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Being thankful a key to being healthy

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It's not easy being happy.

Authors write bestsellers detailing the search for it. Theme parks are based on it, commercials at Christmas promise to sell it to you. But what if the secret to contentment is as easy as being grateful for the things you already have?

Jeffrey Froh, a psychologist, believes it is. The Hofstra University professor is building a career tracking the benefits of gratitude in children and adolescents. He said teens are given plenty of reasons not to be happy.

"The commercialization of kids and the influence of media on kids sets us up to focus on what we don't have and all the things we, quote unquote, should have," Froh said.

In 2006, Froh was conducting a study at a Long Island school to see if something as simple as listing the five things you're thankful for could change a child's life.

During that time, Froh realized one of the boys at his school had already figured things out. He was a sixth grader who didn't have what most in the wealthy district grew up expecting. A bus picked him up at 5:30 every morning and dropped him off at 5:30 every afternoon. When the temperatures dropped, one of his teachers noticed he wasn't wearing a coat.

"She got him a little sports jacket from someone at her church to keep him warm during the day," Froh said. "All the kids had the right clothes, and here this kid is standing in the hall with this oversized sports coat on and he was just beaming from ear to ear. I couldn't imagine what he was so happy about and so I went over to him and said, 'Hey, what's going on?' And he's like, 'Look at this wonderful coat Mrs. So-and-So gave to me.' And that absolutely floored me. Here everybody else wore all the trendy clothes and here this kid is wearing an old man's sports jacket and he was so content and grateful for that."

During this same time, the students in the study were regularly naming five things they were grateful for. Froh waited to see if the exercise was making a difference. It did. Those

who complied felt better about their families and teachers, complained less and reported being happier.

He is not the only one studying gratitude.

Robert Emmons at University of California-Davis and Michael McCullough at the University of Miami published a groundbreaking study in 2003. The pair asked participants to keep a gratitude journal for a specified amount of time. It improved their emotional health. They also slept better, exercised more and reported fewer physical complaints.

The study was then expanded to include those with neuromuscular disease. The 21-day project left the patients with fewer physical complaints, sleeping better and with more energy.

The pair later published a book, "Thanks – How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier," based on their findings. There is even a [survey](#) [2] at the Institute on Character that lets you see if you have a gratitude problem.

Froh thinks the effects are far-reaching and could help an entire society. If you're feeling grateful, you're more likely to let a driver pull out in front of you on a busy street, buy the guy behind you a cup of coffee or drop a few dollars with a charity. And if people who benefited from your generosity decide to give back the effect is multiplied.

But even Froh backslides. There are days when life gets him down just like it does you. He said the key to making this work, is practice.

"It's not just a Thanksgiving Day thing," Froh said. "It's every day. For myself, literally every day I go to work and I say to myself, I'm so thankful for the job I have. I absolutely love where I am. The people I work with are phenomenal. ... And I think we can help our kids do the same thing when they go to school, when they talk about their teachers, their friends, their health. It's our job to make them aware."

There you have it, the key to happiness. Just be thankful for what you have, try not to covet and teach your children to do the same. It's a discipline that costs you nothing and could change your life.

You're welcome.

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