Positive psychology: gratitude and its role within mental health nursing

Article *in* British Journal of Mental Health Nursing · February 2020

DOI: 10.12968/bjmh.2019.0040

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Janet Macfarlane
University of Bolton
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Positive psychology: gratitude and its role within mental health nursing

Jan Macfarlane

Author details can be found at the end of this article

Correspondence to:
jm24@bolton.ac.uk

Abstract

This is the fifth article in a series of articles that explores the meaning of positive psychology and the importance of applying the latest related research findings for the wellbeing of the mental health workforce. It will focus on gratitude as a positive psychology intervention in its present day use in mental health nursing. It will explain what gratitude is and what it is not combined with the complementary underpinning theoretical work of Robert Emmons. It reports on neurological changes when gratitude is practised and is applied to a contemporary event linked to trauma. Finally it emphasises the importance of effective leadership in how the application of gratitude can benefit the individual, the organisation and the client. The practical tasks provided in the boxes throughout the article will help the reader identify what gratitude means for them and understand how to further develop its transferability through evidence-based, user friendly exercises.

Key words: Gratitude; Leadership; Mental Health Nursing; Positive psychology

Introduction

Gratitude clearly transcends culture and history and is perceived as a desirable characteristic to demonstrate (Manela, 2015). It is often linked to other factors such as hope, thankfulness, reciprocity and trust. Gratitude helps to bind people together, as it is a response to the value of receiving from another an exchange that is not given in self-interest, and reinforces that behaviour so that it is likely to be carried out again. When expected gratitude is not shown, feelings such as anger, frustration and putting own needs first are evident. For example, the response to not acknowledging thanks after letting in a driver to a busy traffic stream can often mean that this kindness is not repeated so quickly.

Gratitude, when used as a positive psychology intervention, has without doubt been a successful one. In individuals, it has been linked with increased and sustained wellbeing (Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky et al, 2011), life satisfaction (Fagley, 2012), reducing stress related illnesses (Armenta et al, 2017), improving relationships (Yanhui et al, 2018) and progressive mental health (Froh et al, 2011). In groups, it has been effective in strengthening social bonds (Grant and Gino, 2010), in clinical settings (Geraghty et al, 2010) and in education (Seligman et al, 2009). Gratitude may be thought of as an emotion, attitude, mood coping response or a way of life through involvement with others, the presence of a pet, precious object or having a faith. Macfarlane (2019a) notes it is not easy to classify but is perceived generally, as a desirable characteristic, especially as Emmons (2007) cites it as an intervention that gives the greatest positive benefit in the shortest amount of time.

What is gratitude?

Saying thank you is often something we say or do out of habit, maybe without truly meaning it and therefore lose the opportunity to use one of the most powerful ways to boost positive emotions. It may also be easier for some people to use it than others so it is emotionally intelligent to recognise that not everybody has the same ability to show gratitude to the same level. It would appear generally women find it easier than men to express (Yost-Dubrow and Dunham, 2018), in addition, some individuals have difficulty focusing on others more than themselves and there is also the awareness of cultural variations to take into account. The activities in **Box 1** can help to increase awareness of one's level of gratitude.

How to cite this article:
Macfarlane J. Positive psychology: gratitude and its role within mental health nurisng. British Journal of Mental Health Nursing. 2020;9(1):X-X. https://doi.org/10.12968/bjmh.2019.0040

Gratitude as a character strength

Gratitude is a recognised character strength and was defined by Niemiec (2018) as being aware and thankful for good things that happen and taking time to express these thanks. The activities in Box 2 can help to develop this character strength. It is also associated with kindness, love, hope, spirituality and zest, which are the other five character strengths that are most associated with life satisfaction, happiness, a meaningful life and work satisfaction (Park et al, 2004). It is one of the most common as well, coming sixth out of the identified twenty-four character strengths identified by Park et al (2004, 2006) after honesty, fairness, kindness, judgement and curiosity. Macfarlane (2019b) explored character strengths, confirming that they are the individuals' capacity for thoughts, emotions and behaviours. When these are all in balance, they help people to flourish in life (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Niemiec (2014) claimed that they are the things that positively come naturally to us and what we love to do because of the brain being hardwired to perform them because of constant practice. Seligman (2011) described them as the building blocks of a flourishing life and the pathway to wellbeing as illustrated in this seminal work by his model of PERMA, which comprises of the components: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment.

