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Giving Thanks

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Gracias, arigato, kam ouen, grazie, merci, danke, thank you. These simple words have been spoken throughout history in civilizations around the world. No matter where you live or how you might pronounce it, the phrase is an expression of appreciation and gratitude.

As we celebrate the Thanksgiving season, most of us give some thought to being grateful. However, those thoughts may be brief and transient as we focus more on the tantalizing smells and tastes of a hearty meal, fun with friends and relatives, parades, or the football game that dominates the day.

All of us have something to be thankful for. Yet, in the busy routine of our days, we often take it all for granted. There is so much going on that we simply do not take the time to stop and think about being grateful.

Today we are trying to go faster and faster and are more stressed than ever before. We have deadlines, heavy work demands, bosses, projects, pressures, and family problems. We start our day with a quick cup of coffee, immerse ourselves in high-tech, rapid communications, and rush home to a busy family schedule and too little sleep.

We live in a culture of advances and opportunities for education, technology, communication, medicine, and industry. Yet, these advantages come with greater stress, increasing self-expectations, and pressure for success and achievement.

Pressure is beneficial when it motivates, encourages change, or inspires. Ambition, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and a desire to improve our lives and those of our children are profoundly American traits. These fundamental goals drove the first settlers to our shores and initiated the celebration of their resilience and survival—now the Thanksgiving holiday.

We have come to expect our high standard of living and all the trappings of success. To avoid “wasting time” we fill it with information, appointments, obligations, and input. We seem to find it difficult to set aside time for the things that truly make us healthy and well. Moreover, “mind, body, spirit” energizing activities do not pay the bills. We spend so much time being busy that we have lost sight of the need for connecting with family and friends, playing together, talking together, and maybe even sitting quietly and considering things that we should be grateful for in our busy lives.

Gratitude can be described as a mood, an emotion, or an affective trait. Research has shown that there are many benefits of practicing gratitude. Grateful people are prone to positive emotions and subjective well-being. According to recent studies,^{1,2} the practice of grati-

tude can increase happiness levels by around 25 percent, and cultivating gratitude brings other physical and mental health effects. Gratitude deepens an individual’s sense of interconnectedness and increases one’s sense of personal worth.

Seligman³ has investigated factors that contribute to positive emotional health. His work led to one of the fastest growing areas of psychological research: “positive psychology.” Seligman and his colleagues have shown that individuals who have a high level of life satisfaction (happiness) are less likely to have psychological or social problems, less likely to feel stressed, and more likely to enjoy robust physical health. The researchers have identified key factors associated with individuals who report high levels of life satisfaction. Five are particularly important: optimism, zest for life, curiosity, the ability to love and be loved, and gratitude.

Studies indicate that those who practice gratitude tend to be more creative, bounce back more quickly from adversity, have a stronger immune system, and have stronger social relationships than those who don’t practice gratitude. Methods of practicing gratitude include keeping a daily journal, prayer, giving back through service to others, meditation, and being optimistic.

Gratitude and Resilience

Gratitude is the key to emotional connection and resilience. Resilience is having the skills or attributes to recover quickly from a mental, physical, or emotional crisis. A major component of resilience is emotional awareness and the ability to appreciate the good things in life—even in times of great stress such as illness, economic turmoil, or catastrophic events. Resilience shifts attention from floundering in uncertainty to flexibility, accepting the change, reducing stress, recovery, and enhancing well-being.

Gratitude and Biology

Scientists believe when someone expresses thankfulness, it benefits the person giving thanks as well as the recipient. A positive message travels along a nerve in the brain and releases chemicals that are picked up by the next nerve, allowing the message to be carried on. These chemicals, called neurotransmitters, have a calming effect on



the brain by increasing levels of serotonin, known to produce a feeling of peace and calm. You feel really good!

When an event happens and is fully experienced—both the good and the bad aspects—the brain develops new pathways in which to cope. These emotions work to create and strengthen pathways within the brain so that with each successive event, an individual is better able to cope. Going through adversity tends to make people become physically and emotionally stronger and more resilient.

Gratitude in Tough Times

The most difficult time to be grateful is when there is trouble in your life. Difficult times are usually a time of pain, stress, and uncertainty. Who feels grateful at a time like that?

We all have feelings about the current economic climate and the many storms and trials of this past year. Maybe we feel fear, frustration, worry, or resignation. Perhaps we feel relief that our jobs and houses are safe and guilt that our neighbors are not so fortunate. Typically, the more we are personally and physically affected, the more intense our negative emotions are likely to be.

It is important to keep things in perspective. Think about the things that you still have to enjoy and the opportunities that may occur despite of the situation. Focus on the positive events of your life. Just thinking and “savoring” the small things makes life richer and makes us feel stronger and happier. Learning to be grateful helps fight the natural tendency to minimize or overlook the good things. Resilient people don’t avoid life’s hard knocks; they bounce back, survive, and flourish.

A Few Thanksgiving Facts

The Thanksgiving holiday was forged by gratitude and is a celebration of American resilience.⁴

In 1623, the Pilgrims at Plymouth Plantation, Mass., held a day of Thanksgiving for their freedom, good fortune, and survival. More than 160 years later in 1789, a Massachusetts member of the House of Representatives, moved that a day of Thanksgiving be held to give the American people the opportunity to create a Constitution to preserve their hard-won freedoms. In 1827 Sarah Hale, editor of

Ladies Magazine and Godey’s Lady’s Book, began to agitate for a national day of thanksgiving. After 36 years of crusading, she won her battle by convincing President Lincoln of the need to “soothe the national mood,” which was weary of the Civil War. Buoyed by the Union victory at Gettysburg, President Lincoln proclaimed that Nov. 26 would be a national Thanksgiving Day, to be observed every year on the fourth Thursday of November. On Nov. 26, 1941, on the brink of another battle for freedom, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the bill to fix the date at the fourth Thursday in November, thus making it an “official” holiday.

Resilience, Optimism, and Gratitude

Today we live in a time and place so prosperous and technologically advanced, filled with immense opportunities, political freedom, leisure time, education, and instant global connectivity. We also face uneasy times, and although you cannot change the fact that highly stressful events may happen, you can change how you interpret and respond to those events.

Each person’s experiences vary greatly. To overcome loss and difficulty and to succeed in life a person must have inner resources: resilience, optimism, and gratitude. Thankfulness motivates and reinforces desirable, emotionally healthy behaviors. Giving thanks forces us to look beyond excessive clutter and distractions and allows us to live in the present moment. Recognizing the blessings in our lives and acting upon them on a regular basis can increase our awareness, appreciation, and resilience. Thinking about the good things and sharing our gratitude results in positive emotions, happiness, and adds meaning to our lives. ■

References

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*Thanksgiving is good but
thanks-living is better.*

Matthew Henry 1662-1714