



December 2011

Sue Ann Says: Gratitude Is Good for Your Health

Many of you know that my daughter, Tommi, and I are breast cancer survivors. And like many survivors, this diagnosis gave our family a renewed sense of gratitude – a sweet reminder that life is very precious. It seems to become more heightened around the holiday season, when we stop to observe the richness around us – the beautiful world, our family, and loved ones in our lives.

My thought for this month's column was to write about ways to express gratitude, but in my research, I kept finding evidence that having gratitude is good for our health. Changing my focus was a no-brainer!

Studies show that grateful people have more energy and optimism, are more resilient in the face of stress, have better health, and suffer less depression than the rest of us. People who practice gratitude are also more compassionate, more likely to help others, less materialistic, and more satisfied with life.

According to Prevention Magazine, two psychologists, Robert Emmons, PhD, of the University of California, Davis, and Michael McCullough, PhD, of the University of Miami, conducted a study on gratitude and thankfulness. They divided hundreds of people into three groups, each of which was instructed to keep a different type of journal. One group recorded daily events, another recorded hassles. People in the third group made lists of what they were grateful for. This last group reported more alertness and optimism and better progress toward goals. These people also felt more loved. As my mother used to say, you catch more bees with honey than with vinegar, and when you're appreciative and kind, other people mirror that back.

Research on grateful people also finds that they report a sense of the "interconnectedness" of all life. The holiday season is a great time to aspire to that state of mind – they can make us more spiritual, whether or not we are religious, and it is a natural time to flex those gratitude muscles.

It's easy to forget that just being alive is a blessing, and that the world is full of wonder and opportunity, even when life seems less than perfect. Practicing gratitude seems fitting during Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the New Year, because that is the true promise of the holiday season. Family time and good food are an important focus, but gratitude can also be an attitude for life. When gratitude is the lens through which we view the world, aggravations and stress recede, and our true nature of happiness shines through.

So, this holiday season, let's strive to have only one obligation – to sincerely give thanks and practice gratitude.

Wishing you health, peace and prosperity at the holidays and always.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman...

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

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Gratitude Tips:

Teach your kids. If you have children, giving thanks before bedtime can be a delightful ritual that helps develop a healthy and loving attitude toward life.

Appreciate people. Make it an everyday practice. Tell them what a good job they do, how kind they are, or how nice they look as long as it's absolutely true.

Put it in a letter. Write to a person who made a difference in your life this year. Be specific about how and why their action enriched your life.

Give thanks. It may seem corny, but this holiday season, give each person at your holiday gatherings the chance to tell the others what they are particularly grateful for this year. The window this provides into the good hearts of others is priceless. It's what the season is all about.