

Many of us give thanks at Thanksgiving as we feast on turkey and dressing and count not just our calories, but our blessings.

What we might not realize, UMMC experts say, is that being grateful is actually good for mental and physical health – and that’s a benefit you can enjoy all year long.

For example, if anger keeps you from being thankful, that can cause unhealthy stress, said UMMC chaplain Doris Whitaker, director of Pastoral Services. “Thankfulness releases us from anger and from materialism,” she said. “It helps us acknowledge that there’s something greater than us.”

She sees firsthand from her contact with patients, their families and employees that being grateful “absolutely is something that can be great for your mental health, your emotional health and your physical health. Practicing thanksgiving all year round can extend our lives, and help us lead a less stressful life.”

Her theory on how that works: When we’re grateful, “we become appreciative of ourselves and our bodies. We take better care of our bodies, and we go to the doctor more often.

“I’m working on me,” Whitaker said. “I need to appreciate myself better, and to take care of myself better. Just because something tastes super good doesn’t mean it’s good for me.”

“The research is pretty clear that thankfulness reduces stress and depression, and some of the physiological consequences of that,” said Dr. David Elkin, a professor of psychiatry in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior. “But the reason behind it is more interesting.

“Having a sense of thankfulness as you go through life forces you to look outside yourself – to stop recognizing the red lights, but missing the green lights. We notice when things don’t go our way, but not when they go our way.”

“The concept of gratefulness doesn’t come naturally,” Whitaker said. “We have to cultivate it and practice it. When we are filled with gratitude, our thought processes change.”

Being grateful for the good things in your life can have a positive effect on reducing health issues linked with behavioral and psychological issues, Elkin said. “That’s not to imply that if you think thankful thoughts, you won’t have obesity issues. It’s a bit of a stretch to say that being thankful can reduce your risk for cardiovascular disease.

“But, cultivating a practice of thankfulness is part of the cognitive behavioral treatment we use for psychological disorders,” Elkin said. “We get people to list things that are good in their life. That’s getting people to be thankful.”

Susan O’Bryan, UMMC’s web content coordinator, recently had two surgeries over a five-month span, including a stay in the Adult Hospital. Even so, she’s grateful for many things in her life as she continues to heal.

“I so appreciate my family and friends who made ‘sick’ days into ‘getting better’ days,” O’Bryan said. “When I left the hospital, I felt guilty because there are so many people still hospitalized or suffering. We shouldn’t take good health for granted. It’s something we should appreciate not just at this time of year, but always.”

Whitaker has a few suggestions for those who want to use gratefulness as a route to better mental and physical health. Keep a gratitude journal, and try to write in it every day. Or, if you’re too busy to do that, use the voice memo function on your phone to record eight or nine things that you are thankful for, and then replay it as a reminder before bed, in the shower, or on the way to work.

And, Whitaker said, it’s the little moments of gratitude that can improve your mental outlook at a time when you might be fighting for your physical health.

“I have a patient who loves to feel sunshine. She loves how it warms her face,” she said. “Sometimes, the little things aren’t so little.”