



Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

November 2015

Finding the good in difficult times: How gratitude can improve your health and happiness

It's been one of those days. Your son missed the bus and needed a ride to school. The commute was uglier than usual. Your boss asked you to take on a big new project. You agreed, but you're not sure you're up to it. As you were leaving for the day, your mom called and asked if you could pick up her prescription. At the pharmacy, you ran into a neighbor. A simple "how are you doing" resulted in a detailed, 10-minute rant about his car breaking down in the driveway.

What's to be grateful for in that scenario? On the drive to school, your son told you a really funny joke. Traffic was bad because the highway is finally getting much-needed, potentially life-saving

repairs. Your boss trusts you to take the lead on an important project. You were able to make your neighbor laugh when you shared your son's joke. You reminded him to be grateful the car broke down at home and not on a long road trip. And you got to see your mom today, even if it was just for a few minutes.

The benefits of gratitude

Finding reasons to be grateful can be difficult, especially in a cynical world. But several studies show that gratitude makes people happier and healthier.¹ Robert Emmons, PhD, is a researcher and author of *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. He found that adults who kept gratitude journals exercised more, had fewer symptoms of illness, felt better about their lives and were more optimistic than people who don't practice gratitude.²

Gratitude involves acknowledging the gifts you've received. The gift may be an act of kindness, a material object, or an emotional or spiritual offering. Gratitude also involves appreciating the giver and giving thanks. This awareness doesn't always

come naturally to us, at least in the day to day. We forget to give thanks. We take what we have for granted. For many, it's not part of our nature to see the glass as half full. According to Dr. Emmons, we can choose gratitude. It can be cultivated. The key to making gratitude a habit is to practice it every day.³

Keeping a daily gratitude journal is one of the simplest ways to learn to savor what's good in your life. Every day, take a few minutes to write down the things you're grateful for. Many people like to do this at night, just before they go to sleep. At first, it can be difficult, but keep with it. Soon you'll learn to focus on the good things in your day.

Caregiving and thanksgiving

Caring for an elderly or ill loved one can involve some thankless tasks: laundry, shopping, house cleaning, bill paying, going to doctor appointments, and helping with eating, bathing, dressing or using the toilet. In any given year, about 44 million American adults provide unpaid care to an elderly adult or an adult who is disabled.⁴ Almost 17 million people care for a child with special needs.⁵

What are you so happy about?

Set aside time every day to recall even ordinary moments of gratitude. Here are some ideas for making thankfulness a daily practice.

- Keep a daily gratitude journal.
- Start a gratitude jar. Write good things that happen on a slip of paper with the date and put it in the jar. Make it a family jar so you can look back at your year in gratitude.
- Write a thank you note to someone you appreciate.
- Take a gratitude walk and think about what you're grateful for.
- Give yourself visual reminders to have an attitude of gratitude. Set the word as your wallpaper on your computer screen. Put sticky notes on the bathroom mirror.

Upcoming Articles

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This holiday season, find a healthy balance between overjoyed and overwhelmed.

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For 17 years, Gail Sheehy was a caregiver. Sheehy, author of 15 books including the *New York Times* bestseller *Passages*, cared for her husband Clay Felkner, who had cancer. After his death, Sheehy became an advocate for caregivers. Her book *Passages in Caregiving: Turning Chaos into Confidence* offers strategies and resources gleaned from firsthand experience. She also reminds us to remember what she calls “the upside” of caregiving: “The chance to give back some of the love and compassion and tender care to the parents who were there for us, or the life partners with whom we exchanged solemn wedding vows...”⁶

Caregiving can be an act of gratitude, but for Sheehy that doesn’t mean a caregiver should be “the sacrificial lamb.” A caregiver must stay healthy in mind and body. That means showing compassion toward yourself. Ask for help from family members, friends, neighbors, community resources and paid aides, if possible. Give others the opportunity to give of themselves.

Practicing gratitude may help ease caregiver stress. One study found that caregivers of Alzheimer’s patients were less stressed and depressed after keeping a daily gratitude journal. They reported having a better sense of well-being, and fewer physical complaints.⁷

For caregivers, little things can mean a lot. A parent with dementia calls you by name. A child with autism makes eye contact. A neighbor comes over to stay with your loved one so you can take a walk in the park. Make it a gratitude walk, and think about all you’ve been given, every little thing.

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Visit the LiveWell section of liveandworkwell.com to find articles and resources on caregiving. You’ll also find helpful information about managing stress and building resiliency in the BeWell section. Use the “Search for Clinician” tool to find a mental health professional in your area.

Ask your health benefits representative for your access code to liveandworkwell.com.

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1 Emmons RA, McCullough ME. Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2003; 84.

2 Emmons RA. *Thanks! How the new science of gratitude can make you happier*. New York: Houghton Mifflin; 2007.

3 Ibid.

4 Caregiver stress fact sheet. www.womenshealth.gov/publications/our-publications/fact-sheet/caregiver-stress.html

5 Caregiving in the U.S. 2009 – A focused look at caregivers of children. www.caregiving.org/data/Report_Caregivers_of_Children_11-12-09.pdf

6 Sheehy G. *Passages in caregiving: Turning chaos into confidence*. New York: William Morrow; 2010, p. 30

7 Emmons RA. *Thanks! How the new science of gratitude can make you happier*. New York: Houghton Mifflin; 2007, 169.