

Views from VanDeWalle

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Gratitude Improves Health & Well-Being

During the month of November, many people think about Thanksgiving. The word “thanksgiving” means the act of expressing or feeling thankfulness. If you are a parent like me, how many times do you tell your children to “say thank you” after receiving something from someone? When my kids automatically say, “thank you”, it brings joy to my heart. By teaching youth to automatically say those two small words, my hopes are that it will lead to writing thank you notes and expressing warm words of gratitude to those around them.

The art and practice of handwriting “thank you notes” can sometimes get lost with all the electronic methods of communication. When I receive a hand-written thank you that really brings gladness to my heart, I put those in a special file folder in my desk. Some of those thank you notes are from 4-H’ers, 4-H Alumni, interns, coworkers, etc. As I write this, I even have a thank you note displayed on my desk from a summer adult 4-H volunteer. As the receiver of a thank you note, I can say it is nice to receive meaningful mail, rather than bills or advertising, but writing thank you notes also brings happiness to my heart.

Two researchers from Indiana University, Drs. Brown and Wong (2017) researched and authored an article that provides the following psychological benefits of practicing gratitude.

- 1.) Gratitude unshackles us from toxic emotions. When you write about how grateful you are to others and how much other people have blessed your life, it might become considerably harder for you to ruminate on your negative experiences.
- 2.) Gratitude helps even if you don’t share it. The mere act of writing a thank you letter can help you appreciate the people in your life and shift your focus away from negative feelings and thoughts.
- 3.) Gratitude benefits take time. If you participate in a gratitude writing activity, don’t be too surprised if you don’t feel dramatically better immediately after the writing. You might have that quick “rush” of feeling thankful, however the bigger benefits of gratitude might take time to kick in weeks after your gratitude activity.
- 4.) Gratitude has lasting effects on the brain. Their research suggested that brain activity was distinct for those who felt more grateful, than those who only performed an act of gratitude related to guilt. Those who were more grateful showed greater activation in their medial prefrontal cortex.

University of Southern California (2019) also found evidence that gratitude can have profound health benefits and provided suggestions on how to practice gratitude. Some of the most effective approaches include maintaining a gratitude journal, writing personal thank-you notes and regularly expressing gratitude to others in person. One might also practice guided meditation, call someone to express thanks or write a note to a friend.

It can be easy to get down with all the negativity on social media, the news or being around negative people, but reminding oneself of the many things one should be thankful for can help improve one’s wellbeing. I am thankful for all of you who read my weekly column and support Nebraska Extension!



Upcoming Area Ag Programs:

December 7, 2023 – Dr. Kohl Presents Agriculture Today: Economic Shockwaves: Challenges & Opportunities, 1-4:00 p.m. at the Opera House in Bruning, NE. This Farmers & Ranchers College program is free. For more information, call the Fillmore County Extension office at 402.759.3712.

January 11, 2023 – Cow/Calf College... Details to Follow