As with all other strengths, the context in which gratitude is used needs to be contextualised and used appropriately. Overuse in gratitude could be seen as ingratiation and may be used

Box 1. Becoming more aware of current levels of gratitude

Indicate how frequently you experience the following:

- I feel thankful for my level of physical health (never; a few times a year; a few times a month; a few times a week)
- I reflect on the negative times on my life to realise how fortunate I am now ((never; a few times a year; a few times a month; a few times a week)
- I think of people less fortunate than me to realise how fortunate I am now ((never; a few times a year; a few times a month; a few times a week)
- I really notice and acknowledge the good things I get in life (never; a few times a year; a few times a month; a few times a week)

Adapted from Adler and Fagley (2005)

Box 2. Developing the character strength of gratitude

- Offer thanks to those that carry out kind acts or say positive things to you
- Put post-it notes of gratitude on the desks of colleagues with sincere and thoughtful comments
- For one week at the end of the day, write down 3 things you are grateful for and consider why you are grateful for, being mindful to vary the items
- Walk in nature
- Watch a favourite film
- Appreciate that nothing lasts forever
- Discuss with others good things that have happened to them
- Focus on your blessings – they are gifts not rights
- Create a gratitude board – you could use images, photos, before and after achievements
- Log onto www.gratefulness.org for inspiration
- Download the Gratitude diary app (free from iTunes) or Attitudes of Gratitude (free from Google Play)

Box 2. Developing the character strength of gratitude (continued)

Films to watch:
- It's a wonderful life
- Life is beautiful
- The Pursuit of Happyness
- Pay it Forward
- Forest Gump.

Songs to listen to:
- Thank you for being a friend – Andrew Gray
- They can't take that away from me – Ira Gershwin
- Your song – Elton John
- What a wonderful world – Sam Cooke
- Thank you – Celine Dion.

Adapted from Niemiec and Wedding (2014) and Niemiec (2018)

if one acts impulsively or overthinks a situation. Alternatively, underuse could be seen as entitlement and may be observed in oversight or undervaluing a situation; therefore, in these situations, it is no longer a strength (Niemiec, 2014). Friedlin et al (2017) investigated overuse and underuse of character strengths and suggested overuse and underuse could affect a person's mental health in a negative way.

Mindfulness

As a strength, gratitude correlates strongly with mindfulness (explored in the fourth article of this series – Macfarlane and Weber, 2019) by helping a person to develop greater awareness and the ability to intentionally savour aspects of one's own life (Bryant and Veroff, 2007). It helps to prepare responses to situations where positivity and meaning can be extrapolated to increase optimism (Sears and Kraus, 2009). Mindfulness is the perfect example of a positive psychology intervention for emotional development; aligning this with the facilitation of gratitude-focused thoughts and intentions can gain a deeper appreciation of what is good in one's life and recognise the sources outside of one's self that contribute to this. Niemiec (2014) suggests regular practice will help in reducing complaining and ruminating on the negative by being more non-judgemental and less analytical. Koo et al (2008) further developed a powerful exercise relating to gratitude, which involves focusing on how our lives would be without a particular object, event or person to fully appreciate their presence and contribution to our own fulfilment and happiness.

Focus on self

One's own self-assessment may indicate if an individual has a natural strength in showing gratitude or not. It may be that there are genetic influences in personality traits that are triggered by the environment to be responsive or not responsive and like every skill, it can be improved and developed by proactive behaviour. For example, asking for compliments to reinforce a positive self-concept, or planning to show gratitude or purposeful kindness on a daily basis.

Measuring gratitude

Morgan et al (2017) devised and applied the Multi-Component Gratitude Measure, which measured the understanding of gratitude, emotions, attitudes and affiliated behaviours, and found it could be extended to other constructs. They proposed that positive interventions relating to gratitude ought to be combined with what it is, why it might be a useful quality

to cultivate, and when it is appropriate to achieve the most powerful effect. Wong and Roy (2018) also comment on incorrectly seeing gratitude as a specific component of a person's life and not part of an holistic overview of appreciative attitude. Wong (2016) emphasises the importance of internalising it as a virtue will make it more relevant to people from all ethnic-cultural contexts.

