

Experts: Practicing gratitude can have profound health benefits

November 26 2019, by Eric Lindberg



Practicing feeling gratitude — even for small things like a warm beverage or hot shower — can be beneficial, according to USC experts. Credit: iStock

Before the feast begins, everyone around the table shares something that makes them feel grateful.

It's a Thanksgiving tradition in many U.S. families, but you might be surprised to learn that the simple exercise can have dramatic benefits.

For those who can resist diving into the turkey and mashed potatoes for a few minutes to share their thanks first, evidence indicates that [gratitude](#) can boost health and well-being.

"Benefits associated with gratitude include better sleep, more exercise, reduced symptoms of physical pain, lower levels of inflammation, lower blood pressure and a host of other things we associate with [better health](#) ," said Glenn Fox, an expert in the science of gratitude and head of program design, strategy and outreach at the USC Performance Science Institute.

"The limits to gratitude's health benefits are really in how much you pay attention to feeling and practicing gratitude."

You might get a warm glow from expressing gratitude once a year at Thanksgiving. To truly derive long-lasting benefits, though, experts say you should make it a part of your daily or weekly routine. Scientific evidence from gratitude research backs up a few typical approaches, including saying thanks to people who don't expect it and writing down a few things each day that make you grateful.

"It's very similar to working out, in that the more you practice, the better you get," Fox said. "The more you practice, the easier it is to feel grateful when you need it."

USC scientists link gratitude with health, social bonding, stress relief

Fox first started researching gratitude as a doctoral student in neuroscience at USC. Some people scoffed at his interest in the emotion,

which had received little attention from researchers. But he pressed forward with what would become the first study of how gratitude manifests in the brain.

He found links between gratitude and brain structures also tied to social bonding, reward and stress relief. Other studies have bolstered his findings, revealing connections between the tendency to feel grateful and a chemical called oxytocin that promotes social ties.

Research on gratitude has also found associations with other health benefits, including [general well-being](#), [better sleep](#), [more generosity](#) and [less depression](#). Fox said it makes sense that gratitude is beneficial from an evolutionary perspective.

"Gratitude is such a key function of our social lives and our evolution as a species," he said. "People who did not develop gratitude or grateful relationships with others, it's very unlikely they would have survived in a social context."

Other USC experts also view building connections with others through gratitude as a critical part of thriving—and a cornerstone of the Thanksgiving tradition.

Ilene Rosenstein, a psychologist and associate vice provost for campus well-being and education at USC, encourages students and others to find a way to strengthen social bonds, even if they aren't traveling home or haven't celebrated the holiday in the past.

"There's something wonderful about getting together with people and being thankful," she said. "So you may not be able to be with your family or loved ones, but it may be a time to be brave and ask other people to get together—it doesn't have to be fancy—and talk about what you're thankful for."

Gratitude can help people cope with stress and build stronger relationships

Taking a few moments to reflect on gratitude can broaden your perspective, Rosenstein said, helping you find meaning in small but enjoyable moments, like drinking a delicious cup of coffee or taking a hot shower. Finding those minor sources of joy can keep you from dwelling on what you don't have, she said, and instead help you think about what makes you happy.

Writing in a gratitude journal can build a reserve of positive feelings that you can draw on during rougher patches in life, she added. And sharing thanks with people in your life who make you grateful can pay off with deeper connections.

"People who are grateful get less triggered or angry, they have more positive feelings, and in some ways, that attracts other people," she said. "When you feel these positive emotions and relish good experiences with others, there's a bonding in that, and it tends to build stronger relationships."

At the heart of those strengthened ties is a sense of humility and vulnerability, said the Rev. Jim Burklo, senior associate dean with the USC Office of Religious and Spiritual Life. He views gratitude as a deeply personal emotion, especially when expressing thanks to another person.

"To say thank you to someone is to humble yourself, to recognize that you don't have it all, you didn't create it all," he said. "By humbling ourselves, we elevate our humanity."

Whether spiritual or philosophical, gratitude has roots throughout human history

Gratitude is a common thread through many religions and philosophies. Cicero reportedly called it the "mother of all virtues." Greek philosopher Epictetus said: "He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has." And Charles Dickens shared a similar sentiment with his oft-quoted phrase, "Reflect upon your present blessings—of which every man has many—not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some."

Whether you embrace a spiritual, religious or secular approach to feeling grateful, Burklo said practicing gratitude reflects a recognition that the positive things in life have a source beyond ourselves.

"To be grateful is to express a personal relationship with that source, whether understood as an anthropomorphic deity or as the cosmos, the universe or the greater world," he said. "That's a profound thing."

USC experts share their tips on practicing gratitude

So what are some proven techniques to becoming a more grateful person? Fox said gratitude research has shown that some of the most effective approaches include maintaining a gratitude journal, writing personal thank-you notes and regularly expressing gratitude to others in person.

Fox suggested experimenting to find the method that works best. Stick with something for a few weeks and note any improvements in how you feel. For him, spending a few minutes each day before winding down for bed is the most effective approach. He might write in his gratitude journal, practice guided meditation, call someone to express thanks or write a note to a friend.

"It helps create a buffer and helps me sleep a little better," he said. "It's not that you'll never have a restless night again or you won't feel stressed."

The whole point is that, for that time, you've spared yourself a little bit of the anxiety of the day."

Rosenstein also makes daily entries in her gratitude journal and dedicates time to thinking about things that make her grateful. She encouraged USC students and others on campus to check out the university's mindfulness initiative as a useful way to build more gratitude and self-reflection into their daily or weekly routine.

As for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday, Fox said there's no wrong way to practice gratitude. Going around the table to share thanks, writing positive messages to others or simply taking the time to connect with friends and family are all good ways to get started.

"What other holiday is built on recognizing things we are grateful for?" he said. "I just don't think you can go wrong."

Provided by University of Southern California

Citation: Experts: Practicing gratitude can have profound health benefits (2019, November 26) retrieved 25 January 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-11-experts-gratitude-profound-health-benefits.html>

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