



# How to Be Thankful When You Don't Feel Thankful

Arthur C. Brooks | November 24, 2021

**Even if you think you have little to celebrate this year, you can—and should—practice gratitude.**

Thanksgiving was first proclaimed as a national celebration on October 3, 1789, by President George Washington. He declared “a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.”

Sometimes, though, you just don't feel grateful. Perhaps you have a difficult relationship with family members, or your holiday often features contentious political disagreement. That could make a day centered on thanks difficult.

And the 20 challenging months we've all had might not make it easier. Since last Thanksgiving, the world has suffered more than 5 million deaths from COVID-19. The percentage of Americans with symptoms of clinical depression rose from 8.5 percent in 2017–18 to 27.8 percent during the first year of the pandemic, and though the worst has passed, many still struggle. Scientists are even using a new clinical term: COVID-19 anxiety syndrome.

The crisis has shaken our trust in those who are charged with leading and informing us through the crisis, making George Washington's injunction to be grateful for our system difficult. According to Gallup, the percentage of Americans who trust our political leaders a “great deal” or a “fair amount” has fallen from 53 percent before the pandemic to 44 percent today.

Gratitude, if you see it as something that happens to you because of your circumstances, might feel a bit out of reach. But that's the wrong way to approach it. Gratitude isn't a feeling that materializes in response to your circumstances. It is a practice. And even if you feel that you have little to be grateful for this year, you can—and should—engage in it.

Thankfulness has been strongly and consistently shown to raise human beings' happiness. It stimulates the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, part of the brain's reward circuit. Gratitude can make us more resilient, and enhance relationships by strengthening romantic ties, bolstering friendships, and creating family bonds that endure during times of crisis. It may improve many health indicators, such as blood pressure and diet (Thanksgiving feasts notwithstanding).

Giving thanks also makes us better people. Approximately 2,000 years ago, Cicero wrote that gratitude “is not only the greatest, but is also the parent of all the other virtues.” Modern research shows that he was probably right. Gratitude can make us more generous with others, more patient, and less materialistic. Gratitude also appears to be at least partially under our control. Researchers have shown that you

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can call it into existence by choosing to focus on the things for which you are grateful, instead of the negatives in your life. For example, writing in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* in 2018, four psychologists randomly split a sample of 153 human subjects into groups that were assigned to either remember something they were grateful for, or think about something unrelated. The grateful remembering group experienced more than five times as much positive emotion as the control group.

The obvious implication from the research is that you should start a gratitude list immediately, regardless of your feelings. At first it takes some effort, but as scholars have shown, it gets easier as it becomes a habit.

Here are a few other dos and don'ts to get the most out of Thanksgiving (or any other day you make into a day of thanks):

### **Don'ts**

Don't pretend you feel thankful for the things you aren't actually grateful for. You wouldn't write "Painful case of shingles" on your gratitude list; you are trying to be grateful in spite of that. Similarly, if you are dreading your discussions at Thanksgiving with QAnon Aunt Marge or Socialist Uncle Mike, you can't simply force yourself to be grateful to see them. On the contrary, forced gratitude can undermine your intrinsic motivation to be grateful—think of being forced to say "Thank you" or write thank-you notes as a child, and about whether you actually felt thankful in the moment. Accept the things you aren't really grateful for; give thanks for others.

Relatedly, don't bring up politics, if you can avoid it. It is harder and harder these days to find zones of life that are free of political division, and none of us needs a bunch of academic studies to tell us that ideological bitterness and contempt are incompatible with happiness. The outrage machine in politics is discordant with gratitude, because it requires you to feel aggrieved.

### **Dos**

Do spend time beforehand contemplating things for which you truly are grateful and that are totally unrelated to the holiday. Instead of mashed potatoes and your extended family, focus on the friendships you hold most dear, having a job you enjoy, or the fact that you are in good health. This will help put you in a thankful—and happier—frame of mind, making the situation at hand easier to enjoy.

Do spend some time in prayer or meditation beforehand. Some researchers have noticed that increasing the practice of prayer is strongly associated with gratitude, even among people who aren't devoutly religious. If you don't want to try prayer—although desperate times might lead to desperate measures, depending on your Thanksgiving situation—a similar contemplative exercise can help, such as a quiet walk in which you repeat the phrase "I am blessed and will bless others."

If all else fails and you need a last-ditch solution, contemplate your death. Hear me out: Researchers found in 2011 that when people vividly imagine their demise, their sense of gratitude increased by 11 percent, on average. As a happiness researcher, I rarely see single interventions with this kind of effect. So tonight, while the turkey brines, dedicate an hour to thinking about all the ways you might perish: disease, accident, choking

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on a wishbone, exploding turkey—be creative. Then, assuming you survive into Thursday, you'll feel rather grateful indeed.

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