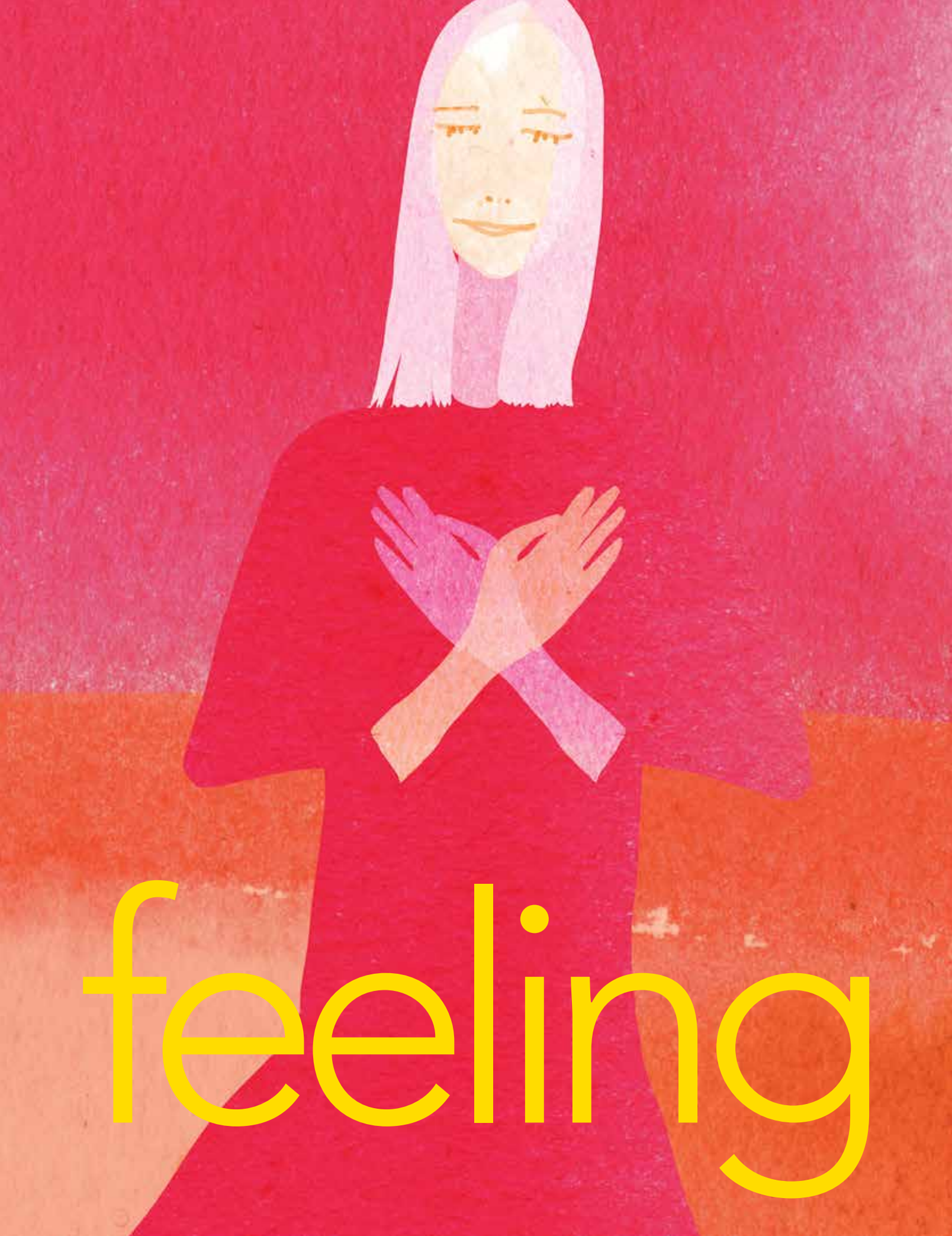


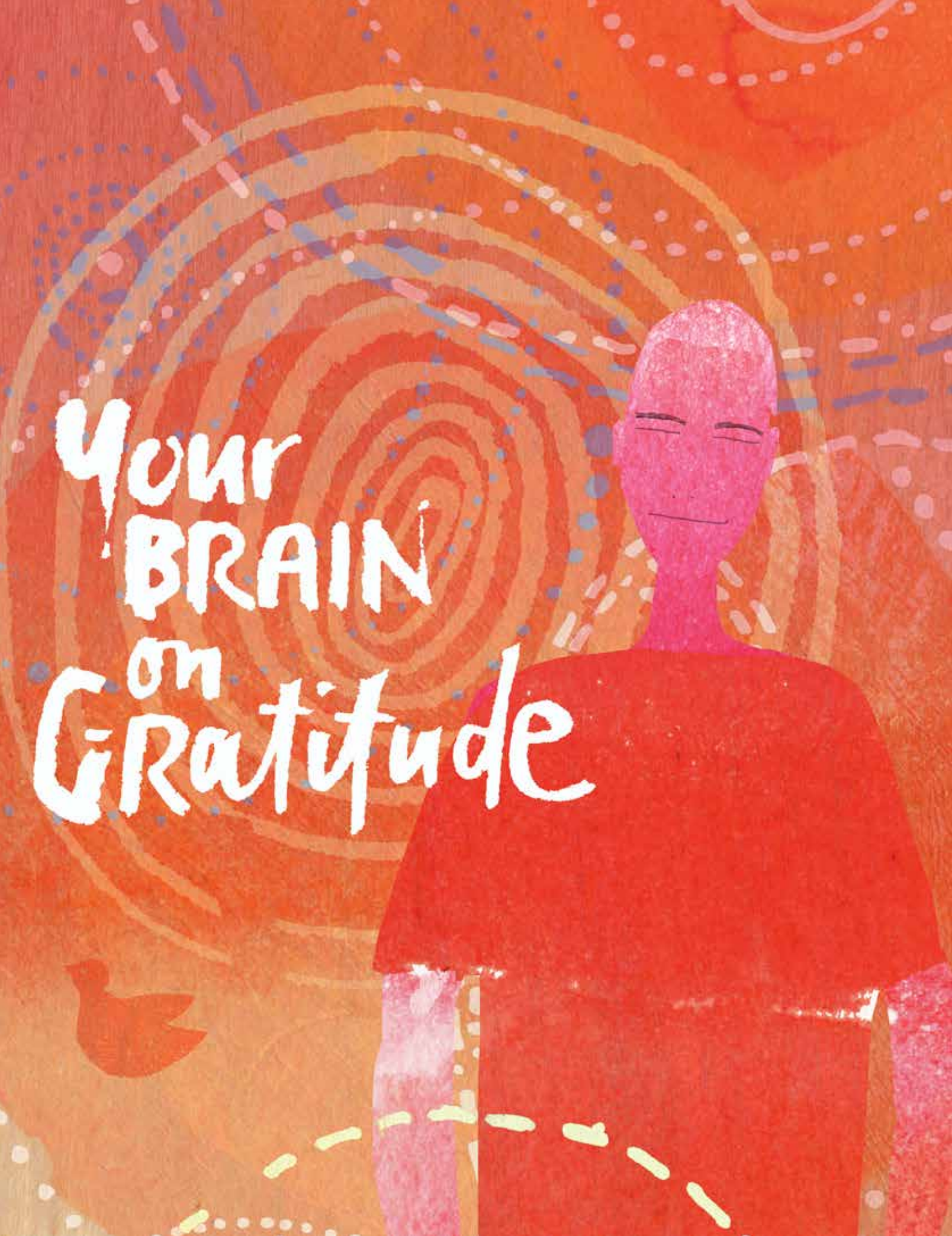
Gratitude can improve our physical, mental and emotional health.

by Paula Felps illustrations by Susy Pilgrim Waters

MORE THAN A



feeling



Your
BRAIN
on
Gratitude



Whether dealing with a major life-shattering event or a small bump in the road, we can use gratitude to help boost our happiness and change our outlook. While gratitude won't change our circumstances, experts say gratitude can change how we feel about them.

