

EARTH TALK: Just ho

The power of saying thank you

Since Thanksgiving is right around the corner and all you ladies will be entertaining family and friends around a well set table, rather than go into the traditional "how to cook a turkey for a hungry group" or the latest recipe for a mouth-watering pumpkin pie, I thought I would pass on an idea that I've been reading about that may make this Thanksgiving just a little bit sweeter for you and your loved ones.

It all starts with a study. Yes, one of those dull studies done a couple of years ago and conducted by Dr. Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of

California, Davis, and psychology professor Michael McCullough of the University of Miami.

What was the goal of the study? They wanted to see if a simple thank you could have a positive effect

on people and, if so, how much of an effect.

So, they took a group of volunteers and divided them into three groups. The first group was told to concentrate on what went wrong or was irritating to them, such as someone cutting them off while they were driving," and told to make a note about each instance of annoyance.

The next group was told to focus on and record everyday events, such as "I went to work," "I went shopping," "I went to school," etc.

The third group was asked to focus on situations they felt enhanced their lives, such as "My husband bought me the CD I've wanted for so long. I'm lucky to have him and told him so," or "My daughter and I went shopping and I told her that I liked the shoes she picked out. We went home happy for a change." Even simpler, "The postman, driving around in an open car in 90-plus degree heat, looked exhausted. I offered him some bottled water and thanked him for always safely delivering my mail."

A Bonus of Thanks

The journals were analyzed and the third group's positive results were amazing: they were considerably happier and more content with life, reported less negative physical symptoms such as headaches or colds, exercised more without feeling guilty or pressured that they had to, were more optimistic and enthusiastic and, as an extra bonus, got more sleep.

Even with busy schedules, many took it a step further and volunteered more, showing compassion to those less fortunate, and did it with a feeling of joy.

However, those two determined professors, Emmons and McCullough, weren't satisfied and continued their studies.

They rounded up a group of college students and asked them to keep even more personal details on a daily basis, for instance how many aspirin or pain relievers they took and the quantity and quality of their sleep. The daily gratitude intervention rather than the weekly summary resulted in higher reported levels of the posi-

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'Take a deep breath, exhale and see if you can get the guests to follow your lead...'

positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy compared to a focus on hassles or a downward social comparison — particularly beneficial to college students struggling with grades.

And, it was also clear that when participants focused on what went right instead of the inevitable things that went wrong, enhanced self-esteem, that trait we all strive for, want to instill in our children and hear about on afternoon talk shows, was another bonus.

So, how does this all fit into your lives and tie in with Thanksgiving?

I thought it might be fun to start to practice the studies' positive results with your family and friends after everyone has sat down for dinner. Start the ball rolling with something like, "I want to thank all of you for being part of my life. I'm blessed to have you all here to help me share in this holiday."

Look around and observe the reaction of your guests. There may be a snicker or two from the youngsters, a surprise look from the older members or a roll of the eyes from your spouse, but ignore them all.

Take a deep breath, exhale and see if you can get the guests to follow your lead by saying, "Before we eat, does anyone else want to join me in giving thanks this year? Is there anyone or anything that has brought you joy during this past year? This past week? Yesterday?" Don't press them, but if no one volunteers, ask them to take a few minutes to give thanks in silence as you prepare to slice the bird.

But don't stop after dinner or once the holiday is over. The study goes into four positive things you can do to keep the power of gratitude going to enrich your lives and perhaps rub off on those around you. Be forewarned, however: Dr. Emmons says, "Gratitude is a demanding quality, a rigorous quality. It's a discipline, an exercise." It may not come easily, but, once again, thank goodness that it can be developed (that was one thank you and a point for me).

1. Record your thanks. Take a moment during the day, right before bedtime is usually best, to jot down three things that happened that day for which you are grateful. It can be anything that brought a smile to your face or joy to your heart. Include a little bit about how you felt or who played a part in your happiness. This "gratitude journal" makes you look at life in a positive, concrete way, reminding you of its interconnectedness in a fast-paced, impersonal world and how much others

add to the quality of your life.

2. See the patterns. Over time, you'll see a consistency within the list of items you're grateful for and your entries will underscore the importance of people in your life. Some items will begin with you and affect others who are grateful towards you — a double win and complete success as you've touched another life in a positive way.

3. Catch the boomerang. Gratitude, when expressed to others, almost always comes back around. People who feel appreciated are more willing to make an effort for those who make them feel valued. For example, in another study, a waitress who simply wrote "thank you" on the check before handing it to her customer received on average 11 percent more in tips than other waitresses who didn't. In a world where personal connections are increasingly limited, and often those connections are stressful, gratitude offers an instant bridge between people, even if that bridge lasts for only a few moments.

4. Finally, seize the moment. Carpe diem. Look around you and decide what's right in your world. If you have a hobby, practice it. If you don't, find one. Reach out to others; share something. Volunteer for a good cause during your off hours when there isn't anything to do but watch re-runs on TV. A small gesture towards another individual costs you little but can bring many benefits.

And what better way to end this column than with a quote from a true scholar? Here's one that I liked that I thought summed up the importance of gratitude. It comes from Cicero, Roman statesman, orator, lawyer and philosopher: "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." He may have said it hundreds of years ago, but it still rings true today.

PORTIONS of this column were quoted from "Thank You Power: Making the Science of Gratitude Work for You," © copyright 2007 by Deborah Norville.

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