

How to Find Some Gratitude During the Pandemic Holidays



By [Kira M. Newman](#) | [Greater Good Magazine](#)

When Americans sit down at our Thanksgiving tables this Thursday—perhaps on Zoom with our extended family, across from just a partner, or in distanced outdoor gatherings—will we find anything to be thankful for?

Gratitude is complicated when we're struggling. Clinical psychologist [Nathan Greene](#) knows this firsthand: He lost his mother when he was a teen, which inspired him to research the connection between grief and gratitude. These days, while witnessing therapy clients grapple with depression, anxiety, and substance use during the pandemic, he's also seen profound experiences of gratitude and connection.

For example, the teen boys he works with have been more appreciative of their teachers, who have suddenly been humanized as they try to juggle home and work life in front of a Zoom camera. And they miss the casual interactions they had with other students who weren't their close friends but also weren't strangers, the friendly faces they used to pass in the hallways. As we all approach the holidays, being deprived of traditions—even ones we might have grumbled about in the past—can bring a bittersweet mix of sadness and appreciation.

“Gratitude can come in the experience of *not* having, too, in reflecting on what we did have in the past and what we hope to have in the future,” Greene says.

I talked with Greene about this strange juxtaposition of gratitude and loss, of connection and isolation, and how we can open ourselves up to appreciating the good even when times seem so bad.

Kira M. Newman: What do we know from research about how gratitude can arise from difficult experiences?



Nathan Greene: Gratitude is kind of counterintuitive. It can come about naturally when something really positive or miraculous or out of the ordinary comes around, like winning a lifetime achievement award or getting a new job or having a baby—these big milestones. But contrary to what capitalism or consumer marketing tells us, we often don't feel grateful when we get a whole lot of what we want consistently.

Somewhat surprisingly, the research shows us that gratitude often arises when we're faced with a loss or a lack or even death. That's something that Buddhist monks have known about for centuries. They have engaged in meditations geared toward imagining their death, and they would even practice meditation in cemeteries to be reminded of that. [Research](#) more recently shows that when we're encouraged to think about our own death in a real way, we often feel more grateful for life.

Right now, we're facing real and imagined death, and we're also facing so much loss: loss of our ability to be with the people we love, and loss of our plans, and [loss of these celebrations, weddings, and graduations](#). I think some people feel a foreclosure on dreaming about the future because we're kind of in this suspended time.

In my [research](#) with adults who lost a parent in childhood, I found that the large majority of people—not all—reported that they believed they were more grateful as a result of enduring the experience of loss. When we looked into that, we found that the reasons they most commonly gave are that they felt a greater appreciation for their life and for their families and began to view life as more precious than they had previously.

KN: How do you think that research applies to the pandemic?

NG: This is an experience of loss, as well; people are losing family members, and then there's the loss of all of these experiences and dreams and jobs. It can give way to gratitude, but I think it's more complicated than, say, losing a parent or loved one. This pandemic is not a singular, fixed loss that we can grieve and move on from. We're continuously experiencing losses, and because we know that this thing will end at some point but we don't know exactly when or how we can't mournfully.

With gratitude coming from loss, it arises from a process of mourning and making meaning of the loss: *I experience this*

loss and it taught me XYZ about myself and life. We often find that meaning in retrospect and looking back on it. But it's really challenging to make meaning of an experience like this that's uncertain and ongoing. That's one of the challenges for us here in finding gratitude, but I think it's possible.

For myself, it's been a rollercoaster with gratitude, but I find myself being grateful for a lot of things that I wasn't grateful for in the same way before—like my health, for instance. It's much more top of mind for me, and I feel grateful each day that I'm healthy. At this moment right now, I have a family member who is hospitalized with COVID and pneumonia, and I'm thinking about him and thinking about my own body and how we're vulnerable.

It's also a time in which I can't see so many of the people I love, and I'm yearning for connection, and I felt really grateful for my neighbors. I've formed closer bonds with them in our lingerings out on the sidewalk with our dogs. Many are also feeling a lot of gratitude, especially early on, for frontline health workers and all the essential workers at the grocery stores and vet clinics and everyone who's out there putting themselves at risk. I feel it individually, but I think there's also a sort of [collective gratitude](#) that can arise when we're all experiencing this challenging thing together.

KN: If people are wanting to feel more gratitude this time of year, during pandemic holidays, what would you suggest?

