



Catching Health podcast

Gratitude with Dr. Robert Emmons, PhD

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Diane: Welcome to the Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood, your own personal health reporter, and I am so grateful that you are listening to this podcast. But what does that mean exactly? To be grateful, to feel gratitude? I am grateful that you're listening. After all, it takes effort to create a podcast, not only on my part but also for my guests. I'd hate to think that no one is bothering to listen. And I was going to add that I'd also hate to think it was a wasted effort, but I don't think it ever is. Because even if no one listens, I always enjoy interviewing people, getting to know them and learning something I didn't know. So today, I and anybody listening will learn something about gratitude from Dr. Robert Emmons. He's a psychology professor and director of the Gratitude Lab at the University of California Davis. Dr. Emmons has made a career out of studying the psychology of gratitude and is considered the world's leading scientific expert on this subject. He researches it, he teaches it, he writes about it. I have to assume that he also lives a life filled with gratitude. Welcome, Dr. Emmons.

Dr. Emmons: Thank you, Diane. One often assumes that it's not necessarily true, though.

Diane: Oh, I was gonna ask you. So is your life filled with gratitude?

Dr. Emmons: Well, I'll tell you, one of the things you realize when you study something like gratitude is just how much work you need to do. You know, there's always a gap between what we'd like to think we're like and

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what we actually are. And I think that that sustains us, you know, that inspires and energizes a lot of us in the psychological business. You know, we studied things we want to get better at, and certainly, that's the case for me with gratitude.

Diane: So you weren't necessarily always a grateful person?

Dr. Emmons: No, you know, I don't know. I think it's a struggle, you know, I think for a lot of us and I freely admit that you know, it doesn't come easily or naturally, but it takes some time. It seems like the mind often wants to gravitate toward the negative, toward what's going wrong, toward complaint, you know, and we've got to stem that tide, we've got to work sometimes a little bit harder to replace that negativity with a brighter outlook, a more optimistic, or in this case, a more grateful outlook, but it can be done.

Diane: Well. So how do you practice gratitude when you're working it?

Dr. Emmons: Yeah, so actually, that's a great question because I don't have a specific concrete practice. I've just kind of learned to look at life through what I call a grateful lens, a grateful framework, you know, I try to use the language of giving and receiving gifts, which is where gratitude begins. And then if I look at life that way, I look at opportunities. I say, you know, this didn't have to happen, or this is really a gift just talking to you right now? I think that's a gift. Being able to share what I've learned about gratitude is a gift and if we use the language of gratefulness and thankfulness we find that there are unlimited opportunities to look at life through this grateful lens. And that's what I try to remind myself on a regular basis.

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Diane: Well, what happened to you early on? When you started your research into this topic? Did you have some kind of an epiphany or an aha moment?

Dr. Emmons: Well, the epiphany for most researchers and so it was for me is the realization that here we have something that really has been neglected, a topic which has been ignored, minimized, marginalized, neglected. I call it the forgotten factor in emotion research, which is the area that I was working in. That's always a big realization for researchers. There's a frontier out there, which has been, you know, uncharted unexplored. And psychology has been around, you know, a long time, well over 100 years now. So to find a topic that has been totally ignored, that's very, very exciting because that means that you can really make some progress really quickly. Some really important discoveries. And it turned out, I mean a lot of things maybe had been unstudied because they're unimportant, they're trivial. But here is something that I think is really, really is important, nontrivial, but yet nobody had bothered to study it

Diane: You said emotional research is gratitude and emotion?

Dr. Emmons: Well, that's another great question. You can think of gratitude, so many different ways. I mean, it's a feeling for sure, because we do say we feel grateful. So that does have a sensible ring to it, but I think of gratitude more as a way of looking at life. You know, it's a way of thinking about things that we've received. So gratitude is really a very thoughtful process, too. When you start to recognize benefits that you receive from other people, you acknowledge the goodness that you have, that you didn't necessarily go out and buy or earn on your own. It's a way of remembering benefits, of remembering that people have done things for you that you couldn't do for yourself. So I like to think of it more as a way of

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seeing, a way of looking at life that certainly has, you know, profound ramifications for our emotional life.

Diane: So it's something that we need to develop or learn how to do. We're not just born with it or are we?

