

Grateful for Gratitude This Holiday Season

Given all that is going on this year, many of us may not be looking forward to the holidays with the same excitement that the festive season usually generates. But with a little gratitude, and some positive thinking, we can still get the most out of the season while also improving our overall well-being.

Everyone has times where they feel appreciative or thankful for a person or a situation. These moments of thinking about the past in a positive way give us a good feeling and are the very definition of gratitude. Feeling grateful just happens sometimes. Other times, we must make a special effort to increase how often we feel it. With so many disruptions to our usual celebrations, this holiday season might be one of those times.

Benefits of Gratitude

Recent studies have found a host of benefits from practicing thankfulness, including:

- Improved heart and kidney function and lower blood-pressure and stress-hormone levels
- Higher levels of optimism and satisfaction with life
- Lower levels of stress and anxiety
- Fewer reports of physical ailments
- Higher motivation to exercise
- Higher levels of personal goal attainment
- Higher levels of alertness, attentiveness and energy
- Stronger emotional support for others
- Increased resilience in the face of hardship

Measurable Improvement

On his Emmons Lab website, Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, sums up some of the recent findings about gratitude and its positive health effects:

- In one study, researchers found that those who kept regular gratitude journals exercised more, reported fewer ailments, felt better about their lives as a whole and were more optimistic than those who recorded problems or neutral life events.
- Adults with neuromuscular disease who were asked to focus on gratitude over a three-week period reported more positive moods, a greater sense of connection to others, more optimism and better sleep than a control group.
- In another study, participants who kept gratitude lists were more likely to have made progress toward important personal goals over a two-month period than those who didn't.

Ways to Increase Gratitude

Experiencing more gratitude doesn't need to be difficult or time-consuming. Try these ideas and see what works best for you:

Make a list. Write everything in your life that makes you grateful. Look at this list regularly.

Gratitude journal. Take five minutes each day to think of three things that happened in your life that you are glad you experienced. Then write them down somewhere.

Take pictures. Photograph little things in your everyday life that make you smile.

Tell someone. Whether it's someone you look up to or just someone who makes you happy, take a bit of time to tell him or her that you're glad to have them around.

Frame events in a positive light. We often joke about whether the glass is half empty or half full. Make an effort to see the half-full side of every situation.

Think about great holidays of the past. Draw pleasure from all the wonderful times you have had with friends and family and think about how you will again enjoy those times soon.

What is there to be thankful for?

You can be thankful for anything in your life that makes you feel positive on some level. Some bigger things could include:

- Friends and family
- Achieving a goal
- Your talents and skills
- Appreciating where you live and the opportunities you have
- Your health and happiness

You don't need to limit your gratitude to big picture ideas. Positive things that seem small and happen every day are also worth focusing on. Some small things could include:

- A good joke you heard from a friend
- A sunny day
- A good song on the radio
- A funny thing your pet did

How do I start?

- Grab a notebook and begin a gratitude journal
- Tell someone when you appreciate something they've done
- Think of three things that you're grateful for and jot them down

Resources

- Emmons Lab: emmons.faculty.ucdavis.edu/
- ReachOut.com: au.reachout.com/all-about-gratitude
- International Positive Psychology Association: www.ippanetwork.org/

Gratitude Tips

By now, most of us are well aware of the emotional and physical benefits of positive thinking, even if it's been difficult to do so lately. But did you know that science is finding that a similar quality, gratitude, may have an equally powerful effect on our well-being? There are ways to increase how often and how deeply we feel grateful, and that has profound implications for our health.

Here are some ways you can tap into your gratitude and improve your health in the process:

Meditate on Positivity

Close your eyes, calm your breathing and take five minutes to think about the people and things you are thankful for.

Send a Thank You Note

Has somebody done something nice for you. Think about it and send them a quick thank-you note.

Compliment a Loved One

Without being prompted, tell a spouse, parent, child or another loved one what it is about them that makes you grateful.

Wake Up and Give Thanks

Before you get out of bed in the morning, stop for a moment and think about how great it is to be alive.

