12 Days of Gratitude Challenge

The holiday season is a time to reflect on what we have, the experiences we’ve enjoyed and what family, and friends mean most to us. This sense of gratitude doesn’t have to end when the holidays are over. Wouldn’t it be nice to be in the “holiday spirit” long after the season is over?

Like everything in life, cultivating gratitude takes practice. However, the benefits are worth it. Science has discovered that practicing gratitude strengthens relationships with others, reduces depression/anxiety and improves immune system and sleep.

When thankful, the reward neural network of our brain releases “feel good” hormones of dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin. This disrupts the negative tunnel vision and rut we sometimes find ourselves in. When truly giving thanks, it is impossible to feel anxious, angry, resentful or any other negative emotion at the same time.

Gratitude will not fix all our problems. However, it can serve as a reminder that difficult times do not last forever.

How do you start practicing gratitude? Start by paying attention. Take time to slow down and identify the good. Second, write down what you are thankful for. Writing reinforces positive experiences in our memory. This activity helps us to become more aware of our blessings. Third, verbally thank others or write a letter (doesn’t have to be delivered) to someone expressing your appreciation. Fourth, reflect how having expressed genuine thanks affected you.

12 Days of Gratitude The Challenge

In a notebook, make a chart like the one below. Create three columns and 12 or more rows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Places</th>
<th>Things</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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Under the “people” column, write in everyone you are grateful for. In the “places” column, indicate all of the places you are thankful for. Use the “things” column to indicate items in your life you are thankful for.

For the next 12 days, pick one from your list. If it is a person, think about who that person is and why you are grateful for them. If it is a place or thing, think about the people who helped you achieve or obtain it, then ask why their help is appreciated.

The next step in this challenge is to express gratitude toward these people in your life. You may do this in-person, over the phone or through a letter (does not have to be delivered). Tell that person you are thankful for them and why.

The more we practice gratitude, the more often and deeper we experience it. Being thankful is a choice we make and can be done in any given moment. Start this practice today to take the holiday spirit of thanks well into the new year.
Tis’ the season for hustle and bustle. The key to avoiding burnout and becoming over stressed during the holidays is to limit over-stimulation.

There is a such a thing as “good” stress. We feel this good stress when our capacity and coping isn’t being overwhelmed by the demand at hand. We are challenged but do not feel like drowning. The task is stressful but we are moving through it successfully.

Negative stress is felt when the demand is dwarfing our ability to keep up and things begin to fall apart.

Here are some tips to better keep calm during the holidays.

Avoid an over-stimulated body-mind state. This means not taking on more than you can handle. Learn to ask for help and be open to delegating. Don’t wait for a crisis before sharing the load.

Approach eating and drinking alcohol in moderation. Restful sleep rejuvenates the mind and body. End stimulating tasks at least one hour before sleep.

Reduce self-created stress. For many, the holidays triggers negative memories of previous holidays and the fear that it may reoccur. We end up going between the past and the future. Catch these thoughts early, and purposely stop, sit down and take a few moments to breathe and re-center.

Pre-emptive calming techniques. Before stepping out into the holiday crowds, take a moment to slow down and relax. You can then strategize your to-do list by plotting out your trip and writing out the tasks that need to be done. Keep calm and holiday on!

Co-Parenting Holiday Scheduling

The secret to co-parenting is to consider the holidays from the child’s point of view. Think about how you would feel if you sat down to Christmas dinner with one family, then had to be whisked away for Christmas dinner with another family.

Parental scheduling done in good faith spares children feeling rushed and stressed so they’re more able to enjoy the holidays. These two scheduling options are potential ideas. Your ability to be flexible and compromise in your child’s best interest is essential.

First option is for parents to alternate each year, from 6 p.m. on the last day of the school year until 4 p.m. on Christmas Day and from 4 p.m. on Christmas Day until 6 p.m. on January 1st.

In the second option, one parent has the children for Christmas and Thanksgiving, and the other parent has the children for all other holidays and school vacations.

Managing the Holiday Blues

1. Limit alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a depressant and if already feeling down, alcohol may intensify a depressed mood.

2. Get your beauty sleep. Allow yourself at least 8 hours of sleep. Keep a regular bed time and routine. Being well-rested improves mood and puts us in the best position to meet tomorrow’s demands.

3. Keep regular exercise. Workouts can boost your mood for up to 12 hours. The rhythm and repetition of walking and running has a tranquilizing effect on your brain, decreases anxiety and improves sleep.

4. Listen to music. Listening to your favorite music can relax blood vessels and increase blood flow. This not only calms you down but is good for your heart, too.

5. Get some sunlight. Natural sunlight stimulates the production of Serotonin, a “feel good” chemical. Individuals with a diagnosis of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), may wish to discuss phototherapy (light therapy) with their doctor.

6. Make and stick to a holiday gift budget. Remember, you can’t buy happiness.

7. Take a breather. Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do.

8. Learn to say no. Saying “yes” when you should say “no” can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. If saying no is unrealistic, remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.
Grief and Bereavement During the Holidays

The Holidays may be a particularly difficult time for those who have lost a loved one. It may very well be the first Holiday without that loved one or serve as a reminder of an absence in our lives.

Understanding Grief

The term “grief” is used to describe feelings and thoughts associated with processing a loss. Just as no two individuals are alike, so too is grief. Everyone’s experience is uniquely theirs. Nevertheless, there are particular stages related to grief that are helpful to know and understand.

