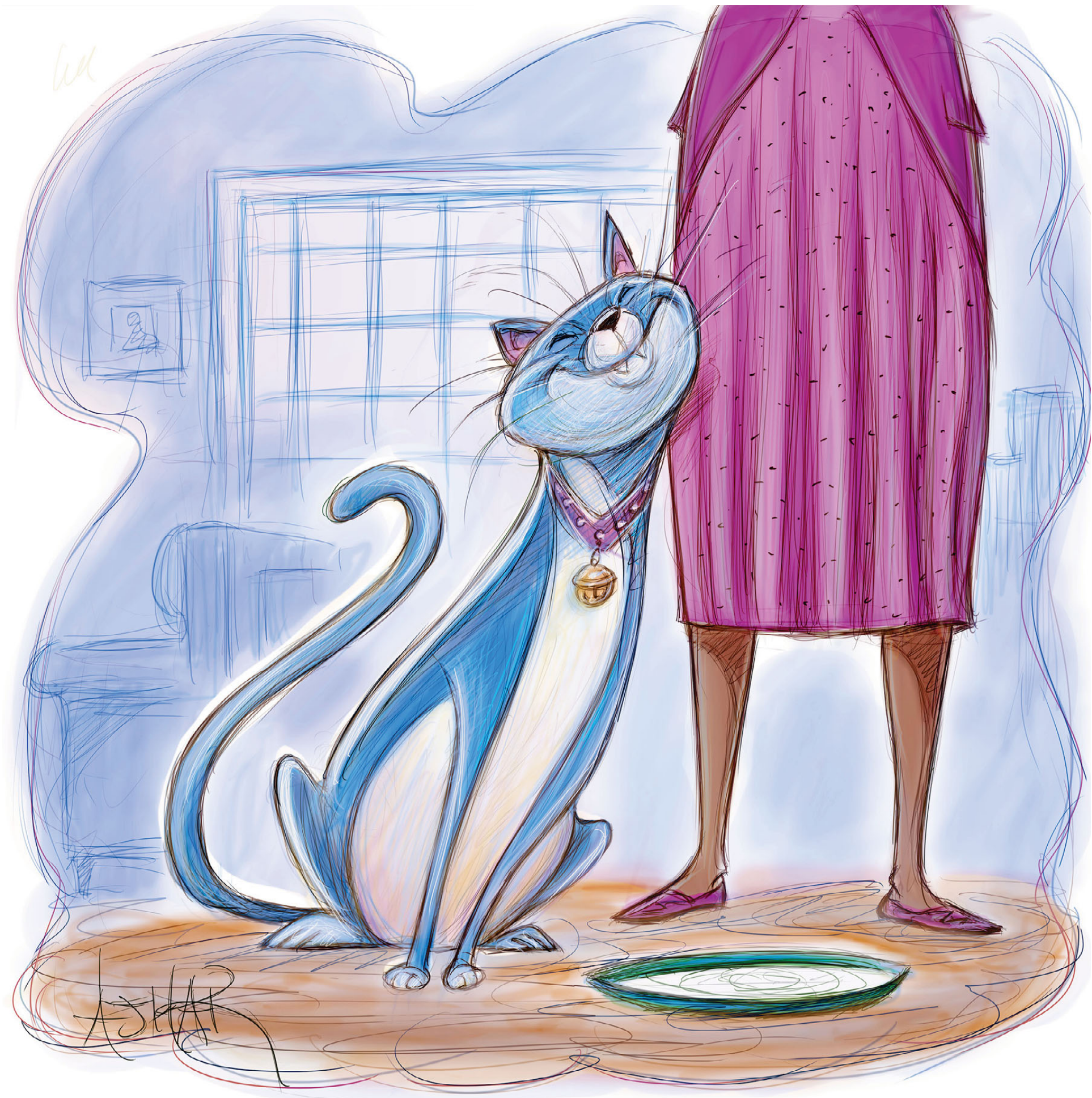


EXPRESS YOURSELF | G5
PEN A LETTER TO SOMEONE SPECIAL

EARLY ONSET ALZHEIMER'S | G2
DIAGNOSED AT 54, HE STILL FEELS LUCKY

The Philadelphia Inquirer

HEALTH



Brian Ajhar for The Inquirer

Want to start feeling happier? Brush up on your gratitude

A branch of psychology that began in Philly holds that focusing on the good in our lives does wonders.

