

There Is No Downside to Gratitude, So Fill Your Plate This Thanksgiving

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A boy and girl saying grace before a roast turkey dinner, circa 1970. FPG/Hulton Archive/Getty Images



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11/23/2024

Updated: 11/23/2024

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Commentary

Each year, Thanksgiving is a fresh chance to embrace the spirit of gratitude that characterizes the holiday. As we enjoy turkey and stuffing and spending time with family and friends, it's important to slow down and take stock of the bounty we enjoy, and give thanks because we recognize that all we have is a blessing.

No matter your standing or status in life, there is always much for which to be grateful. All too often, especially here in America, we get



Hyper focused on what we don't have, instead of focusing on the many blessings we do have.



There are many advantages to practicing gratitude. When you



appreciate what you have, you set yourself on the path to peace and serenity. Gratitude fortifies and inoculates you from negativity and



the poison of a toxic attitude. It keeps you centered and helps you embrace contentment with what is before you.

However, gratitude is not merely being focused on the blessings in the external world. It also has an internal component. When you are grateful, you affirm what is good in life, both internal and external. You recognize the goodness before you, including food, shelter, family and friends, and material possessions, and you recognize the goodness within you, such as your health, your abilities, your attitudes, your intellect, and your emotional being. You are grateful for the goodness that abounds around you and within you.

While gratitude is related to your emotional life, it is also related to your will or choice. Sometimes, though we may not feel grateful, we have to choose to focus on the good rather than being stuck in negativity.

That may be even more true this Thanksgiving.

With the polarization of the United States population, Thanksgiving this year will be a challenge for many families as they gather with people on each side of the political divide. In these kinds of situations, we are faced with two choices. We can either disengage and abandon our annual Thanksgiving gathering to avoid potential conflict, or press

in through the power of gratitude and choose to share Thanksgiving, focusing on what brings us together rather than what would seek to push us apart.

It is important to remember that while you may have polarized (and strong) points of view, you remain family and friends. We cannot pretend the differences don't exist, but we can choose to recognize the differences and instead be grateful for the bonds that bring us together.

These intentional choices help weave a grateful disposition into the very fabric of your being so that it becomes more than a mere moment of thanksgiving. While feeling a moment of gratitude may bring pleasure, it has much greater emotional, cognitive, physical, and social impacts over time.

Being grateful **reduces distressing emotions** such as depression, anxiety, and anger. While you may want more than you have, being grateful for what you have brings peace, contentment, and tranquility. These serve as psychological antibodies that help the stressors of life become significantly less stressful.

Other benefits of gratitude include improving sleep, reducing overeating, strengthening the immune system, increasing pain tolerance, helping manage glucose levels, fighting heart disease, and even possibly increasing longevity. Put simply, practicing gratitude makes living far more pleasant and has a powerful impact on overall well-being.

Internally, gratitude increases self-confidence, improves patience, and makes you more resilient. Because gratitude and distressing emotions such as depression, anxiety, and anger cannot occupy the same psychological space, gratitude acts as a buffer against stress.

Practicing gratitude has many other benefits. It can sharpen clarity of thought, increasing cognitive flexibility. This enables creative, outside-the-box thinking, which helps generate new and original ideas.

While gratitude can seem like an abstract concept, there are tangible ways to practice it in your daily life.

You can enhance your gratitude by recording (in writing, audio, or video) the details of positive experiences in your day. You can set aside time each day or each week to count your blessings, focusing on the good that can often get lost in the busyness of life. You can openly express your gratitude to others through your words or by writing letters thanking those in your life who have helped you. You need not even send the letter. Simply feeling grateful and writing the letter will have a positive impact.

Personally, I am grateful for the hummingbirds that frequent our feeders, build nests, and hatch their young in our cozy garden. I am grateful for every Thanksgiving that brings my family together, even when we are celebrating from distant locations. I am grateful for my health and being able to remain physically active even during my senior years.

There really is no downside to gratitude. So, this Thanksgiving, let's commit to focusing on what we have and giving thanks for the manifold blessings that surround us, both large and small.

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