



MASSACHUSETTS  
GENERAL HOSPITAL  
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL  
TEACHING HOSPITAL

BRAIN  
HEALTH  
INITIATIVE



ACADEMY FOR  
BRAIN HEALTH  
AND PERFORMANCE

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Brain Health Matters and Giving Thanks Makes a Difference

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. In honor of the Thanksgiving holiday, the BHI is discussing carrying that attitude of gratitude throughout the year.

Thanksgiving is time each year to pause and share our gratitude for what we have. Gratitude encourages brain health and fights brain illness by amplifying the good in our lives. It is that feeling of appreciation, gratefulness, or graciousness. It involves taking time to recognize and express thanks and to give kindness in return.

While 2020 has thrown a lot of challenges our way, we still may have so much for which to be thankful. For example, we may be grateful for the good in our relationships, in our coping skills, or our overall health and well-being. We may also be grateful for surviving during a pandemic, during times of social inequality and unrest, economic hardships, and a contentious presidential election.

So, what do you need to do to protect your brain health and truly enjoy the holidays? How can you practice an attitude of gratitude this Thanksgiving, throughout the holiday season, and into the coming year?

The first step toward a meaningful, brain healthy holiday is acknowledging that it likely will be hard, and / or not what you may want. Breaking with tradition, no matter if temporary, is an adjustment and change can be made easier with thoughtful planning. Amid the hustle, try to pause and reflect about the meaning of the holidays. Instead of planning the perfect celebration, aim for “good enough.” Slow down, be present in the moment, and take time to actually enjoy your family(ies) and traditions.

While physical distancing is critical in preventing the spread of COVID-19, try to be mindful that it doesn't mean that you have to distance yourself socially. Turkey over Zoom may not be your idea of a Thanksgiving dinner, but it does give you a chance to gather, share stories, and practice gratitude for those in your life.

Living a brain healthy life of appreciation and thankfulness has many life-healing benefits. In fact, some research has found that one of the greatest contributing factors to happiness is how much gratitude you show. When you focus on gratitude, you encourage many other brain healthy behaviors. These habits help you cultivate brain and body health, increase happiness, and your overall well-being for yourself and those around you. When you carry yourself with positive, grateful energy it has a ripple effect on those around you who are then able to share that positivity onward and outward to the next person, and the next. A BHI friend recently described this as "a herd effect." Creating a brain healthy "herd" begins with you. Here is a [video](#) about the power of gratitude.

How does gratitude help you lead a brain healthy life? Science shows being grateful has many benefits.

- Reduces selfishness
- Reduces envy and jealousy
- Decreases pain
- Decreases depression and anxiety
- Improves physical and emotional health and well-being
- Strengthens friendships
- Encourages humility
- Increases fulfillment
- Boosts stress resilience
- Increases empathy
- Strengthens self-esteem
- Improves sleep
- Increases happiness

The point of practicing gratitude is to change your perspective. "Gratitude is an attitude" may be a platitude, but it happens to be true. By becoming aware of what we have, we find more and more for which to be grateful. This change in attitude and perspective supports brain health and fights brain illness, and opens us up to greater happiness, health, and well-being. We all have the ability and opportunity, and maybe even responsibility, to cultivate a grateful herd.

From all of us at the BHI, may you make, experience, and benefit from a meaning-filled Thanksgiving.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Here are some suggestions from the BHI for finding your gratitude during this holiday season.

- Acknowledge that the holidays will be hard this year and that family celebrations will be different. This allows you to manage your expectations for the holidays.
- If you can't celebrate in person, celebrate virtually. Reach out to friends and family via phone or videoconference. Zoom is suspending its 40-minute time limit on holidays, so your family celebrations won't be cut short.
- Look for opportunities to gather, share stories, and practice gratitude for those in your life. You may not be able to host a large family dinner, but you can get together with a small group of friends or family. This is Florida so why not have an outdoor celebration?
- Try to find ways to make the holidays more positive. Plan something that gives meaning to the day, such as volunteering to serve or delivering meals to those who are less fortunate. Helping those in need can boost your spirits and help you see the positive things happening in your own life.
- Gratitude meditations can help you remember the small blessings you may take for granted in your day to day life.
  1. First, find a comfortable position to rest in, either in a chair, or on a comfortable flat surface.
  2. Take a moment to center yourself. Turn off the ringer on your phone to ensure you won't be disturbed. If you're able, close the door to the room you're in.
  3. Now, take a deep breath through your nose. Fill your lungs entirely with air. Let your breath out through your mouth.
  4. Take a few more deep breaths this way. In through the nose, filling the lungs with air, and out through the mouth.
  5. Now, practice a gratitude mantra. The mantra might be: *I am grateful for \_\_\_\_\_*. Sounds pretty simple, right? All you need to do is fill in the blank with something you're grateful for. Repeat this mantra 10 times. Each time you repeat the mantra, try to come up with something different that you're thankful for. If you're having trouble coming up with things, start small, focusing on your immediate environment.
- **Adopt a Brain Healthy Lifestyle**, including thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

### **About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.*** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).