By Abraham Gutman
Staff Writer

Pause for a second. Take a breath. With so much on our minds and our seasonal to-do lists, when was the last time you focused on things that are going well — big or small? Psychology shows that taking a moment every day or even every week to express gratitude can increase happiness. An entire branch in psychology dedicated to what makes

individuals and communities thrive, called positive psychology, started here in Philadelphia, through research by University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman. Gratitude ranks among the most important “character strengths” that help people thrive, according to experts in the field. Suzann Pileggi Pawelski, a

positive psychology specialist and the co-author of *Happy Together: Using the Science of Positive Psychology to Build Love That Lasts*, called gratitude the “key to our well-being.” “It’s incredibly powerful,” she said. **A skill** Gratitude is a skill that anyone can develop.

Even the simple act of writing down three good things that happened today and why can influence how you feel at the end of the day. This exercise makes us intentionally focus on what did go well and why, which is important because we tend to forget good things, explains James Pawelski, a professor of positive psychology at the University **→ SEE GRATITUDE ON G5**

Getting your kids to feel thankful

It can be a challenging concept. But when parents persist, the lesson can get through.

By Abraham Gutman
Staff Writer

“How was school?” The obligatory parent question seems universally loathed by kids. Rarely is the answer satisfying. Suzann Pileggi Pawelski has a different approach.

“Tell me one good thing that happened today,” the positive psychology specialist asks her 12-year-old son, Liam, on the way home from school. Gratitude can be a challenging concept for children to understand — and for adults to explain to them. Ever seen a parent prompt a child to say thank you, even when it’s clear the kid has no idea why? But introducing children to the concept of gratitude early can help them establish stronger relationships and teach them to value the things they love. “Gratitude is one of the most

important, if not the most important, emotion or character strength for individual well-being and for relationships,” Pileggi Pawelski said. She and her husband, James Pawelski, wrote the book *Happy Together: Using the Science of Positive Psychology to Build Love That Lasts*. In it, they emphasize the importance of expressing gratitude — not just thinking it. “It’s not enough for me to just feel grateful for my mom or my brother,” Pileggi Pawelski said. “If I’m not expressing it, it’s not impacting them.” **→ SEE KIDS ON G5**

Six ways to practice being grateful daily

By Abraham Gutman
Staff Writer

Research shows that routinely expressing what we’re grateful for can boost mood, strengthen relationships, and improve health. One study even found that daily gratitude practice led people to exercise more and make fewer trips to the doctor’s office. There are many ways to practice gratitude, and the best approach is

the one that feels best to you. Here are a few exercises you can try. **“Three blessings”** One of the most basic gratitude practices is called “Three Good Things.” Once a day, a few times a week — however often you’d like — write down three good things that happened that day and why. Doing the exercise, even for one **→ SEE GRATEFUL ON G5**

The power of writing a letter will bring change to both you and the recipient

By Abraham Gutman
Staff Writer

Penn undergraduates get an unusual assignment in classes taught by psychology professor Angela Duckworth: Write a letter to someone whom you have not properly thanked.

Duckworth, winner of a MacArthur “genius grant,” learned about the exercise, called the Gratitude Letter, from her graduate school advisor, Martin Seligman, who is credited as being the father of the positive psychology movement.

The full exercise also includes visiting the recipient of the letter, without telling why, and reading

the letter aloud. Seligman and others found that this exercise can increase the letter writer’s happiness as long as a month.

