

# The Science of Gratitude



Wednesday May 20th

You may be aware that today is ‘Thank a Teacher’ day—there have been lots of messages on social media celebrating the great work that goes on in schools. It’s great to read it, especially after a week of very mixed media reactions to teachers. I know all of my teacher colleagues would also extend the thank you to everyone who works in schools, both teaching and support staff.

It’s always nice when others are grateful, especially when we’re trying our best in difficult circumstances. Dawn H shared a contribution from her daughter, Lucy, a Mental Health Senior Occupational Therapist who was (before going on a wonderful adventure to Australia 3 months ago) based at Highbury Hospital and worked within the Nottingham City community. As you can imagine, a challenging but incredibly valuable and varied role. This was her take on gratitude. It highlights how much of an impact the simple act of kindness can give, and how long it stays with us:



‘My research for my MSc was based on expressing gratitude in the workplace, and of course is applicable in every aspect of life. This was done within a community mental health setting with high levels of burnout and stress. Staff were asked to express gratitude to people of their choice via written notes (post it’s), email, face to face or in a letter. The findings were incredibly positive in how much the expression of gratitude impacted on the receivers feelings of being valued, appreciated, recognised, self-esteem and confidence raised and it increased social connectedness within and outside the workplace. The ‘winners’ that people found the most impactful were face to face, and a letter. The letter, people placed a lot of thought into writing, and really personalised it.’

Rachel I also emailed me to share a similar activity she had taken part in where people were encouraged to write positive comments about the other people in the room. She still has the paper with the comments written on and remembers vividly what a huge impact it had. It’s easy to take people, including those you work with, for granted. An act of kindness expressing genuine appreciation may take minutes to do but the positive feeling can stay with that person for a long time.

As Lucy writes: ‘There is a lot of literature within positive psychology on kindness, random acts of kindness, altruism. And findings suggest that engaging in helpful, kind acts boost your mood, mental state, feelings of worth and value.’

In terms of the impact kindness can have, there’s been some interesting work done on the impact practicing gratitude can have on mental wellbeing:

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

*Thank you to all the staff who have shared their own experience of acts of kindness, here’s another:*

When I was about 13 I used to travel on the school bus home. There were 2 school buses, one bus took a route through the villages, one was more direct into the town, and therefore a few minutes faster. I happened to live in one of the villages, so needed to get on the bus which took the longer route.

Some of the other pupils didn’t like going through the villages and when the bus driver asked if anyone needed to go through the villages, they all shouted “No!” I was too scared to speak up and resigned myself to having to find my way home from the town. Before that could happen another older pupil, seeing me sitting there, said “No – we need to go through the village”. She saved me from being left stranded. I was so grateful but too embarrassed to say anything to her. 35 years later, I ran into her at a mutual friends party and told her how much this small act had meant to me as a child. She’d had no idea how much it meant to me – but was overwhelmed that it had. I was so pleased to finally be able to thank her. 😊



## Research on gratitude

Two psychologists, Dr. Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, Davis, and Dr. Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami, have done much of the research on gratitude. In one study, they asked all participants to write a few sentences each week, focusing on particular topics.

One group wrote about things they were grateful for that had occurred during the week. A second group wrote about daily irritations or things that had displeased them, and the third wrote about events that had affected them (with no emphasis on them being positive or negative). After 10 weeks, those who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic and felt better about their lives. Surprisingly, they also exercised more and had fewer visits to physicians than those who focused on sources of aggravation.

Another leading researcher in this field, Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, tested the impact of various positive psychology interventions on 411 people, each compared with a control assignment of writing about early memories. When their week's assignment was to write and personally deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had never been properly thanked for his or her kindness, participants immediately exhibited a huge in-

crease in happiness scores. This impact was greater than that from any other intervention, with benefits lasting for a month.

Of course, studies such as this one cannot prove cause and effect. But most of the studies published on this topic support an association between gratitude and an individual's well-being.

Thanks to Janette for highlighting this, link is at <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>

Brené Brown also had a brilliant podcast with Dr Vivek Murthy (19th US Surgeon General) on loneliness and connection in which he sums up by saying one of the best ways to beat loneliness is to help/support/ someone else.

"...One of the things that I found in the writing of this book, to be a surprising but enormously helpful solution to loneliness, is service. It turns out that when we reach out and help someone else, that that not only enables us to connect with another human being, but it reminds us of our value and of our purpose in life. It turns out that giving and receiving both strengthen our social bonds. And in the time of COVID-19, that could mean checking on a neighbor. It could mean seeking advice. It could mean giving advice to a colleague who might be struggling to balance teleworking with caring for and homeschooling their kids. This is not easy, but this is a place where technology, if used right, can actually help us to fend off some of the social consequences of this pandemic. And can hopefully, if we do this right, maybe even give us a deeper appreciation for our relationships and leave us stronger than when we started."

<https://brenebrown.com/podcast/dr-vivek-murthy-and-brene-on-loneliness-and-connection/>

<https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2020/03/23/vivek-murthy-loneliness>



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