

The psychology of giving thanks

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As we all sit down tonight to feast on turkey and pumpkin pie, many of us will be going around the table giving thanks for our everyday sources of gratitude, like friendships, relationships, and good health. Luckily, there are actually plenty of reasons why Thanksgiving itself can help maintain and improve those very things for which people are thankful – and why we shouldn't limit the act of giving thanks to just one day of the year.



Make every day Thanksgiving

Most people with a significant other give thanks for their partners at the Thanksgiving dinner table. However, anyone who's partnered up should really try to focus on extending that gratitude throughout the rest of the year as well. Gratitude can act like a "booster shot" of sorts for romantic relationships; in one recent study, couples that reported feeling gratitude towards their partners for everyday acts of kindness (like picking up their favorite coffee from Starbucks or doing the dishes without being asked) experienced higher levels of relationship quality and satisfaction the next day. This means that expressing thanks and gratitude for the things your partner does is not only good for your partner's happiness, as the one being thanked – it increases your level of happiness and satisfaction with your relationship as well.

It's also not the case that people who express more gratitude are simply more satisfied because they happen to have nicer romantic partners. This bump in satisfaction is specifically related to gratitude; relationship partners who felt "indebted" to their partners for these everyday acts of kindness did not demonstrate the same spike in relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, couples who were instructed to express gratitude towards their romantic partners experienced these spikes in relationship satisfaction as well, even if they had not been habitually expressing gratitude before the experiment started. This shows that it's not the fact that couples who express gratitude towards each other are somehow qualitatively different than those that do not – gratitude itself is important.

This effect is not limited to romantic relationships, either. Another study looked at the same phenomenon in sorority women who were meeting each other for the first time; new members who reported feeling more gratitude towards older sorority women who gave them gifts ended up experiencing higher relationship quality and satisfaction with those sisters later on. So, whether it's your sorority sister, girlfriend, husband, or best friend, there's evidence to suggest one simple thing to make your life a little happier: If you feel and express gratitude for the things that others do, your relationships with those people will be better as a result.

It's good to give gratitude...



Expressing gratitude can do a lot more good than simply making your husband or wife happy; it can make you a better person, too.

First of all, grateful adults report higher levels of well-being, regardless of age, gender, or marital status. This effect even holds after you control for other relevant personality traits, like neuroticism (or moodiness), extraversion, openness, agreeableness, or how forgiving a person tends to be. Over and above all of these variables, there is still a significant, positive relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being.

Secondly, experiencing gratitude can have a dampening effect on some morally questionable behaviors. In one study, some participants were prompted to vividly recall and write about a time when they felt grateful, while others recalled a neutral memory. They were then told that there were two tasks to be completed (one pleasant and one unpleasant), and they had to complete one themselves and assign the second to another participant. Even though over 80% of the participants in the control condition gave the other participant the undesirable task (ouch!), that number dropped to 50% among the participants who were induced to feel gratitude. Furthermore, there is something in particular about gratitude that evokes this cooperative response; participants who were induced to feel proud felt just as happy as those who felt gratitude, but acted no better than the control participants. It's not simply that people act more altruistically when they are happier, or when they feel better about themselves. There is something very special about gratitude.

...And good to receive it!



Expressing gratitude is not only helpful for the person who experiences it. In fact, receiving gratitude from others can be especially beneficial for the helpers themselves. When people who provided others with help were then thanked for their efforts, they were more likely not only to help that same person in the future, but also to help others as well.

What's the logic behind this effect? We all have two great needs in life — we want to feel like capable, competent people (agency), and we want to feel like we are connected to and needed by others (communion). When someone is thanked for his/her helpful behavior, this actually fulfills both of those core human needs. It fulfills the need for agency because it reinforces the idea that the helper is capable of providing needed help, and it fulfills the need for communion because it reinforces the idea that the helper is valued and appreciated by others. In fact, when people have been thanked for their behavior (e.g. others have expressed gratitude towards them), they report higher levels of perceived competence and social valuation (though only this latter sense of perceived social worth is causally implicated in the increase in future helping behavior). So if someone helps you, make sure you express your gratitude — this will make your helper feel capable and valued, and this sense of social "worthiness" will increase the odds that he/she will go on to help more people and spread the joy.

In the end, if you're grateful for your friends and family, tell them so today — but also make sure you let them know about it all year round! It will help your relationships, your well-being, and the world around you.

Fonte: Scientific American [Portal]. Disponível em: <<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/psysociety/2013/11/28/thanksgiving-2013/>>. Acesso em: 28 Nov. 2013.