

Gratitude During the Holidays

Making the Season Sparkle

*Waking up this morning, I see the blue sky.
I join my hands in thanks
For the many wonders of life
For having twenty-four brand new hours before me.*
- Thich Nhat Hanh

What if you could not only survive the holidays but actually enjoy this time of year? Can you imagine yourself looking forward to this season and moving through it with ease? Research by leading psychologists says you can. UC Davis researcher, Robert Emmons, PhD, in his book, *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, says emphatically that being thankful actually amplifies the good - the good things in our lives, the good people in our lives and even the good in us. What better time than the holidays to practice these skills?

Recognize the Gifts

In his research with thousands of people, Emmons showed clearly that we can strengthen the ability to recognize the gifts in life. We can, over time, learn to better notice the beauty around us and to ground ourselves in that beauty. We can learn how to slow down and savor the goodness. There is so much beauty during the holiday season to relish and enjoy - the lights, the ornaments, candles in a window and children's faces.

We learn to recognize not only the gift, but also the person who gave

us the gift. We grow to understand that many people have helped us along the way, providing us with what we couldn't do for ourselves. We no longer take people for granted. We realize that we are deeply connected with the people in our past and present. They have helped bring us where we are today.

Gratitude - An Approach to Life

Gratitude is more than just a feeling. Practicing gratitude is an overall approach to life. We are learning to see through a different lens; a lens of abundance rather than scarcity. We can't be anxious (envious, angry, worried, etc.) and grateful at the same time. Gratitude is an attitude consciously cultivated and an orientation which can eventually become a habit.

The Daily Gratitude Inventory (DGI)

Charles M. Shelton, Ph.D., has developed a Daily Gratitude Inventory (DGI) - a written, daily examination of the gifts and blessings in our lives. Writing encodes positive experiences in our memory. This practice helps us to become more aware of our blessings. It may be helpful to break down the day's events in the following categories:

The Everyday

Enjoy your senses during the holidays. Taste the varieties of food, lovingly prepared; delight in the tiny white lights strung along the streets; revel in the deep winter colors, the sumptuous velvets and rich brocades. Celebrate the changing of

the seasons and create rituals that fulfill and sustain you. Bring out the flannel sheets, the fire logs and the candles. Savor the beauty of the world around you.

People and Relationships

We gather with friends and family during the holidays and feel deeply connected with those we love. We feel a sense of belonging. We go out at night; we visit each other in our homes; we dress up and go out on the town; we enjoy good entertainment. We connect with some of the people in our lives only once a year around this time. Plan ahead for the holidays, scheduling events you look forward to with people you enjoy. Feel your affection for the people you love.

The Big Picture

As you focus on your life, take the long view. This is a good time to reflect over the past year. Focus on what was good. Was there a difficult situation you handled well? Did you exhibit a strength or talent this year that was helpful to another person or to your organization? Was there an experience that helped you to grow? Did you receive an insight or an understanding that changed you for the better?

Taking in the Good

Another suggested gratitude practice has been developed by Berkeley researcher Rick Hansen, Ph.D. The practice of taking in the good uses your mind to change your brain for the better. It has been shown that practicing gratitude actually changes the brain chemistry. Hansen maintains that as your mind changes your brain

changes. "Neurons that fire together wire together," Hansen says. Gratitude practices have been proven to strengthen existing synapses and actually thicken the frontal cortex, building new synapses. Directing attention skillfully is a fundamental way to shape the brain over time.

- Look for positive facts and let them become positive experiences. Let yourself feel good if you get something done, if someone is nice to you, or if you notice a good quality in yourself.
- Savor the positive experience and sustain it for 10-20-30 seconds. Try to let it fill your body, and be as intense as possible.
- Intend and sense that the positive experience is soaking into you, like water into a sponge, becoming a part of you.
- Do this several times a day. The more you take in the good, the more your brain will change for the better.

The good news is the more we practice gratitude, the more often we experience it and the deeper we experience it. Being thankful is a choice we can make in any given moment. Take the time to relish and savor the gifts in your life this holiday season.