

## Gratitude Schmatitude



## On being grateful when everything stinks.

*“Bah!” said Scrooge, “Humbug!”*

- [A Christmas Carol](#) by Charles Dickens

The arrival of the holiday season brings with it more than just some time off from work. Holidays are important landmarks that help us navigate our way through the unfurling of our lives, and their traditions connect us to other people, places, and times.

But this year, instead of our traditions bringing us joy and comfort, COVID has twisted some of them into sources of risk. This year we have to choose between being with our loved ones and keeping them safe, and this choice has left many of us feeling resentful, worried, and lost.

In the face of this struggle, we're often implored to put down our sadness and anger, plaster smiles on our faces, and count our blessings. But *how* do we do this when the bad news just won't stop coming and our lives keep feeling smaller and smaller? Perhaps an additional question is - *should* we?

Gratitude, which can be defined as “an overwhelming feeling of appreciation,” has become a hot topic for good reasons. Research indicates strong associations between levels of gratitude and levels of stress, depression, relationship health, sleep quality, resilience, life satisfaction, worry, and even body image.

But having to pick through the tangle of our lives searching for glimmers of thankfulness can make it feel as if we're trying to manufacture gratitude. It can feel forced and flimsy. What would happen, if instead, we allowed ourselves to experience both the tangle and the shiny bits?

We commonly divide emotions into two groups: positive or negative. Emotions that are pleasant to experience—happiness, trust, love, optimism, etc., get labeled as “positive.” Emotions that are unpleasant (fear, sadness, remorse, anger...) are labeled as negative, and, in our culture, they are to be banished as quickly as possible.

At times, it can seem like we're expected to feel only positive emotions and that there are unspoken time and intensity limits for the emotions that fall outside of that approved positive range.

[There can be benefits](#), though, to acknowledging and investigating “negative” emotions. Emotions are sources of information that help us understand our lives. Cutting ourselves off from any source of information limits our ability to know ourselves and what matters to us. Emotions (even uncomfortable ones) are signals that help us to know where we need to focus our attention, and they can fuel us as we work toward creating change in our lives.

Like many things, it's “the dose that makes the poison.” To a point, anger, fear, and sadness are important emotional signals, deserving of acknowledgment and action. Past a point, they become harmful and can begin to dissolve the foundations of our well-being and the well-being of others. When this is the case, they still function as signals, informing us that it's time to explore how we can recalibrate our emotions and appropriately redirect their energy.

Perhaps one way we'll get through this holiday season with all its conflicting emotions is by not making either/or decisions. This year may be about “both/and.” We can be sad that we don't get to be with our families *and* glad that video-chatting exists. We can feel irritated that we have to wear face coverings *and* comforted by the knowledge that we're doing our part to protect other people.

We can recognize and accept that while this is a time of loss and uncertainty, of anger and hurt, there are moments of tenderness and caring, of beauty and love. We can steel ourselves to face the hard times that are ahead at the same time we remain open to noticing and appreciating the goodness in our lives. Perhaps we can be grateful, even when everything stinks.

If you're struggling to balance the many parts and emotions of your life, remember that the Behavioral Health team at Sawtooth Mountain Clinic is here to help you.

Just call 218-387-2330 to set up your appointment.

**Taking care of ourselves can take a lot of support. We're here to help!**  
*Ask a nurse or provider if you'd like to talk.*

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If you'd like to practice using difficult emotions as signals and sources of information, instead of trying to ignore or eliminate them, just give yourself a chance to STOPP.

STOPP is a series of steps:

- **Stop**—Pause, even if just for a few moments.
- **Take a breath**—Notice your breathing. Allow yourself to take a few deep, slow breaths.
- **Observe:**
  - ⇒ What sensations do you notice happening in your body?
  - ⇒ What thoughts are going through your mind?
  - ⇒ Where are you focusing your attention?
  - ⇒ What are you reacting to?
- **Pull back for perspective:**
  - ⇒ What would someone watching your situation see and hear?
  - ⇒ Are the thoughts you're having facts or opinions? It's not always a good idea to believe everything you think!
  - ⇒ What could be a different way of looking at this?
  - ⇒ What would a trusted friend say to you about this?
  - ⇒ Are your explanations for what's happening reasonable?
  - ⇒ In the big picture, how important is this? How important will this be in 6 months?
- **Proceed/Practice with what works**
  - ⇒ What would be the best thing to do next? Best for you? Best for other people? Best for the larger situation?
  - ⇒ What next step fits with your values?
  - ⇒ Where would be the most helpful place to focus your attention?
  - ⇒ What next step would be effective and appropriate?

Taking a moment to STOPP when we're having an intense or uncomfortable emotion helps us to honor that emotion and the potential information that it conveys, while at the same time allowing us to continue to be in control of our behaviors.

Instead of lashing out, freezing up, or escaping, we can STOPP, assess what's happening both inside and outside of ourselves, and use the power of those emotions to fuel effective, appropriate next steps.

For more information and tools, visit [www.getselfhelp.co.uk/stop.htm](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/stop.htm).

When we STOPP, we give ourselves a little breathing room, and in that space, it's easier to feel the depth of our gratitude.

[This benefits us as individuals](#) and everyone that we contact.

There are lots of [tools](#) we can use to shift our

focus and become more aware of our feelings of gratitude. One of the most profound is performing acts of kindness. Offering kindness [improves our well-being](#) and the well-being of others. It helps to neutralize some of the worry or anger that can block being thankful, and acts as a catalyst for chain-reactions of gratitude and goodwill. Here are a few suggestions to get the kindness ball rolling:

- **In your community:**
  - ⇒ Leave quarters at the laundromat.
  - ⇒ Wheel out your neighbor's trash bin or shovel their walk.
  - ⇒ Who takes care of you "behind the scenes?" Mail carrier/delivery drivers? The grocery store team? The maintenance team at work? The roads/sanitation crew? Let them know you "see" and appreciate what they do!
- **In your home:**
  - ⇒ Study the workload of your housemates. Jump in and offer help where they most need it.
  - ⇒ Don't just compliment someone on their looks. Praise their efforts and the person they are.
  - ⇒ Surprise someone with their favorite meal.
- **Online:**
  - ⇒ Leave a glowing, detailed review for a favorite local business.
  - ⇒ Reply to a social media post that you enjoy.
  - ⇒ Join an on-line forum about a favorite topic and share your knowledge.
  - ⇒ Write a positive comment on an impactful article or blog.
  - ⇒ Send an encouraging email.
- **For yourself:** (because you deserve to be treated kindly, too!)
  - ⇒ Feed yourself nourishing food and drink enough water.
  - ⇒ Prioritize sleep and physical activity.

For more, check out the [Random Acts of Kindness Foundation](#). Their mission? To make kindness the norm. They even have a "[Kindness Challenge](#)" full of ideas and prompts that will fuel your kindness fire!

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person.  
Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

- Albert Schweitzer