Hug Your Pet

Something we forget how much joy our animal friends bring into our lives. Let them know how good they make you feel.

Reward Positivity

Buy a special treat for that one colleague who brightens your day. Leave it for them as a surprise.

Slow Down Dinner

Take your time eating and make an effort to taste and enjoy every bite. Be thankful for the food you have.

Make a Donation

Donate to a charity of your choice while reminding yourself how grateful you are to be in a position to give.

Make it Public

Find a way to publicly praise a colleague for their contribution to the organization.

Appreciate Difficulties

Having a bad day? Take a second to appreciate what you're thankful for. You'll be amazed at how quickly it can turn your day around.

Listen to the Music

Block out distractions, put your headphones on and listen to one song. Enjoy the melody and the beat and think about how lucky we are to have music in our lives.

Get Outside

You don't have to hike into the woods to be grateful for nature. Stop and smell a flower, or take a moment to appreciate the beauty of trees. Feel a little sunshine on your face.

Take on a Burden

At home, take on a partner's chore or at work, take on a task your colleague dislikes. Show them how much you like having them around.

Stuck, but Happy

Crawling in highway traffic or stuck in a long line for service? Take a second to appreciate being free to be alone with your thoughts.

Hug Yourself

Sometimes we forget that our best companion is ourselves. Take a second to appreciate what a good person you are to be around.

Move It

Sometimes we take for granted the simple joy of movement. Get up from your desk and stretch. Appreciate the sensation.

Start a Journal

Good things don't stick in our memory as easily as bad things. Start a journal so you can record all of the good things that happen to you.

Take pictures

Photograph little things in your everyday life that make you smile.

Say Thank You

No matter how small the gesture, express your gratitude for it. Even if you're just thanking the driver as you get off the bus, such a small gesture of gratitude can brighten the moment. Multiply those gestures and you have a bright day, week and year.

Tip Extra Well

One time a week, reward someone for their good service. It will make them happy and you appreciative of their hard work.

Share a Talent

Can you fold origami figures? Can you sketch, or knit? Share your talents with others. They will be happy for the guidance and you can reinforce and appreciate your self-worth.

Navigating Rocky Times

There are two options to consider whenever life throws us off course: We can ask, “Why is this happening to me?” or we can ask, “How do I use this experience to help me grow and to start fresh?”

Deciding which perspective to adopt will have a huge impact on how well and how quickly we bounce back.

Learning to roll with change will lead to a happier and more fulfilling life. That doesn’t mean ignoring feelings of sadness, anger, frustration or stress. These are normal responses to major life changes. But once you have acknowledged those feelings, it is important to move forward and focus your energy on what’s possible.

The following are some simple, solid steps you can take to turn unexpected transitions into positive outcomes:

Reflect and refocus: Take stock of your personal assets and express gratitude, such as, “I can deal with this. I still have my ability to think, my special talents, my skills and my aspirations. I’m grateful for relationships and for my family.”

Ask yourself some important questions: “How do I want to feel three months from now? What will it take to get there? What does my ideal week look like? What could I do to realize that? Who could help with that?”

Choose: Decide what you want as the next chapter of your life. Simply choosing doesn’t guarantee you’ll get it, but the power of your intentions makes a huge difference.

Take action: Start by visualizing how you want to feel or where you want to be three months from now. Work back from this goal until you find something small enough that you can do today, tomorrow or next week.

What makes humans happy?

Humans have an enduring belief that if we just do the right thing, happiness will follow – that additional happiness will be doled out to us because we earned it. “Happiness is not a reward – it is a consequence,” instructs Robert Green Ingersoll, a Civil War-era orator. Many notable others, from Aristotle to the Buddha to Ursula K. LeGuin, agree with this sentiment.

New research takes a fresh look at this topic. Jennifer Aaker and Melanie Rudd at Stanford University and Cassie Mogilner at the University of California Los Angeles find that happiness is indeed a consequence of the choices people make.