Further reflection might not only focus on what was received and given, but how difficulties caused to others can be reduced. It may be that there are people that exude this characteristic and it is a positive action to keep in contact with them and to appreciate and learn from their positivity, especially when times are hard. Learning to focus on what one has in the present moment, appreciating the natural beauty of the environment and comparing favourably to others' positions in society will vary individually. The activities in **Box 3** can help to identify why one is grateful.

Evaluating what gratitude means

It is important to be critically evaluative of any research and this is especially pertinent in the emerging field of positive psychology to ensure its robustness. In relation to gratitude, there may be different views on what it actually is (Gulliford et al, 2013). Gratitude could be 'dyadic' – having only a beneficiary and a benefit (Gulliford and Morgan, 2018), such as an appreciation of one's life or the beauty of nature. Alternatively, it could be argued that there should always be a benefactor as well (McAleer, 2012), and that it should always be positive in nature. For example, receiving a thoughtful gift is often seen as a positive emotion; however, this could be tempered with a negative response of obligation or uncomfortableness if the gift was not wanted (Gulliford, 2016). Equally, being nominated for an award at work may be rewarding for recognition of one's hard work, but may also incur a feeling of indebtedness or expectation of reciprocity, and an insincere gratitudinal response would not be classed as gratitude (Gulliford et al, 2013).

Indebtedness is different to gratitude

Indebtedness often has feelings of anxiety attached. It may be that the person does not want to pay back but feels obliged to because of maintaining a position in the social network, it may be hard to match the value of the gift, a person may feel expected to give something in return or support an action that they do not agree with, especially if the giver reminds the recipient of their obligation. The use of power can evoke indebtedness, as not showing gratitude may expose a person to incur negative actions.

Gratitude cannot be used to sweep issues under the carpet and overdosing on it can lead to overdependency on others in unhealthy relationships. Healthy gratitude focuses on others with no strings attached, so it is important to consider the self and the value that one also gives to success to keep a perspective and be accepting of when it is given. There are times when gratitude is the wrong emotion, so context is really important.

Box 3. Identifying why you are grateful

- I am grateful for my family because…
- I am grateful for my friendship with… because…
- Something good that happened to me this week was…
- I am grateful for who I am because…
- Something else that I am grateful for is… because…

To further increase the activity, choose something from the range and share it with a colleague. It may be large or small but be specific, for example, children's laughter, or a beautiful sunset

Now enjoy reliving the moment

Adapted from TherapistAid.Com (2015)

Gratitude in adversity

Gratitude might not be seen as the first activity to engage in when experiencing extreme stress, adversity or grief and, indeed, should only be engaged in when the person is ready to process events to avoid the opposite response. However, a degree of deprivation or experience of a traumatic event is when this strength often comes into its own. Gratitude can be linked to positive outcomes in trauma, increased resilience and reduce rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as focusing less on materialism (Polak, 2005; Kashdan et al, 2006; Lies et al, 2014; Vieselmeyer et al, 2017).

Bolton University fire

Gratitude in adversity is a particularly pertinent topic, as in November 2019 (a fire swept through Bolton University's student accommodation blocks, (BBC News, 2019), leaving 200 students homeless and displaced with no access to their belongings, if indeed they were lucky enough to have any left, in a situation they had not experienced before so had no exposure on how to deal with it. Many had lost passports, birth certificates, academic work, clothes, items of family history, money and possibly other things that they have not yet realised. So, while one would never hope to experience this event, the fact that there were no fatalities, and only two students who required medical attention, losing items of value or being faced with mortality can provide a perspective, and gratitude can transfer a person away from temporary circumstances to appreciate the wholeness of existence.

Gratitude can not always provide a brisk solution, yet it does have the power to heal and help cope with crisis and there will be no doubt be various levels of grief seen as loss, which is acknowledged through the four stages moving from denial to anger, bargaining and eventually moving towards some level of acceptance (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 2005).

