

For many, Thanksgiving can be a source of anxiety, conjuring up thoughts of hectic travel schedules, long hours in the kitchen and uncomfortable conversation with family members.

But as one Texas A&M University researcher explains, the [holiday](#) can help fill an important psychological need. According to Dr. Joshua Hicks, a professor in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, taking time to be thankful helps us feel a greater sense of [meaning](#) in our lives. Holidays like Thanksgiving can boost those feelings, he says.

"If you're searching for meaning, just taking a break to feel grateful—for what you have, for the people around you, whatever it is—certainly helps," Hicks said.

By its very nature, the tradition of Thanksgiving works to promote this type of behavior by encouraging people to gather together and take stock of the things that bring them comfort and happiness.

"It's an easy way to appreciate things for most people," Hicks says. "You have all these things available for you: Often you have authentic interactions with loved ones, you have good food and even a soothing sense of nostalgia related to previous Thanksgiving gatherings. All of these things are ripe for the experience of meaning."

Sources of meaning

For the last several years, Hicks has been studying the unique psychological importance of experiences like these, building on previous scholarship about the different ways humans find meaning in their lives.

Previously, Hicks said, sources of meaning were broken into three main factors: coherence, or the feeling that one's life makes sense; purpose,

which concerns the formation and pursuit of clear life goals; and existential mattering, described by Hicks as "the idea that your actions actually matter in the grand scheme of things."

But according to Hicks' research, there exists a separate fourth pathway to meaning, which he has termed "[experiential appreciation](#)." As Hicks explains, the ability to savor small moments like a meal, a talk with a friend, or time spent in nature [contributes uniquely to a person's overall sense of meaning](#).

"It's a very subtle aspect of meaning—it could be as simple as walking across campus and looking at something that you find beautiful," he said. "There's beauty everywhere, and just noticing and detecting it lie at the heart of experiential appreciation."

In the context of Thanksgiving, Hicks says experiential appreciation is highly compatible with broader notions of thankfulness or gratitude, making the holiday an excellent opportunity to replenish your sense of meaning.

"Gratitude goes hand in hand with that," Hicks said. "It's important to appreciate things, whether it's your experiences, your loved ones, your relationships, that you're alive, all of that is very important."

Still, Hicks admits, there are a number of obstacles that may detract from a person's ability to find joy and meaning in the Thanksgiving festivities. Conflicts with family members, including political disagreements, are some of the most common, he said, as are issues related to overuse of smartphones and social media. These in particular can prevent people from being truly present at their holiday gatherings.

"You have to resist the urge to get lost in your phone," Hicks said. "This is a time to connect and come together, and I think when you do that, all

this other stuff becomes trivial in many ways."

That feeling of human connection is one of the main psychological benefits of the holiday season, Hicks said. So while you're enjoying that next bite of turkey or [pumpkin pie](#), make sure you're also savoring each moment spent with friends, [family members](#) and others.

"If you want to make the holidays extra meaningful for yourself and others," Hicks said, "it is always good to reach out to loved ones or even acquaintances who don't have anywhere to go during the holiday. It is one of the easiest things you can do to remind people that they matter."

Provided by Texas A&M University

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