

Thankfulness and Your Health

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | November 25, 2010



Happy Thanksgiving! Here in the U.S. we celebrate our annual Thanksgiving holiday on the 4th Thursday of November. Thanksgiving is a traditional harvest festival, which has its American roots in Plymouth Massachusetts, when the Pilgrims and local native Indians gave thanks in 1621.

Historically, Thanksgiving was a religious holiday, a time for families to come together and give thanks to God for His blessings throughout the year. Over the last century the holiday has become increasingly secular with the focus of thanks shifting from God the Giver to we the receiver.

Does it really matter whether we give thanks to others, live lives that express our gratitude outwardly, or whether our thanks is a more inward experience focusing on how we have been blessed and relishing our gains and advances? The answer is a resounding Yes! – it makes a huge difference.

Medical science^{1,2,3,4,5} has shown that those who experience an outward focused thankfulness experience a greater sense of wellbeing, happiness, optimism, satisfaction with their lives, greater sense of feeling loved, greater success in achieving life's goals, and lower incidence of stress and depression when compared to those who don't express outward thankfulness.

Grateful people also live healthier lives, they exercise more, engage in healthier lifestyles, experience

more fitful and restorative sleep, have healthier immune response, lower rates of headaches, stomach problems and pain, and are more alert, mentally sharp and efficient in their activities.

The thankfulness that results in all these positive changes is the thankfulness which moves one toward actions of appreciation. It is when we recognize our appreciation, develop a sense of goodwill toward those to whom we are thankful and then express our gratitude in meaningful ways that we experience positive mental and physical outcomes. Further, expressing thankfulness has positive impact on social relationships resulting in greater sense of cohesion, connectedness, and bonding within one's social group. We are more valued and loved and we love and value others more when we are thankful.

Those who tend to focus on self, who are thankful for what they get, rather than for those who are gracious in giving, fail to express genuine thankfulness. The verbal expression of "thanks" mumbled as someone opens the door, or as one birthday present after another is opened, is not the healing, life transforming thankfulness. It is when we take time to allow ourselves to genuinely care about and appreciate others and then take purposeful action to express that care that we experience mental and physical wellbeing.

Our thanks should also extend beyond the people in our lives to our amazing Creator God who has provided so much and sacrificed so much for our health and eternal well-being.

If you are not already living a thankful life, then I encourage you to begin today. Each day purposely examine the events of the day and choose 3-5 things you are thankful for. The only requirement is that the items on your list are meaningful to you. It might be a new toothbrush, the fact it didn't rain after you washed your new car, the umbrella you had with you when the storm hit, a friend who shared a lunch, the person who stopped to help when your car broke down, the pastor whose sermon touched your heart, or your family members who love and care for you. Whatever it might be take time each day to purposely reflect on what you are thankful for in that day. And then consider how to express that appreciation in meaningful ways, a phone call, letter, email, text, gift, cookie, or whatever is meaningful in your life in order to show someone how their kindness brightened your day.

Remember, offerings given from a thankful heart are the only acceptable gifts to God. Why? Because God wants us to experience the blessings of living the thankful life and He knows if we return tithe and offerings from a sense of obligation we don't experience the healing and life changing benefits that thankfulness brings. Therefore, God loves the cheerful giver because He loves it when His children are healthy and happy. Finally, one of the best ways to give thanks to God is to remember what Jesus said, "as you have done it unto one of the least of these you have done it unto me." When you recognize how God has blessed you, when your heart is warmed with gratitude and appreciation for His love in your life, go and give to someone in need, seek to share with another the love and joy you have received from God. Let this be your thank offering to God.

On this Thanksgiving and everyday forward, may you and your family be filled with Thanks!

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