People felt scared, isolated, numb and demoralised, and yet this event also showed gratitude demonstrated openly and freely. The skills and experience of the emergency services, the staff who volunteered throughout the weekend, the many donations of clothes, toiletries and sundries from individuals, shops and organisations, the free food and drinks provided from the canteens for students and their families, the hotels and local people who opened their doors to provide accommodation, and the financial, administrative and emotional coordination of the university for affected persons, helped to begin a pathway of gratitude by highlighting grit, tenacity and a potential reframing of the future. These acts covered the basic needs, as identified by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1981), in terms of immediate life-saving physiological gifts and offers of safety, security, affection and increased self-esteem, for which gratitude was evident.

Gratitude will also appear later for many after therapy, such as counselling, has taken place. It can be difficult to match cognitive gratefulness with emotional dissonance and appreciation of time, and it is acknowledged that practice is required for full healing to take place (Emmons and Stern, 2013). The longer-term effects on academic learning, initiating new or igniting relapses of mental illness have yet to be measured and educators must be mindful of signs of trauma that may appear so effective signposting can take place. These could include higher absences, adverse behaviour, withdrawal, poor attention span, increased anxiety, and hyper vigilance (National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee, 2008).

Gratitude and neuroplasticity

As trauma can affect the brain (Sherin and Nemeroff, 2011), studies have also shown how experiencing gratitude can manifest itself neurologically. A study by Zahn et al (2009) found that experiencing emotions involved in gratitude activated areas in the mesolimbic and basal forebrain, which are linked with feelings of reward and social bonds. Their next study reported that people who more readily experience gratitude have more grey matter in their right inferior temporal cortex, which is an area linked to social intelligence (Zahn et al, 2014). Karns et al (2017) observed that people with more trait gratitude appeared to have more altruistic brains; this could be strengthened by carrying out gratitude interventions that reward and encourage prosocial behaviour.

In studying the process of practising gratitude by donating to charity, areas of the brain associated with making mental calculations were stimulated, suggesting that gratitude is a cognitive and an emotional process (Kini et al, 2016). Cox (2018) cited gratitude as a 'secret sauce': when gratitude was used, the brain released dopamine and serotonin, triggering positive emotions such as optimism and intrinsic motivation. The more frequently this is carried out, the stronger the neural pathways become.

The importance of using gratitude for mental health nurses

Mental health nursing is more than a job, as it involves the caring of vulnerable others, being supportive of colleagues, promoting positive health amongst other duties, in often challenging and difficult circumstances. Expressing and receiving gratitude enable nurses to cope with the ever changing and demanding work environment (Lanham et al, 2012). Gratitude has been shown to have many benefits for the general population, and also with nurses as a specific group, demonstrating improved physical and psychological signs and symptoms relating to lowered blood pressure, better sleep, conveying more compassion and taking better care of themselves (Randolph, 2017). Development of this skill may help counterbalance the stresses of work and help demonstrate a more peaceful presence with clients and in the clinical team. Amin (2013) observed that it can also enrich management skills, increase productivity and improve decision making. Starkey et al (2019) outlined that more episodes of being thanked at work was positively related to improved physicality in sleep, eating and satisfaction.

Benefits of using gratitude for clients

Because of the varied benefits seen by gratitude practice, there has also been research on its use with clients who have mental health issues. Leung and Tong (2017) compared cohorts of clients who had substance misuse issues, and found that those who showed higher traits of gratitude showed stronger coping strategies and lower drug use. In contrast, Krentzman (2017) found that clients from an alcohol treatment centre who did not abstain following treatment had high gratitude levels, which was thought assisted them in ignoring their harmful behaviours and situations. Studies have shown that gratitude may benefit patients by lowering stress, depression and anxiety (Petrocchi and Couyoumdjian, 2016; Disabato et al, 2017) and by reporting less suicidal ideation (Huffman et al, 2014; White et al, 2017). Conversely, Celano et al (2017) reported that cognitive-focused interventions were more effective than positive psychology interventions in a group of patients who were being discharged after major depressive illness and attempted suicide. These results suggest that gratitude interventions may have some usefulness for clients, but it is too early to ascertain if they are equal to more standard therapies on offer, or are better used as a complementary package of care.

