

A Time for Giving Thanks: The Power of Gratitude

By Jim Concotelli, Ph.D., Horizon Bay VP of resident programs



In today's world, qualities such as gratitude seem to belong to another age – a simpler time when life moved along at an easier pace and there was time to appreciate everything. Yet within gratitude lies a tremendous source of power that can radically reshape the way you look at the world. In fact, researchers find the virtues of gratitude include an enhanced sense of well-being.

Many philosophers, spiritual teachers and the world's major religions prize gratitude as a morally beneficial emotional state that encourages reciprocal kindness. Pastors, priests, parents and grandparents have long extolled the virtues of saying thank you and feeling gratitude for what we have. Now psychologists indicate gratitude plays a significant role in a person's overall health.

After reviewing previous research on gratitude, Dr. Robert Emmons, psychology professor at the University of California, conducted the Research Project on Gratitude and Thanksgiving. The study required several hundred people in three different groups to keep daily diaries. The first group kept a diary of the events that occurred during the day, while the second group recorded their unpleasant experiences. The last group made a daily list of things for which they were grateful.

Gratitude encourages a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness since one act of gratitude encourages another.

The results of the study indicated that daily gratitude exercises resulted in higher reported levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism and energy. Additionally, the gratitude group experienced less depression and stress, was more likely to help others, exercised more regularly and made more progress toward personal goals. According to the findings, people who feel grateful are also more likely to feel loved. The researchers also noted that gratitude encouraged a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness since one act of gratitude encourages another.

At this point you may be thinking, OK, sounds great, but how can I really be more grateful, more often? It's really very easy. Here are a few ways you can practice right now.



1. Make a list of five things you are grateful for. These can be big things (like your family) or little things (like the friendly smile of someone you just met).
2. Reflect on your list and allow yourself to feel good about these things.
3. Think of a person you can thank or you appreciate. Give them a call or send a note and show your gratitude by sharing your appreciation.

You can do these exercises anytime, and you don't have to stop at five things. In fact, it is a great idea to keep a running list in a gratitude journal or on note cards. This way you can return to your list anytime you wish, reinforcing your feelings of gratitude. At any moment you can make a list, bask in those thoughts and share that thankfulness with others. And you can say "thank you" to many people in any given day, not just that special someone. You've probably thought of being thankful as a good thing to do or the right thing to do. But now hopefully you see it can be even more powerful than "right." You can increase your sense of well-being and create positive social effects just from counting your blessings and passing along this feeling by saying "thanks."