"Gratitude is a core part of each of us," explains Ryan Niemiec, Psy.D., education director for Cincinnati's VIA Institute on Character. "Gratitude is easy to tap into, and when you tap into that strength, it's truly energizing."

Research on gratitude during the past 15 years has shown that it has many benefits—physically, mentally and emotionally. It's been found to improve job performance, strengthen marriages and friendships, and enhance overall wellbeing. It is linked to stronger immune systems, lowered blood pressure, greater compassion and lowered stress levels. Gratitude also provides us with greater optimism and can increase happiness by as much as 25 percent.

The research pointing to gratitude's benefits, as well as the increased attention it has been receiving, have encouraged many people to begin incorporating it into their daily lives, Ryan says. Part of its appeal is how simple it is to apply: "Just

count your blessings. Write down things you're thankful for. Say 'thank you' more. Write a gratitude letter to someone—all of these are things that are easy to identify with and easy to do."

Your Brain on Gratitude

People's definitions of gratitude vary—some call it an attitude, some call it an action, some call it an emotion. It's one of VIA's 24 character strengths and falls under the category of "transcendence," which encompasses strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide our lives with meaning. What's interesting about gratitude, says Christina Karns, Ph.D., of the University of Oregon, is that all those definitions are correct.

"It really is more than one thing," she says. "As an emotion, it is complex and is made up of other emotions. Gratitude feels good—it is rewarding—but it's also humbling [when you] consider what others have done for us."

Studies are showing that people with higher gratitude levels experience more activity in the hypothalamus, which is

There is a link between gratitude and an emotionally fulfilling life, personal growth, forgiveness, hope, optimism and even global positive effect.

the “control center” for everything from functions like eating, drinking and sleeping to metabolism and stress levels. Like other feel-good emotions such as love and compassion, gratitude releases a rush of dopamine, a neurotransmitter in the brain that makes us feel great both physically and emotionally. That’s why, scientists say, it improves sleep, lessens physical discomfort, and lowers stress and anxiety. It also helps create what they call a “virtuous cycle”—as you get the feel-good rush of gratitude, your brain starts looking for more things to be grateful for, hoping to get that next rush. The more we look for (and find) things we’re grateful for, the more we realize how blessed we are.

After practicing gratitude for years and seeing how it improved her life and helped her through hard times, Christina began researching how it affects the way our brains are wired and how gratitude affects our reward systems.

Her current research, which will be published in 2015, studies the key

changes gratitude creates in the brain. She uses functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI, to show which regions of the brain are affected by gratitude. Her research shows that gratitude relies on and triggers multiple brain systems, so she now is studying how gratitude-based exercises can change our behavior, affect brain responses and improve our connections with other people.

“It’s fascinating how much [we] can change what our brain processes moment to moment, and how those changes can affect the wiring of the brain long term,” she says.

