



## Extending the Season for Giving Thanks

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Last week, we celebrated a day of giving thanks. But before we completed our meal with that last bite of pumpkin pie, the season of giving gifts was upon us.

The holiday shopping season now begins on the evening of Thanksgiving. Black Friday starts on Thursday night!

So let the holiday shopping begin but, before we become overwhelmed with the need for buying gifts, let's look back to the spirit of Thanksgiving. Did we actually take the time to give thanks on Thanksgiving Day?

Perhaps even more importantly, do we take the time to give thanks in our lives in some way every day?

Giving thanks or “expressing gratitude” means that we acknowledge what is good outside of ourselves, or we show appreciation for something we have received.

It is easy to see how being grateful and giving thanks has strong social value, and can make others feel better. In addition, studies clearly document that when we give thanks, and have an “attitude of gratitude,” it makes us both psychologically and physically healthier. In fact, it increases our feelings of happiness and our other positive emotions, it strengthens our relationships with others and with our community, it enhances our ability to cope with stressors, and it has been associated with improved physical health (fewer headaches, stomach issues, chest pain, muscle aches, and appetite problems).

We may already give thanks for our meals by saying a blessing or grace before the meal, or taking a moment of silence, but it's also helpful to give thanks for intangibles such as our health, our family, having a job, or experiencing a significant world event.

Of course, “thanks giving” and “gift giving” do bear some similarities. After all, gift giving focuses on someone or something outside of ourselves and it's motivated from the kindness of our heart.

On the other hand, the season of gift giving can become overwhelming. Our shopping can become stressful. Also, particularly among children, we can view this holiday as a time of “gift receiving” not gift giving. Too easily, we can become obsessed with what we think we'll get rather than what we plan to give.

### **Improving Our Sense of Gratitude**

While gratitude is a feeling, it is also a skill that can be learned and practiced. Like any skill, it might feel awkward and unnatural at first, but as expressing gratitude becomes

more habitual, the benefit for us, and others around us, grows significantly. Here are a few helpful techniques for improving our gratitude.

One technique is called “the snowball effect.” Pick someone every day and write that person a brief thank you note. There’s no need to actually send these notes to the individuals in question. That’s optional. Just the practice of writing the notes increases our overall sense of gratitude.

Or, in a similar vein, try keeping a “gratitude list.” Every day, write down a couple of things you’re thankful for. When doing this, consider everything going on in your life. Sometimes the most noteworthy things are those we take for granted. For example, just living in America and experiencing the freedoms we have can be something we can be thankful for each day, but how often do we think about this?

These two techniques are from psychologist Robert Emmons from University of California – Davis. He developed these and showed that, over time, the more we practice the feeling of gratitude, the more we actually experience it.

Other techniques include:

Saying “thank you” more often. - Even saying “thank you” silently in our heads has been shown to help change our attitude.

Keeping a “gratitude journal.” - Write a daily entry on things you have to be thankful for. This journaling technique is similar to the two techniques Robert Emmons recommends.

Meditation, yoga, or prayer. - Any activity that increases our ability to focus on the present moment can increase our experience of gratitude. Meditation, yoga, and prayer excel at this.

Do something helpful for someone else. - Volunteering to help another person is giving the gift of your time. While it invites that person to feel thankful, it also will instill a feeling of gratitude within you. This type of gratitude arises from developing a deep sense of appreciation for someone or something outside of yourself.

Counting your blessings. - This is an old, standard technique. During a quiet, restful moment of your day, just consider some of the things you have to be thankful for. No need for paper for this one; the mind will do all the work.

In addition, there are some ways to help children improve their sense of gratitude, especially during the gift giving season. One way is to make it a standard practice that your children give gifts as well as receive them. For younger children, they often enjoy creating something artistic for each person on their list. Another way is to have the simple expectation for your children that they say thank you for each gift they receive.

Here’s wishing each and all of my readers a happy holiday season!

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