

The Dr Louise Oliver Brain & Body Boost challenge © 2021

If I offered my patients a medication that was free, was very unlikely to produce unwanted side effects and improved motivation, relationships, sleep, digestion, well-being as well as reduced pain and stress I would be inundated with requests to prescribe. The good news it is available to you now however it doesn't come in the form of a tablet.

I challenge you to try this with an open mind, no expectations, and no judgement for 4 weeks. The magic behind the plan is due to an increase in 4 chemicals in your brain & body:

***Dopamine** – produces feelings of pleasure, increases motivation, a desire to repeat the activity.*

***Endogenous opioids** – reduces pain, produces euphoria, feeling of well-being.*

***Oxytocin** – decreases stress response, helps making relationships.*

***Serotonin** – contributes to well-being and happiness. Helps sleep cycle and digestive system.*

This is a simple, natural way of increasing these chemicals. All you need to do is to commit to the 4-week challenge and either print this document or write the tasks in a notebook. The best place to keep the document/ notebook is next to your bed so you can refer to it when you wake and before you go to sleep. I am going to include some of the science, in simple terms, to help you understand what is happening within your body during the challenge. Looking forward to joining you on your journey.

Enjoy!

Dr Louise Oliver

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Week 1

Life is precious – sometimes we get caught up in the stresses of day to day and forget to appreciate that we are alive. Instead try grateful living. Being grateful increases production of serotonin and dopamine in the body which will improve mood, sleep, digestion, motivation, and a desire to repeat the activity. Alex Korb a neuroscientist at the University of California, Los Angeles said, ‘once you start seeing things to be grateful for, your brain starts looking for more things to be grateful for. It’s a virtuous cycle’.

The not-for-profit organisation A Network for Grateful Living www.gratefulness.org defines grateful living as:

‘Grateful living brings the abundant gifts of gratitude to life – in all the moments of our lives. It is a way of life that invites us to take nothing for granted, cultivating awareness of and appreciation for the fullness of our lives. Living gratefully helps us awaken to the opportunities that are always available – even in the most challenging times – to learn, grow, and extend ourselves with compassion to ourselves, others, and the world. As we endeavour to notice our inner and outer landscape with wider eyes, we deepen our engagement and embrace of life in all its poignancy and preciousness. We come alive, opening up to wonder, joy, and love.’

There is no better time than when you wake up, before you do anything else, to remind yourself this day is a gift and set the filter in your brain (known as the reticular activating system) to look for grateful living opportunities throughout the day. I begin every morning saying a statement by

Dalai Lama ‘I am fortunate to be alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it.’

You can use this statement or create your own. Initially it will feel strange however over time you will discover the power behind starting the day in this way.

Brother David Steindl-Rastm, a Benedictine monk known as the ‘Grandfather of Gratitude’, defines gratitude as the feeling of appreciation that comes when

‘You recognise that something is valuable to you, which has nothing to do with its monetary worth.’

Throughout the day look for people, experiences, sights, sounds, smells, noises, sensations, opportunities that are valuable to you which has nothing to do with its monetary worth e.g. clean water from the tap, a roof over your head, a bed to sleep in, food in the fridge, sunlight filtering through the leaves, someone asking how you are, someone making you a cup of tea, a smile, a cuddle, the breeze running against your skin.

Open your mind and your senses to see the world around you.

Before bed, in your mind fast forward from the start to the end of the day quickly over a few minutes and pick the top thing, you appreciated and write it down on the weekly journal on the following page.

Week 1

| Day | Morning statement | The top thing you appreciated today |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Monday | | |
| Tuesday | | |
| Wednesday | | |
| Thursday | | |
| Friday | | |
| Saturday | | |
| Sunday | | |

Week 2

Congratulations on reaching week 2. Over the next 7 days we are going to continue what we have started as well as adding in an act of kindness. Remember an act of kindness can be a small gesture e.g. opening a door for someone, making a drink for someone, offering to help, checking in on someone, letting someone pass on a narrow road, picking up litter, letting someone go before you in the queue

I have been astounded by the biochemical effects of kindness. Dr David Hamilton, a former pharmaceutical industry organic chemist, is an expert in kindness. In his book 'The Five side effects of kindness' he pulls together the scientific evidence on how kindness affects our body.

