A RECIPE FOR GRATITUDE



Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

As someone who absolutely loves food, family, friends, and tradition, Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, and I suspect I'm not alone. Whether it's a Turkey Trot, indulging in multiple desserts, Macy's Day Parade, or football, there's something for everyone! While it feels uniquely American, many cultures, religions, and countries around the world also celebrate harvest, family, and giving thanks. Here in the US, it wasn't until 1863, in the middle of the Civil War, that Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday. During an incredibly difficult and divided time, Lincoln called on Americans to recognize the blessings in their lives.

That history is a good reminder that gratitude isn't just something we practice when everything is going well. As humans, we tend to focus on what is going wrong, something called a negativity bias. This tendency helped our ancestors notice and avoid real threats, but today it can leave us dwelling on problems and overlooking what's going right. Gratitude can help balance that out, especially when life feels stressful or uncertain, by reminding us to notice what is still good and meaningful. And research suggests that making it a regular habit may benefit both our emotional and physical well-being.

What is gratitude?

Gratitude is the feeling of appreciation for someone or something, and it's also a skill we can strengthen with deliberate practice. While gratitude is an inward feeling of appreciation and often involves a period of reflection, thankfulness is when we express that feeling outwardly, through our words and actions.

Benefits of gratitude

A large 2023 review of 64 randomized trials found that people who practiced gratitude not only reported better mental health with a decrease in anxiety and depressive symptoms, but also more life satisfaction and happiness. Some early research also suggests it may be linked to better sleep and help people cope with adversity. Given these potential benefits, it might be worth making gratitude a habit all year long.

How to Practice Gratitude

Start slowly

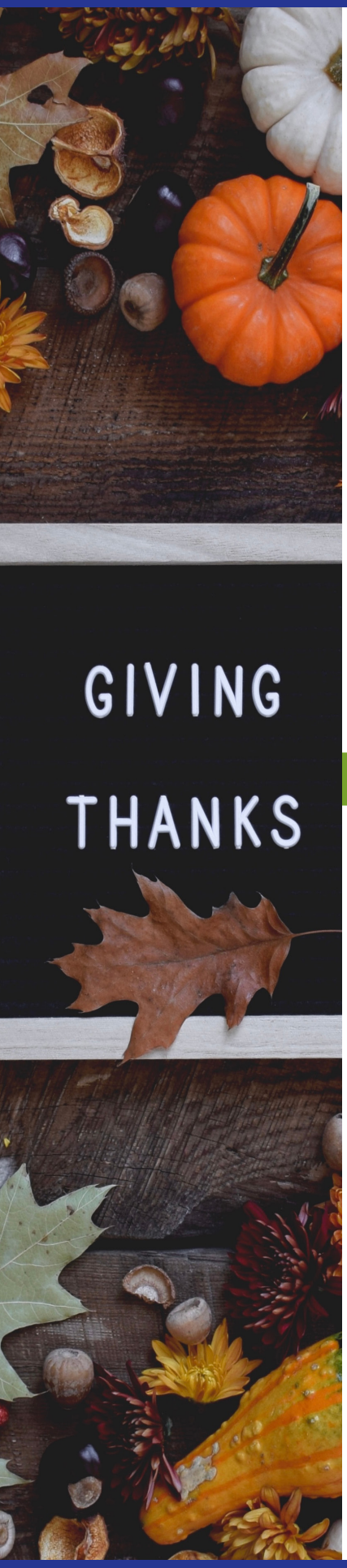
When life is hard, the temptation might be to throw up our hands and say, "What's there to be thankful for?!" Gratitude is not a cure-all if you are struggling, and coming up with things to be thankful for can be very difficult if you aren't in the habit. Start slowly, identify at least one thing you appreciate (a warm bed!) and find a way that feels natural to you without forcing it. Pay attention throughout the day to find even the smallest of things that might be okay and bring a small amount of joy, such as sunlight through a window or a warm cup of coffee. There's no right or wrong way to do this, and you might be surprised at what you come up with.

Write it down

Journaling and writing down what you are grateful for is probably the best-known gratitude practice. Writing it down helps us to slow down and actively engage with what we appreciate instead of passively thinking about it. It also gives you something to look back on later. One study found that writing once a week had a bigger effect than writing three times per week, possibly because it didn't feel like a chore.

Take a Moment to Reflect

You don't need to write anything down. When something good happens, pause for a moment to really notice and appreciate it. It could be as small as someone helping you find something in the grocery store, a good conversation with a friend, or a neighbor bringing in your garbage cans.



Share Your Gratitude with Others

Thanksgiving is the perfect time to send a quick text of "I'm so grateful for you" to the people who mean the most to you. In one well-known study, participants who spent time writing a thank-you letter to someone who made a difference in their life and delivering it to them in person had significantly better well-being scores for up to a month after.

Try it At the Dinner Table

Before you dig in, take a moment to appreciate the food in front of you and everyone who helped bring it there, from the farmers to the cooks. Slowing down and enjoying each bite can also help you tune in to your hunger and fullness cues, so you leave the table feeling satisfied rather than overstuffed. Another idea is to try the Rose, Bud, Thorn exercise at family meals. The rose represents a success or a highlight of the day, the bud represents potential or something you are looking forward to, and the thorn represents a challenge that you faced. This exercise is a fun way to share what you appreciate and hear what others are thankful for.

This Thanksgiving, I hope you can take some time for gratitude and notice what's good in your life, even on the harder days. It doesn't mean ignoring what is difficult or pretending everything is perfect. Sometimes it's just noticing and acting on the small positive things. A quick text to someone you love, a few lines in a journal, or a pause to appreciate your meal all count. Try one practice over the holidays, keep track of how you feel, and see what works for you. Wishing you and your loved ones a happy and healthy Thanksgiving!

What are you grateful for?

START A GRATITUDE CONVERSATION

Write a gratitude prompt on each guest's place card or on notecards to scatter around the table.

What's the best gift you've ever received?	Tell us about someone who always makes you smile.	What's something you're grateful to have experienced?	How has someone helped you in the last week?
What's something you find truly beautiful about your environment?	What is a place in your community that you are grateful for?	Tell someone in the room why you are grateful for them.	What's a memory you cherish?
What's the best thing you ate today?	What have you accomplished in the last year that makes you feel proud?	What are you looking forward to in the next week?	What cheers you up on a tough day?



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