

## **Strengthening Family Connections with Letters of Gratitude in the Family Science Classroom**

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**ABSTRACT.** This manuscript discusses a *letters of gratitude* assignment based on gratitude research and on the family strengths framework. Instructors can use this assignment in various family science courses. The assignment represents a relatively simple, cost-effective strategy to strengthen family ties and improve health in emerging adults. This paper provides information on the importance of gratitude, on academic and familial benefits of the assignment, and an explanation of the assignment.

*Keywords:* family, gratitude, letters

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### **Introduction**

Gratitude, known as the simple expression of appreciation, is also a powerful catalyzing agent for positive change in domains such as happiness and well-being (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; McCullough, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). The root of the word *gratitude* derives from the Latin *gratia*, which means *grace* or *graciousness*. Commonly used words that describe gratitude also reflect qualities of graciousness; such words include kindness, generosity, gifts, and beauty (Pruyser, 1976). Generally, contemporary definitions of gratitude refer to “a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty” (Peterson, Martin, & Seligman 2004, p. 554). However, definitions of gratitude can differ greatly depending on context and on how people employ the word. For the purposes of this assignment, we rely on Emmons’s (2004) definition of gratitude as “the recognition and appreciation of an altruistic act” (p. 9). That recognition results from two cognitive processes: (a) that one has obtained a positive outcome and (b) that an external agent is responsible for providing that outcome (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Furthermore, Emmons and Stern (2013) describe gratitude as a cognitive-affective state that develops when one perceives a personal benefit from another person. The other-oriented emotion of gratitude has the power to change cognitive-affective styles and social relationships, which is the basis for the writing assignment presented here. However, it is necessary to look more closely at the power of gratitude as a vehicle for positive change.

### **The Power of Gratitude**

Numerous studies support the idea of gratitude as a vehicle for positive affect and well-being (Emmons, 2008; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Toepfer, Cichy & Peters, 2011; Toepfer & Walker, 2009). Others report that those who express gratitude frequently demonstrate improvement on measures of well-being (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Gratitude promotes positive reframing of negative situations (Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, 2009) and enhances personal comfort in voicing relationship concerns (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, 2010).

Gratitude’s impact extends beyond the individual and into the interpersonal domain. Numerous studies show that expression of gratitude improves relationships and social functioning in various ways (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky 2006; Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Joseph, 2008). For example, Algoe et al. (2008) found that acts of naturally occurring gratitude are a basis for predicting relationship quality between college sorority sisters when established

sorority members had been generous, perceptions by new sorority members of benefactor responsiveness from the older members improved. This was one of the first studies to associate gratitude with relationship formation. Slatcher and Pennebaker (2006) found that expressive writing among young adult dating couples increased relationship stability, especially for those who used positive emotion words in their writing. Lambert and Frank (2011) showed that gratitude increases positive perceptions of one's partner and subsequently improves perceptions of the relationship. Findings indicate that expressing gratitude has positive effects in long- and short-term romantic relationships (Lambert & Fincham, 2011). According to several studies, expressions of gratitude have positive effects on marital relationships (Lambert & Fincham, 2011; Schramm, Marshall, & Harris, 2005; Sharlin, 1996). Sharlin (1996) showed that verbal gratitude expression between married partners over time leads to satisfying marriages. There are also immediate effects of expressing gratitude. Newly married couples benefit from expressing gratitude toward one another and enjoy higher rates of marital satisfaction and better adjustment (Schramm et al., 2005).

One study found an association between perceived positive behavior of a partner (without actual behavioral change in that partner) and increased gratitude, on the same day (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Slav, 2006). Findings consistently demonstrate that expression of gratitude by couples is a means to improving communication and strengthening relationships (Kramish, 1956; Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010). The effect is so strong that even among couples with an acknowledged divide (such as unequal division of domestic labor), expression of gratitude dissipated negative feelings (Klumb, Hoppmann, & Staats, 2006). Some describe gratitude as the most powerful variable for improving couple relationships when compared to factors such as effective communication, domestic labor, or listening (Hawkins, Marshall, & Allen, 1998). Interpersonal connection is what makes the family strengths perspective the foundation of the *letters of gratitude* assignment this article presents.

### **Family Strengths Perspective**

The basis of the family strengths perspective is the philosophy that all human beings have strengths, capacities, and the ability to grow (Saleebey, 2009). It is an orientation toward health and away from pathology. It emphasizes human factors of resilience, ability, and potential. It does not deny or neglect problems or trauma. Instead, the perspective employs strengths in the service of empowering families and finding solutions to problems (Agllias, 2011). The family strengths framework is a global model that promotes strong, positive family relationships to manage stress and crisis effectively from within the family system (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002). Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) propose six qualities of strong families: commitment, time together, appreciation and affection, positive communication, spiritual wellness, and coping with crisis. The two qualities that best fit the present assignment are *appreciation and affection* as well as *positive communication*. These qualities align naturally with goals of the *letters of gratitude* assignment.

### **Benefits of the *Letters of Gratitude* Assignment**

The assignment is beneficial in academic and in familial settings. As an academic writing assignment, *letters of gratitude* requires students to put their thoughts into words, thereby increasing their proficiency in that skill. The assignment employs the family strengths framework by using the model's *appreciation and affection* and *positive communication* components. From the family perspective, the task requires students to express positive feelings to a parent, grandparent, or sibling; it is possible that students have had such feelings but never communicated them until this assignment. The assignment is structured to take advantage of cumulative benefits of writing as shown by Toepfer et al. (2011). These findings indicated that positive outcomes of writing increased significantly over the course of writing three letters. The assignment also allows for long-term work with the emotion of gratitude. Writing these letters is a behavioral expression of appreciation and positive communication through gratitude; therefore, it has the capacity to shape positive growth among family members. While the project can be adapted to many different classes, these courses provide an ideal fit with course content: (a) Interpersonal Relations and the Family, (b) Life Span Development, and (c) Building Family Strengths.

