

# Say thanks, a lot

Don't keep gratitude to yourself. You need to express it to reap the wider benefits, finds Susana Martinez-Conde

**W**ITHOUT meaning to sound ungrateful, it really is the comedown after the festive cheer: the dreaded thank-you notes. Perhaps you agonise over how to make each sound genuine. Maybe you put off the chore for so long you end up not bothering, or simply feel they are an outdated waste of time. Then there is the skill of mustering the convincing faux-thanks for unwanted gifts.

If writing thank-you letters is a task you readily dismiss, you aren't alone. It turns out we express our gratitude more rarely than you might assume. But, however you feel about those festive notes, it is time to knuckle down. Because saying thanks could be the best gift you can give, to yourself and others.

The benefits of gratitude have long been championed in religious and philosophical thinking. In recent years, the science has been catching up: it shows that people who feel most grateful generally get a psychological boost as a result. They also have greater life satisfaction, fewer visits to the doctor and better sleep. This has led to gratitude becoming part of our cultural zeitgeist, inspiring a proliferation of gratitude journals, in which you record things you are thankful for, and meditation practices in which you focus thoughts on them. It has also led to renewed interest in the neuroscience and psychology of gratitude (see "The grateful brain", right).

However, the benefits of actually expressing this gratitude have received

less attention. Now evidence is stacking up that shows turning our inner gratitude into action can make our lives even better.

For instance, a simple thank you can build relationships, even with strangers. Take people who have received a note of thanks for something they have done from a peer they don't know. They are more likely to share their contact details with that person in an attempt to continue the relationship than people who receive a note that doesn't contain thanks. A simple thank you seems to signal interpersonal warmth.

Expressing gratitude to a friend also changes your view of that relationship, making it feel stronger. In 2010, Nathaniel Lambert, then at Florida State University, and his colleagues found that people who simply thought grateful thoughts about a friend, or even took part in positive interactions with them, didn't experience the same effects.

But the benefits go further than just strengthening social bonds, they can have an impact on health, too. A study of more than 200 nurses working in two Italian hospitals found that gratitude expressed by patients could protect nurses from burnout. That was especially so in the emergency room, where personal interactions with

"Turning our inner gratitude into action can make our lives even better"



patients are typically shorter and less rewarding. This positive feedback from patients reduced feelings of exhaustion and cynicism among nurses, says Mara Martini at the University of Turin, who carried out the work.

All of this makes sense from an evolutionary perspective. Gratitude is a very social emotion. It sends a signal to others that we recognise what they have done, that we aren't just freeloading. It might also imply that we intend to reciprocate.

In light of all this, you might expect that we go out of our way to express our thanks in our daily lives. In fact, the opposite is true: we rarely bother.

To better understand how people



express gratitude in normal life, anthropologist Simeon Floyd, at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands and his colleagues staged a large, cross-cultural study spanning five continents and eight languages. They included English, Italian, Polish, Russian and Lao, as well as unwritten languages such as Cha'palaa, spoken in Ecuador, Murrinh-Patha, used in northern Australia, and Siwu, spoken in Ghana. Interactions included both verbal and non-verbal expressions of gratitude such as a smile or a nod.

Floyd's team left cameras in household and community settings and captured more than 1500 instances of social interactions in which one person asked for something and another responded.

They found that in every culture, people overwhelmingly fulfilled requests, but expressions of gratitude, such as saying "thanks" or nodding in appreciation, were remarkably rare, occurring just 5.5 per cent of the time.

English and Italian speakers had slightly higher rates of gratitude expression than others – 14.5 per cent and 13.5 per cent of the time, respectively, but still surprisingly low considering Western ideals about politeness, says Floyd. "English speakers are not so different from other people, and often opt for no expression of gratitude in informal contexts," he says.

Cha'palaa speakers had the lowest frequency of expressed gratitude, with zero examples in 96 recorded

interactions. But this starts to make sense once you learn that the language has no easy way to say "thank you".

Also surprised by the findings was David Peterson, a linguist who developed the constructed language Dothraki for the TV show *Game of Thrones*. It too, has no word for thank you, something Peterson initially believed unlikely. "I thought that you had to have a word to express gratitude," he says.

## Overthinking it

One explanation for the absence of thank yous in some languages could be a tacit understanding of our social obligations in informal contexts, such as with close friends and family, which makes explicit acknowledgement less vital.

Or it could be that we simply don't realise the impact on others of saying thanks. In a series of three experiments in 2018 at the University of Chicago, Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley asked volunteers to write letters expressing gratitude, and to predict how surprised, happy, and awkward recipients would feel. The pair then asked recipients how the letters actually made them feel. The results were disheartening: the letter writers consistently overestimated the awkwardness that recipients felt, while underestimating positive feelings and surprise about the letters and their contents. In other words, even though people really like receiving letters of gratitude, we send them far less often than we should because we underestimate their beneficial impact.

Kumar advises against overthinking your thank yous. "One thing we observe is that expressers are inordinately concerned with how they express their gratitude – how articulate they'll be, whether they'll get the words just right," he says. But those on the receiving end are far less bothered. "Saying something, irrespective of precisely how you go about doing it, could improve your own well-being, as well as the well-being of another person," he says.

High time to drop the excuses and get those thank-you notes done. ■

Susana Martinez-Conde is eternally grateful

## THE GRATEFUL BRAIN

One way to find out where gratitude comes from and what it is good for is to try to locate it in the brain.

In one of the first such studies, Glenn Fox at the University of Southern California and his colleagues scanned the brains of volunteers in whom they induced a sense of gratitude by presenting them with acts of kindness that occurred during the holocaust, as recounted by survivors.

The fMRI scans showed a strong overlap between the areas of the brain that are active during feelings of gratitude and those associated with theory of mind – our ability to put ourselves in the shoes of others. We often say that it is the thought behind a gift that counts, the team points out, and the results seem to bear that out.

The brain areas involved in feeling gratitude have also been linked to making

value judgements, fairness and decision-making.

That fits with the idea that gratitude plays a strong, probably evolved, role in our social bonds and networks (see main story).

The feeling of gratitude seems to be about processing the value of another person's contribution to our lives, our motivations to help others and the relief we can feel when someone comes to our aid, says Fox.

