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Grateful attitude can make all the difference
Study: Most thankful tend to be the happiest

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Even on Christmas, Lina Castillo of Miami Lakes will stick to her routine: a prayer of gratitude for her family and friends. That comes first, even before her 3-year-old son Alex devours his bounty under the tree.

"You don't wallow into negative thinking -- you appreciate what you have," says Castillo, a third-grade teacher at Silver Lakes Elementary in Miramar.

Now science is proving her right.

A series of studies involving 2,000 people over the last three years found the most grateful people tend to be the happiest, said lead researcher Dr. Michael McCullough, an associate professor of psychology and religious studies at the University of Miami.

"With gratitude, there is virtually no down side," said McCullough, who has been working on the Research Project on Gratitude and Thankfulness: Dimensions and Perspectives of Gratitude.

And there's a major upside: "Most grateful people have low rates of depression and negative moods -- but high self-esteem."

The message is a good one to remember on Christmas, McCullough said, when being grateful works as a powerful buffer against materialism.

"Having gratitude over time loosens the hold of wealth and status and comparisons to what others have," he said.

But it doesn't have to come naturally -- people can learn to be grateful, McCullough said. One gratitude study he worked on asked respondents to make daily notes on four or five things for which they were thankful -- even if it was just a sunny day.

The results: "In just two to three weeks they reported being happier," he said. "People close to them could see the difference too."

Dr. Andrew Wenger, a psychologist in Pinecrest, said he tries to show some clients how to be more thankful to make them more adept in handling life's challenges.

"Grateful people are more likely to be resilient, and they seem to have an easier time overcoming obstacles," Wenger said.

Being appreciative of others also helps keep relationships strong, added Miami Beach

marriage therapist M. Gary Neuman.

"When we feel underappreciated, it's a very draining experience," Neuman said.

McCullough said the most grateful people see how other people have helped them ``while not discounting their own effort."

"There's something about grateful people that causes them not to take things for granted," he added. ``They have a sense of wonder, of appreciation."

Tamye Hanna of Miami said feeling grateful can be a lifesaver during tough times.

Few would think she was counting her blessings 2 ½ years ago. She was struggling to get off welfare. Money was tight. Very tight. Still, she was grateful. Her mother, Doris Hanna, helped her.

"I don't know where I would be without her," Tamye Hanna said.

Then she found a job as a secretary at Ebenezer United Methodist Church in Miami. Since then, she said, things have have gone from good to great.

"This Christmas my girls [Chelbe, 11, and Brittney, 9] will sleep in new beds for the first time," she said. ``I don't have to stand in a [charity] line for toys. Now I go to the store and pick what they want."

There's even more to be grateful for: Her oldest daughter, Fredericka, 20, is studying at Miami-Dade Community College. And Hanna recently got her first car. Used, true, but it runs well, she said.

"It just makes me feel good to be grateful -- I feel blessed," she said.

In Miami Lakes, Castillo said her daily prayer of gratitude keeps her more positive. Like everyone else, she's got problems.

But, says Castillo, ``I have a job. A lot of people don't."

She has even begun feeling grateful for problems -- just because of how good she feels once she conquers them.

"If you're grateful you'll always be blessed with abundance," Castillo said.