Receiving gratitude

Practising gratitude seems to be beneficial, but little is known about the impact of receiving gratitude, whether this is by words or cards of thanks, or by gifts such as chocolates or flowers, which are much less seen in mental health settings compared to general health settings (Aparicio et al 2019). This scoping review around showing gratitude from clients towards health professionals, indicated it is mainly anecdotal evidence. However, they further concluded, that as human beings, mental health nurses recognise that it is the quality of a given interaction from clients that has more meaning than the quantity of less sincere comments, and this serves as motivation for further altruistic intent. This may suggest that this is helpful in coping with the accompanied stress of the many crisis situations mental health nurses find themselves in, and the ability to reframe difficult situations in a balanced way helps to develop emotional closure towards unpleasant memories of events.

Meaningful recognition can be seen as one of the six elements associated with healthy work environments to produce effective and sustainable outcomes for patients and nurses. The others are:

- Standard 1: Skilled Communication. Nurses must be as proficient in communication skills as they are in clinical skills
- Standard 2: True Collaboration. Nurses must be relentless in pursuing and fostering true collaboration
- Standard 3: Effective Decision Making. Nurses must be valued and committed partners in making policy, directing and evaluating clinical care, and leading organisational operations
- Standard 4: Appropriate Staffing. Staffing must ensure the effective match between patient needs and nurse competencies
- Standard 5: Meaningful Recognition. Nurses must be recognised and must recognise others for the value each brings to the work of the organisation
- Standard 6: Authentic Leadership. Nurse leaders must fully embrace the imperative of a healthy work environment, authentically live it, and engage others in its achievement. (Pinkerton, 2005).

In the nursing profession, so much time is spent on the welfare of others, it often means that it is too easy to ignore individual staff wellbeing and that this lack of caring for the carers could lead to poor delivery of care. Patients require that the staff are at their best, so understanding the rewards of taking time to experience and receive gratitude is a reward so very well deserved.

Mindful interaction

Working in nursing lends itself to being in contact with an extensive range of clients and colleagues from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and appreciation of the variation of constructs surrounding gratitude needs to be acknowledged. Although gratitude is prized in many religions including Muslim, Buddhist, Christian and Jewish groups, there may well be a variation in responses and subsequent positive reactions that may be misinterpreted by nurses who are not aware of them. Working with a range of people and mindfully interacting to understand that individual's background to recognise familiar and unfamiliar thoughts and behaviours increases understanding and reduces stereotyping. An improved understanding of others leads to effective relationships in the care context as well as the workplace, at home and in education, as talking to others highlights what is often taken for granted, for example, in terms of background, freedom, health, and support systems.

Focusing on others by showing thoughtfulness, being sensitive to preferences and giving of time is effective when it is carried out regularly and not forced. Acting as a positive role model, for example: saying thank you to someone who may not often receive this affirmation, such as administrative staff or the cleaning staff, letting someone know they are 'your hero', or by volunteering to help, enables others to mirror actions for themselves and also experience positivity.

Cheng et al (2015) researched chronic occupational stress among health care practitioners, investigating how practising the gratitude intervention of writing a diary could improve their mental health. The results showed significant decrease in stress levels and depressive symptoms; although this lessened over time, it illustrated this as an effective intervention. **Box 4** suggests a gratitude exercise to carry out to increase wellbeing The activities in **Box 5** have been found to improve sleep, reduce physical symptoms of pain and worry in depression. Clearly, it is not realistic to be eternally positive and grateful; pointing out mistakes, challenging poor practice and showing corrections are essential to delivering high-quality care. However, the ability to forgive occasional, unintended mistakes

Box 4. Gratitude exercise to increase wellbeing

- Think of a deserving person who you have never properly thanked before.
- Write a thank you letter to them expressing how much you appreciate them.
- Arrange to deliver the letter in person and read it out aloud to them.

This boost of happiness lasts up to a month to the giver as well as the helping the recipient feel appreciated.

