

To what extent does the practice of gratitude benefit personal relationships and communication?

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In the mid-15th century, the word “gratitude” evolved. The word “gratitude” derives from the Latin word “gratus”, meaning pleasing, welcome or agreeable. Over the past six centuries, the word “gratitude” has evolved to signify the quality of feeling thankful and the readiness to express appreciation. Although there are holidays created to celebrate this word and the impacts it has on the kindness of our world, the purposeful practice and expression of gratitude is often lost in the midst of our daily worries and struggles. The practice of gratitude can lead to changes in one’s baseline disposition and enhance connectedness to others. For example in the personal narrative named *A Simple Act of Gratitude*, John Kralik illustrates the ways in which gratitude turned his life around.¹ With clients refusing to pay bills, Kralik’s attorney business was sinking and he was close to bankruptcy. At the same time, Kralik had just experienced his second divorce and his mental health was crumbling. Despite the negative impacts on Kralik’s mental health from living alone, his small apartment in Los Angeles was all that he could afford. On New Year’s Day, 2008, he went on a hike and at the pinnacle, decided to set a goal for himself in the spirit of new beginnings. From that moment onward, Kralik would write one thank you note every day. After one year of applying thankfulness and gratitude to his life, he discovered that his perspective on life had shifted into a more positive lens. Furthermore, John Kralik described how over time, the notes led to more meaningful relationships and a deeper sense of connection with his acquaintances. Following the publication of his memoir, Kralik interviewed with Forbes and stated that “gratitude presses outwards and that creates good feelings in the universe. A lot of that comes back to you eventually”. The day John Kralik began practicing gratitude marked a turning point in his mental state and his relationships, as it has for many others in similar

¹ Homayun, Omaid. "How A Simple Act Of Gratitude Changed One Man's Life - And Can Transform Yours Too." *Forbes*, September 13, 2015. Accessed November 17, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/omaidhomayun/2015/09/13/how-this-simple-act-of-gratitude-can-impact-your-life/?sh=7ad6795f5c3e>.

experiences. For many, this drastic change led to questioning the extent to which gratitude benefits personal relationships and communication. The deliberate practice of gratitude significantly benefits personal relationships and communication because psychological studies have proven a recurring positive impact, and the neuroscience behind gratitude indicates the release of “happy hormones” in response to gratitude.

Despite the evidence of positive impacts of gratitude on relationships, some argue that gratitude can do more harm than good in relationships. In one article in *Forbes*, “Why Your Gratitude Journal Could Be Doing More Harm Than Good”, Greta Soloman claims that gratitude can lead to overlooking red flags in relationships. Soloman states that “if you ascribe to positive thinking and are a person who tries to make the best of everything, you could be in danger of using gratitude to gloss over things that need your attention.”² For example, if someone is repeatedly treated unfairly by a romantic partner, or even a friend, they could use gratitude as a way to refocus their attention on the positive aspects of their relationship or acquaintance. Indeed, it is true that the glorification of emotionally or physically abusive partners contributes to the cycle of abuse. However, this is an example of forgiveness, not gratitude. Forgiveness requires the complete acceptance of a person’s actions, despite the damage they cause. Meanwhile, the Latin root of gratitude means pleasing, welcome or agreeable. Since this definition is rather broad, it includes both the feelings a grateful person feels as well as the action they are thanking. Since abuse within relationships is neither pleasing, welcome, or agreeable, the appreciation of such a partner should be limited. However, forgiveness is often viewed as giving a pass to a transgression or moral violation performed by a friend or partner, when on the

² Soloman, Greta. "Why Your Gratitude Journal Could Be Doing More Harm Than Good." *Forbes*, March 19, 2019. Accessed November 17, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/gretasolomon/2019/03/19/why-your-gratitude-journal-could-be-doing-more-harm-than-good/?sh=4531cc29371c>.

other hand, gratitude is more of an emotional expression of thankfulness that does not require a cause. While some people can try to forgive unjust actions, ultimately causing them to be stuck in an abusive situation, the practice of forgiveness differs from the practice of gratitude, as gratitude should be a natural, genuine feeling. Therefore, it is imperative to distinguish the difference between forgiveness and gratitude to recognize the lack of negative impacts of gratitude. In a journal article by Alex M. Wood, Robert A. Emmons, Sara B. Algoe, Jeffrey J. Froh, Nathaniel M. Lambert, and Philip Watkins, the authors detail the harmful effects of gratitude to display more balanced research on the practice of gratitude.³ More specifically, the article brings to light what they have named the “slave-foreman problem”. In this issue, there arises an ethical dilemma when one tries to feel gratitude for the kind actions of a cruel or hostile person. The example posed is whether it is appropriate for a slave to feel gratitude toward their foreman who treats them well beyond what is expected of their position. Since the foreman still contributes to the cycle of slavery and recapture of forced laborers, gratitude toward any of their actions may be deemed unethical. The appreciation towards an acquaintance or an organization that is either harsh or oppressive due to their societal role can lead one to face a similar ethical dilemma and go out of their way to avoid mistreatment in the relationship. However, once again, justifying the oppression or mistreatment of a person or organization is forgiving their actions and focusing on their kinder traits. But one can feel grateful towards a person who is acting kinder than he or she might have despite the oppressive system in which they operate, while still recognizing that the system itself is unjust. Therefore, gratitude does not possess the same

