Gratitude and Reflections at the End of a Long Year
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The end of year holiday season is typically considered a time of joy, reflection, and the celebration of traditions passed on through generations. As 2020 winds down as one of the most unique and unprecedented in history, many among us are still holding our collective breaths wondering, “What will come next?” “How much more change and challenges can we anticipate ahead?”

Right now, we can’t predict what will come next. In the spirit of the holiday season, this is the perfect time for us to redirect our stressful energy of this past year, and open ourselves to the opportunity to reflect, recognize and realize the many things we have to be grateful for.

In the best of years, achieving and maintaining an “attitude of gratitude” is challenging for individuals with mental illness, such as depression, or when faced with circumstances such as difficult relationships, poor health, or financial worries. Research has shown that people who practice gratitude regularly are healthier, happier, and have better relationships.

What is gratitude?
We’re most familiar with the idea of being grateful for something tangible such as saying “thank you” after receiving a gift, or someone gives us a compliment, or holds a door for us. There are many definitions for gratitude, in essence it is most commonly attributed to an emotion or feeling that generates positivity, and makes us feel happier and conscious of our blessings. Research shows experiencing and expressing gratitude not only impacts our attitude, it can bolster physical, psychological, and social well-being as well.

The gift that keeps on giving
Robert Emmons, psychology professor and gratitude researcher at the University of California, Davis, explains that there are two key components of practicing gratitude:

1. We affirm the good things we’ve received
2. We acknowledge the role other people play in providing our lives with goodness

Gratitude is a social emotion that grows and benefits all parties. The practice of expressing gratitude creates a positive contagious effect leading the receivers to more likely to continue, and “pay-it-forward” to others.

In order to enjoy these benefits, we need to deliberately learn how to feel gratitude, just as we do any valuable skill. Initially, this can prove difficult because of a tendency to focus on the negative. The great thing is that like any habit, the more we practice expressing gratitude the easier it becomes. The more often we look at things positively the more our brain is trained to think that way.

While 2020 has provided more than its fair share of challenges, among the best blessings to come out of this year are relationships with our friends, families, and co-workers who have navigated so many changes alongside us. We can all tip our hat of gratitude to healthcare workers, first responders and other essential workers who have continued to provide service and care to our communities for the greater good.

The holiday spirit
How can we end a year like 2020 on a high note? How can we tap into that holiday spirit to redirect, reflect, and give the gift of gratitude which keeps on giving? While we all may differ in holiday practices and beliefs which are abundant and varied near the end of the year, many of us are familiar with continued on the next page.
the Charles Dickens classic, A Christmas Carol. Much like
the spirits of Christmas who visited Ebenezer Scrooge, as a
signature strength, gratitude is felt and expressed in multiple
ways.
It can be applied to:
- The past (retrieving positive memories and being
  thankful for elements of your childhood or past
  blessings)
- The present (not taking things for granted as they come)
- The future (being hopeful and optimistic that there will
  be good things arriving)

Reflections
Look back at highlights over the past year, or reflect on past
blessings, and assess your progress over the past twelve
months.
- What goals did you set?
- How has your team and/or family adapted over the past
  year?
- What new experiences or practices have you
  implemented that you had not considered, or done on a
  large scale previously?
- How have others stepped up to the plate?
The more mindful we are about the changes in our lives,
the easier it is to see the positive progress we have made.
In business, acknowledge your team for coming together
or going above and beyond to adapt to face challenges and
rapid changes that took place over the course of the year.
At home, look to the moments when your family embraced
this new togetherness, and took walks or rode bikes in the
evening, maybe you finally mastered fifth grade math by
helping your child, or the home cooked meals share around
the dinner table. The smaller moments provide a snapshot
of things we could easily take for granted, and through
reflection remind us to cultivate that “attitude of gratitude”
for the future.

Be present
To achieve happiness and success, ignorance is not bliss.
Our challenges are part of our journey. Acknowledge them
and then learn from them. At the same time, be mindful and
to not get stuck focused on negatives. Celebrate the wins as
well!

Some questions to pose to those with whom you shared
experiences:
- Can we find ways to be thankful for what happened to
  us now, even though we were not thankful at the time it
  happened?
- What ability did the experience draw out of us that
  surprised us?
- Are there ways we have become better (a better
  workplace) because of this?
- Has the experience removed an obstacle that previously
  prevented us from feeling grateful?
- These questions will help you find the silver linings in
  even the most challenging experiences, including those
  which seemed to be failures.

Additionally, for yourself, consider journaling, writing thank
you notes, or sending surprise gifts to those who have
traveled with you on this wild ride that has been 2020, or
include a gratitude sharing session with colleagues and
family, even if gathering remotely. End the year on a positive
note, make a list of the things you achieved, and the positive
or happy events that happened this year.

Gratitude yet to come
The last step to wrapping up a positive end to the year is
to look towards the future. The New Year is a time for fresh
starts. Take the upcoming weeks to create a new list of goals
and plans for achieving them. As you do, think back on the
past twelve months to know what needs to be improved
upon, acknowledge potential unknowns, and what you can
continue doing right.

We've all dealt with a lot this year. There are no easy answers
to preserving mental health, combating stress, and anxiety,
but they do remain priorities for leaders. Gratitude helps us
recenter on what we have instead of what we lack.

Ending the year on a high note is all about perspective.
There is a silver lining in every situation, whether it be a
lesson learned or an unexpected opportunity discovered.
Fostering a culture of appreciation can reduce stress,
increase happiness, boost mental toughness, and help your
team remember the positives. Let your collective gratitude
practices power you and those around you through the end
of 2020 and well beyond.
First Choice EAP is grateful for the opportunity to provide support and work/life services to our clients and their family members. We remain available 24/7 at 1-800-777-4114, or www.firstchoiceap.com, including holidays. We look forward to continuing to support you and your covered family members in the upcoming weeks of 2020 and the New Year ahead.

Gratitude is a quality similar to electricity: it must be produced and discharged and used up in order to exist at all.
- William Faulkner

Sources:
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