'Physiologically speaking, the opposite of stress is actually kindness' Dr David Hamilton.

Kindness leads to the production of our natural opioids (reduces pain, produces euphoria, feeling of well-being) and oxytocin (decreases stress response, helps making relationships). The effect of these chemicals on the body causes a release of nitric oxide which reduces blood pressure as well as protects our heart. In addition, the inflammatory response and the number of free radicals within our body reduces therefore it slows the aging process.

Personally, I have found it fascinating how infectious kindness is. If someone does something kind to you it gives you a feeling of being grateful or a sense of connection or warmth or joy. Psychologist, Jonathan Haidt described this state as elevation. The research shows in this elevated state there is an increased chance over the next few hours/ day that the person will be kind or kinder to another person. In the pandemic we have talked about R number related to infecting another person with the coronavirus. The R value for kindness has been calculated on average to be between 4 to 5 depending on culture/ location. In other words if one person experiences kindness it is likely they will be kind or kinder to 4-5 people over the course of the day due to way the act of kindness made them feel. Scientists at Harvard and Yale measured the ripple effect of kindness spreads to 3 social steps or 3-degrees of separation. This means at 3 social steps on average one person who did an act of kindness has infected 125 others with kindness. Dr David Hamilton says kindness is the most infectious things he has come across in the scientific literature - which is a good thing when kindness is associated with so many health benefits.

Week 2

| Day | Morning statement | The top thing you appreciated today | One act of kindness performed today |
|-----------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Monday | | | |
| Tuesday | | | |
| Wednesday | | | |
| Thursday | | | |
| Friday | | | |
| Saturday | | | |
| Sunday | | | |

Week 3

Congratulations on reaching week 3. This week we are going to look for two things which we appreciate within the day as well as performing two acts of kindness.

Sometimes in life we forget to express gratitude for the routine things in life. Notice when you use a statement that begin with 'I have to.....' and try changing it to 'I get to

e.g. Swap 'I have to go to the supermarket' to 'I get to go to the supermarket'. Open your mind and think of all the people/ processes involved to put the products on the shelf and into your shopping bag.

Change 'I have to clean the bathroom' to 'I get to clean the bathroom'. Open your mind and think of all the people/ processes involved in producing clean water and removing waste from your bathroom. Consider those in the world that do not have access to clean water and sanitation.

Kindness transforms things in our brains. When we actively practice kindness the 'aversion' or 'avoidance' pathways in our mind are switched off and the 'approach' ones are switched on instead. Therefore, if we practice kindness when a setback occurs, we will be open to new opportunities if our 'approach' pathways are open. When I experience a setback, I say to myself 'good thing, bad thing, who knows' and I remind myself about this story:

"There was once a farmer who owned a horse and had a son. One day, his horse ran away. The neighbours came to express their concern: "Oh, that's too bad. How are you going to work the fields now?" The farmer replied: "Good thing, bad thing, who knows?"

In a few days, his horse came back and brought another horse. Now, the neighbours were glad: "Oh, how lucky! Now you can do twice as much work as before!" The farmer replied: "Good thing, bad thing, who knows?"

The next day, the farmer's son fell off the new horse and broke his leg. The neighbours were concerned again: "Now that he is incapacitated, he can't help you, you might starve, that is too bad." The farmer replied: "Good thing, bad thing, who knows?"

Soon, the news came that a war broke out, and all the young men were required to join the army. The villagers were sad because they knew that many of the young men will not come back. The farmer's son could not be drafted because of his broken leg. His neighbours were envious: "How lucky! You get to keep your only son." The farmer replied: "Good thing, bad thing, who knows?"

