

Cultivating Gratitude During the Holidays

by Karen Brouhard, LICSW, BU Faculty & Staff Assistance Office

The holiday season is upon us. Beginning with Thanksgiving, we're entering the time of year when we're encouraged to stop and consider all we have to be grateful for in our lives. And doing so is good for us. [Research](#) has demonstrated that feelings of gratitude are associated with better health, sounder sleep, greater happiness and kinder actions toward others. Holiday gatherings provide useful opportunities to cultivate feelings of gratitude. We often come together with family and friends, many of whom have been important influences in our life. Take a moment to acknowledge and give thanks for each of them. Let them know how they've guided, inspired or supported you and how much they mean to you. Even our most difficult relatives usually have some redeeming qualities. Choosing to focus our attention on what's positive about them, no matter how small, rather than dwelling on their annoying habits can improve your state of mind.

Remembering to be grateful takes practice for most of us. The holidays may be a good time to begin practices such as keeping a gratitude journal. Taking time each day to identify a few things you feel grateful for has [been proven to improve mood and feelings of well-being](#). A version of this, which has been studied at Duke University Medical Center, is called [Bite Sized Resilience: Three Good Things](#). This practice involves writing down three positive things at the end of the day. Not only has this helped to reduce the rates of burnout among healthcare providers, but it has been shown to improve resilience, sleep quality, work-life balance, and even depression.

"Gratitude visits" can be another useful practice. Recommended by Dr. Martin Seligman, the founder of positive psychology, this exercise begins with writing a 300-word letter to someone who has changed your life for the better. Be specific about what the person did and how it affected you. Then deliver it in person, preferably without telling the person in advance. Read the whole letter to her or him slowly, allowing time for both of you to savor the feelings of warmth and connection. [Research](#) suggests you'll feel happier and less depressed for weeks afterward.

At times holiday rituals intended to be expressions of gratitude interfere with the experience for some people. As Kira Newman from the UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center writes in [The Trouble with Thanksgiving Gratitude](#), "For the shy adult or the grumpy teen, expressing gratitude around the Thanksgiving table can seem awkward and trite." These forced "grateful motions" can feel more like a burden than a blessing. Newman [suggests four exercises](#) that can help everyone feel less pressured and more authentically grateful.

Our culture's consumerism can be another obstacle. Giving holiday gifts to show thanks and appreciation to loved ones can become bogged down in materialism. In [Cultivating Gratitude in a Consumerist Society](#), Thomas Gilovich of Cornell University discusses research that shows experiential gifts give greater satisfaction than material ones and that experiential gifts lead to higher levels of gratitude.

To help you get in the mindset of gratitude, take a few minutes to watch Louie Schwartzberg's [TED Talk](#) on the subject. You'll be reminded of all we have to be grateful for each day of our lives. Additional resources to support your gratitude practice are listed below.

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Articles and Videos on Gratitude

[Holiday Gratitude Traditions](#) for Fostering Gratitude in Children, Christine Carter, Ph.D., sociologist and happiness expert at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center who blogs on science-based parenting advice.

[Turn Holiday Resentment into Gratitude](#) by Meg Selig

[Six Habits of Highly Grateful People](#), by Jeremy Adam Smith

[Tips for Keeping a Gratitude Journal](#), by Jason Marsh

Gratitude Apps

[Happier](#) by Happier, Inc. – Free for iOS

[Attitudes of Gratitude Journal](#) – free for Android

[Gratitude 365](#) – \$1.99 – iOS