



# Northwest Veterinary Associates, Inc.

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## The Science of Gratitude

Liz Brock, DVM

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This newsletter will not be about cows.

Full disclosure time, I am a worrier. I worry about the cleanliness of my house. I worry about getting a flat tire in the middle of the night on the way to a calving. I worry about my peanut allergic kid going into anaphylaxis at soccer practice. I worry about my never ending to do list and the feeling that no matter how hard I try I'm always letting someone down. I know in my brain that none of this is useful, that stewing in my head does not protect my son from peanut exposure or my tire from a random puncture wound. And yet...

So, in not unexpected fashion, I looked for science to help me with my worry habit. In my research on the brain, I stumbled into the work of Shawn Achor, a Harvard trained psychologist and "happiness researcher". His book, *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work* talks about the habits one can create to live a happier, less worrisome life and be more productive and successful in the process. Lots of those habits are ones I've heard before: exercise daily (does arming cows count?), sleep more (only if someone watches my two small sleep depriving monsters of children), and eat healthier (you want me to cut back on caffeine? See the previous comment on my sleep habits). When I hear this advice, I get a little snarky because while I do my best, there is just only so much I can reasonably do. I would hazard a guess that the same is true for many of you.

Turns out, according to Achor's research, there is another habit that helps. It requires two minutes of your time – you could do it while brushing your teeth – and literally no effort. No barbells, seaweed greens or 7:00 bedtimes needed here. His research says doing this one thing daily for three weeks can turn a low-level pessimist (insert me raising my hand here) into a low-level optimist. The secret is gratitude and the practice is simple. Every day, you scan your day and find three things for which to be grateful. It can't be the same three things every day – for example, kid, kid, husband, done – the trick is to find three unique things daily that came up during the course of your day. Think about them and why they made you grateful. That's it. If you wanted to further enhance the practice, you could write them down in a journal, but just thinking about them daily for a few seconds can change your outlook, according to Achor's research.

How is this possible? Our brains are hard wired with a survival mechanism to remember the bad stuff that happens to us over the good stuff – it's called the negativity bias. This makes sense in our evolutionary history as a species. It would be much more important to remember which berries give you horrible stomach pain versus those that tasted kinda ok, right? This hold over from our evolutionary past, however, does us no favors in this day and age. It's this negativity bias that's responsible for my worry about conversations that went wrong, mistakes I made or things that could happen. My brain is hardwired to search out the bad and then stew on it so I really, really remember it. Turns out, when we do this daily gratitude practice, it bypasses that default setting. It tricks us instead into searching for the good. I know at the end of the day, I have to list three new things that I'm grateful for, so I'm going to be looking for them every day as I go about my life. That means I start to see more good all around me in little things, instead of only noticing what goes wrong. In



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addition, just by the simple act of thinking about the positive experiences again, it re-wires our brains to start to remember the positive over the negative. I can hijack my “factory settings” so that when I remember an event from the past, I see what went well, not just what went wrong.

I suspect if you made it this far, you are thinking one of two things: 1. Maybe that concussion she got caused more damage than she realized or 2. Sounds good and all, but does it work? It’s like any new research we bring to your farm – it can look good on paper, but you won’t buy it till you see if it works on your farm. I am a small sample size, but I can tell you it’s helped me. I have been a card-carrying member of the pessimist club my whole life and while this practice has not made me into Pollyanna, I find it easier to find good instead of just worry about the bad – especially bad that has not even happened yet. Try it out for yourself and let me know how it works for you. You can find out more at [shawnachor.com](http://shawnachor.com) or google him and find his Ted Talks or podcasts. We could all stand to be a little bit happier, right? And really what else are you doing while brushing your teeth?

Lastly, I want you to know how incredibly grateful we are to you, our clients, as we have faced challenges as a practice this fall. You have been patient when it was 2:00pm before we got to your DA. You have understood when we moved your clinic, sometimes multiple times. You have supported our team members through injuries and surgeries and stress. We are so grateful for your kindness, your compassion and your loyalty to us. We will continue to serve you the best we can and look forward to healing in all its forms for all of us in 2020. Thank you for making my personal gratitude practice so easy – my daily list of gratuudes is almost always full of NWVA farmers, their families and their cows. Merriest of holidays to you all and best wishes for the year of perfect vision – 2020!

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## **NORTHWEST VETERINARY ASSOCIATES WISHES YOU ALL A HEALTHY AND HAPPY HOLIDAY AND NEW YEAR!**

As a reminder, our office will be closed on Christmas and New Year’s Day. We will also be closing @ 3 on Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve.