Denial and Isolation.

A person in this stage may talk and/or behave as if the loss has not occurred. “This isn’t happening to me!” As a result, they may avoid family and friends that may challenge the denial or call attention to what has changed.

Anger.

This stage typically occurs when the person begins to ask, “Why me?” They may question religious beliefs. They may accuse family members or friends of uncaring attitudes.

Bargaining

At this stage a person has vented all their anger and now tries to make a “deal” with themselves or a higher power. A promise to fulfill something if things would simply be as they were before. “I promise to be a better person if…”

Depression

At this stage the person feels the full extent of the loss...it sinks in and the sadness is heavy. Other factors such as changes in finances, family roles, independence and/or intimacy adds to the burden. “I don’t care anymore.”

Acceptance

At this stage, there is a sense of ease about the present and what lies ahead, “I’m ready for whatever comes.” For survivors, this will be a time when healing begins.

How to Support a Loved One Through Grief

Be a good listener

This means you do less talking and allow him/ her to reminisce and talk about their feelings.

Provide reassurance

It is very common for a person to feel guilt that they could have done more. Let them know that they did what they could.

Be available

This is especially true immediately after the death and during holidays and other special events when the loss is most keenly felt.

Help out with errands and keep in touch

A person may feel too overwhelmed with emotion to do even simple tasks.

Be patient and understanding

If a loved one refuses to accept your invitations to dinner, etc., be patient and keep asking. In time they will be ready.

What Not to Do

Don’t avoid. Don't worry if you don't know the right thing to do or say. Your presence or simplest of gestures is all that is required to help.

Don't pressure them to stop the grieving

Each person grieves in their own time and own way. Don't hide your grief or avoid the subject because you don't want to upset them. Instead grieve together, hold each other and cry, or talk about the times you both spent with the loved one.

Don't say, "It was for the best"

Statements like these end up minimizing the real pain and send of loss.

Don't say "I know how you feel"

Unless you really do, these words sound hollow unless you have been in the same situation and can offer suggestions about what helped you to heal.

When to Seek or Encourage Professional Help

At times assistance may be needed to help cope with grief. Professional help may be needed when the individual:

1. Feels like life is not worth living
2. Wishes one had died with loved one
3. Blames oneself for the loss or guilt for not having prevented it
4. Feels numb and disconnected from other for more than a few weeks
5. Is having difficulty trusting others since the loss
6. Is unable to perform normal daily activities and/or responsibilities
**The Grinches**

Yes, it is true...the Holiday Season may bring out both the best AND worst in folks. Sometimes the hustle and stress of the Season wears down patience and common courtesy. So, what to do if you are faced with holiday rudeness?

**Distance yourself.** You may actually need to put physical distance between yourself and the other person, especially if the other person appears overtly hostile. Taking a step back provides you with safe distance and gives the other person an opportunity to calm down. Distancing yourself also means not taking the rude behavior personally.

**Do not “fight fire with fire” and respond** with equally rude behavior, sarcasm or passive-aggressive behavior. Muttering a zinger comeback under your breath may open the door to more conflict.

**Stay calm.** Keep your emotions in check by purposely slowing down your speech and actions. When we feel wronged, our “fight or flight” response gets triggered. Our pulse may increase, our breath quickens and muscles tense up. At the same time our ability to think clearly and problem solve becomes harder to do when under stress.

**Stick to the facts.** Many times, conflicts arise from misunderstandings or misperceptions. Politely but firmly explain your behavior, intent or request. Be prepared to repeat it several times if necessary. Stand your ground; firmly and calmly repeat yourself.

**Let it go.** You can’t stop someone from being rude. Moving-on doesn’t mean you are push over. Rather, it means mean you are smart enough to know what you can and can’t change and strong enough not to allow anyone to push your buttons.

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**EAP Mission Statement**

It is the mission of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to assist employees who develop behavioral/emotional problems that may directly affect their work performance, and to provide Key Personnel with policy and procedural guidelines for the management of these problems.

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**City of Milwaukee Events and Reminders**

- **Not feeling well?** Visit the Workplace Clinic (841 N. Broadway, Milwaukee, WI 53202 (Zeidler Municipal Building) for FREE onsite health care services. Call 414-777-3413 for information or to schedule an appointment.

- **Free screening, consultation, and education services to prevent and treat potential musculoskeletal injuries.** Schedule an appointment with a physical therapist at the Injury Prevention Clinic. Call 414-777-3413 to schedule an appointment.

- **Health4Me™** is a UnitedHealthcare (UHC) mobile app that provides instant access to your family’s critical health information, anytime/anywhere. Find a physician, check the status of a claim or speak directly with a healthcare professional.

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**Sober Holidays**

The holidays are stressful on everyone. They may be especially challenging for those in recovery. Don’t let the holidays get you down or cause you to slip. Here are some tips to support recovery during the holidays.

1. **Get enough rest and sleep.** When tired, we are more likely to make snap judgements that compromise our sobriety.

2. **What’s in your glass only matters to you.** Chances are people are preoccupied with their own drinks. If you don’t draw attention to your non-alcoholic beverage, no one else will.

3. **Go late, leave early.** You don’t have to avoid holiday parties altogether. However, don’t set yourself up for undue temptations. Arriving later and leaving early helps limit the chance of slip ups.