Week 3

| Day | Morning statement | Two things you appreciated today | Two acts of kindness performed today |
|-----------|-------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Monday | | 1. 2. | 1. 2. |
| Tuesday | | 1. 2. | 1. 2. |
| Wednesday | | 1. 2. | 1. 2. |
| Thursday | | 1. 2. | 1. 2. |
| Friday | | 1. 2. | 1. 2. |
| Saturday | | 1. 2. | 1. 2. |
| Sunday | | 1. 2. | 1. 2. |

Week 4

Congratulations on reaching week 4. This week you will be looking for three things to appreciate within the day and perform 3 acts of kindness.

The opposite of gratitude is complaining (or negativity). Research has shown frequent complaining (or negativity) shrinks the hippocampus due to higher levels of cortisol. The hippocampus is the area in the brain for creating new memories, learning, and understanding emotions. As a result of the brain's ability to change (neuroplasticity) if we choose actively to not complain as much, we are literally rewiring the brain. It will be difficult initially however the more we do it the easier it will become.

Spend a few moments considering what aspects of your life involve negativity or complaining. Do these aspects enrich your life? Has the complaining become an unhelpful habit? Does it involve specific activities e.g. social media, the News. How could you modify or address these episodes of negativity or complaining?

Week 4

| Day | Morning statement | Three things you appreciated today | Three acts of kindness performed today |
|-----------|-------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Monday | | 1. 2. 3. | 1. 2. 3. |
| Tuesday | | 1. 2. 3. | 1. 2. 3. |
| Wednesday | | 1. 2. 3. | 1. 2. 3. |
| Thursday | | 1. 2. 3. | 1. 2. 3. |
| Friday | | 1. 2. 3. | 1. 2. 3. |
| Saturday | | 1. 2. 3. | 1. 2. 3. |
| Sunday | | 1. 2. 3. | 1. 2. 3. |

Week 5

Congratulations on completing The Dr Louise Oliver Brain & Body Boost challenge ©. Now is the time to consider if anything has changed over the last 4 weeks. Have you:

- Noticed new things and enjoyed the moment more?
- Have you felt more motivated?
- Have you seen more pleasure in life?
- Have you felt less stressed?
- Experienced less daydreaming?
- Felt a stronger connection to others?
- Have you smiled more?
- Has your sleep changed?
- If you experience pain has the intensity turned down a little?
- Has your digestion improved?

I encourage you to practice daily kindness and gratitude so you can continue to experience the benefits of increased amounts of dopamine, serotonin, endogenous opioids, and oxytocin in your brain & body. I started practicing gratitude & kindness as a New Year resolution several years ago and I continue to practice this daily. Please pass on this challenge to someone who you feel would benefit. You have started this journey. Maybe it is time for you to consider trying new things:

Breath work

Consider how you breathe. Effective breathing improves your mind body connection. I have more information on my website <https://www.drloiseolivertherapeuticlifecoaching.com/breathingre-education>

Yoga

Try a yoga class. There are lots of free access to yoga on YouTube - I enjoy using Yoga with Adriene.

Meditation

Try a meditation class. The app 'HeadSpace' has been very helpful in my daily meditation practice.

Volunteering

Could you offer to help a local organisation?

Mindful activities

Try a mindful walk or mindful eating. Spend more time in the garden or a green space.

Listening to well-being podcasts

I like 'Radio Headspace' & Dr Chatterjee's 'Feel Better Live More' podcast.

Reading well-being books

'The Five side effects of kindness' by Dr David Hamilton

'Breath – the new science of a lost art' by James Nestor

My third-party recommendations come from a place of good intention and with no financial reward however I am not responsible for their content.

I have enjoyed guiding you along your journey – don't let it end here. Open your mind and see where it takes you. Kind regards, Dr Louise Oliver GP, Functional Breathing Practitioner & Therapeutic Life Coach