



Suzanne Zoglio

Gratitude is a gift

In late November every year, we speak, read, and hear about the importance of gratitude. Preachers share prayers of thanksgiving. Before meals many families say “grace.” Magazines are filled with ideas for getting guests to share what they’re most grateful for. In all of this discourse about gratitude, however, there seems to be an implied “should.”

Although the economy is bad, you *should* be grateful for your health. Although your retirement account has lost value, you *should* be grateful you still have a job. Although you might have less to spend on gifts this year, you *should* be grateful for a loving family and loyal friends.

From my own point of view, there are no *shoulds* when it comes to being grateful...it just makes sense. Research shows that those who practice rituals of gratitude become happier, healthier, and even more energetic. Gratitude is actually a gift you give yourself.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, a scientist at the University of California at Riverside, found (in a study for the National Institutes of Health) that when people took time once a week to write down things for which they were grateful, their overall satisfaction with life increased over a period of six weeks.

In addition, psychologist Robert Emmons at the University of California at Davis, found physical benefits to writing down what’s right with your life. Gratitude journaling improved physical health, raised energy levels and, for patients with neuromuscular disease, relieved pain and fatigue. Those who benefited most tended to elaborate more and have a wider span of things they were grateful for.

So don’t limit your appreciation list to a few huge things such as your faith, health, or spouse. Include little surprises such as getting the last paper when you’re in a hurry, receiving a note

from an old friend, or overhearing a great joke on your morning commute. Include life’s natural treasures like catching a glimpse of a gorgeous sunrise or hearing the song of a little warbler.

Martin Seligman, a pioneering researcher in the field of Positive Psychology, ran similar controlled trials at the University of Pennsylvania. The single most effective way to turbo charge your joy, he says, is to make a “gratitude visit.”

Write a testimonial thanking someone to whom you owe a debt of gratitude—and then visit that person to read your letter of appreciation. Seligman reports that people who do this just once are measurably happier and less depressed a full month later. But, the effect lasts only about three months, so Seligman recommends an exercise he calls “three blessings” which is less powerful, but longer lasting. Each day write down three things that went well and why. Seligman found people less depressed and happier even six months later.

The 2008 holiday season will be economically challenging for many...downright depressing for others. To give yourself or someone else a lift, consider giving the gift of gratitude. Complaints are draining. Blaming doesn’t change a thing. Whining annoys most people, and worry stresses your heart. Be smart-give thanks.

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