

STRESS REDUCTION THROUGH GRATITUDE

November is the start of the holiday season. I don't know about you, but for me, that includes three family birthdays, parent-teacher conferences, cooking Thanksgiving dinner, trying to come up with a witty letter to include in the holiday cards, getting those cards out *before* Christmas, shopping for gifts, getting the kids to pageant practices, buying presents for teachers and bus drivers, baking cookies for class parties, etc. In addition to the routine activities of work and family life.

Does thinking about your own upcoming holiday tasks send *your* stress level soaring? How would you like to learn a simple way to cope with stress, enhance your health, and increase your overall feeling of life satisfaction?

You can do all this by developing a gratitude practice. What exactly is gratitude? Dictionary.com defines being grateful as “warmly or deeply appreciative of kindness or benefits received.” Practicing gratitude is a way to take stock of what you have, and let yourself be open to a connection with God, Spirit, or Universe. Psychologists Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough, authors of **The Psychology of Gratitude**, found that subjects who wrote weekly in a gratitude journal were different from those who did not have a gratitude practice in the following ways:

- They exercised more regularly.
- They had fewer physical symptoms.
- They felt a greater sense of optimism.
- They felt better about their lives as a whole.
- They were more likely to make progress toward important personal goals.

People with higher levels of measured gratefulness have higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, zest, optimism, and lower levels of depression and stress. It also appears to enhance their immune systems.

How can you start a gratitude practice? It need not be greatly time consuming, but should be something you can dedicate time to regularly. Choose a time that works best for you, when you can have a few quiet moments for reflection. And keep in mind that Emmons & McCullough found positive results with subjects who only wrote in their gratitude journals weekly! Here are some ideas to help you get started:

- Make a list of things you have to be grateful for. Add to it whenever something new occurs to you. Look at it regularly.
- Try reframing your negative thoughts into things to be grateful for. For example, instead of focusing on how irritated you are with your three year old's constant “Why....” questions, be grateful s/he can talk now (and that this is just a phase).
- Joan Borysenko recommends finding one thing to be grateful for each day, and writing it down. Don't repeat yourself! This takes care of the really easy things in about the first month! At the end of one year, you have a beautiful book of thoughts to look back on.

- If you have children, you might want to include them in a practice. You might have everyone go around the table at Thanksgiving dinner and say what they are thankful for, or perhaps do this at bedtime.
- In the morning upon awakening, you might say a prayer of gratitude for a new day and set an intention for the day.

Here's hoping you try some of these ideas, or develop your own gratitude practice. The benefits you will receive from such a small investment of time and energy are well worth it. If you would like to share your own gratitude practice ideas, please e-mail me at drdojka@comcast.net. I'd be grateful for any thoughts you'd care to share!