Dr. Emmons: Well, I mean, you know, a baby doesn't pop out of the womb expressing gratitude, that's for sure. But certainly, we all have the capacity for it. I think that's what's built-in, you know, to some degree, the potential reality is there for it. I like to think of gratitude as something that's built into our DNA. It's part of our operating system, it's part of our factory-installed equipment, you know. It's not optional equipment, it makes us human because much of life is about giving, receiving, returning benefits and gratitude makes that possible. But you're quite right, a young child doesn't have that, you know, the highly developed kind of capacity yet to experience gratitude. That doesn't emerge until a little bit later on in development.

Diane: So do you think that some people struggle with the notion of gratitude?

Dr. Emmons: Indeed. I think a lot of people struggle with it. In many respects, it's counterintuitive, you know, in the sense that we want to take credit for things that happened to us, you know. One of the things we've learned in psychology is what's known as the self-serving bias. That is, when good things happen to us, we want to take credit. For one thing, we did this, right, we brought that about. Of course, the opposite is when bad things happen, we want to blame other people for those as well. And gratitude really works against that because when good things happen, the grateful perspective says, okay, who contributed to this, who made this possible? Right. I realized that all the success I've had, all the benefits I've had, advantages, weren't totally because of my own efforts. There had to

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be a whole, you know, a whole network of other forces in play that helped me get to where I am today. And that's the kind of thinking that doesn't come very easily or naturally to lots of people unless we work at it.

Diane: And the other thing that you have to do is to stop and think about it.

Dr. Emmons: Yes, you do, you really do. You know, it's so easy to get caught up in the moment, right and to react very quickly and emotionally reactively to what's happening. Gratitude is almost a form of mindfulness in a sense, that helps slow down the thought process. It keeps us from reacting very quickly and sometimes negatively when situations aren't going the way that we'd like them to. So definitely, it's something that needs to be, I hate to use the word practiced because practice implies doing, doing, doing something, you know. With gratitude, you don't really have to do so much as you have to just focus on what's already been done for you, by other people doing things for you that you cannot easily do for yourself, but it's a realization of that taking place.

Diane: And like you said a few minutes ago asking that question, who else contributed to this?

Dr. Emmons: Yeah, who else or what else or what forces because you know, one thing about gratitude is that it's inherently other-directed. It's, you know, it's other folks. It's not all about me, right? Nobody writes a thank you note, addressed. Dear me, there's somebody else out there who is doing things. So that also makes it counterintuitive. It's just more natural to think about ourselves than to think about other people.

Diane: Although I might disagree with you a little bit about being able to show gratitude to yourself, you know, because some people who realize

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the need to make a change in their life, might feel grateful that they had the courage to take whatever steps that they had to take.

Dr. Emmons: Yeah, well, you can certainly give yourself the gift of gratitude that is by you know, realizing that this is something that can really change my life. Realizing it's something that can energize me, I can look at life differently now, and so feel good about taking that opportunity. And really, you know, taking it in and identifying it as part of yourself and I guess, you know, gratitude would be one way we can describe that reaction to noticing this positive change in ourselves.

Diane: Yeah, because sometimes, because we're our own worst enemies, our own strongest critiquers, or whatever, and we can be pretty hard on ourselves. So it's good to show yourself a little.

Dr. Emmons: Very hard on ourselves, that's right. And then if we're hard on ourselves, we're gonna be hard on other people too. So the two seem to go together.

Diane: And some people don't take gratitude very easily. You know, somebody even says something as simple as thank you for doing that. And they're like, Oh, no, no, no, no, it was nothing.

Dr. Emmons: Not a problem. It's nothing, right? It's, you know, what, sometimes we need to be good receivers as well as good givers. And because then, you know, you're really dismissing that person when they want to express their gratefulness to you. You need to take that and just accept that and just, you know, sometimes just you're welcome is the best response.

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Diane: That's right. Now, this may sound like a stupid question, but how do you recognize gratitude in your, you know, what does it feel like? It just feels good?