While most anyone can benefit from writing letters of gratitude, college students between ages 18-22 are the primary cohort using the assignment (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004; Toepfer & Walker, 2009; Toepfer et al., 2011). This age range is a period often referred to as emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 2006; Arnett, 2000). During emerging adulthood, many young people continue receiving emotional support from parents (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselman, Zarit, Furstenberg, & Birditt, 2012; Kim, Zarit, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2014; Swartz, Kim, Uno, Mortimer, & O'Brien, 2011), which provides these emerging adults ample opportunities to express gratitude for that support. This is consistent with other lifespan research indicating that family members are natural recipients of gratitude (Defrain & Asay, 2007).

If writing to a family member is not feasible (e.g., because the family member is deceased or because of familial dysfunction or estrangement) authors may write to non-family members such as friends or significant others. In special cases participants may write letters that are not delivered to addressees; letters need not be mailed in order to complete the assignment or to experience benefits of gratitude. Generally, however, participants' letters should be mailed, but the authors' realize their primary benefit due to the writing process.

### **Learning Objectives**

The *letters of gratitude* assignment provides an opportunity to learn about the family strengths model within family sciences. The following learning objectives represent the desired outcome for participants.

1. Students should be able to specify meaningful sources of gratitude and important relationships.

2. Students should be able to better articulate complex, often abstract feelings and thoughts associated with gratitude based on the conscious act of writing.
3. Students should be able to make clear connections between the act of writing letters of gratitude with related family strengths concepts such as *appreciation and affection* as well as *positive communication*.

### **Procedure for the *Letters of Gratitude* Assignment**

Students are required to write three letters of gratitude as an in-class assignment. Letters should be addressed to different family members on three separate occasions at one-week intervals. Students can write their letters at any point during the semester at the discretion of instructors, but best practices dictate conducting this assignment early to provide opportunities for class discussion. This allows time for linking the assignment to class material regarding gratitude, relationships, health, and other relevant course concepts. It is best to avoid other strenuous due-dates, such as final exams.

Students may write letters to anyone, but writing to immediate family members as intended recipients is recommended. Students who choose to write to non-family members should receive instructor permission to do so. An option to this step is to ask students to place sticky notes on the outside of their sealed envelopes, stating their relationships to the recipients.

Students are to bring sheets of blank paper and stamped envelopes addressed to the recipients at each of the three writing sessions.

Letters are to be

- handwritten;
- a minimum of ½ page in length and a minimum of six sentences;
- non-trivial and focused on non-material things for which students are grateful;
- signed by the authors;
- sealed and given to the instructors to mail.

Those who are absent on the day of the in-class assignment may turn in their letters at the next class meeting. Letters should not be thank-you notes for gifts. Instead, they need to express gratitude for non-material acts of caring. For example, one may thank someone for emotional support because they were always there for the writer, or for specific acts of kindness. The basis of evaluation of completed assignments includes (a) providing a full letter to the specifications outlined above, (b) providing the necessary materials (stamped envelope), and (c) submitting it to the instructor for mailing.

## Discussion

The *letters of gratitude* assignment is a method for improving relationship bonds in families. Evidence indicates that this method has additional benefits. Previous studies show increased well-being among authors who completed letters of gratitude assignments, as measured on indices of happiness and life-satisfaction; there were also simultaneous decreases in depressive symptoms (Toepfer & Walker, 2009; Toepfer et al., 2011). In part, these results may explain why student-participants have enjoyed the project. In the 2011 study, 68% of participants said they would like to write more letters of gratitude and that they planned to do so. Some study participants provided anecdotal comments. For example, one student-participant stated, "Writing the letters was hard but putting my feelings on paper put some relationships into perspective." Another student said, "I fight feelings of depression and this assignment helped me appreciate my family, especially my mother, who have always been there for me." Another comment addressed challenging aspects of the writing process: "It was difficult to come up with a third person but it just made me dig deeper into who I appreciated in life." Other participants were more general but no less enthusiastic in their remarks, writing, "I loved it!" At the risk of overemphasizing the positive, it is notable that just two of the 219 participants in the 2011 study stated they did not enjoy the assignment.

The design of the family strengths perspective builds on familial resources and strengths that are useful for coping with stress, managing problems, and improving quality of life. The letters of gratitude assignment is a method whose design capitalizes on a preexisting strength – gratitude – to build relationship bonds between family members. To be grateful is a conscious choice. It is itself a benevolent act. The *letters of gratitude* assignment is a tangible method for improving family strengths by fortifying emotional bonds. Expressing gratitude in written form is the act of formulating thoughts and of articulating for others appreciation that may be dormant, to usher in positive effects of gratitude cognitively and emotionally. The act requires the author to till the soil of gratitude in order to reap benefits; the author must contemplate what she or he already knows in order to give it meaning. The acts of composing gratitude letters, especially when performed over time, can foster connections between family members. However, people must cultivate those connections. The *letters of gratitude* assignment is a tool to help individuals cultivate emotional bonds by expressing gratitude in a structured way.

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