

Gratitude attitude: Counting your blessings can make you happier

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BY TERESA MEARS

We have a lot to be grateful for in South Florida, especially in winter.

While the rest of the country is shivering, we are basking in brilliant sunshine and gentle tropical breezes. As we go about our daily lives, we can see beautiful water views, dolphins, wading birds and other joys of nature.

But it's hard to be grateful when you're stuck in traffic.

"I'm no saint," said Al Pino, senior pastor of Palm Vista Community Church in Miami Lakes. "I typically don't thank God for the slow driver in front of me."

The holiday of Thanksgiving is the time we set aside to give thanks for our blessings. But Pino, 51, and others say we should count our blessings every day -- even if we backslide when we're caught in traffic.

The world's major religions have long extolled the virtues of gratitude. It will be the theme of an interfaith Thanksgiving service Wednesday night at Coral Gables Congregational Church. Master Tsai, a Buddhist, will give the message.

Now science has joined in, discovering that people who count their blessings are happier, healthier and more likely to achieve their personal goals.

"It seems to make life better in a lot of substantial ways," said Dr. Robert Emmons, a psychology professor at the University of California-Davis who has spent the last decade studying gratitude. This year he published *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*.

His research showed that people who regularly practiced grateful thinking were more than 25 percent happier, slept better, suffered lower levels of stress and even spent more time exercising.

"What really surprised us was how easy it was to make them happier," said Mike McCullough, a psychology professor at the University of Miami who worked with Emmons on gratitude research.

Louise Greenleaf of Palmetto Bay starts every day by wheeling herself out onto her patio before sunrise to enjoy the beauty of nature. One recent morning, she was rewarded by a flock of ibis in her backyard.

Now 48, she has had multiple sclerosis for the last 26 years and has had to scale back her activities as the disease has progressed. Every day, she writes down five things for which she is grateful.

"I have through the years made the decision . . . that I'm going to live life to its fullest and I'm going to be grateful," she said.

Among the things she is grateful for are her husband, Don; her daughter Krissy, 24, a teacher in Pensacola; and her church family at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Pinecrest. For her, being grateful is tied to her Christian faith.

"While I was going through that darkness, I didn't ever lose my faith," she said. "I can't tell you I didn't get mad at God." But, she adds, "I have never stopped being thankful even when the storm is at its worst."

For their first study on gratitude, Emmons and McCullough assigned two groups of students to write daily journals. One group would list things for which they were grateful. The second would list daily hassles and complaints.

What they learned from this and subsequent studies, says Emmons, is that the regular practice of gratitude -- something as simple as listing a few things for which one is grateful -- can increase one's level of happiness more than 25 percent.

Six months after the study had ended, nearly half the people were still keeping the gratitude journals. And even those who had quit writing in the journals were still benefiting.

"It's like exercise," Emmons said. "You see the benefits and you want to keep doing it."

Jill Rapperport, 46, of South Miami is extremely grateful for the changes that practicing gratitude has brought to her life. She came to the practice gradually, spurred by a divorce and the challenges of being a single mother, the sudden death of a friend, the death of a friend's young child from a rare cancer.

The final impetus came in September 2001, when she was away from her family at a Tony Robbins seminar in Hawaii when the World Trade Center was attacked.

"I made some strong choices that I was going to consciously practice gratitude and find something to do with meaning that would bring peace to the world," she said. She gave up her high-pressure job in publishing, moved with her daughter to a smaller house and became a yoga teacher.

"Before I had this practice, every choice I made I questioned," she said. "I have a completely different experience of myself because of it."

"When I am centered in gratitude, I have an access to a creative part of me that's constricted when I'm not in it."

Queen Brown, 47, of Miami Gardens has never kept a formal gratitude journal, but she thanks God every day for the blessings in her life.

Being grateful for the good things in her life has helped her deal with the bad, she says, especially the tragic death of her 24-year-old son, Eviton, in 2006. His murder has never been solved.

After her son's death, she became an activist and motivational speaker, seeking to help other mothers and their children avoid senseless violence. Brown and her three surviving children started a radio program, *What's Going On?*, which airs at 2 p.m. Sundays on WINZ-940 AM. In May, she was profiled as a CNN hero.

"Through the tragedy, God has allowed me to come in contact with people all over the world," she said. "My son's life has been taken but other lives have been saved as a result."

When she counsels other parents who have lost children, she advises them to give meaning to their loved one's life by reaching out and helping others. Though she mourns her son, she is grateful she has been given the opportunity to serve others.

"I thank God and I thank the people God uses to bless me and encourage me and let me ride on their shoulders," she said. "We need to let people know that we thank them. Sometimes we forget that God works through people on earth."

Like Brown, people who are thankful for the good things in their lives are more likely to help others, the research found. Greenleaf is active in her church, sending cards to ill parishioners. She also participates in teleconferences with her neurologist to explain a new MS treatment to doctors and patients. Rapperport sees her yoga teaching as a way to bring peace to the world.

Living with gratitude is more than playing Pollyanna's "Glad Game," looking for the silver lining in every setback. When bad things happen, people still need to mourn and cry before they are ready to appreciate the good things that remain in their lives, Pino says.

"It's hard to be thankful when there's a tragedy," he said. If he were counseling people who had suffered a loss, "I'd cry with them a whole lot before I started talking" about gratitude.

“Eventually I would probably say that God is after something that would be of eternal value of finding our character and finding our souls.”

Focusing on the things that are going right rather than the things that are going wrong isn't easy, he says. "We're just wired that way, wired more to see the glass as half-empty," he says. "It takes work for me to see where are the things that are working."

Practicing gratitude won't make you rich or cure your cancer, McCullough notes. But it can give you more resilience when life doesn't go well.

"This is not the cure for all that ails the human race," he said. "It's a small part, like starting to floss your teeth."

He advises people to start small: On your way home from work, instead of focusing on the traffic, count your blessings. "Try it for a week," he says. "You'll get out of the car, you'll be more refreshed and ready to see your family."