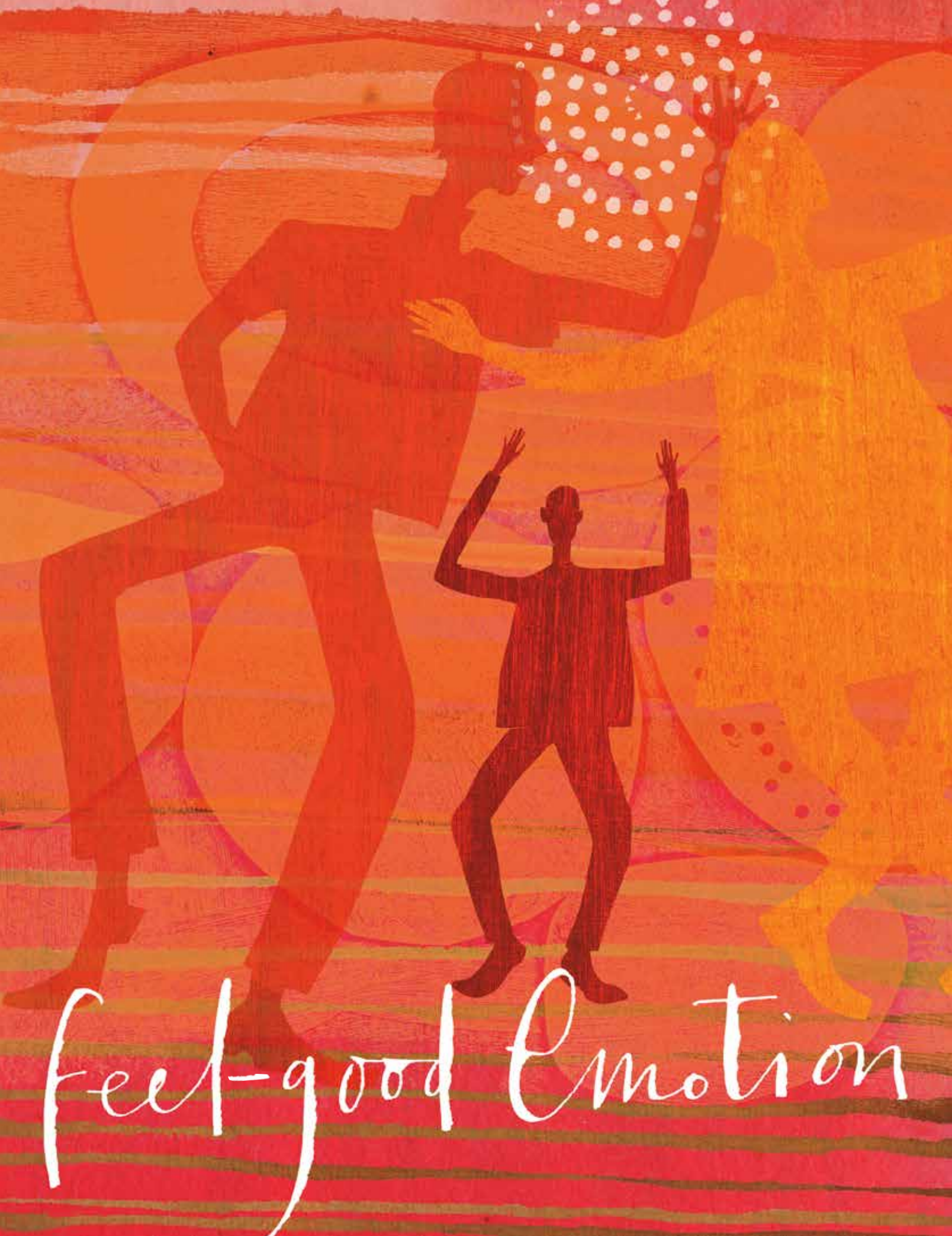
While her studies have not yet identified how long an act of gratitude affects the brain, or if that effect can be prolonged, one thing has become clear: “Gratitude will make lasting changes in the brain—but only if you keep practicing!”

Consistency is key, experts agree. Robert Emmons, Ph.D., of the University of California, Davis, has shown that people who keep a gratitude journal significantly increase their wellbeing over time, something he attributes to the way it makes us focus on the positives rather than the

negatives. It helps us overcome what psychologists call our negativity bias, the natural tendency to remember negative experiences over positive ones.

“When we become more grateful, it helps us focus on what is important to us,” explains Louis Alloro, M.Ed., MAPP, of the Certificate in Applied Positive Psychology program in Philadelphia. “We are conditioned to focus on what’s not working rather than looking at what is working. Gratitude changes what we look at and how we see it.”

