

## **James L. Holly, M.D.**

### **Gratitude and Your Health: Why Thanksgiving is a good prescription**

**By: James L. Holly, MD**

Reflect on your present blessings, of which every man has many, not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some.

—Charles Dickens (M. Dickens, 1897, p. 45)

Today 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. 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)

The power and necessity of thanksgiving have been the subject of a great deal of thought:

- “In our daily lives, we must see that it is not happiness that makes us grateful, but the gratefulness that makes us happy.” Albert Clarke
- “In all things give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you all.”  
The Apostle Paul

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.

### **Conclusion – the nature of gratitude**

- **Gratitude is a choice.** Gratitude does not just happen; a person must choose to make it happen.
- **Gratitude is a commandment.** Christian men and women, boys and girls are commanded, as an act of loving God, to give thanks in all things. This same obligation for thanksgiving and gratitude is a strong element of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and other religions.
- **Gratitude is a conscious act.** While there are feelings associated with gratitude, it is a “cognitive” act. That means that it is something you have to “think about.” It is not a “warm and fuzzy feeling.” Gratitude is an act of your will; “to be grateful” is a decision you make.
- **Gratitude is a comment.** Gratitude which does not become words has not yet become gratitude. Whether expressed in a prayer to God, or in praise toward others, the act of gratitude is not complete until it has been verbalized.
- **Gratitude is concrete and specific.** Gratitude is associated with discreet acts of others and is not a general assessment of one’s life but is related to specific incidents, experiences or blessings. Gratitude may be expressed for the efforts of others in regard to provisions of food or clothing. It may be expressed for the efforts of others in regard to emotional support during a time of crisis, or, it may be in response of someone’s commitment to your well-being over a life time, but, in any event it is associated with real happenings in your life.
- **Gratitude must be consistent.** Few things are as unattractive as a person who is ungrateful, and few things are as compelling as a person who is consistently grateful. Gratitude must become a habit of life; it must become an “automatic default” position. It must become spontaneously the “thing we do.” Gratitude can begin as a conscious choice, but then it will become an unconscious act.
- **Gratitude is compelling.** There is no act which is more motivating in the lives of others than is the act of gratitude. Sometimes the response to an expression of gratitude is so powerful that it could be feared that it is

possible to manipulate others with that power. The positive benefits of gratitude in the lives of both the recipient and the giver are so great that it is soon discovered that a state and/or attitude of gratitude can be the foundation of successful living and relationships.

### **The Discipline of Gratitude**

With these characteristics of gratitude and with the confidence that 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.