

Dr. McQuaid's Stress Reduction Cures

It is always surprising for people to learn that stress reduction is not hard work. You don't need to fly to beach in Hawaii to feel better. Of course there are times in life when Hawaii is helpful, but stress reduction in daily life is easy and often of little cost. In my last column, I explore the health benefits of deep breathing. Today I will discuss the stress reduction achieved from gratitude. Given the current economic crisis, isn't it refreshing to know you can improve your health and feel better for no money? Let me explain how.

Being grateful is a scientifically proven way to reduce stress and depression. Practicing gratitude changes your mind from negative thoughts to positive ones. The human mind thinks very fast. Thoughts occur at an almost instantaneous rate of one ten thousandth of every second. Emotions quickly follow thoughts. So if you have a depressing thought you will quickly feel depressed. Thoughts of gratitude, however, do the opposite. If you feel grateful for something you will automatically change the way you feel to a more positive emotional state. The positive shift can occur as fast as the mind works. Being grateful brings our attention to what we already have that we feel good about. It takes our minds off of what we think is missing and redirects it to what we have that brings us joy. I read Oprah Winfrey say once, "If I knew only one prayer, it would be thank you."

The effectiveness of practicing gratitude is confirmed by research. A UC Davis psychologist, Dr. Robert Emmons, has shown gratitude exercises to increase energy levels, reduce depression, physical pain and improve health. Another researcher, Dr. Martin Seligman, has discovered a way to improve your spirits for a full three months after his suggested exercise. Dr. Seligman recommends the process of a gratitude letter. You write a letter to someone whom you are grateful, listing specifically all the things they have done to make you feel this way, and then you read it aloud to them. According to Dr. Seligman, there is a measurable increase in life satisfaction months after you do this. I personally did this for my wife and we both cried tears of joy.

If you struggle to find something to be grateful for, compare your life to those who are less fortunate. Consider, for instance, how it is to live in this country. Billions of people on earth go without running water, electricity, medical care, let alone television. A friend of mine spent four years operating a hotel in Belize, an English speaking country in Central America. I would always ask him on his return visits to the United States how it was going for him living in Belize. My friend said once, "When I get off the plane in the United States, I get on my hands and knees and kiss the ground." After hearing this I understood how fortunate I am to live at this time, in this country.

There are several ways you can begin to practice gratitude in your life. One way I have practiced is to begin a gratitude journal. Get a notebook and write down five things you are grateful for today. Focus on the day at hand and be as specific as possible. For example, if you see a breathtaking sunrise on Clear Lake, describe it in detail. Describe

the colors, how it reflected off the water, and how the clouds looked. Be as specific as you can. You can be grateful for any number of things: a child's laugh, a pet, a sunset, or even the flavor of strawberries. This activity is guaranteed to improve your mood and make your days more satisfying. Another practice I recommend is to be grateful with your family at dinner. Each member of the family takes a turn and tells the others what they are grateful for on that day. My experience with this is the conversation at dinner has less complaining. We all have a choice. We can be grateful for the things that are right and abundant in our lives, or we can complain. I, for one, would rather improve my health, reduce stress and be happier. Gratitude is a free way to do so.