In fact, one Gallup study reports that more than 90 percent of American teens and adults said expressing gratitude made them “somewhat” or “extremely” happy. This same mindset is backed up by numerous studies showing the link between gratitude and an emotionally fulfilling life, personal growth, forgiveness, hope, optimism and even global positive effect.



feel-good Emotion



Feeling Gratitude
is
TRANSFORMATIVE

In Sickness and in Health

Since much of the attention given to gratitude looks at emotional benefits and how it boosts an already healthy immune system, far less is known about the role of gratitude in people who are already sick. That led Fuschia Sirois, Ph.D., a professor in the department of psychology at Bishop's University in Sherbrooke, Quebec, to research how gratitude affects people with chronic illness.

Her co-author on the study, Alex Wood, Ph.D., director of the Behavioral Science Centre at the Stirling Management School at the University of Stirling in Scotland, studied gratitude as a tool for wellbeing in healthy individuals—then wondered if it would be similarly beneficial for those with ongoing health challenges.

“Research tends to focus on the negative consequences of living with illness rather than how people can live well and flourish with chronic illness,” Fuschia says. What their studies found was that noticing “all the small but positive things in one’s life is key for enhancing happiness and wellbeing.”

Practicing with Purpose

While many people talk about practicing gratitude, there is a difference between practicing gratitude and having a gratitude practice.

“When you create a gratitude practice, it’s very intentional and defined,” says Jan Stanley, who has worked with Fortune 500 companies to develop leadership development programs and is now a speaker and teacher on the topics of rituals, practices and habits. She says a gratitude practice helps you slow down and take note of the many gifts in the world around you.

Studies are showing that practicing gratitude increases life satisfaction and overall wellbeing. In fact, one study by Robert Emmons, Ph.D., of the University of California, Davis, indicates that a regular gratitude practice helps people “appreciate life to the fullest”—even during difficult life events.

“People roll their eyes because it’s so simple, but even if you start small with the intention of becoming grateful, you will see changes,” Jan says. “Start thinking about not just what you’re grateful for that day, but why,” she says. As you think about what those things mean to you, your appreciation for them grows.

Some simple gratitude practices include:

GRATITUDE JOURNAL: Write down what you’re grateful for every day. Focus on one topic and write about why it makes you feel grateful, or list several different things that make you grateful.

GRATITUDE JAR: Keep a jar of glass beads or stones in a central location, and make sure every person in the home or office has an empty jar. “If you’re grateful for something that person did, put a stone in their jar and tell them why,” Jan says.

THREE BLESSINGS: Each day, write down three things you are grateful for.

CANDLE RITUAL: This can be done as a daily ritual or for special family gatherings; each person lights a candle while sharing what he or she is grateful for.

“What happens is that you start looking for things throughout the day that make you grateful. It has an amazing, transformative effect,” Jan says. “You start noticing things you didn’t see before and appreciating them.”

When this becomes habitual, it can improve mood and adjustment.”

Fuschia and Alex compared patients who practiced gratitude with those who practice “benefit finding,” which involves looking at what they have gained from their experience. The researchers found the gratitude group enjoyed significantly greater wellbeing and were less vulnerable to depression.

“This is very important for individuals living with chronic illness, as [their] depression rates tend to be much higher compared to those without ongoing health issues,” she says. And, with further research, she said gratitude may be studied as an accompaniment to traditional medicine for overcoming health challenges in the future.

In more than a dozen studies conducted since 2003, gratitude has consistently been shown to lower the incidence of eating disorders, anxiety, phobias, dependence on drugs, alcohol and nicotine—among other ailments. Additional studies indicate that practicing gratitude has even helped

Growth Through Gratitude

Paige Rollins was in high school when she fell in love with Bob Clark. By their mid-20s, the couple had married, started a family—and had a life ahead neither could imagine. “We are really blessed—not lucky, but blessed,” Paige says. “I wake up every day and just say ‘thank you.’ I have so much to be thankful for.”

Paige’s gratitude and appreciation come not from being handed a magical life, but from thriving in spite of adversity. Bob was just 27 the night he crashed his car. He survived, but the accident left him a quadriplegic, robbing him of the use and feeling of anything below his shoulders.

