In this Issue:
Turning Stressing into a Blessing this Holiday Season
The mission of AIS is to improve the health of the community and the world by setting the standard of excellence of stress management in education, research, clinical care and the workplace. Diverse and inclusive, The American Institute of Stress educates medical practitioners, scientists, health care professionals and the public; conducts research; and provides information, training and techniques to prevent human illness related to stress.

AIS provides a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters intellectual discovery, creates and transmits innovative knowledge, improves human health, and provides leadership to the world on stress related topics.
Contentment is a quarterly newsletter published in March, June, September and December with news and advertising designed with the general public in mind. It appeals to all those interested in the myriad and complex interrelationships between stress and health because technical jargon is avoided and it is easy to understand. Contentment is archived online at stress.org. Information in this publication is carefully compiled to ensure accuracy.

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Gratitude and Kindness: Small Gestures, Large Impact

By Dr. Robert Brooks, FAIS

Dr. Robert Brooks is one of today’s leading speakers and authors on the themes of resilience, motivation, school climate, a positive work environment, and family relationships. During the past 35 years, Dr. Brooks has presented nationally and internationally to thousands of parents, educators, mental health professionals, and business people.

Years ago I wrote about the importance of the “seemingly small gestures” of gratitude and kindness that enrich our lives and the lives of others. As I delved into the area of resilience and our connections with others, I became even more impressed by the power of small gestures. I often like to relate the story of a supervisor I had during my year as a postdoctoral Fellow in psychology at the University of Colorado Medical School. I was asked to present at my first major clinical conference in front of many faculty and trainees. I was not as accustomed to speaking as I am now and was quite anxious. I thought my talk went okay, but I wasn’t certain. Later that afternoon I found that my supervisor had left me a brief note that read, “You did a great job today, Bob.” It took him only a few seconds to write but that note was to set a very positive tone for my entire postdoctoral experience. His actions also served as a model for me when I began to supervise others.

Studies of Gratitude

The title of an article written by John Tierney that appeared in The New York Times-caught my attention: “A Serving of Gratitude May Save the Day.” Tierney sets the tone of the article by noting, “Cultivating an ‘attitude of gratitude’ has been linked to better health, sounder sleep, less anxiety and depression,
Tierney offers insights from well-known psychologists about nurturing this “attitude of gratitude.” He describes a strategy that several clinicians have advanced, citing the pioneer work of Dr. Robert Emmons at the University of California at Davis and Dr. Michael McCullough at the University of Miami. Emmons and McCullough proposed the creation of a “gratitude lite” that involved people writing in a journal once a week five things for which they felt grateful. They were instructed to keep things brief with just one sentence for each of the five.

Interestingly, when I have described this technique of writing down things for which one is grateful, some people attending my workshops have questioned whether it is just a “gimmick” and whether it can really improve the mindsets and outlook of those engaging in the practice. The answer from the research of Emmons and McCullough is that it is not simply a gimmick. They found significant effects after two months. Those maintaining the gratitude journal compared with a control group were more optimistic and reported feeling happier. They also noted fewer physical problems and an increase in physical activity.

In attempting to explain the power of gratitude, McCullough asserts, “It is the emotion of friendship. It is part of a psychological system that causes people to raise their estimates of how much value they hold in the eyes of another person. Gratitude is what happens when someone does something that causes you to realize that you matter more to that person than you thought you did.” An interesting observation upon which to reflect.

Similar results were noted in a study of polio survivors and other individuals with neuromuscular problems. Those who kept a gratitude journal expressed greater feelings of optimism than those in a control group, an observation corroborated by their spouses. In addition, grateful people fell asleep more easily at night, slept for a longer period of time, and woke up feeling more refreshed. Tierney quotes Emmons, “If you want to sleep more soundly, count blessings, not sheep.”

Tierney also refers to psychologist Dr. Sonja Lyubormirsky at the University of California at Riverside whose work related to happiness was the basis of my February, 2005 article. Similar to my notion about “small gestures,” Lyubormirsky recommends doing a “small and unobtrusive thoughtful or generous thing” for family members. “Say thank you for every thoughtful or kind gesture. Express your admiration for someone’s skills or talents,” she explains.

Dr. Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, regarded by many as one of the founders of “positive psychology,” is also cited in Tierney’s article. Seligman has recommended an exercise that involves writing a 300-word letter to an individual who has changed your life for the better. Seligman suggests that the letter be very specific, noting what the person did and...
the way in which their action impacted on you. Seligman proposes that if possible you deliver the letter in person without any advanced warning and then read it to the individual for whom it is intended. He asserts, “You will be happier and less depressed one month from now.”