NG: Our brains are naturally wired toward glomming on to the negative and toward worrying about the future, and this is an evolutionary mechanism to help keep us safe. This pandemic is a rich environment for being sucked down into negativity, and there's a lot to be upset and worried about. In the Bay Area, we felt so deeply the impacts of climate change with the fires, and there's such a huge reckoning around [racial injustice](#), and a lot of people were feeling

very [stressed](#) around politics and the election.

Right now, we really have to actively work toward balancing that out with gratitude. There are ways that we can do that; counting blessings is one way. In my house, we like to do that at dinner, so we express gratitude for our food, for the earth that provided it and the hands that tended to it, and for any other people or occurrences over the course of the day that we're grateful for. Some people find a lot of support in [gratitude journaling](#): writing down each morning three or 10 things that you're grateful for; some people like to use different domains as prompts, like health, family, friends, work, nature.

Also, gratitude can come about more organically through just slowing down and paying attention more mindfully to the present moment, taking the stance of non-judgmental observation. For instance, when I'm on my walk with the dog in the morning, sometimes I try to really notice the hues of burnt orange and crimson in the leaves; when I'm drinking my tea right now, I'm trying to slow down and enjoy that tingling sensation of peppermint. I think mindfulness and gratitude are really closely linked—so when I take a mindful stance, gratitude is often what follows.

KN: It's easy to feel pressure toward gratitude right now, especially if you're healthy and employed and your loved ones are safe. But we're not saying people *should* feel grateful, right? What's your perspective on that? □

NG: I'm so glad that you brought that up because I think it can be really, really unhelpful to tell people you should be feeling grateful. So many reactions to what's happening right now aside from gratitude are understandable and important. So many people are feeling sadness, frustration, despair, hopelessness, and fear, and to hear that we should be feeling grateful can be alienating to our experience and it can result in us feeling shame and feeling worse off.

Research shows us that we can do these things to mindfully cultivate gratitude, but we can't force it. If we try to force it as a way to not feel the other feelings, it's really just an avoidance strategy like anything else that can lead us to feel worse. But, again, if we can allow ourselves to focus on the feelings that we're having without judgment and with full acceptance of that feeling, you might find that space opens up for gratitude to come in.

KN: Besides accepting our feelings, are there other strategies that you suggest to your clients when they're working through the pandemic?

NG: One thing that's helpful right now is to reflect on what has this pandemic showed me about myself? What have I learned about what's important to me, about my own resilience? What are my [strengths](#)? What am I capable of that I might not have been aware of? I think many of us feel like things are just being done to us and that we have such little control right now. But we can control how we respond, and we can control how we understand ourselves and learn about ourselves in working through hardship.

KN: For the holidays, how can people navigate the loss of traditions, disappointment, and sadness?

NG: Remember first that this pandemic will pass, that all of these holidays will be accessible to us in the future—Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanzaa, whatever it is that you're celebrating—even though it feels like we're in this thing forever. Feelings of sadness and frustration and anger are totally understandable right now. I'm sounding a little bit like a broken record, but it's important to feel them and honor them.

I also think about my work with people who lose a loved one. In the first year after losing someone, the holidays are often a challenge because it's such a stark reminder of the absence.

I think much of the advice that I give in that situation applies for now. I advise people to find some small way to honor the past, whether it's making your mom's famous pumpkin pie recipe or doing this practice of going around the table and sharing what you're grateful for with your roommate or your partner, or hopping on Zoom and finding somebody else who's important to you to do that with.

Then, we need to remove expectations that this holiday is going to feel like others and intentionally try to establish a radically new tradition—whether it's going for a hike with your family or sitting on the beach on the day of Thanksgiving, or making a meal entirely unrelated to the holiday. We can pre-record funny family stories from past holidays and send them over a video to one another, or mail one another holiday baked goods. I think some people are talking about cooking the traditional family recipe together over Zoom, or saying what we're grateful for over Zoom before sitting down with our own families. We can also get a sense of gratitude through giving, so thinking about dropping off items or friendly notes to our neighbors, as they're likely feeling isolated right now, too.

When we incorporate these new traditions, there's a feeling of injecting new life and meaning into what we're doing. Often times you may be surprised; this tradition may end up sticking and be something you want to do every year. So honoring the past with things that bring you comfort, and also trying something radically new.

About the Author



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