“We really didn’t realize what we were in for,” Paige says.

At a Colorado rehabilitation facility a few weeks after the accident, the enormity of their loss and the reality of their future hit them. Simple tasks once taken for granted, like shaving, brushing his hair and dressing himself, were now impossible. Faced with a new life as Bob’s caretaker, Paige relied on the only resources she had left: grit, humor and gratitude.

“When things are at their worst,” she says, “the only way I can get through it is to take a deep breath and make myself find something to be grateful for, and that changes everything. That is what allows me to go on.”

Paige says she starts each day with a simple prayer of thanks, focusing on what she has instead of what they’ve lost. She’s thankful that Bob doesn’t feel pain from the many surgeries and infections he’s endured, and that the experience has made the couple and their two now-teenage sons extremely close—something, she says, she “wouldn’t trade for anything.”

“I’ve gotten to see the best of our family and friends through all of this. I know how much love we have in our lives. A lot of people never experience that kind of love.”

And, she adds with a laugh, “We get way better parking spaces now.”


Paige Clark says she has become more grateful since the accident that left her husband, Bob (far right), a quadriplegic. She says it also has created a closer bond with their sons, Tyce (left) and Kade (center).



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF THE CLARK FAMILY



Appreciation
Releases
DOPAMINE



The evidence for gratitude's role in a happy life is substantial, but it's important to do more than just "be" grateful. Louis Alloro, M.Ed., MAPP, advises taking it a step further and "feeling" gratitude each time you express it.



Working with Gratitude

Seattle's Brown Paper Tickets, an event ticketing company, makes a point of expressing appreciation to both its employees and the community they serve.

"It's just the right thing to do," says Steve Butcher, the company's CEO. "Showing gratitude to others is a catalyst for positive things to happen. If you behave well, good things will happen back. And especially in today's world, what better way is there to behave than as a polite and grateful entity?"

From giving employees 40 hours of "paid time on" to work on causes or with charities they consider important to offering six weeks' paid vacation and covering all of their insurance costs, the company shows appreciation through both its written policies and daily interactions.

"When you have a clear mission like that in a company, employees get it. They become more grateful as well, and that shows in the work they do. We have very low turnover in an industry that usually has very high turnover."

Even though the workplace is where you spend much of your time, it's also where you're least likely to express or receive gratitude. A survey released by the John Templeton Foundation last year found that fewer than 15 percent of us express thanks or appreciation to our colleagues on a daily basis—even though almost everyone taking the survey admitted saying "thank you" to a co-worker makes them feel happier and more motivated.

Robert Emmons, Ph.D., a leading researcher on gratitude, found that people who show gratitude in the workplace increase their productivity and happiness by as much as 31 percent. Essentially, those who don't practice gratitude are shortchanging themselves—and their co-workers.

"When you give and receive gratitude at work, you feel like others have your back," Steve says. "When someone appreciates us, we recognize that. It's what helps us survive—not as a company, but as people."



Vietnam War veterans overcome post-traumatic stress disorder. Outcomes have been so positive that Todd Kashdan, Ph.D., of George Mason University believes further research is needed to see how gratitude could be used to help survivors of other types of trauma heal and thrive.

The evidence for gratitude's role in a happy life is substantial, but Louis teaches that it's important to do more than just "be" grateful. He advises taking it a step further and "feeling" gratitude each time you express it.

"It is key to feel it in your heart instead of keeping it in your mind," he says. "When you say you're grateful for something, it's very often something that happened in the past—even if it was earlier that day. So I encourage people to not just say why they're grateful, but to take a moment to remember how they felt when that was happening."

Taking time to feel that appreciation again gives that ever-important rush of dopamine, immediately increasing blood flow and activity. Basically, we emotionally re-enact the experience that made us feel grateful, and in doing so, we instantly generate healing, positive feelings.

"It takes a little more time and more effort," Louis says, "but you'll see such a difference in the way it affects you." 🙌