Similar thoughts were expressed by John Kralik in an article he wrote for Parade Magazine titled “Up Your Gratitude.” Kralik, author of A Simple Act of Gratitude, describes a time in his life when he was feeling very low, a time in which he was overweight, owned a law practice that was losing money, involved in a divorce, and living in a “depressing” apartment. At that time he went for a hike and heard a voice that conveyed life-changing advice. He writes that the voice said, “I shouldn’t focus on what I wanted or had lost but should be grateful for what I had. The idea of a year of thank-yous popped into my head.”

Kralik made a decision to write a genuine note of gratitude to those who had made a positive difference in his life. He found that the project “transformed” him. “I saw how much I had been blessed by so many people in different ways, and acknowledging their blessings seemed to make them multiply. After I thanked colleagues for directing cases to me, they referred more. When I expressed gratitude to clients for paying promptly, they began doing so even more quickly. Something more subtle occurred, too. With my thank-you notes, I was trying to tell people how much their kindness meant to me. As they responded, that same message was reflected back.”

Kralik describes that his life has improved immeasurably since his hike. “I'm now in great shape—I ran a marathon to benefit leukemia research in part to thank an employee. . . . I found a small but lovely house, and I was appointed to my dream job, Superior Court judge. Having written my 860th note, I can say I keep learning that gratitude is a path to the peace we all seek.”

The Alternatives We Face
Sadly, when I have discussed the benefits of gratitude and acts of kindness at my presentations, I have on occasion met individuals who feel they have little for which to be grateful. I have no reason to doubt them, but as Kralik discovered even during a very despairing time in his life, there were still some things for which to be thankful. What he also did was to adopt a proactive stance—a key feature of personal control—by initiating the practice of writing notes of gratitude. In so doing, his attitude and the attitude of the recipients of the notes improved.

I know when one is feeling depressed, the idea of composing notes of gratitude may seem of little value, serving only to sap one's limited energy even further. However, in contemplating the different choices we have when depressed, we should think about a quote by Anais Nin that I used in my last article but is equally relevant for this article. “And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight inside the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

Think of even one note of thanks you might write or one act of kindness you might undertake that may be the first step towards a blossoming of hope.

For more insights from Dr. Brooks, check out his recent interview with AIS Executive Director Heidi Hanna here.
GET INSIDE OUR HEAD

It’s Not Our Credentials That Make AIS So Impressively, It’s the Fellows That Go with Them.

The American Institute of Stress is a non-profit organization established in 1978 at the request of Dr. Hans Selye (the Founder of the Stress Concept) to serve as a clearinghouse for information on all stress-related subjects. AIS Founding Fellows include:

Paul Rosch  Linus Pauling  Alvin Toffler  Bob Hope  Michael DeBakey  Herbert Benson  Charles Spielberger

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Holiday stress happens primarily because of unrealistic expectations, feeling overwhelmed or out of control, and losing sight of what matters most to us. The good news is that stress can be like an internal GPS, shining light on course corrections to get us back on track. Stress is not good or bad, but rather a sense we have when something is not as it should be. We only feel stress when something that matters to us is at stake, so it turns out that stressing can be one of our greatest blessings if we take time to pay attention and adjust.

The most important part of managing stress is to first understand what it really is. Stress is simply a stimulus for change. We experience stress when the demand on our energy is greater than our capacity, and that can trigger both positive and negative adaptive responses depending on our perspective. There are a lot of ways to define stress (read about Redefining Stress here), and how you define it will actually determine your experience so choose wisely.

Research has demonstrated that when people see stress as health-promoting stimulation (energy) instead of system-wide breakdown (anxiety), the physiological response is dramatically different. Energy helps our brain and body work better, while
anxiety causes brain fog and inflammation that lead to excess wear and tear on our system, hinder our ability to problem solve, and speeds up the development of what’s already going wrong. (For more, see Dr. Alia Crum’s TEDx Talk Change Your Mindset, Change The Game).

The holiday season is a particularly stressful time for most people for many reasons. Perhaps the most fundamental is that decades of marketing has told us we’re supposed to be filled with the magic of a Hallmark card or peaceful Clydesdale trot through the snow, setting expectations that are seriously out of reach. In fact, if we can laugh at these unrealistic models of what the holidays are supposed to look like we can immediately reduce stress hormones and see more clearly how to create an experience that is aligned with what matters most to us.