³ Wood, Alex M., Robert A. Emmons, Sara B. Algoe, Jeffrey J. Froh, Nathaniel M. Lambert, and Philip Watkins. *A Dark Side of Gratitude? Distinguishing between Beneficial Gratitude and its Harmful Impostors for the Positive Clinical Psychology of Gratitude and Well-Being*. <https://scottbarrykaufman.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/ch10.pdf>.

possible negative impacts that forgiveness does, as gratitude only stems from what one truly admires in life, not what they are attempting to justify.

Several psychological studies have shown that the deliberate practice of gratitude significantly benefits personal relationships and communication. In a journal article by Science Direct, “Cooperation: The roles of interpersonal value and gratitude”, researchers Adam Smith, Eric Pedersen, Daniel Forester, Micheal McCullough and Debra Lieberman summarize the results of their experimental computer simulation. The simulation measured the welfare tradeoff ratio, which is how much participants value another player's welfare relative to their own, as well as the amount of gratitude felt toward the different players. When other players sacrificed their own wealth to help the participant gain more, the participant ended up feeling more grateful towards the players and was more likely to return the favor. Consequently, the researchers concluded that gratitude corresponds to a positive upward trend in the value placed on other people.⁴ Expressing gratitude to another being is a sign that we value them a significant amount, and as a result, are more likely to act in their favor in the future. This feeling, for both the person on the giving and receiving end of gratitude, creates a stronger sense of union, trust, and kindness within the relationship. Therefore, expressing gratitude does, indeed, benefit the strength and depth of personal connections and relationships, as well as the communication of positive feelings and emotions. In a journal article in Greater Good Berkeley, “It’s the little things: Everyday gratitude as a booster shot for romantic relationships”, researchers Sarah Algoe, Shelly Gable, and Natalya Maisel portray a closely related point of view. During the journal, the psychologists summarize their 2010 study on the effects of gratitude on romantic relationships

⁴ Smith, Adam, Eric J. Pedersen, Daniel E. Forester, Micheal E. McCullough, and Debra Lieberman. "Cooperation: The roles of interpersonal value and gratitude." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 38, no. 6 (November 2017): 695-703. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1090513817300818>.

by stating that “gratitude worked like a booster shot”.⁵ For both the giver of gratitude and the recipient, Algoe, Gable and Maisel discovered that gratitude benefitted evaluations of the relationships in their lives. As demonstrated by experiments in Science Direct and the Greater Good Magazine, the deliberate practice of gratitude positively impacts romantic relationships and communication because it brings attention to how much a loved one is valued. Through the research conducted by Adam Smith, Sara Algoe, and their partners, practicing and outwardly demonstrating gratitude leads to stronger casual and romantic relationships due to a boost in feelings of appreciation, trust, and overall happiness within the partnership.

The extent to which gratitude benefits personal relationships and communication is not only demonstrated by social studies, but it is also supported by the neuroscience of gratitude. One study was performed by the University of Oregon, and published by Gale in Context, to explore the relationship between gratitude journaling and pure altruism. In other words, researchers were aiming to find a correlation between gratitude journaling and the amount subjects feel inclined to help others. Pure altruism stems from internal values, and occurs when someone helps others at their own expense. In this study, the chosen subjects, all of whom were female for a more consistent experimental group, first rated their own levels of gratitude and altruism. In addition, they were placed under a fMRI scan of brain activity in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and nucleus accumbens, both of which are responsible for altruism in the brain. Then, the subjects were separated into either a gratitude journaling group or a control group for a three week experiment. After monitoring the prefrontal cortex and nucleus accumbens of the gratitude group and control group for three weeks, the conclusion was that those who practiced

⁵ Algoe, Sarah B., Shelly L. Gable, and Natalya C. Maisel. "It's the little things: Everyday gratitude as a booster shot for romantic relationships." *Personal Relationships* 17 (2010): 217-33.
<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Algoe-Gable-Maisel-2010-Its-the-little-things.pdf>.