“Generally, what happens is that everyone starts crying,” Duckworth said. “But they are tears of joy.”

For those worried about reading a heartfelt letter aloud to the recipient, Duckworth says that people underestimate how important the letter will be. “They’re not judging you. They’re not worried about grammar. They are not thinking, ‘Oh, this essay could have been better written,’” she said. “They’re crying!”

Duckworth is also co-founder of the Character Lab, a nonprofit that brings positive psychology to educators to help kids thrive. The

organization’s website has a “gratitude playbook,” full of tips including the Gratitude Letter (characterlab.org/playbooks/gratitude).

When writing the letter, the Character Lab recommends considering what you remember most the recipient saying or doing. How would your life be different without that?

Duckworth said the Gratitude Letter can become a holiday tradition. Once a year, sit with family to write letters or come prepared with a letter to read to a member.

“You will not run out of people,” Duckworth said.

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Kids

→ CONTINUED FROM G1
Practicing with M&Ms

For young children, James Pawelski, a professor of positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, likes an exercise he learned from a student: Grab some M&Ms and count your blessings.

Children get to pull out an M&M from the bag. Before they eat it, they must say something they are grateful for based on the color.

For example, blue could be something in school, yellow something about themselves, orange an object, green an event, and brown telling someone why they are grateful for them.

“That’s a nice way of helping kids practice something like gratitude within a family kind of context,” Pawelski said.

Pileggi Pawelski admits that, at first, her son resisted her after-school gratitude exercise, but she stuck with it.

The brain naturally focuses on threats, what can go wrong, she said. Asking about one good thing redirects attention toward things that we can be grateful for.

But recently, Liam has been responding. Once, when she was distracted by traffic and forgot to ask, Liam initiated the conversation. “Mom,” she recalled him saying, “I have to tell you about my one good thing.”

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Make giving thanks a part of your daily routine rather than a once-a-year holiday tradition. It is a skill that anyone can develop. Dreamstime / MCT

Gratitude

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of Pennsylvania and co-author of *Happy Together*.

The brain is hard-wired to fixate on what can go wrong, on perceived threats, research has found. Intentionally focusing on things for which people feel grateful can help to shift that mindset. Research has shown that practicing gratitude can

“It’s incredibly powerful.”
Suzann Pileggi Pawelski, positive psychology specialist

help people to experience more happiness and less depression.

“Ignoring problems is not a recipe for thriving,” Pawelski said. “But perseverating on perceived threats isn’t a recipe for thriving, either.”

Other studies have found that people who practice gratitude report greater well-being and improved physical health.

Still, don’t confuse positive psychology with positive thinking. The goal is not to develop a skill that will help ignore or minimize problems but rather to focus on the issues that matter.

Best practice
Bindu Kumar, a family medicine

physician at Main Line Health, learned the power of gratitude from a close friend with advanced breast cancer.

“She was constantly thinking about what she was grateful for, and it seemed to really help her,” Kumar said of her friend, who persevered through treatment and complications with four young children at home.

Kumar has incorporated gratitude in her work overseeing employee health and safety for the health system in Philadelphia and its western suburbs.

Many physicians ask patients to track their diet, blood pressure, and other health details. She began asking sick health-care workers to

also jot down what they are grateful for.

“I’ve seen more successful return to work, more successful return to pre-injury and [pre]-accident state when individuals show and practice gratitude,” Kumar said.

Part of the routine

Practicing gratitude can be especially comforting for those going through a tough time. But it can be part of anyone’s routine.

Adrian Sullivan Jr., a 28-year-old entrepreneur, started gratitude journaling about three years ago. He uses the *Five Minute Journal*, a book and app featuring daily writing prompts, such as “name three things you’re grateful for” or “write

about what went well today.”

The former football player at Temple University compared practicing gratitude with working out. He has found that gratitude works like a “muscle in your brain” that is designed to help you “have a positive lens.”