Adapted from Seligman et al (2005)

Box 5. Count one's blessings to improve positive emotions aligned with gratitude

- Keep a gratitude journal and write in it two times a week for a minimum of two weeks
- You could select a beautiful notebook/diary to increase the pleasure of writing down your thoughts and emotions
- Do not rush to write down the first thing – plan for 10–20 minutes to appreciate your thoughts
- Write in the specifics and details of why you are grateful
- Prompts might be:
  - The best part of today …
  - Something beautiful I saw …
  - An unexpected good thing that happened…
  - Something I am proud of…
  - Someone whose company I enjoy…
  - An experience I am lucky to have…

Adapted from Emmons and McCullough (2003)

produces an atmosphere of trust and allows others to learn and try new things again, increasing engagement and productivity. This is crucial to help stabilise social cohesion and improve the team's ability to function when both good and bad things happen. It could by hypothesised that teams who help each other will increase individual wellbeing and improve each others mood, which will in turn, help support professional self-regulation in the nursing profession and reinforce affirming behaviour. It is naïve to believe that gratitude is a panacea to negativity; it is easy to practice when all is going well, but there will be times when it may be temporarily too difficult to show at all, and it is then that it will be the most vital quality to help, support and see the big picture.

Leadership

Effective leaders appreciate the importance of recognising and showing appreciation to others within their team at all levels. Unless told, people may not be fully aware of the positive impact they are making. In return for being appreciated, they may feel more motivated to be flexible and work harder to contribute to team and organisational goals. Jin and McDonald (2017) demonstrated that when staff believe they are supported, higher levels of overall gratitude are expressed and shown as engaging in pro-employment activities, such as working later and volunteering for further tasks.

Developing the team

A healthy nursing team is engaged with their colleagues, managers and clients. They demonstrate dedication, perseverance and initiative in changing times. This is hard when a lot of the workforce are faced with increasing workloads, diminished resources, changing job roles, and reduced autonomy (Buchan et al, 2019). Team development activities can focus on what is going well, explore why it is working well and reward successes accordingly. Discussing with colleagues about good things that have happened to them at work and outside of work might be a positive addition to end most meetings.

Gratitude can be developed by sharing strengths and talents so others can learn and appreciate the action, or thanking team members for their specific contributions, thereby enhancing group dynamics. Being able to take the time to be clear and concise rather than a generalised comment such as 'that was good' is much more effective. The colleague receiving the compliment will have their self-esteem enhanced and as they feel safer, their creativity and productivity will be triggered.

Key points

- Evidence-based practice shows how practicing gratitude has positive effects on mental health and psychological wellbeing and is linked to forgiveness and kindness.
- Developing gratitude will help improve reflective practice with transfer of knowledge being applied to other areas of life.
- Gratitude can be helpful in supporting those who have experienced traumatic events.
- Mental health nursing teams that encourage cohesion and gratitude increase their performance in many ways, therefore, it makes sense to cultivate this for communal benefit.

A sincere giving of thanks is always well received, whether delivered verbally or through written ways – a hand written note is a very powerful form of communication as it takes time and thought to compose in comparison with a standard email to all (Sherman, 2012). Riordan (2013) commented that teams that encourage cohesion and gratitude increase their performance in many ways; therefore, it makes sense to cultivate this for communal benefit and creating a positive feedback loop (Mosely and Irvine, 2014)

Conclusions

This article has looked at the development of gratitude as a positive psychology intervention from a theoretical and applied perspective. It clearly states the importance of not overlooking the conceptual complexities surrounding it and points out that research needs to be aware of its potential ambiguity. Scientific research surrounding gratitude is relatively new with many questions ready to investigate so it opens up the mental health setting as an area rich for potential exploration in gratitude because of its many benefits in motivation, improved health and positive relationships. It also highlights areas that are more complex, such as how using gratitude can control behaviour and its perception following a traumatic event. There are of course a range of factors that will influence whether individuals are likely to engage in these interventions or not and how much benefit will be derived. However, gratitude is one of the most effective positive psychology tools available and can be used in improving our own wellbeing.

Author details
Faculty of Health and Well-Being, University of Bolton, Bolton, UK

Acknowledgements
The author is grateful to Professor Jerome Carson for commenting on an earlier version of this manuscript. This article is dedicated to the students, staff and others affected by the fire at the University of Bolton, November 2019.

Conflicts of interest
The author declares that there are conflict of interests.

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