Dr. Emmons: Well, I think you know, we're starting to learn that there is a physiology to it as well. And I think as science moves forward and into the next frontier of research on gratitude, we'll learn more about the underlying physiological signature of gratitude. So we're starting to explore a little bit. When I say we, I mean scientists in general, you know, what's happening under the skin when a person feels grateful, but it certainly is a warm feeling. There's this warm sense of appreciation towards someone. So I think we detect that change inside of us. I mean, when I give a lot of talks to a lot of different audiences, and I people come up afterward and they want to share gratitude, what gratitude means to them, and I can see that it's affecting them at a deeper level. So they can't always articulate or put it into language, but I can see something's happening at a visceral level. And so I do think we recognize that in ourselves and we recognize that in other people as well when they want to express their gratefulness to us.

Diane: How do you research the psychology of gratitude? How do you know what's happening inside a person's body when they feel grateful?

Dr. Emmons: Yeah, so, of course, psychology as a science, relies on a lot of different methods, a lot of different approaches. One is simply, you know, the oldest and best approach is just asking people to tell about a time where they felt a profound sense of gratefulness or gratitude for something or somewhere in their lives and just listen to what they say. And if you do this enough times and repeat this on occasion with enough people, you start to discern a pattern there. What do people talk about? What language do they use? What does gratitude make them feel like doing? You know, so we asked, we would include a number of probes in terms of you know,

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what are the circumstances that elicit gratitude? What are the feelings that you have when you feel a sense of thankfulness or gratefulness? What does this make you want to do with respect to how you would behave toward this person? So it's just a matter of asking the right sort of questions just to let people elaborate on what's in their minds and what's in their hearts when they are feeling the state that we're calling, gratefulness, thankfulness.

Diane: Now, your research has shown that if you consciously practice gratitude, you're gonna reap all kinds of rewards. Can you list some for us?

Dr. Emmons: Sure. I mean, the grateful mind we've learned, just reaps massive advantages. Every single domain that's been examined, grateful people are, when people are, let's say, really focused on what they're grateful for through a sort of self-reflective exercise, maybe it's gratitude journaling, writing down on regular basis things to be grateful for psychologically relationally. emotionally, physically, they just are doing better. They're feeling better, you know, health and wholeness and wellness and fullness result from the systematic practice of grateful living. And these are all quantifiable results. We've done lots and lots of studies and lots of other labs are doing that, showing that these changes are measurable, quantifiable, and also sustainable over time. So it's not just the immediate benefit that if you're grateful for this moment, you feel more energy, you feel more alive, more alert, more attentive. You will, but it also will carry over to tomorrow to next week, maybe even, you know, months from now, if you systematically engage in this state on a regular basis.

Diane: How do you even get started?

Dr. Emmons: Hmm. Well, I mean, a good place to start it is very concrete and very practical is just making the decision to focus now on what is going

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right in my life. What am I grateful for? Write down 2, 3, 4 things today that went well. And sometimes that's very difficult for people, particularly in a different mode, a different framework of focusing on what's going wrong. And many of us are because the brain seems to like negativity, kind of latches on to what's going on. So we can overcome this by focusing in the direction of magnifying the good things in our lives, and what we find is that this sustains itself. Over time, people realize that, hey, this is something that really helps me gain control over my mental outlook and they start to see the benefits and they start to find more more things to be grateful for. It doesn't mean it ever comes easily or naturally, but it can become much more of an automatic process if it's practiced consistently and intentionally over time.

Diane: So when you're out there talking to people, do some people try to debate the issue with you?

Dr. Emmons: Yeah, in different ways, I mean, one of the nice things about gratitude is that most people do tend to find it has a positive resonance to it. And there are others who say that you know, what do I have to be grateful for? I mean, look at my life, look at this, look at the world and so on. And, you know, the thing about gratitude is that it's not just positivity, you know. It's not a denial of negativity. It's not a denial of pain or suffering. But I think it's a very realistic approach to life because it's focusing on the good at the same time recognizing that things are not the way we would always like them to be. Right? That gratitude recognizes that suffering is inevitable and unavoidable. The question becomes, okay, what now? You know, do I see this as an opportunity? Is there a way to grow through this difficult time, is there something positive that I can be grateful for even in the midst of this difficult experience? So I like to think of it as an accurate or truthful approach to life.

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Diane: And I was going to ask you about what people should do. Our country is going through a kind of a difficult time right now, a lot of people are feeling discouraged, anxious, angry. And I was going to ask you, how can we express gratitude if we're feeling just the opposite? But you kind of answered that question.

