

Your Personal Coach

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On Thursday, Americans will celebrate our own unique holiday – Thanksgiving. From coast to coast, families and friends will gather to share a meal and to count their blessings. Some will travel miles, battling busy interstates or bustling airports for the privilege of sharing the hearth with loved ones. Others will devote at least a part of their day to serving others whose life circumstances don't allow for a turkey dinner or a roof over their heads. In ways, large and small, and regardless of where you find yourself this Thanksgiving, it's a great time to think about all the things for which you feel grateful... and not just because it's traditional at this time of year, or even because it's a good spiritual thing to do. A grateful heart, filled with appreciation, is the single-most powerful path to good health and longevity, as well as to a life well-lived.

By now, we all know the harmful consequences of stress and negative emotions on our well-being. These feeling states open floodgates of cortisol, adrenaline and other hormones that wreak havoc on the body, causing illness and a compromised immune system, not to mention accelerated aging. But did you know that positive emotions -- like appreciation, joy, hope, optimism, forgiveness, and love -- have the opposite effect? And this is not just a 'feel-good' theory.

The effects of positive emotions can be measured in heart rate variability waves, brain waves, and by blood or saliva samples showing lowered levels of dangerous stress hormones. A recent study, conducted at Duke University by Medical Psychologist Beverly Brummett, demonstrated that positive feelings were predictive of increased survival in cardiac catheterization patients.

Another recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Wisconsin and the VA Hospital in Madison showed that when patients with coronary heart disease were able to forgive people who had hurt them, blood flow to the heart decreased less than when they thought about the hurtful incidents. Important? Yes. Decreased blood flow to the heart increased the risk for heart attacks. I could go on for pages and pages about the scientific research that confirms what poets and children have always known: Cultivating a contented, joyful, appreciative attitude is the best and healthiest way to live.

I plan to express my gratitude this holiday by sharing it with people I love, and by making sure that I've told those important to me how much I love them. I'm going to count my blessings this Thanksgiving as I reflect on some of these thoughts about the power of gratitude:

- ? "Write it on your heart that every day is the best day of the year" and "I awoke this morning with devout thanksgiving for my friends – the old and the new." – Ralph Waldo Emerson
- ? "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others." - Cicero
- ? "Gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder." – G.K. Chesterton
- ? "Hem your blessings with thankfulness so they don't unravel." – Author Unknown

- ? “Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful.” – Buddha
- ? “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” -- Albert Schweitzer
- ? “Appreciation can make a day, even change a life. Your willingness to put it into words is all that is necessary.” – Margaret Cousins
- ? "Gratitude is the inward feeling of kindness received. Thankfulness is the natural impulse to express that feeling. Thanksgiving is the following of that impulse." – Henry Van Dyke

These beautiful quotes inspire me, but my favorite thought about the importance of gratitude lies in this simple statement from a fourteenth-century Christian mystic. Meister Eckhart got it right when he said, “If the only prayer you said in your whole life was ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” My best wishes for a happy Thanksgiving to you and yours.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.