

Choosing an Attitude of Gratitude

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It recently was the Thanksgiving holiday in the U.S., a time of year when we focus on our blessings. Some families have a tradition of going around the table and listing at least one person or thing for which they are thankful. This past month many of us who use the Facebook social utility program changed their status each day leading up to Thanksgiving to reflect our blessings. Some of my status updates on Facebook this past month were "I'm thankful for my beloved mom," "I'm thankful for my friends," and "I am thankful to God at all times--the good and the bad." I found that selecting someone or something to be thankful for each day really helped to direct my attitude in a more positive way and to start my day right.

Expressing gratitude is good for you. Psychologists and other researchers have even done studies on the benefits of gratitude. Robert Emmons, the author of *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude can Make You Happy*, claims that individuals who write down what they're thankful for are happier, experience less stress and depression, sleep better at night, and can even have lower blood pressure.

I truly believe that focusing on gratitude can reduce stress at the very least. I recently went through an exercise in which a coach had us focus on a stressful situation in our life and any resultant tension we felt in our bodies. We were to particularly notice where in our bodies we felt the discomfort (I felt a knot in my stomach). We were then instructed to think of people or things for which we were grateful and about some happy times in our past. Afterwards we were to notice if our bodies felt differently. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the knot in my stomach was actually gone! That convinced me that what I have heard and read about gratitude is true. It can have real health benefits.

Robert Emmons recommends keeping a gratitude journal, something I have kept in the past and want to start up again. A number of years ago, when I was in a very stressful position, I made it a habit each day to list five people or things for which I was grateful. My beloved dog was often high on my list. I might not have realized what a difference my dog made in my life if I hadn't acknowledged her through my gratitude journal. Keeping such a journal helps us to focus on the positive aspects of our lives, rather than on any perceived "bad" parts of our lives.

In addition to starting to keep a gratitude journal, you can also write a gratitude letter at least once a month or even give it as a Christmas gift. You can send such a letter to someone by e-mail, but I prefer to send a card or letter to someone who has touched my life in some way, even in the distant past.

As we are gearing up for one of the most stressful times of the year—the holidays—let's try to make expressing gratitude a regular habit instead of something we just focus on during Thanksgiving. Here are some of the many ways you can choose to express gratitude: you can tell people in person that you are grateful for them; thank God through prayer for your blessings; start keeping a gratitude journal; write a gratitude letter to individuals who have made a difference in your life; and/or fall asleep counting your blessings.

Here's my gratitude list for today. I am thankful for:

1) my loving husband and family; 2) living in a place that is sunny and warm during the winter; 3) the opportunity to share what is on my heart with others; 4) a country where I have freedom of religion and speech; and last, but not least ... 5) YOU! Let's choose to have an attitude of gratitude. It will help you to start AND end each day right.