



# Tap into Joy and Family This Thanksgiving

**A dose of gratitude and some creativity will bring loved ones and friends closer**

**By Christina Elston**

**A**re we grateful to have made it to November? Thankful that 2020 is almost over? Before it is, we have the holiday season to get through and next up is Thanksgiving. This is a time of year when we focus on gathering together, connecting with family and friends, sharing a meal and expressing gratitude.

Does this year have you asking, "Gratitude for what?" Or maybe you're wondering whether you want to bother with Thanksgiving at all, with so many worries and restrictions on who can be together. How will you pull it off? And what is the point anyway?

Believe it or not, you can still enjoy the holiday.

Everyone will need to work out their own logistics to follow health and safety guidelines. Local officials are recommending that no more than three households gather together. Ideally, these gatherings will take place outdoors. But before you dig into your planning, think

about setting an intention for the holiday.

"We can decide that this particular holiday is going to be a moment of extreme gratitude," says therapist John Sovec, who practices in Pasadena. "We get so caught up in what we've been told that a holiday is supposed to be that oftentimes I think people have lost the actual meaning of the holiday for themselves." So, give it some thought. What's important to you this Thanksgiving? Maybe you would like to set aside some time to volunteer, or a little cash to donate to a cause you support. Maybe you want to put some extra effort into keeping the family connected.

## **Start practicing now**

Whatever you're planning, plan for some self-care. This year – with the pandemic, continued social divisions and election stress – is likely to be bumpy. This can be especially true if you have family at

the table. "We have this imagined version that it's going to be this beautiful Norman Rockwell holiday that's going to be filled with turkey and laughter and good cheer, but unfortunately everyone's coming to Thanksgiving as a real person," says Sovec. "And they do have real feelings and real beliefs and a lot of stuff does get triggered for people."

The good news is that your self-care can begin right away, and that you can incorporate something that dovetails perfectly with Thanksgiving: a gratitude practice. That means grabbing a pen and piece of paper and taking a few seconds every day or so to write down three things that you're grateful for.

Why? "When you express gratitude, you're essentially trying not to take things for granted in your life," says Sonja Lyubomirsky, a UC Riverside psychology professor and author of "The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want." She calls gratitude an antidote to negative emotions. "It's almost impossible to be grateful and jealous at the same time, or to be grateful and bitter or angry at the same time," Lyubomirsky says. This doesn't mean pretending that all is right with the world. "We can be grateful but also be focusing on the problems, too," she says. "It doesn't mean that you're passive."

If you give gratitude journaling a try, one key is not to be too hard on yourself. Don't expect an overwhelming epiphany every time you sit down to do it. "It's not so much that when we practice gratitude we're trying to have these overwhelming feelings of happiness or joy in any given moment. You don't have to think that you're going to be some enlightened guru from a five-minute gratitude journal exercise," says neuroscientist Glenn Fox, a researcher with the USC Performance Science Institute whose focus is gratitude.

Another important point is that gratitude need not be limited to big, important stuff. "Maybe you have one good sip of coffee before your kid starts crying and you have to warm it up again. That's me this morning," says Fox, who has a 6-month-old son. "Take even one short minute to sit there and just find something that is going OK - it could be the socks on your feet, it could be being able to breathe some air, or it even could be gratitude for a memory of a better time. It's fully OK to take a break from the doom."

The point really is to practice. Gratitude is a bit like going to the gym. You don't see results right away, but over time you can experience dramatic changes. "There might be some days when you go to the gym and you don't feel like you're getting anywhere, but if you keep going, sooner or later there will be some benefits," says Fox.

And unlike at the gym, with gratitude practice you can fake it till you make it. "It might be that writing it down just feels like you're doing something because you think you should. But even in the latter case, there's still benefit to it," Fox says. "Because what you're actually doing is priming your mind for more things to be grateful for in the future. The point isn't to feel amazing all the time, it's to maybe feel better for a millisecond."

## Prepare for self-care

Along with his therapy practice, Sovec is a teacher at Yoga House Pasadena. He is hosting an online workshop on "Handling the



Holidays: Emotional Wellness During Challenging Times" from 2-4 p.m. Nov. 14. Sovec reminds us that our schedules can get really ragged during the holidays, leading to extra stress. However, "everything we've put in that schedule is something we chose to put there," he says.

