Emerging research shows that people who remind themselves every day of the things they are grateful for demonstrate improved mental and physical health. Further, saying a meaningful “thank you” and counting your blessings plays a significant role in a person’s sense of well-being and happiness. Participants in a recent study who exhibited gratitude reported higher levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism, and energy. They also experienced less depression and stress, and were more likely to help others, exercise more regularly, and make more progress toward personal goals. The results of the study, published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, appear to be equally true whether for healthy college students or people with incurable diseases.

Positive Psychology
The positive psychology studies relating to emotions and the impact on happiness and well-being is an expanding area of research for many reasons. A relatively new branch of psychology, positive psychology studies the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive and primarily focuses mental wellness. Researchers seek to better understand how positive individual traits have a positive influence on individual health that can foster and strengthen the workplace, families, and communities.

Emotions influence our moods and cause us to feel and react to stimuli in particular ways. By studying how emotions are formed we begin to understand why people respond the way they do in certain circumstances, furthering the understanding of human behavior. This allows us to begin to decode certain emotional disorders and find more effective methods of treatment.

Recently, the examination of a grateful outlook from the perspective of health, well-being, and happiness, as well as an alternative to materialism, has emerged as a focused area of interest.

Materialism has been implicated as a cause of unhappiness, and early studies have indicated that practicing gratitude can diminish negative effects of materialistic attitudes.

The act of gratitude serves as a social, emotional barometer because the act of gratitude is in fact an act of socialization. Gratitude usually occurs when someone acknowledges another’s good deeds. Role models such as parents and teachers instruct children to be grateful, reinforcing these experiences by encouraging children to say “thank you,” whether receiving gifts or practicing good manners. Gratitude is often interpersonal and tends to affirm or reaffirm social resources and reinforces the concept that positive emotions broaden and build appropriate behaviors.

The Psychology of Gratitude
Although little is known about the psychological impact of gratitude, evolving research shows that gratitude appears to be associated with happiness and well-being, indicative of an ability to adapt to life circumstances. Other studies have shown that long-term happiness varies only slightly in spite of life circumstances and supports the idea that positive attitudes, forgiveness, and gratitude contribute to longevity and satisfaction. The recent study by Emmons and McCullough investigated the possible links between gratitude and subjective well-being, the benefits suggesting that gratitude is a crucial
component of happiness.

According to the findings, people who feel grateful are also more likely to feel loved and appreciated. Gratitude was also shown to encourage a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness among people, since one act of gratitude encourages another. The authors suggest that anyone can increase their sense of well-being, create positive social effects, and influence their own happiness if they take time to appreciate what they have and what they have accomplished.

Focusing on what you are grateful for also reminds us of our priorities and of what is fundamentally important. Often we get caught up worrying or focusing on little things that really are not important to us. Thinking about what we are grateful for allows us to refocus and re-center ourselves on what is important and meaningful to us.

Other studies have shown that individuals who take a few minutes each day to write down the things for which they are thankful tend to sleep better and feel less stressed. Further experiments have shown that people who experience gratitude seem to recover from traumatic events more quickly. They are less bothered by negative memories of the event, and when those memories do surface they are less intense. Gratitude appears to help individuals make sense of negative events and supports closure and recovery faster after traumatic situations.

**Linking Gratitude, Forgiveness, and Well-Being**

Research has shown that holding a grudge and nursing grievances can affect physical as well as mental health. By reliving and retelling the story of our wounds, we trigger sympathetic nervous system arousal and re-imprint the trauma again and again. Experts note that one way to curtail these kinds of feelings is to foster forgiveness, including forgiving yourself. This appears to reduce bitterness and resentment and redirects the negative emotions. Active cultivation of forgiveness adheres to the principles of cognitive therapy, a form of psychotherapy that helps people replace negative explanations of events with more positive ones.

When you find yourself brooding over an unpleasant experience, you can consciously choose to avoid rehashing grievances, diminishing the harm and performing your own cognitive therapy.

Across time, religious thought, and multiple cultures, the emotional mechanisms of gratitude and forgiveness have been viewed as positive and desirable aspects of society. Yet both are somewhat difficult to define or categorize. Most individuals, largely through their own life experiences, recognize the emotions of gratitude and forgiveness as positive aspects. Early scientists defined gratitude as a positive response to interpersonal benefit, and forgiveness as a positive response to interpersonal harm. The more recent studies have begun to further explore their links to individual welfare and happiness.

The research evidence of the neurological markers of happiness supports this view. Studies show greater stimulation in the prefrontal cortex in people who have a positive, happy outlook. In happy people, activity in the amygdala is inhibited. The opposite was shown for unhappy people. They have increased activity of the amygdala and greater stimulation of the right prefrontal cortex. Furthermore, those with greater activity in the right prefrontal cortex were more likely to experience distress when experiencing a negative situation. Other studies show that kindness and caring have positive effects on serotonin levels and the immune system.

The emerging discoveries support empirical knowledge of the value of a grateful disposition. Gratitude connects us to the kindness of others and intensifies interpersonal relationships. As we give to others, we strengthen ourselves. As we receive from others, we allow them to also grow. Feelings are very personal and only you can determine what is significant for you.

However, when you are conscious and purposeful in your emotions, you have the power to influence everyone. Each of us has a different style of coping when faced with painful times. It is through self-forgiveness and our sense of gratitude that reconciliation is nurtured and encouraged. Further, it tells us how one ought to live when facing personal loss and grief and reminds us of the limits of our understanding when something traumatic occurs.

With our hectic and stressful lives, it is much too easy to lose perspective and focus on the negatives. As you celebrate the busy holiday season, you have the ability to choose, to be energized to do the things necessary to improve your own relationships and personal well-being. Be grateful for your job, your family, your friends, and your health; they are too precious and wonderful to be taken for granted.

**Resources**

