

The Benefits of Saying Thank You

Everyone knows how good it feels to be appreciated by someone else, but how does expressing gratitude affect the one who expresses it? Researchers at Yale, Florida State University, and the New College of Florida recently set out to answer that question.

In their first experiment they asked 137 college students to complete a survey about two issues: 1) how often they express gratitude to their partner or significant other in their daily lives, and 2) how strong their relationship is with that other person, which they call “communal strength.” They found that expressing gratitude and communal strength are highly correlated.

In their second experiment they asked another 218 students to complete the same survey about expressing gratitude and relationship strength at two different times, 6 weeks apart. They found that the tendency to express gratitude at Time 1 was correlated with perceived strength of relationship at Time 2, regardless of how strong the tendency was at Time 1.

In their final experiment they randomly assigned 75 students to one of four conditions. Students were instructed to either 1) increase their expressions of gratitude (verbally or through writing) to their partner twice a week for a 3 week period; 2) pay attention to activities with their partner and write them down twice a week; 3) think of positive past events in the relationship and bring them up with their partner twice a week; or 4) pay attention to events that made them feel gratitude toward their partner and write them down twice a week but not express them to their partner. There was no initial difference in communal strength scores among the four groups, so they all started out at the same level of relationship, but after three weeks the students who had been instructed to express gratitude to their partners reported higher communal strength scores in their relationships than did any of the other groups.

Keeping in mind the subjects in this study were all college students in a time of life when people are typically focused on starting relationships, the results may nevertheless have implications for the rest of us, mainly that expressing gratitude to our partners makes us feel stronger and probably more committed to them than just trying to be pleasant around them or merely feeling grateful toward them. The authors suggest that actually coming out and expressing gratitude may have two benefits. First, it positively affects how we see ourselves (i.e., “I’m being good and doing something nice for my partner”). Second, it likely produces good feelings in our partners as well, which they will probably give back to us, thus strengthening the relationship.

Of course, to really test this idea, we should probably try it out ourselves. Expressing gratitude to others might even improve other relationships in our daily lives.

Lambert, N.M., Clark, M.S., Durtschi, D., Fincham, F.D., Graham, S.M. (2010)
Benefits of expressing gratitude: Expressing gratitude to a partner changes one’s view of the relationship. *Psychological Science*, 21, Pp. 574-580.