November Wellness Article

The Health Benefits of Giving Thanks

I need to pause every now and then and examine my mind, my body, my thoughts and my emotions. Some days it feels like we are just racing through life on autopilot and barely keeping up. Life may overwhelm us and prevent us from taking care of ourselves especially if we don’t occasionally evaluate where we are, how we are feeling and where we are spending our emotional energy.

Fall in Ridgecrest provides a lot of opportunities to experience holiday and community activities. With all this extra activity may come additional expectations, which can often bring stress or a sense of feeling overwhelmed. Add to this the tenuous events in our world and we may find that our motivation to interact with others, our capacity to take care of ourselves and even our ability to manage our stress is becoming more difficult.

When I start to feel like this I know it’s time to take a pause. For many this may involve mindfulness, for some it may involve prayer and for others it may be reaching out to a trusted friend, family member or provider for support. Oftentimes for me it is refocusing on what is truly important and especially this season reminding myself to practice gratitude. “Taking the time to feel gratitude may improve your emotional well-being by helping you cope with stress” and the benefits go beyond our emotional well-being.1 Research is showing that gratitude can also impact our physical health and even lower stress hormones like cortisol.

When we get stressed, our body responds by releasing stress hormones. Prolonged stress can have a negative impact on sleep, digestion and overall wellness. Finding ways to handle stress is critical in helping us care for ourselves. What works for one person may not work for another but the usual benefits of exercise, eating healthy, connecting with others and practicing gratitude all equip our body with ways to handle and cope with stress. “In fact, gratitude helps lower cortisol levels in our bodies by about 23 percent.”2 How amazing is that! When we feel better we are able to take better care of ourselves and when we take better care of ourselves, we feel better. It’s a cycle that can work harmoniously and beautifully to keep us motivated to make decisions that help us physically, mentally and emotionally.

One of my favorite recommendations from Positive Psychology on practicing gratitude is the gratitude jar.3 The idea is to write down three things you are thankful for each day and put it in the jar. It’s amazing what all we can be thankful for when we just take the time to pause and focus on the good in our lives. Or even better, write what you are thankful for in a highly visual area that you will see each day. It could be a list on your fridge, a sticky note on your mirror or whatever works best for you. The idea is the practice of writing down what we are grateful for and having a daily reminder to keep our thoughts and emotions focused on the positives in our life.

If stress is impacting you more lately, please reach out to a trusted individual and share with them. Take time to get outdoors and move and enjoy nature. Be mindful about opting for foods that help you feel your best. And try practicing gratitude this season and focusing on all the little and big things that you have to be thankful for.

1. <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2019/03/practicing-gratitude>
2. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/comfort-gratitude/202007/gratitude-helps-minimize-feelings-stress
3. <https://positivepsychology.com/gratitude-exercises/>

*Tera Moorehead is the Director of Community Outreach, Wellness and Philanthropy at Ridgecrest Regional Hospital. With dual master’s degrees in nutrition and education, as well as a national board certified health and wellness coach, Tera shares her passion for health and wellness through various programs offered free to the community through RRH. You can contact her at 760-499-3825.*