Dr. Emmons: Yeah, well, I mean, gratitude does seem to drive out some of these negative feelings, right? Resentment. If you make a list of opposites of gratitude, you get a list that sounds just like the list that you recited. So resentments and anger and bitterness, and envy and way down this negativity, it's very difficult to access you know, gratitude and peacefulness. It's certainly the case, but I sent out a tweet yesterday saying that grateful thinking is the most direct and accessible means we have for controlling the contents of our minds, and thus the quality of our life. So the only thing we can control is how we think about them. Right? And so gratitude is one road to serenity, one road to peace, one road to fearlessness. A friend of mine who is an expert on gratitude says gratitude is the antidote to fear. You cannot be grateful and fearful at the same time. So a posture of gratitude makes us look at, helps us look at life from the stance of what's working. A stance of sufficiency, of surplus, of abundance, of security, a stance of ingratitude, or entitlement. It's just the opposite. We start to look at life through a lens of deficit and insufficiency and scarcity and insecurity. And so you know, a very different place to be in. Each of us makes that choice whether aware of it or not on a regular basis.

Diane: I wonder if you start looking at things from what you have, maybe that puts you in a frame of mind that allows you to start working on the things that make you scared, unhappy. Maybe you realize that there are solutions that you hadn't even thought about before because you were feeling so negative about everything.

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Dr. Emmons: You're right about that. In positive emotions, whether it's gratefulness, they tend to expand our frame of reference, we start to think more creatively, we start to think more innovatively, we find solutions, where we just used to see problems. Whatever puts us in that state where we can achieve a little bit of emotional and cognitive flexibility, obviously, is going to be very helpful in dealing with some of these, you know, situations that we'd rather not be going through.

Diane: What projects are you working on right now? Do you have some research projects that you've recently started?

Dr. Emmons: Well, one of the things I'm quite interested in is looking at the connection between gratitude and joy. I've always found that gratitude enhances happiness, you know, When I first started, I should maybe take a step back. Back when I was in graduate school in the mid-1980s, I was working on a project on happiness that was kind of a new topic back then 30 years ago. Now there's a happiness industry there. There's thousands, literally thousands of studies, looking at happy people. Who is happy? Why they're happy. There's all sorts, of course, self-help books, some of which came out of the research science, showing ways in which a person can become happier through 30 days, 10 steps, seven secrets, top three things to do whatever and all those are great and so on. But I do think there's a distinction between happiness and joy. Joy might be a little bit deeper, a little bit less connected to circumstances, right. I think of joy as more undeniable. I'm sure I stole that word from someone. An undeniable sense of well being or happiness, right, that's not dependent upon circumstances. I should say that goes back to the previous question. Now can we measure joy, can we study joy the same we've studied happiness by asking people? It seems like it's worth a shot anyway, so I'm trying to develop some research tools to ask people about joy and joyful experiences and seeing if gratitude, I think gratitude really is the foundation for joy and gratitude is

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something that enables us to get through these difficult times. To get through suffering and depression and disappointment and despair and all the daily Ds yet still come out on the other side with a positive perspective on life. Gratefulness, I think can help transform that suffering into some sort of emotional prosperity.

Diane: I love that you're researching joy. I think about joy actually quite a lot. And for me, I find joy in moments. I remember many, many years ago, having what I call one of my moments. It was like everything fell into place in that moment in time and I felt so peaceful and happy, but it was at a different level. And so I decided it's a moment of joy. And I would love to have that all the time.

Dr. Emmons: But there's two things there that are true. I think what you just said. One is that the feeling that the world is working the way that it should. So we have that. And then there's the feeling that we want this to go on. We want this to last. There's a sense of wishing for eternity, as one philosopher said, in the sense that you want this to go on, right? And so happiness doesn't quite have that same thrust to it. I think. Happiness, you're making a judgment. My life is going pretty well the way I want it to and so on. It's not this immediate immersion in a situation that life is really great right now, I would love this to be able to continue but there's also sometimes a recognition that I realized this might be transient, right? But we can get back to that spot again that space again and we desire to do so. I think you're right. I think that's what joy is.

Diane: And you can remember the moment and you can recognize it. They're easier to recognize once you've had that first experience, and you think, what is this? Wow, everything feels so good.