Three years into journaling, he feels more prepared for his days and happier, Sullivan said.

“I’m a lot more positive,” he said, “and it feels good.”

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Grateful

→ CONTINUED FROM G1
week, made people happier, said James Pawelski, a professor of positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and co-author of *Happy Together: Using the Science of Positive Psychology to Build Love That Lasts*.

Journaling

For those who are looking for more structure in their gratitude practice, there are a variety of journals that can guide you with writing prompts. Some examples are the Five Minute Journal or The Happiness Project One-Sentence Journal.

Themes vary, but the premise of most is similar to that of the three blessings — making it a routine to think of the positive and express gratitude.

Writing alternatives

Writing in a journal isn’t for everyone, and that shouldn’t be a barrier to practicing gratitude, said George James, a licensed marriage and family therapist and chief innovation officer at Council for Relationships, a Philadelphia

mental health nonprofit

If journaling isn’t for you, James recommends that you open a note on your phone and type up things you are grateful for or use the voice memo to record your gratitude.

If you have a partner, perhaps make it a bedtime ritual to say to each other a few things you are grateful for.

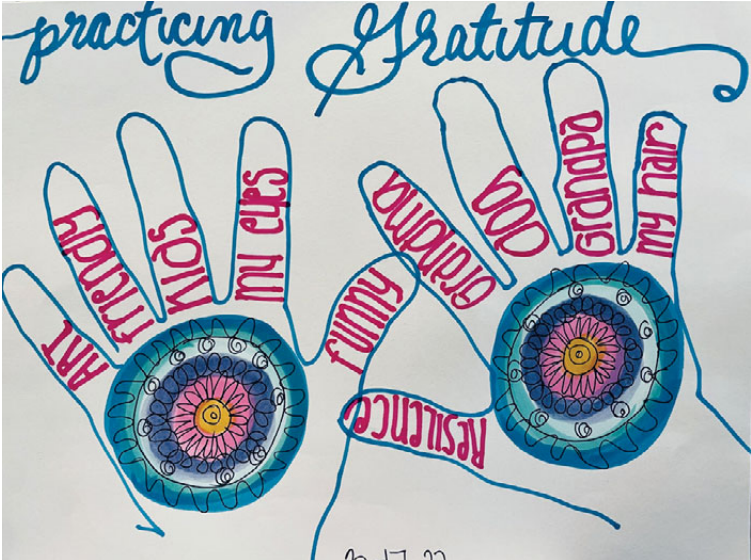
“It doesn’t have to be written. There are multiple ways you can practice the same skill of gratitude,” he said.

James also recommends setting a reminder on your calendar or phone to practice. It works for his patients — and for him.

Art

Linda Baker, an art therapist who works with youth at Princeton House Behavioral Health, found success in using art to express gratitude.

One of her exercises involves tracing her hands on a piece of paper and then writing in each finger something she is grateful for — an object, a person, a talent or quality about herself.



Linda Baker, art therapist at Princeton House Behavioral Health, draws her hands as a gratitude exercise. Courtesy of Linda Baker

Senses

Another exercise Baker recommends deploys all five senses.

Think about the past week: What are you grateful for that you’ve seen, tasted, heard, done, or smelled?

As a visual artist, Baker said she often identifies new things to be grateful for by being mindful of all five senses.

“If I’m in this moment, using all my senses, then I can appreciate

things that maybe I never noticed before,” she said.

Think it, say it

Gratitude can also be incorporated in daily life outside of a specific routine.

Angela Duckworth, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, has a rule: If you think it, say it.

When she reads a novel, or a scientific paper that she enjoyed, she will email the author a short note of thanks. She will do the same when someone does something nice for her.

She recognizes that at first it might be a bit awkward. But it’s worth it.

“In my experience, there’s never been an occasion where gratitude wasn’t received with joy,” Duckworth said.

We all have people in our lives that we should have thanked but didn’t.

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