

Keep an “Attitude of Gratitude” and Change Your Marriage!

With Thanksgiving just around the corner, I thought that it might be good to focus on the positive benefits of expressing appreciation and thankfulness in our marriage. It is easy for me to expect Sue to do certain things around the house and not express any appreciation for all her “labors of love” for me. Most of the time I don’t even think about whether there will be clean clothes in my drawers or on my side of the closet, or if there will be any food prepared and waiting on the table when I come in from outside or sit down for lunch or dinner. It wasn’t until I retired and started trying to help Sue more around the house that I began to realize just how much she does for me every day and how hard it is to keep everything in the house neat and clean all the time.

Even though one of my love languages is Words of Affirmation and Appreciation, I seldom express my thankfulness for all Sue does for me on a regular basis. But I am getting better at expressing appreciation now, especially as we have learned all of the benefits from being thankful. **Our heavenly Father has made us for relationships and wired our brain and physical body to respond in positive ways to giving and receiving appreciation and thankfulness.**

I want to pause for a moment here and assure you that I’m not implying that we stick our head in the sand or deny that there may be things our spouse does that irritate us or cause conflict in our marriage. Those issues still need to be addressed and resolved through effective communication, forgiveness, and love. But we still need to look for ways and reasons to express our thankfulness to our spouse for even the little or routine things that they do for us all the time.

As I looked into the effects of expressing appreciation, I found a number of physical benefits such as a stronger immune system, fewer aches and pains, lower blood pressure, increased energy and vitality, and improved quality and duration of sleep. People in other studies on appreciation expressed more satisfaction with their lives as a whole and a higher feeling of well-being.

There’s an old saying, “If you’ve forgotten the language of gratitude, you’ll never be on speaking terms with happiness!” **Studies also have shown that appreciation magnified levels of positive emotions, improved overall mental health, increased ability to manage stress and reduce anxiety, and produced higher self-worth, more joy and pleasure. Appreciation also produced more optimism, happiness, and life satisfaction. Studies have shown depression to be inversely correlated to gratitude. The more grateful a person was, the less depressed they felt.**

Expressions of thankfulness also have positive social benefits. **It has been found that expressing heartfelt appreciation to someone for something that they have done for you releases oxytocin, a hormone which prepares your brain for bonding and positive relationships.** Oxytocin is also referred to as the “cuddle hormone” that is released when a mother breast feeds her baby or a couple snuggles together. It promotes connectedness and pair bonding. As a result of appreciation, couples tend to build stronger interpersonal relationships, express more forgiveness, are more generous and compassionate, and more outgoing towards each other. This all helps strengthen our marriage. A study at the University of Washington found that unless a couple is able to maintain a high ratio of positive to negative encounters, it is likely the marriage will not last. They found that for every negative encounter (a complaint, frown, put-down, or expression of anger) there needs to be at least five positive ones (smiles, compliments, laughter, or expressions of appreciation and gratitude). Craig Hill in *Two Fleas and No Dog* uses thanksgiving as part of his formula for having more intimacy in your marriage. In working with couples, Craig has found that most couples live more

independent lives moving through life side by side instead of face to face. Eye contact is crucial to igniting real love and passion. **When we gaze into our partner's eyes, we are seeing into their heart.** "A few minutes of sustained gazing can lead to relaxation, a sense of safety, and full here-and-now engagement." (*Wired for Love*) **You can rekindle your love and intimacy for each other again and again just by spending time looking into each other's eyes. Try sitting in a chair opposite each other, knees touching, and for three minutes just look into each other eyes (but don't stare!).**

Craig Hill suggest that you regularly pray to Father for your spouse using these three components **as you look into your spouse's eyes**; then switch roles and have the other person pray.

- 1) **Repentance** – for areas where you have been unloving or disrespectful towards your spouse – ask for forgiveness for any ways you may have wounded their heart by your actions or words.
- 2) **Thanksgiving** – while still looking into their eyes express thanksgiving for the good qualities your spouse has, ways they have blessed you, how they look, their spiritual growth and maturity, providing for the home or making it a safe place, etc.
- 3) **Blessing** – as you look into their eyes, speak a blessing over your spouse – favor, wisdom, skills, qualities of being a parent, husband, wife, or lover, creativity, peace, joy, laughter, etc. Be creative!

When Sue and I have done these exercises it has been very powerful!!!

Here are some other ways to express your appreciation to your spouse:

1. **Keep a daily journal** of things that you are thankful for about your spouse each day
2. **Tell your spouse** something you appreciate about them every day
3. **Look in the mirror** and think of something you have done well recently or something you like about yourself.
4. **Write thank you notes:** Whether in response to a gift or kind act, or simply as a way to show gratitude for your spouse being in your life.
5. **Count your blessings:** Once a week, reflect on events for which you are grateful, and write them down. As you do, feel the sensations of happiness and thankfulness you felt at the time it happened, going over it again in your mind.
6. **Pray:** Expressing thanks during your prayer times together is another way to cultivate gratitude.
7. **Practice mindfulness** - actively pay attention to the moment you're in right now. - focus on something that you're grateful for, such as a pleasant smell, a cool breeze, or a lovely memory.

Dialogue Questions

When you express appreciation to me for something I have done for you, how does that make me feel?

When you snuggle with me on the sofa or in bed, how does that make me feel?

When we look into each other's eyes, how does that make me feel?

Fun Night Ideas

Go to one of your favorite places, get a cup of hot chocolate or coffee, look into each other eyes, and share what you appreciate about each other. Talk about your dreams and what you are looking forward to doing together in the future.

Together make a list of all the things Father has done this year in your lives and give thanks!