So what can people do to increase their happiness? Their answer is surprisingly simple: Spend your time wisely. Some of the ways people should spend their time are, in fact, surprising.

Spend Time with the Right People

The greatest happiness levels are associated with spending time with people we like. Socially connecting activities – such as chatting with friends and family – are responsible for the happiest parts of the day. However, work is also an essential element in the time-happiness relationship.

Although spending time, whether in person or via Zoom, with bosses and co-workers tends to be associated with some of the lowest degrees of happiness, two of the biggest predictors of people’s general happiness are whether they have a “best friend” at work and whether they like their boss. Therefore, people should try to reframe relationships and workplace goals such that colleagues become friends and time spent at work becomes happier.

Spend Time on the Right Activities

Certain activities are energizing, and others make us feel drained and defeated. To increase happiness, people should avoid spending time on the latter activities in favor of the former whenever possible.

Of course, the bills have to be paid, the bathroom cleaned, and it’s sometimes a challenge to get through the day. But people need to reflect on how they are spending their time – the extent to which they mindlessly move from activity to activity without considering what they would really prefer to be doing.

For instance, when deciding how to spend the next hour, simply asking yourself the question, “Will what I do right now become more valuable over time?” could increase the likelihood that you behave in ways that are more in line with what will really make you happy.

Enjoy Experiences Without Spending Time Actually Doing Them

Research in the field of neuroscience has shown that the part of the brain responsible for feeling pleasure – the mesolimbic dopamine system – can be activated when merely thinking about something pleasurable, such as drinking a favorite brand of beer or driving a favorite type of sports car. In fact, this research shows that people sometimes enjoy anticipating an activity more than actually doing it.

For example, reading guidebooks in advance of a vacation, and anticipating the food you will eat and the activities you will do while there, could actually give you more pleasure than the vacation itself.

In short, research suggests that we can be just as well – if not sometimes better off – if we imagine experiences without having them. So to increase happiness, spend plenty of time happily daydreaming.

Expand Your Time

Unlike money, time is inherently scarce. No one gets more than 24 hours per day.

In fact, there is a bidirectional relationship between time’s scarcity and its value: Not only does having little time make it feel more valuable but when time is more valuable, it is perceived as more scarce.

To increase happiness, it can make sense to focus on the here and now – because thinking about the present moment (versus the future) has been found to slow down the perceived passage of time. Simply breathing more deeply can have similar effects.

In one study, subjects who were instructed to take long and slow breaths (versus short and quick ones) for five minutes not only felt there was more time available to get things done but also perceived their day as longer. And even though feeling time-constrained makes people less likely to take the time to help someone else, doing so actually makes people feel as though they have more spare time and gives them a sense of a more expansive future.

Therefore, if you can't afford to "buy" more discretionary time (e.g., by hiring a maid), focus on the present moment, breathe more slowly, and spend the little time that you have in helpful and meaningful ways.

Be Aware That Happiness Changes Over Time

As we age, we experience different levels of happiness, and how we experience happiness changes.

Recent research found that younger people are more likely to experience happiness as excitement, whereas older individuals are more likely to experience happiness as feeling peaceful.

Therefore, you should be aware that basing future decisions on your current perceptions of happiness may not lead to the maximum levels of happiness in the long run.

Finally, although the meaning of happiness may change, it does so in predictable patterns. Therefore, it is possible to anticipate such changes, and you should allow yourself to shift how you spend your time over the course of your life – as the meaning of happiness shifts.

Aaker points out: "The experiences people accumulate over the course of spending their limited time quite literally makes up each person's life. So if you take away anything from this research, it should be that spending time with the people you love doing the things you love is the best road to happiness."

Resources

- Written by Jennifer Aaker and Melanie Rudd at Stanford University and Cassie Mogilner at the University of California, Los Angeles. From Stanford Knowledgebase, a free monthly electronic source of information, ideas and research published by the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Originally published as "If Money Doesn't Make You Happy, Consider Time," in the "Journal of Consumer Psychology," 2011. Republished with permission. All rights reserved.

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