gratitude had an increase in their neural pure altruism responses.⁶ Therefore, this study illustrates how practicing gratitude increases activity in parts of the brain that are responsible for helping others. The practice of gratitude not only enhances one's own mood, but it makes them more empathetic, caring, and inclined to help others. Furthermore, Oxford Academic published a journal article, "Evidence for a role of the oxytocin system, indexed by genetic variation in *CD38*, in the social bonding effects of expressed gratitude", in 2014 that details an experiment conducted to identify the neuroscience behind gratitude. According to researchers Sarah Algoe and Baldwin Way, the results of the study showed that expressing gratitude is closely linked with the release of oxytocin, which is often considered the "love hormone".⁷ The release of this hormone evokes more feelings of love and care toward one's partner, which in turn builds a greater connection and bond between the two people. According to the studies published in Gale in Context and Oxford Academic, gratitude alters brain activity and hormones, which causes humans to feel closer to their acquaintances and loved ones. The neuroscience behind gratitude both reinforces the psychological studies done on gratitude, and implies that intentional gratitude has the power to change the way our minds function, whether it is practiced in an intervention or done alone. Accordingly, the neuroscience behind gratitude proves that it stimulates areas of the brain responsible for pure altruism and releases the hormone oxytocin, both of which contribute to stronger relationships. Similar to the way in which humans can build muscles and skill by going to the gym on a regular basis, committing to a routine of gratitude can train our brains to be more caring, loving, and appreciative.

⁶ "Findings from University of Oregon Provide New Insights into Human Neuroscience (The Cultivation of Pure Altruism via Gratitude: A Functional MRI Study of Change with Gratitude Practice)." *Health & Medicine Week*, 2985. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A527098360/GIC?u=menlo_schlib&sid=bookmark-GIC&xid=46f21325.

⁷ Algoe, Sarah B., and Baldwin M. Way. "Evidence for a role of the oxytocin system, indexed by genetic variation in *CD38*, in the social bonding effects of expressed gratitude." *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 9, no. 12 (December 2014): 1855-61. <https://academic.oup.com/scan/article/9/12/1855/1611597?login=false>.

Although holidays such as Thanksgiving remind us to show our appreciation for the ones we love and cherish, the recent research on gratitude suggests that gratitude is a practice worthy of our attention every day, not just once a year. This year, I had the opportunity to express my gratitude to a family member through writing and reading gratitude letters. The first letter I wrote was to my brother and despite having a nation-wide distance between us, reading my letter to him aloud led to us each ending in tears. Then, in my Happiness Lab, I wrote two more letters which both had similar impacts to the letter before. Each time I wrote out my gratitude towards a family member or friend, I felt a deeper sense of warmth and love for them. But when I was able to express my thankfulness by reading the letters aloud, either in person or over a video call, I was overwhelmed with a new sense of connection, understanding, and vulnerability. Due to my personal experience with the purposeful practice and expression of gratitude leading to a deeper connection in relationships, I am further convinced that gratitude sparks a positive growth in connection and communication. In accordance with my practice with gratitude, the psychological and neuroscientific research on gratitude supports the larger idea that the intentional practice of gratitude positively affects personal relationships and communication. On the other hand, there are limitations to these findings proposed by psychologists and researchers. For one thing, there are certain relationships that simply can not be improved through the continual expression of gratitude. For example, abusive relationships often can not be fixed with small acts or expressions of appreciation. However, gratitude does appear to be most effectful for relationships that already have a stable basis in equality, rather than in obligation or exploitation, but could still benefit from the application of communication of appreciation, communication and trust. In order to learn more about the effects of gratitude on relationships and open communication, further research would need to be conducted on the following questions. What is the optimal

routine of gratitude practices for the most positive growth in relationships? For example, should both the people involved express and receive gratitude equally, and is there a prime duration of a gratitude intervention? Furthermore, if gratitude is an obligation that a friend or romantic partner “should” have, is it gratitude at all? Additionally, what relationships or specific people do not gain the positive impacts of gratitude in terms of aiding relationships and communication? Lastly, is there an extent to which the expression is overwhelming and uncomfortable for the person on the receiving end? If so, how could that difficult situation be avoided or prevented? Despite the need for further examination on the impact of appreciation on friendships and romances, current research does, indeed, point towards stronger relationships and communication as a result of gratitude. Therefore, we should intentionally apply gratitude to our relationships in order to live a life full of meaningful connections and love, and one similar to the Latin meaning of “gratus”: Pleasing, welcome and agreeable.

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