#StressSmart Tip: create your own picture of what you want the holiday season to look like and feel like, spend a few minutes each morning reflecting on what’s most important to you, and then make a concrete plan to help you reach your own unique outcome.

Beyond our perceptions of not being or having enough, stress is deeply affected by our sense of control. When we believe we have the ability to navigate challenges and have the resources to do so effectively, stress is a stimulus for positive growth or an adventure. If we try to be all things to all people, are careless about over committing or don’t build in adequate time to recharge our own battery, we can’t possibly keep up. Stress hormones become our fuel to get things done, and we quickly find ourselves going through the motions like we’re putting out fires instead of enjoying time with friends and family. Instead of gratitude we feel resentment and irritability, frustrated by our inability to be in the present moment.

#StressSmart Tip: resist the rush, know that if you’re going to bring your best energy to the time you have you have to limit your commitments, and get comfortable with saying you’re not available.

In order to shift seasonal stress, it’s important to enlist some support. Find an accountability partner who you can work with to come up with a clear pathway for navigating the holidays with ease. Talk about your goals for being fully engaged in what matters most to you, and then check in regularly to make sure you’re taking the necessary steps. Studies have shown that no matter how difficult the climb we’re facing, when we have social support we perceive the obstacles as being more manageable, which immediately decreases our stress response and provides us with the mental clarity and emotional resilience to adapt effectively.

#StressSmart Tip: be pro-active by talking about your goals for the holiday season with your closest support person, check-in regularly, and be willing to slow down and refocus regularly.
Create a clear picture of how you want to feel this holiday season. If it’s a success, how will you know? Imagine yourself engaging with friends and family in a way that energizes you and gives you a sense of peaceful fulfillment. What specifically will it take for you to have that experience? Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and ask your heart what matters most to you. Then, from a more aligned perspective, ask what you need to do to get there. Journal about it, and get as clear as you can on the daily steps you will need to take. Here are a few more positive nudges to fuel your journey.

1. **Recharge regularly.** Prioritize sleep and create relaxing bedtime rituals to quiet your mind and rest your body. Eat something every 3-4 hours during the day and focus on foods that are whole, natural, and health promoting as much as possible. When you do indulge, eat slowly and mindfully to enjoy the experience. Move as often as you can, and build in physical activity throughout the day to keep energy up and stress hormones down.

2. **Rethink your stress.** When you notice yourself feeling overwhelmed, take time to pause and reflect on what adjustments can be made to create a sense of ease. Use stress as a guiding light to bring you back to what’s most important. Say no more, be present in the moment, and let go of unrealistic expectations.

3. **Redesign your routine.** Don’t take any action until you’ve clarified the energy you want to bring to the day. Think about who you want to be before you think about what you need to do. Build in time throughout the day to come back to this peaceful, intentional place of reflection. Remind yourself that it’s not about the time you have but the energy you bring to that time that is most important.

For more tips to tame holiday stress, check out [this article by Mother Nature Network](#).
Nutrition protects against the impact of stress on the brain in early life

Date: November 14, 2016
Source: Universiteit van Amsterdam (UVA)

Summary: Young mice that grow up in stressful circumstances go on to have fewer cognitive-impairments and memory problems as adults if they are given enriched breast milk, scientists report.


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Traumatic stress changes brains of boys, girls differently

Date: November 11, 2016
Source: Stanford University Medical Center

Summary: Traumatic stress affects the brains of adolescent boys and girls differently, according to a new brain-scanning study. Among youth with post-traumatic stress disorder, the study found structural differences between the sexes in one part of the insula, a brain region that detects cues from the body and processes emotions and empathy. The insula helps to integrate one's feelings, actions and several other brain functions.

The Latest Headlines...

3 Minutes of negative news may sour your perspective

**Source:** Harvard Business Review

**Summary:** Individuals who watched just three minutes of negative news in the morning had a whopping 27% greater likelihood of reporting their day as unhappy six to eight hours later compared to the positive condition.

[https://hbr.org/2015/09/consuming-negative-news-can-make-you-less-effective-at-work](https://hbr.org/2015/09/consuming-negative-news-can-make-you-less-effective-at-work)
First we got your brain...

Now we need your heart.

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The American Institute of Stress is a qualified 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.
ISSN # 108-148X