your Military Life

Expert advice on cultivating a grateful life, even when times are tough.

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Air Force spouse

Military spouses make many sacrifices. Long separations and last-minute moves can cloud even the sunniest dispositions. “Sometimes it is hard to be positive when you’re left behind to watch the news, manage your life, the house, and the kids (if you have them). You can get really bogged down in self-pity,” says Allison Mewes of Boise, Idaho, spouse of an active-duty Army National Guard soldier. The best defense against that self-pity? A sense of thankfulness and appreciation for life’s goodness.

BENEFITS OF GRATITUDE

Experts recommend that people write down what they are thankful for each day, and studies show that’s wise advice. Counting your blessings has tangible benefits, says Robert Emmons, Ph.D, professor of psychology at the University of California, and author of “Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier.” People who keep gratitude journals are 25 percent happier than people who don’t write down their blessings, Emmons says. They also sleep a half-hour longer each night and exercise 33 percent more each week.

Although scientists can’t pinpoint the exact biological mechanism responsible, studies show grateful people cope more effectively with everyday hassles and trauma-induced stress, and they recover more quickly from illness.

A thankful heart is good for your marriage, too. Partners notice increases in happiness and helpfulness in spouses who keep gratitude journals, says Emmons. Grateful people have higher relationship satisfaction, feel more connected to others, and are more altruistic.

Although gratitude offers immediate mood-boosting benefits, it’s more than a quick fix. Gratitude is a gift that keeps giving, says Emmons: “Changes in well-being last at least six months.”

HOW TO GET IT

Write It Down: Listing your blessings requires you to recognize what’s good and acknowledge its source. When you do this repeatedly, you begin to notice small blessings you might otherwise overlook, like the commissary clerk who gave your kids stickers for good behavior or your new-found friend in Zumba class. Keeping count accentuates abundance. “If you stop to list all the good things about your life,” says Mewes, “you realize that your husband being gone is one bad thing and there are so many great things on top of it to be thankful for.” ☞

• Air Force couple Justin and Sarena
• Kelley, with their baby.

• photo by Amanda Rulon,
• Air Force spouse, Offutt AFB
• amandarulongphotography.blogspot.com

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• • • **Savor Experiences:** Tune in to what is good right now, where you are. "Gratitude is the realization that we have everything we need, at the moment," says Emmons. Savor a perfect cup of coffee or the scent of a candle. Listen to music you love; hang pictures to remind you of good times. If you're overwhelmed by frustration, stop where you are and just breathe. Feel your chest rise as you inhale, then say a silent "thank you" as you exhale. Simple meditations like this make you feel centered and calm.

• • • **Reach Out:** Don't just count your blessings: Be a blessing. Helping others is an active way to cultivate gratitude. Navy spouse Cyndia Rios-Myers, who is also a Navy veteran, is the administrator for a Facebook page for military wives in San Diego, Calif. "I love giving advice to newcomers and answering any questions they might have," Rios-Myers says. Serving others creates a community circle of gratitude. Marine Corps spouse Casandra Chesser, who lives at Camp Lejeune, is "grateful to live in a place that is a true community, where – even though people don't know each other – they'll band together to help out total strangers through some of their darkest hours."

• • • **Pass It On:** Kids can't always see how privileged they are. Model grateful behavior for your children. "My hope is that by helping my children understand the concept of gratitude now, they too will begin to cultivate it," says New York Army National Guard spouse Kimberly Tulley of Camp Smith. "Most recently, I discussed the famine affecting Somalia with my 4-year-old. We compared their life with our life, and remembered small things that we should be grateful for but often take for granted, like clean water, a home, and food." Appreciation encourages empathy.

When the burdens of military life are more obvious than its blessings, remember: Service is truly a privilege. "I'm grateful for the opportunity to stand next to the person I believe in the most, doing the job of protecting the American people and our way of life," says Coast Guard spouse Dina Scalia, stationed at Oak Island, N.C.. A spirit of gratitude makes bad times bearable and good times great. ★

Grateful spouses sound off! You're most thankful for:

- * Steady Paychecks
- * Adventures
- * Space-A Travel
- * Friendship & Camaraderie
- * Supportive Communities
- * GI Bill Benefits
- * Great Deals at the Exchange
- * Health Insurance

4 Ways to Strengthen Your Spiritual Connection in 2012

by Cachet B. Prescott, Air Force spouse

With life's constant demands, connecting to your inner spirit may not be high on your list of priorities today. Spiritual wellness, however, contributes to your body's overall health. So carving out time for it is a necessity. When you're hungry, you eat. When you're sick, you seek healing. When you find that your spirit's lacking, you must also tend to it. Investing in your spirit is an investment in yourself.

1 THE POWER OF PRAYER

Connect with your higher power through prayer. During this personal and intimate experience, you can confide, share or ask for what you desire. Praying doesn't require elaborate preparation, so make use of the many opportunities throughout your day. Pray as you drive in the car, as you're sweeping your floor, or as you're getting a pedicure.

2 CONCENTRATE ON MIND AND BODY

Work on mind, body and spirit through the practices of meditation and yoga. In addition to reducing stress and inducing relaxation, both methods encourage conscious reflection, personal exploration, spiritual inquiry and restoration of inner peace.

3 PUT IT ON PAPER

In a private journal, candidly express your thoughts, hopes, dreams and aspirations. You'll truly learn about yourself as a person. Television mogul Oprah Winfrey suggests journaling about your appreciation for both the small and big things in your life. Commit to writing down at least three things each day, you'll be amazed to see just how much there is to be thankful for.

4 TAKE 10

Give yourself 10 minutes each day to just be still and truly live in the present. Experience that particular moment as it is, and don't permit thoughts about what you need to do or should be doing to invade your mind. View a beautiful sunset from your window, or soak in a lavender-scented bubble bath. Whatever you do, and allow yourself to enjoy the moment and simply be there—not focused on the past, the future or what's happening elsewhere.