
Gratitude Is More Powerful Than You Think



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Regular appreciation and thanks from service users can make a huge difference in the lives of burnt out essential workers.

The marks of a surgical mask seared into the cheeks and over the nose. Brows furrowed in resigned exhaustion. Eyes that have seen too much suffering. Who can forget the harrowing faces of nurses and doctors photographed at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic? They remind us that healthcare workers perform a critical service, often to the detriment of their own physical and emotional health. And, as we enter the third year of the crisis, many have had enough.

Almost half a million healthcare workers in the United States have quit their jobs since February 2020, the [Atlantic](#) reported recently, citing the Bureau of Labor Statistics. A similar exodus is taking place in the [United Kingdom](#), [Singapore](#) and [Australia](#), to name a few. Many nurses are **burnt out**: The ranks of those intending to leave within a year have doubled to 20-30 percent, the International Council of Nurses said in December.

Blame a once-in-a-century contagion for taking stress on healthcare workers to the extreme, but theirs is a demanding job even in the best of times. As trite as it may sound, a little appreciation from the people who benefit from their service can go a long way.

In a [paper](#) published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, we and our co-authors* uncover just how much. We found that receiving gratitude energised healthcare workers on the job and, significantly, improved their family life by making them better spouses. Gratitude, it would appear, has greater impact on the recipient than what many might think.

Source of energy

While gratitude has become something of a buzzword in recent years, the focus has largely been on the benefits of feeling or expressing the sentiment. Our research is one of the first to examine the effect of gratitude on the receiver rather than the giver. More importantly, it examines the effect of receiving gratitude across the work and family domains.

We conducted two experience-sampling studies covering nearly 200 hospital employees (doctors and nurses) in China and Singapore as well as their spouses. In the first one, participants from a large public hospital in northern China filled out a thrice-daily survey over two weeks rating perceived gratitude from patients, whether they felt positive or negative feelings, and their relational energy (e.g. the extent to which they felt increased vitality when they interacted with their patients).

Meanwhile, participants' spouses were asked to fill a daily survey in the evenings about their satisfaction with the marriage and perception of their partner's performance at home.

We found that healthcare workers who received more appreciation and gratitude from patients had higher relational energy and, in turn, happier and more satisfied spouses. This association between relational energy and spousal satisfaction was significantly stronger for participants who [identified strongly with their job](#).

Our second study, conducted with nurses at a private hospital in Singapore and their spouses, was similar to the first, but focused on the unique role of patients' gratitude and relational energy. We measured patients' positive emotional display (e.g. patients smiling) and patients' social support (e.g. the

extent to which the patients were trusting or supporting). We also controlled for factors – positive affect, work engagement, self-efficacy and need for interpersonal connection – that could have an impact on the link between participants’ work-derived relational energy and their family life.

As it turned out, the findings of our second study were similar to those of our first. They underscored the effect of perceived gratitude from service beneficiaries on service providers’ relational energy at work, with positive spillover to their family lives. Importantly, we found that healthcare workers who identified more closely with their occupation were more energised by grateful patients. They were also better spouses at home.

Daily thanks over grand gestures

While our study participants were healthcare workers (doctor and nurses), we believe our findings can be extrapolated to workers in other essential services such as public transportation, sanitation, delivery and food. Even as many of us were able to bring our jobs home during the worst of the pandemic, these workers stayed on the frontline to keep societies running. Every bit of thanks and appreciation they receive could be a shot of much-needed adrenaline that trickle down to their personal lives.

There are two practical takeaways for organisations and managers. First, it is important to create *regular* opportunities for service users to show their appreciation for nurses, doctors, cleaners, bus drivers and couriers. Annual grand gestures such as International Doctors’ or Nurses’ Day are important but not enough. For gratitude to work its magic and give essential workers the energy to go on, the key is to practise it regularly.

Second, since workers who identify more strongly with their occupation are more likely to be energised by gratitude received at work, it is in the direct interest of managers and organisations to nurture this sense of identity in employees. For example, they could highlight attributes and qualities associated with the profession and the organisation. They could also remind employees of the meaning and value of their work, such as benefitting others or saving lives, and the personal values that led them to the profession.

The concept of gratitude is rooted in reciprocity: If someone has done something for you, you reciprocate by giving something back. A simple gesture of thanks and appreciation may be all that we can offer service

providers, but collectively it can literally make their day and improve their lives.

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About the research

["How and when service beneficiaries' gratitude enriches employees' daily lives"](#) is published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.