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Dr. Emmons: And maybe we can't create that, you know, maybe it just happens to us. Maybe we can increase the likelihood that might happen, right? We can put ourselves in situations to make that more possible, but ultimately, I think it just happens to us.

Diane: When you can remember, you can remember the circumstances or what was going on in that moment that made you feel so absolutely wonderful. Anyway, when you first started studying gratitude, I'm guessing that you had some expectations, maybe some assumptions about what you'd discover. So looking back, it's been about 15 years has it?

Dr. Emmon It's been actually almost 20 now. It's been a long time, you know, and when you think of that period of time that goes by, on the one hand, it sounds very impressive that someone has been studying this for such a long time. On the other hand, it's like, well, we should have learned a lot more if we've been doing this for so long. We should know about everything there is to know about gratitude, but it's such a complex topic. One thing I've learned is that there are so many layers and levels to it, and so many nuances, that there's more and more. And you know, the way science works is that you do a study, it answers some questions, but it opens up even more than you answer. So, there are expectations. You know, I thought it had something to do with happiness. That's probably why I got interested in it. I thought, okay, well, I know people have said for actually thousands of years, hey, count your blessings, right? It's important to focus on those things you've received. There seems to be some philosophy out there, some religious writings, devotional writing, suggesting this is a good approach to life. So it wasn't that surprising to find that people were happier when they were practicing gratitude, but what did surprise me were some of the physical benefits. That is that people reported feeling more energetic, people actually slept better when they were keeping a gratitude journal, people went out and they exercised more,

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right. That really surprised me. It was the physical benefits of gratitude that were surprising. So, in some respects, I kind of expected to see the pattern with emotional psychological health, but it was the physical benefits that really surprised me and really, you know, I find that so fascinating that that's actually where a lot of the attention now is. While the action in gratitude is in the medical benefits of gratitude.

Diane: So if I really work at it, I could live to be 100?

Dr. Emmons: Well, there was this lady from New Jersey, actually born in New Jersey moved to Florida and back to New Jersey. Her name was Clara Morabito and I write about her in my book *Gratitude Works*. She was 87 years old, and decided to start practicing gratitude, right? Never did before and she swore that this was going to help her to live to be she's going to become a centenarian by practicing gratitude, it did add about six, seven years onto her life. She did pass away after a broken hip and surgery, but she saw that gratitude really enhanced the quality of her life. So we can't say that we can guarantee it will give you a quantity of life, but we can guarantee it will improve the quality of your life.

Diane: Well, that sounds good to me. So you need to give us an assignment. Should we start this gratitude journal? Or should we just start becoming more aware, as you mentioned earlier?

Dr. Emmons: I think one of the best places to start is just by starting very concretely, and thinking about a time where recently maybe someone has done something for you, gone out of their way to do something for you, provide you with a benefit, or a favor or a kindness. And then think about who this person was, what they did, and then realize that they didn't have to do that. Right. They could have not chosen to do that. They could have just gone on their merry way right but they chose, at least for that short

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time, to make your concern their concern, to make your well-being important to them. And then think about what they did, who this person was, and then you know, that makes it very, very concrete for those who struggle and say, you know, I have nothing to be grateful for, right? Look at my life, it's full of, you know, difficulties and struggles and trials and the realization is that by opting to live gratefully is to some degree nearly always possible, but it can be difficult to start. So that's why I say start with a specific gift or favor or benefit you received from someone and that might open the door to noticing further benefits and gifts and things you're receiving from others. It becomes more of a way of life as opposed to just, you know, a one time practice.

Diane: And one of your books I saw is about words of gratitude? Yes. All right, so you've noticed something and you want to be able to say something to that person.

Dr. Emmons: Yes. So I have a little three-step sequence I call the aware, share, and declare, or maybe it's aware, declare, share, but it's those three anyway. So gratitude starts with just this awareness, this recognition, this realization that someone has done something for me or I've benefited from the actions of other people. And then I want to declare, I want to say something about it. I want to write it down, I want to post it on my social media, whatever I need to do, to really just, you know, declare that. You put it into words, take those thoughts and write them down. And then I want to share that. I want to tell that person what they've done for me, I want to tell other people what this person has done. You see, because as an emotion, gratitude yearns to be expressed. It's not just meant to be private and intrapsychic, right? It wants to show itself in words and thoughts and in deeds and so and that's when gratitude really becomes the giving of thanks or thanksgiving. So it's not just a passive world. It's actually something that's very action-focused,

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Diane: And you don't keep it to yourself. You share the gratitude.

