

## **Practicing Gratitude**

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Each year in November there are a number of campaigns and events, political and social, that are distracting and pull our attention in many directions. This year the political debates have been full of harsh rhetoric causing discomfort and at times heated discourse among friends and family. This is also the time that we start planning for the holidays. The holidays can trigger a variety of emotions that can overwhelm us as we prepare to decorate, gather family, remember those who are no longer with us, and navigate the good and not so good of Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Diwali, and New Years. Is it time to fess up to the family that you have never liked turkey, the sweet potato casserole, or pumpkin pie that your relatives expect on the holiday menu?

But there are activities that can center and calm us. One such activity is practicing gratitude, appreciating or being thankful for the good things in our lives. How can we practice gratitude? First we make a promise to ourselves to spend time each day to appreciate the world around us and the people with whom we interact. In the beginning, a few post-it notes scattered about- on the night stand, on the refrigerator, near the front door, and on the car's center console - can serve as reminders to approach the day with gratitude. Once it becomes a daily practice we can toss the post-its and be on our way to harnessing a grateful attitude.

Journaling our gratitude can be helpful. To start, buy a journal and a good pen. Each evening reflect on your day. Consider the things that you appreciate and the people with whom you come in contact. Start journaling by writing one thing about your day or the people in your life that you appreciate. Make it specific, because on occasion you will want to go back and read through your journal and hopefully the good feeling you had as you wrote your gratitude entry will reignite feelings of happiness and contentment.

As the weeks progress, try to increase your gratitude entries until you have worked your way up to five things to be grateful for each day. The delicious coffee at Starbucks and the barista who greeted you with a smile and remembered your name. The cashier at the grocery store who waited patiently as you fumbled for the correct change. The co-worker who surprised you with a chocolate chip cookie. Your spouse who took the garbage out before the trash was collected that morning. The beautiful rose colored orchid that unfolded while you were at work. When you think back on the day, there are any number of things that you can be grateful for if only you embrace your experiences with openness and nurture your ability to notice the good around you.

Those that have studied and written books on practicing gratitude agree on its beneficial effect. It can improve our mood, reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, counter stress, and strengthen our general sense of wellbeing. As our optimism grows we can be more open with others by smiling more often and bringing kindness and generosity to our relationships. For those around us short quick notes of appreciation can show our gratefulness and inspire others to pass the gratitude forward. A simple thank you can make someone's day brighter.

So this month, amid the flurry of activity and the approach of the hectic holiday season, take a deep breath, look around you at all the good in life, and practice gratitude. Start now and allow your gratitude to grow throughout the year.