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## **Gratitude: The Foundation of Good Health**

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**Your Life Your Health**

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### **Gratitude and Greed**

Recently, a colleague expressed gratitude upon the receipt of something he had earned and deserved. It was something which he could have justly expected and even which he could have demanded. As he effusively expressed gratitude, I told him how remarkable it was that he was grateful for a just reward for his hard work. As I enjoyed the warmth of this exchange, it occurred to me what a healthy attitude he had demonstrated. I said to him, "The power of gratitude is great but to be grateful for what you have earned is a gratitude which is rare and which reproduces itself again and again."

To know what something is, we must know what it isn't. Identifying the opposite of what we are trying to define clarifies our understanding of what it is. The opposite of gratitude is greed. Gratitude is the thanksgiving for what you have; greed is the complaint that you don't have more. Gratitude builds contentment, which regardless of circumstance, promotes mental, spiritual and even physical health. Greed is the demand for more and especially the demand for more of what others have; greed generates envy and jealousy, both of which will produce bitterness and illness.

Greed cannot be satisfied even by the obtaining of that which is envied; gratitude is an end in itself and generates joy, happiness and health in both the giver and the recipient of thanksgiving. Greed breeds anger, hostility, often violence and in the end does not result in the gaining of that which is desired. Gratitude generates diligence, perseverance, industry and discipline. The root of greed is the pride of believing that you deserve more, for less effort, and for longer. Pride and arrogance are the roots of greed and they result in poverty of soul and spirit and often of purse. Humility is the root of gratitude and results in hard work and diligence which are the foundations of happiness, health and satisfaction with one's life.

Greed is created by the covetousness of what others have in the belief that you are the one who deserves what they have. Gratitude is created by the contentment of finding comfort and pleasure in what you have without comparing it to what others have. Greed results in slothfulness, the failure or the refusal to work for what you think will make you happy. Gratitude creates diligence, which often results in the obtaining, by the grateful, of what the greedy think they can't live without. Ironically, the grateful through diligence often get what they never needed, or wanted in order for them to be happy.

This duality is critical to life. The greedy think that the solution to life is more; the grateful know that the solution to life is enough. This is the key to the words of Agur in Proverbs 30:9 in the Bible, which explain the prayer in verse 8 in which the writer asks for neither wealth nor poverty. The reason: wealth will cause one to be self-sufficient, thinking that he or she does not need God; poverty will cause one to be discontent and result in the taking of that which does not

belong to him or her. This is a remarkable new definition of wealth and poverty. A person who is self-sufficient and who has no need of God or others is wealthy in their own minds. A person can be wealthy in this context even if he or she has nothing. On the other hand, a person who believes that he or she doesn't have enough will resort to any measure to get what he or she wants; this person is poor regardless of whether he or she has great resources. To be rich is not to need others and particularly God; to be poor is to want what others have and to be willing to resort to any measure to get it. The person who is rich or poor in this context can be greedy and envious; the solution to both is gratitude.

## **Thanksgiving**

Thanksgiving Day is my favorite day of the year. It is a remarkable day in which faith, family, friends, food and celebration of our blessings is the center piece of every table. Every man is equal at his or her table on this day. Thanksgiving Day was first observed in response to an edict of the Continental Congress of the United States of American in 1782. Subsequently, George Washington, in 1789, issued a proclamation of a Thanksgiving Holiday for the entire nation. (See sidebar)

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national day of "humiliation, fasting, and prayer." On that day, Lincoln stated: "We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us."

As we celebrate a day of rest and family, we do so in the historical context of the American experiment. It is probable that without gratitude this experiment would never have succeeded. Gratitude flows from the humility of knowing that you have more than you deserve, that what you have cost less than it could have and that others significantly contributed to your life. Many virtues – duty, honor, discipline, diligence, perseverance and others – flow from gratitude and are the product of gratitude.

