An attitude of gratitude is good for you

By Andrea Raischel, RN

With Thanksgiving rapidly approaching, many of us begin to focus more on the things for which we are thankful. According to psychologists, thinking about and appreciating all you have can boost your happiness and overall sense of well-being. This may explain why, according to a recent poll, Thanksgiving rates so high among favorite American holidays. But Thanksgiving isn’t the only time to reflect and take stock of all the positive things in our lives. Turns out, practicing an attitude of gratitude on a daily basis is just plain good for you.

Numerous studies have shown it takes little effort to reap the powerful, long-lasting benefits of gratitude. One study from the University of Pennsylvania found that people who wrote and [delivered a heartfelt thank you](https://my.happify.com/hd/the-one-phone-call-that-will-make-you-happier-for-weeks/) letter felt happier for a full month after. The same researchers discovered writing down three positive events each day for a week kept happiness levels high for up to six months.

[Scientists studying positive psychology](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16045394) found a one-time act of thoughtful gratitude produced an immediate 10 percent increase in happiness and 35 percent reduction in depressive symptoms. The happy effects disappeared within three to six months. People who regularly take time to notice and reflect upon the things they're thankful for experience more positive emotions, feel more alive, sleep better, express more compassion and kindness, and even have stronger immune systems.

Cultivating gratitude in your life can be as simple as keeping a gratitude journal. Try writing at least three things you are grateful for at the beginning or end of every day. Be specific. For example, when thinking about your family, don’t just write “I am grateful for my family,” but write specific details as to why you’re grateful for them, such as, “I truly appreciate the way my sister encourages me” or “I am grateful for my spouse helping with the dishes after a long day.” Writing down things you are grateful for helps you begin to notice even more things in your life worth mentioning. Make a game out of noticing new things each day and look beyond your immediate surroundings.

If you are like me and the enthusiasm for developing such a practice wanes in three or four days, then try an approach that suits you better. Some people find they are more likely to stick with a gratitude practice if they can simply verbalize what they are grateful for. Saying it out loud takes it from a simple thought in your mind into an action, which helps reinforce it. Others write significant moments of gratitude on pieces of paper and put them in a gratitude jar. The contents of the jar can then be read on Thanksgiving or New Year’s Eve, which brings more meaning to those moments. You may even catch yourself saying “that’s one for the gratitude jar,” which encourages you to keep recognizing more things to be grateful for.

Building an attitude of gratitude can become a social endeavor by involving other people. Relationships blossom when we express appreciation for the little things others do for us. UC Davis psychologist Robert Emmons, author of [Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0547085737/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0547085737&linkCode=as2&tag=happify05-20&linkId=4L5BEFQ6NCOEAFC2), suggests focusing our gratitude on people for whom we’re thankful, rather than circumstances or material items, will enhance the benefits we experience. Whether it is a parent, a sibling, a stranger or a lover, everyone gains something from little acts of kindness and words of appreciation we express.

Try writing a letter to someone who had an impact on you at some point in your life whom you have never properly thanked. The person may not even know something they did made a difference. I will never forget being the recipient of such a letter. I was the nurse at a summer camp in northern Minnesota. Each three-week camp session had 236 kids, male and female, of various ages, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. Some had never before left the city they lived in. Coming to the backwoods of northern Minnesota was a big stretch out of their comfort zone. A few months after camp was over for the summer, I received a letter from a young girl thanking me for my love and support. She expressed how much she appreciated the hugs I so freely gave out when campers would come to visit the health center. Many came with no real ailments other than anxiety, fear and uncertainty. For her, at a time when she was feeling lost and alone, those hugs were a lifeline helping her get through the camp experience. I had no idea. I still look back with fondness and appreciation for her thoughtfulness, writing to let me know that I had made a difference.

Another good way to embrace gratitude is to go around the dinner table and share the day’s grateful moments. You might be surprised at the conversations that erupt and the things you find to be grateful for. This sets a great example for children and helps them begin to cultivate an attitude of gratitude in their own lives.

Try embracing a new gratitude tradition this Thanksgiving, and then carry it on throughout the days and weeks that follow to discover just how beneficial an attitude of gratitude can be for you and yours.