

Thank you!

Leading Through COVID-19

USING GRATITUDE TO CONNECT DURING COVID-19

As we all adjust to life during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's common to hear people saying they miss the interaction with their friends and loved ones. Technological advances have made it possible for us to virtually connect with one another, but the isolation resulting from staying at home is very real and unsettling to many of us. In the Greater Good Magazine, Elizabeth Markle says, "Humans need to feel connected. We need to feel seen, heard, and understood by another human—and to extend the same in return."¹ When we lose that ability to connect, anxiety heightens and depression can creep in. We have learned that gratitude is a virtue that connects people and provides vital emotional and physiological benefits. In these uncertain times, gratitude can fill the need for that human connection we desire and help us stay attuned to each other's health and well-being.

Gratitude, known to foster pro-social behaviors and lead to greater positive interactions, is even more relevant with today's social distancing. These interactions strongly correlate with the Law of Reciprocity, better known as the "pay it forward" response—*someone does something nice for you, you do something nice in return.*² This is applicable in personal and professional

Gratitude, known to foster pro-social behaviors and lead to greater positive interactions, is even more relevant with today's social distancing.

lives. While we may not have the usual interface with our teammates, there's abundant opportunity to express gratitude for an act of kindness and helpful behavior by our coworkers.

Practicing gratitude creates a positive neurochemical response in our brains. Greater

attention to what we are grateful for during these isolated times minimizes the brain's built-in negativity bias. Brain scans show being grateful activates regions of the brain associated with improving psychological well-being, considering the perspective of others and heightening the focus on what's going well. Gratitude also offers a protective response in the body by stimulating the release of oxytocin. This neurochemical blocks the release of the stress hormone cortisol.³ And, who doesn't need that? We most likely will be under insurmountable stress for the foreseeable future as the unpredictable spread of COVID-19 continues.

By expressing gratitude, we activate the parasympathetic nervous system (the calming part of the nervous system). Practicing individual and team gratitude helps our employees—and us—cope with the anxiety and apprehension associated with the pandemic. Together, we have greater resilience in the face of adversity, decreased depressive symptoms brought on by the loss of human interaction and greater awareness of positive thoughts and emotions.

What practice techniques can we use and share with our employees? One example is bringing together gratitude and handwashing, as suggested in the March 19th article in the *New York Times*, *Gratitude in the Face of Crisis*. While applying the 20-second rule of proper hand hygiene, reflect on feeling grateful for the doctors, nurses, first responders, front line hospital workers and employees in grocery stores and pharmacies.⁴

Because philanthropy professionals are in the business of building relationships, we are especially challenged with social distancing. Refraining from personal contact with clinician partners, donors and colleagues during mandatory isolation is torturous. There are things we can all do, however, that will continue to foster

goodwill and strengthen relationships. Gratitude is the answer. We can create connections simply by using creative expressions of gratitude:

- Ask donors and board members to write letters of gratitude or send short video clips thanking hospital clinicians for their tireless work during this pandemic.
- Invite employees to share expressions of gratitude about each other.
- Share these expressions of gratitude from donors and colleagues in morning huddles and other means of communication.
- Make video calls to donors to share stories of kindness and excellence happening in the hospital every day during the crisis. Emphasize how these help make it possible for the hospital to be successful.
- Send thank you notes to team members at their homes.

However you say it, “thank you” goes a long way in helping humans connect, especially during times of uncertainty. Philanthropy professionals are exceptionally talented at showing gratitude; and we can be of great service, right now, in helping others connect by simply using and implementing acts of gratitude.

About the Authors: Pam Maroulis, CFRE, is a Principal Consultant with Accordant. You can reach her at Pam@AccordantHealth.com. Linda Roszak Burton, BS, BBC, ACC is a Principal Consultant & Certified Executive Coach with Accordant and author of *Gratitude Heals ~ A Journal for Inspiration and Guidance*. You can reach her at Linda@AccordantHealth.com

¹ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_keep_the_greater_good_in_mind_during_the_coronavirus_outbreak

² <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/gratitude/definition>

³ https://health.ucdavis.edu/medicalcenter/features/2015-2016/11/20151125_gratitude.html

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/well/live/virus-well-newsletter-gratitude.html>