Dr. Emmons: You know, there's one of the sayings, I think it's in the Words of Gratitude book. And that is feeling thanks but not expressing it is like buying a present but not giving it you know, it does nothing for the receiver.

Diane: Well, I thank you for that. You've got we've mentioned a couple of books, we should tell people where they can get them. So I've got a list here: Thanks, How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier. Gratitude works, The Little Book of Gratitude and Words of Gratitude: Mind, Body, and Soul. What's the easiest way for people to find your books?

Dr. Emmons: Well, it would be through the usual places online Amazon, for example, I think Barnes and Noble. If there are still physical bookstores, there are a few that would have them but online would be the simplest. The Little Book of Gratitude is my most recent one. It's really, it is a little book. It's small, it's short, it's easy to read, it's easy to digest. And it's like 100 pages that are very small pages. And it's a fun book that's full of exercises about how to practice gratitude. It's full of actionable goals about things you can do. There are about 30-35 specific exercises and plus some of the more recent science on gratitude in the brain and some of the mechanisms by which gratitude works and so, but you can get those at Amazon or any of the online retailers.

Diane: Alright, so I'm holding that little book in my hand right now. Number one, unpacking gratitude. Gratitude is first and foremost a way of seeing that alters our gaze.

Dr. Emmons: That's beautiful. I wish I wrote that. Oh, I did write that.



Diane: Alright, show yourself a little gratitude.

Dr. Emmons: I mean, that's so true. When you start to see opportunities where you used to see problems, right, you start to see things as being granted. That's, we talked about language before, you know, and then we take so many things for granted. Our family and our friends and good weather if you live where I do, and for you, it's nature and other things like that. What if we started seeing those as being granted, as given to us as gifts? We would really, I think, start to really live more deeply and profoundly, and appreciatively maybe more likely to take care of those things if we don't take them *for* granted. And so just a lot of ways of changing our gaze when we look through a grateful lens.

Diane: Well said. Is there a website that the general public can go to and read more about what you have to say?

Dr. Emmons: Well, the best one so they can follow me on Twitter because I post all sorts of things, links to articles, links to columns, just kind of tweets, you know, things that I think of about gratitude, and that would be Dr. And then underscore Bob Emmons, and that'll be all one word that's on Twitter, and then through Facebook, if you look at my Gratitude Works page. That is about 8000 or so followers on there. That's also another place. I don't have a dedicated page per se but through Twitter through Facebook are the best ways to access more information and gratitude. So Gratitude Works on Facebook and then my Twitter, [Dr. underscore Bob Emmons.https://www.facebook.com/GratitudeWorks1/](https://www.facebook.com/GratitudeWorks1/).

Diane: Okay, I'll make sure to put links to that in the blog post that will go with this podcast.

Dr. Emmons: Well, that'd be great.



Diane: All right, any final words of wisdom or gratitude before we say goodbye?

Dr. Emmons: You know, the thing about gratitude is that it winds up being a decision we can make and need to make on a regular basis. That's the thing about it. There's no G spot in the brain. There's no genetic predisposition for it. It's not like you're born either with it or without it. It's something that is accessible to everyone. No matter how young, how old, no matter whether you're well or unwell, whether you're liberal or conservative, no matter where you live. I mean, gratitude is available to all and that's really great information, great knowledge, just knowing that it's, it's something we can always access and we don't need a special code to do so.

Diane: Well, I'll start right now by saying, Thank you for enriching our lives today.

Dr. Emmons: You're welcome, Diane. It's great to be with you.

Diane: I've been talking to Dr. Robert Emmons, a leading researcher on the psychology of gratitude. I'm Diane Atwood and you've been listening to the Catching Health podcast. If you have any questions about practicing gratitude or suggestions for future podcasts, send me an email Diane at Diane Atwood calm and be sure to check out my Catching Health blog and other podcasts at catchinghealth.com Thank you