## **Gratitude and Health**

The contribution of gratitude to health and well-being has never been proved scientifically. Gratitude defies easy classification. It has been seen as an emotion, an attitude, a moral virtue, a habit, a personality trait, or a coping response. The word *gratitude* is derived from the Latin root *gratia*, meaning grace, graciousness, or gratefulness. All derivatives from this Latin root "have to do with kindness, generousness, gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing." The object of gratitude is other-directed, whether that "other" is a person or God.

There are good reasons to believe that experiences of gratitude might be associated with happiness and well-being. Gratitude is linked with positive emotions including contentment, happiness, and hope. Many of these are interrelated, such as contentment and happiness. One Christian minister has said, "He that is not content with what he has will never be happy with what he wants." And, at the root of contentment is hope and gratitude. Grateful people are

much more likely to be content. “Believing” or “feeling” that they have more than they deserve, grateful people are less likely to be demanding of more. Having received something from another which they believe is not earned; grateful people are “hopeful” that in the future such blessings can recur.

## **Gratitude and Well-Being**

In classical and popular writings on happiness there is a recurrent theme that an effective approach for maximizing one’s contentment is to be consciously grateful for one’s blessings. Experimentally, there does appear to exist benefits to regularly focusing on one’s blessings. In one study, it was found that a weekly benefit listing was associated with more:

- positive and optimistic appraisals of one’s life,
- time spent exercising and
- fewer reported physical symptoms.

In another study, self-guided daily gratitude exercises were associated with higher levels of positive affect. People led to focus on their blessings were also more likely to report:

- having helped someone with a personal problem or
- offered emotional support to another

This suggested to the researchers that gratitude motivated people to develop positive social relationships. The daily recitation of blessings and expression of gratitude were, on average, more powerful in facilitating gratitude than was the weekly listing.

Encouraging people to focus on the benefits they have received from others, leads them to feel loved and cared for by others. Gratitude, thus, is a form of love and is also likely to build and strengthen a sense of spirituality. Gratitude, like other positive emotions also facilitates coping with stress and adversity. Gratitude not only makes people feel good in the present, but it also increases the likelihood that people will function optimally and feel good in the future.

## **The Discipline of Gratitude**

Gratitude exerts a powerful influence over our health and well-being, it is possible to “write a prescription for gratitude.” As with all “prescriptions,” there are elements of content, frequency and route of administration. To this end, here is your “Gratitude Prescription”:

- **QAM** – each morning, begin the day with a review of your life and with an expression of gratitude to God for your life and its blessings. If you are having a bad time and don’t “feel” grateful, start with things which you may have taken for granted, i.e., freedom, safety, heritage, America, and the men and women who remained awake while you slept to provide each of these for you.
- **TID** – three times a day, thank God for your food and nourishment and also thank those who provided that food, whether it is your spouse or a waitperson. It will amaze you how your gratitude will result in acts of kindness, both of which will result in powerful

motivators in the lives of others, each of whom may be having a bad day themselves. It is just as easy to spread joy, peace and hope, as it is greed, anger and discontent. Don't be afraid to express your gratitude publicly. Don't do it ostentatiously, but humbly and quietly. Your example may be what someone else needs to turn their day or life around.

- **QHS** – at bedtime, be sure and thank your spouse for all he/she does to contribute to the success of your life. It does not take humility, only an accurate assessment of reality, to know that your success and/or achievements are the product of the efforts of many, not just yourself. That knowledge is the fount from which gratitude flows.
- **PRN** – as needed, throughout the day, as circumstances and opportunity arise, thank others for what they have done. Thank them for anything and everything they do and are. Gratitude will gain more positive results from children than all of the discipline in the world. Gratitude will provoke great effort on the part of others, but the most powerful impact of gratitude will be upon you. Gratitude may not cure disease, but grateful people are happier, healthier and live better everyday they are alive than those who are not.

The “good news” about this prescription is that you cannot “overdose” on it and there are absolutely no contraindications to its use!!!

At SETMA, it is our hope and prayer that not only is your Thanksgiving celebration successful on this day, but that everyday becomes a day of giving thanks – a day of gratitude. It is the best prescription you can take. And, don't ever forget, it is your life and it is your health.