

The science behind being grateful before, during and after the holidays

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The holiday of Thanksgiving is just that — giving thanks. Whether it be for family and friends or achieving personal goals, Thanksgiving is the time when people reflect on what they are grateful for.

Though it's a simple question that can be answered in a variety of ways, what is complex is that research shows that answering this question has significant benefits in physical and mental health.

According to Positive Psychology — a blog where psychologists share their knowledge — the benefits of gratitude extend into five domains of one's life: emotional, social, personality, career and health.

The benefits within those categories range from increasing one's self-esteem and quality of sleep to finding meaning in a job or optimizing relationships with others and oneself.

The Empathy Entry Point

Giving back to students in the Penn State community is always at the forefront of Minister Ben Wideman's mind.

Wideman is a leader for 3rd Way Collective, which is a club devoted to people of all religions who want to continually pursue their faith while also assisting justice causes around their community and the world.

Several years ago, Wideman wanted to make a club for people to not only find a sense of belonging, but also a space where people no longer feel that they have to choose between faith and justice.

"So many students feel like they are alone," Wideman said about students who felt obligated to choose between religion and fighting injustices. "One student said she spent time at Penn State not being a Christian."

When considering what gratitude means to him, Wideman says that it can open one's eyes to a world of empathy. The community he has around him has inspired him to give others that sense of home when they feel lost.

"Gratitude is an entry point into empathy," Wideman said. "I always feel that people have my back. That sense of gratitude comes to helping people to give people a place to belong."

To seek the benefits of gratitude in one's daily and overall lives, performing small tasks every day adds up to an overall goal of gratitude. Something as effortless as a hug can have a major impact in the future.

The health newsletter Mercola referenced psychotherapist Virginia Satir's who once said the average person needs "4 hugs a day for survival. We need 8 hugs a day for maintenance. We need 12 hugs a day for growth."

Similarly, neuroeconomist Paul Zak, also known as Dr. Love, found that through a simple embrace — he recommends eight hugs a day — one can strengthen relationships with others and improve their day-to-day happiness.

Inner Peace

Gratitude can also help ease people's mental health by assisting people recovering from depression and reducing stress.

A Harvard Health article stated that giving thanks can improve one's happiness, and listed small tasks a person can perform to recognize gratitude. These include having a gratitude journal, praying and writing thank-you notes.

One popular form of practicing gratitude is meditation. Meditation is a very common practice that can be done alone or included when practicing yoga.

Lila Yoga Studio owner Erica Kaufman says gratitude plays an integral part in yoga and finding serenity within oneself. Kaufman has practiced yoga since she was nine years old, and has seen how yoga has affected her.

"I have always had an interest in living life to the fullest," Kaufman said. "I have always been able to recognize when fear is the dominant factor in my state of being."

There is a moment in Kaufman's yoga practices near the end of each session when participants rest on their backs, reveling in feelings of gratitude and positivity.

"We should have gratitude for the community of differences," she said. "The community of idiosyncrasies and differences. To have gratitude for the lessons of life and lessons of time."

Pumping Iron

At One on One Fitness, a personal fitness gym for older clients in State College, having a client recognize what they are grateful for is the first step to set themselves up for a healthier lifestyle.

Partner and Director of Business Development Ryan Burke spoke about a client who formerly attended One on One, but is now unable to due to health conditions.

"[The client] worked his whole life, he's never taken care of himself, he's never really practiced gratitude towards himself," Burke said. "Just worked, taking care of his family."

Burke said the client had diabetes, poorly-functioning kidneys and neuropathy in his feet.

“So here he is at 60 years old, having to go to dialysis,” Burke said. “He's not capable of coming here and he would give anything to get off of [dialysis] and just start coming back to One on One [and] have the opportunity to be able to exercise again.”

Burke said coming into a fitness journey recognizing the blessings and accessibilities to healthy foods or even a gym is something someone must know and feel grateful for in order to gain maximum success in a fitness journey.

“Well, you’re making a deposit in your gratitude account every time you [exercise],” Burke said.

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By taking the first step toward taking care of oneself, Burke says it creates a domino effect of good for the rest of the journey.

“It creates an upward spiral of motivation, so when these people leave here today, they feel good, they feel physically good,” Burke said. “They get the endorphins, they get their muscles going and their blood flowing. They didn’t just take their body for granted today, they took care of it.”