



# Holistic Wellness

## An Attitude of Gratitude May Be Season's Best Gift

BY JACKIE DOBRINSKA

What are you grateful for? The warmth of the sun? The fragrance of flowers? The wind on your face? The strength of your soul? We all experience the highs and lows of life—from abundance and love to lack and struggle. Yet, no matter the situation, gratitude has the power to make it better. It improves mood, heals the body and even transforms lives. In fact, it may be the best gift we can give this holiday season.

Gratitude is an attitude of appreciation. As Meister Eckhart, a 12<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher and mystic, put it, “If the only prayer you ever said was ‘Thank you’ that would suffice.”

Nine hundred years later, science is catching up—and the findings are remarkable. People who are grateful—whether it is an innate character trait or a virtue consciously cultivated—have stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure and higher levels of joy, optimism and happiness. They feel less isolated, anxious or depressed, show more generosity and compassion, and are better able to achieve their goals. They also are better able to recognize the interconnectedness of life and consider material goods less important.

“Gratitude is a function of where you put your focus,” says Dr. Robert Swoap, professor of psychology at Warren Wilson College. “Don’t deny. Adopt a stance that allows you to look at what the world can give you. To appreciate the moment, this breath, the fact that you’re alive.”

While the data is still emerging in this new science, several mechanisms are at play. When we direct our thanks to the things around us—the sun, our pet, our breath—we get more present. It pulls us out of the ‘fight,

flight or freeze’ response, engaging the parasympathetic nervous system. As a result, our bodies heal, our minds access better problem solving techniques and we take greater advantage of social bonding.

Turning gratitude inward—to our virtues, strengths and talents—we step away from comparison. Instead of seeing ourselves as better or worse, we see our interconnectedness, which builds compassion and tolerance.

Giving thanks also facilitates a positive type of memory known as ‘mood dependent memory.’ When depressed,

we remember painful moments, when grateful we recall a more positive past. This is why it is imperative to practice gratitude, even when we least feel like it.

“You’ve got to fake it ‘til you make it,” says Kristin Ray, mother, teacher, musician and community leader based in Asheville. “When I’m humbled by life, I fall to my knees, and practice relentlessly. The practice is potent and eventually takes hold. It changes my neurology. And it is great for kids,” she continues. “They understand it. Because we give daily thanks at



meals, before bed and on our bulletin board, I hear it in my five-year-old’s dialogue.”

Try gratitude this month. You don’t have to change your whole worldview to start. Just choose a few practices, such as giving at least one compliment daily, keeping a gratitude journal or vowing not to complain, criticize or gossip for ten days. If you identify a negative trait in a person or situation, look for something positive too. May the practice of gratitude energize and transform your life.

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