

Why a small ‘thank you’ can make a big difference in relationships

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Summary

When did you last say thank you to someone? Not the “thanks for passing me my coffee cup” kind of thanks, but the look-‘em-in-the-eyes-and-express-some-gratitude kind of thanks. If you’re in a relationship it may be long overdue for you, your partner and your relationship. Here’s why a small ‘thank you’ can make a big difference in relationships.

For centuries we’ve been told to ‘count our blessings’ – to be grateful for the good things in life. But until recently, no-one would have thought that glib saying could be the basis of an evidence-based intervention for mental wellbeing and relationship happiness. But according to British psychologists [Alex Wood, Stephen Joseph and Alex Linley](#), if you’re not thinking about gratitude then you could be missing out on some serious benefits.

“The importance of gratitude has been a fundamental focus of religions including Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam”, according to the research team. Even Adam Smith – the strictly secular influence behind capitalism and free market economics – wrote extensively about gratitude. “[Smith] believed that gratitude was essential for society”, they say. But until recently, the study of gratitude was neglected by Western psychology.

The growth of the Positive Psychology movement changed that. Founded in 2000 by eminent US psychologist [Professor Martin Seligman](#), the flow on effects of gratitude have now been re-evaluated – and their benefits rediscovered. Seligman, a former [South Australian Thinker in Residence](#), revealed simple evidence-based methods for people to increase their happiness by 10% using simple exercises to express gratitude (see ‘Seligman’s gratitude exercises’ box). The benefits of these exercises can often be noticed instantly and can last months.

The flourishing Positive Psychology movement has found many other effective ways of 'doing gratitude' and improving wellbeing since Seligman's early work. There are now courses and organization-wide training on Positive Psychology including some through SA's own [SAHMRI Wellbeing and Resilience Centre](#). But what can couples do to express gratitude without feeling, well, a bit odd?

Enter [John Gottman](#), another pioneer of evidence-based interventions in psychology. Famous for his research predicting divorce by watching couples in conflict, Gottman theorised a similar foundation of gratitude when he talks about the Culture of Appreciation in relationships.

[Gottman's research](#) found that couples in troubled relationships get stuck in negativity and lose the energy to find and say something positive about their partner. Couples in at-risk relationships expressed one positive to one negative; the ratio for those in happy relationships was five to one. Crucially, these ratios held even in the midst of arguments. It seemed that happy couples can fight fair, expressing lots of admiration amongst their frustration.

But it's not all doom and gloom if you can't remember the last time you gave – or received – a positive in your relationship. Simple behavioural techniques in the Gottman method, as used by relationships counsellors in places like [Relationships Australia SA](#), make for meaningful and lasting change in relationship satisfaction.

Gottman method counsellors usually do it like this. First, they have a list of words that Gottman's research has found are often used by those in happy relationships to describe their partners (Loving, Sensitive, Brave, Intelligent, Thoughtful [and so on](#)). Then they give the list to their client and ask them to see if any words describe their partner. (In my years of doing this, only once did I hear someone say "No"! - the key is having a series of words which can prompt clients – crucial to nudge people who feel low on energy or motivation).

The next part can be done at home or in the therapy room. Clients privately jot down one to three characteristics that they appreciate about their partner. To support this, clients are asked to write down highly detailed, specific examples of times where their partner showed this characteristic that they appreciated. Lastly, clients ensure they have their partner's full attention – it doesn't have to be in the therapy room – and ask their partner to listen without interrupting while they read out their journal entry. Then rinse and repeat.

Gratitude Exercises

In one research study, Seligman's research participants said the two exercises with the most beneficial effect were:

1. "The Gratitude Visit"

People were given a week to think about, write and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but had never properly been thanked.

2. "Three good things in life"

People were asked to write down at night three good things that had happened or had gone well that day and why they felt grateful for these things. This exercise was kept up for one week.

Like the gratitude exercise, Gottman's exercise on building appreciation is simple but not simplistic. Importantly for troubled relationships, it can create an instant boost in relationship satisfaction. With enough repetitions, these small 'thank you's' may even begin to inoculate your relationship against divorce and build meaningful connections with people who may never have realised how important they were to you.

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