Saying yes only to those things that fill us with joy, and no to those that bring on dread, is one way to set boundaries. "It leaves tons of room for us to have some self-care time, some fun time, some meditation time, intention time," Sovec says. "By managing that schedule, we then have the ability to have an absolutely joyous holiday."

Helping others can also be part of your self-care because doing acts of kindness for others makes us feel happier. "We see that a lot during the pandemic," says Lyubomirsky. "People are helping their neighbors, helping their classroom teachers. Almost anything that takes your attention away from yourself and directs it toward another person is going to be beneficial. A lot of our problems are due to too much self-focus. When you focus on other people, it takes the





weight of that off a little bit.”

Plain old social interaction can also give you a boost – even if it is with strangers. “My husband still goes and picks up a coffee in person, even though he can’t sit down,” Lyubomirsky says. She has a friend who makes it a habit to have Zoom gatherings with different friends every week. You can also pick up the phone.

However, other people can sometimes be part of the problem. So, you should also have a plan for responding to conflicts that arise during holiday gatherings. Think about the types of things that might come up, and how you might manage that energy for yourself. You might respond to some questions with, “Thanks so much for your interest, but let’s move on to another topic.” Or maybe, “I’m not comfortable talking about that right now.”

You then might consider taking a break by taking a walk or slipping off to another room (or even your car) to read or listen to music. If dinner table conversation becomes heated, try Sovec’s water technique. “Take a sip of water and while you’re drinking it, feel that cooling energy moving through you,” he suggests. You could also excuse yourself to the restroom for a few calming breaths or to text your frustration to a supportive friend. Later, you’ll want to record your gratitude for that friend in your journal.

### **Focus on connecting**

In fact, gratitude toward others is the easiest kind to muster. “We

don’t notice it, but people do things for us all the time,” says Fox. Think of the people who are keeping your utilities running, who deliver your mail, the firefighters and first responders, the people working at the grocery store. “When you pick up a carton of milk out of your fridge, think of the number of people who had to handle that carton of milk, who had to go to work during this time, to put that carton of milk in the store so you could grab it,” he says.

And how about expressing some gratitude to the people you *do* know? In her research, Lyubomirsky asks people to write letters of gratitude to specific people in their lives. Think about a family member, friend or mentor, how much they’ve supported you and what they mean to you.

Consider contacting everyone who will gather with you for Thanksgiving ahead of time and asking each person to write a letter of gratitude to share with someone else who will be there. You could also write and mail letters to people who won’t be around your table. “When you express gratitude toward specific people, it makes you feel more connected to them,” Lyubomirsky says.

For the more traditional around-the-table Thanksgiving exercise, where each person names something for which they are grateful, set some parameters to make it easier for everyone. “There is a vulnerability to gratitude,” Fox says, so people can feel stuck or awkward about expressing it. He suggests asking people to name something in the room that makes them feel grateful, or maybe a person who has done something helpful for them this past year. That will help people focus and not feel the need to come up with something so profound.

Not everyone, however, will be able to be around the table. Fox, for instance, has a baby at home, so the family is planning a much smaller celebration than usual. They will have Zoom calls with some family members, including some on the East Coast he hasn’t seen in months. Phone calls, FaceTime or even sending a card can help you connect. “Even if it’s a smaller, more humble Thanksgiving, there’s still something to be grateful for,” he says. “You might as well make the best of it.”

This might mean doing things in new ways. “All of those traditions that we have tied to the holidays started somewhere,” Sovec says. “Can we tap into our creativity and find new meanings and new traditions?” Maybe this is the year to sit down with your kids and make beautiful hand-drawn Thanksgiving turkeys and send them out to all the extended family. Maybe it’s time for a recipe exchange, so that no one will miss out on Dad’s famous sweet potato casserole. Hop on Zoom to cook together and compare notes. Maybe people are going to eat separately, but after dinner you can all have a Zoom game night. And next year, game night might become a live thing.

Despite your best efforts, this could be the year that makes you appreciate every other Thanksgiving that much more. That’s also OK. “There’s no limit on the way we can think forward and backward with gratitude,” Fox says. And he suggests trying to tap into a related outlook as well. “The cousin of gratitude is optimism,” says Fox.

So, here’s to a better holiday season next year. ♦

*Christina Elston is Editor of L.A. Parent.*