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Part 9 of our Wellness Revolution series

Practicing Gratitude in Everyday Life

Jennifer Bradtke, PsyD

Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine (Saint Kitts)

Busy veterinary professionals often feel life is constantly about identifying and solving problems, which are not in short supply. They get caught up in the day-to-day troubles, which can leave them tired, stressed, and feeling hopeless, and they can ultimately find themselves in a state of burnout that negatively impacts work, relationships, and health. These overwhelmed, stressed individuals frequently search for ways to cope with and eliminate distress, sometimes choosing unhealthy strategies (eg, another glass of wine, staying one more hour at work to catch up).

Research has revealed a healthier, more effective strategy that appears to be easily within reach, at least partially—and does not come in pill form. The answer? Intentionally cultivating gratitude every day.

Find our previous Wellness Revolution articles at brief.vet/veterinary-wellness



thank you

What Is Gratitude?

Defining gratitude is not easy. Is gratitude an emotion, an attitude, or an action? Where can gratitude be found? One of the clearest definitions was published in the *Harvard Mental Health Letter*: “Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives, whether tangible or intangible....As a result, gratitude also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals—whether to other people, nature, or a higher power.”¹

The good news is that gratitude is easy to practice and comes with a number of benefits.

The Practice

Gratitude can be cultured and expressed in a variety of ways, including committing to volunteering, sharing, and celebrating instead of complaining. (See **Take Action**, page 16.)

The Benefits

In recent decades, mental health research has grown in the areas of wellness and positive psychology. The practice of gratitude, a currently researched topic, is demonstrating noteworthy benefits.

■ Decreased stress and improved perceptions of wellbeing

The continued practice of gratitude has been found to lower stress and depression²⁻⁵; in one study, participants who practiced gratitude for just 2 weeks felt better in aspects of wellbeing and had less perceived stress.⁶

■ Mood improvement

Practicing gratitude on a daily basis can decrease negative effects, improve mood,^{4,7} and reduce depression and anxiety.^{4,5}

■ Improvement in relationships

Gratitude is linked with higher social support levels and feelings of connectedness.^{4,7} Expressing gratitude for a partner can:

- Enhance positive perceptions of the partner and the relationship
- Motivate both parties to engage in activities that maintain the relationship⁸
- Increase compassion and decrease aggression, positively impacting relationships⁹
- Increase feelings of self-efficacy and social worth in others¹⁰

■ Health improvement

Study participants asked to practice gratitude reported fewer physical illness signs and lower blood pressure, and they exercised more.⁷ Even asymptomatic heart failure patients who expressed more gratitude had lower levels of inflammatory biomarkers.⁶

Research continues on the link between practicing gratitude and health benefits, but the results look promising.

■ Improved sleep

Practicing gratitude has been linked to better sleep patterns—including total and subjective sleep quality (ie, how an individual perceives how he or she slept, feelings of restfulness), sleep latency (ie, time taken to fall asleep), and sleep duration—and reduced daytime dysfunction (ie, excessive daytime sleepiness, lack of energy, irritability).³

Conclusion

The compelling research on practicing gratitude is linked with an overall sense of improved wellbeing that helps veterinary professionals cope with stress and see their interactions and relationships with family, friends, and colleagues more positively.

Setting aside a few minutes each day to reflect on the positive aspects of life is worth the investment toward improving our own lives and our patients' lives—and such introspection is more effective than counting sheep. ■



TAKE ACTION

Here are 11 ideas for cultivating gratitude each day.

- 1 Start the day positively.** Practice a gratitude ritual each morning (eg, sharing gratitude with your partner, writing in a gratitude journal while drinking coffee) because a specific mindset can color your view of and response to specific situations. By starting the day feeling grateful, you are more likely to look for the positive in situations throughout your day.¹¹
- 2 Keep a daily gratitude journal.** In a small journal, write down 3 to 5 things—large or small (eg, catching up with a friend, a promotion at work, getting foam on a latte as a special treat)—for which you are genuinely grateful. Intentionally practicing more grateful thinking helps decrease negative thought patterns.
- 3 Be intentional about expressing gratitude.** Write thank-you notes. Keep a box of blank note cards in your desk and use them to acknowledge your appreciation for others. Thank-you notes not only help you to see others in a positive light but also can lead to reciprocal helping behaviors.¹⁰
- 4 Practice gratitude meditation.** Set aside a few minutes each day to reflect on aspects of your life for which you are grateful.
- 5 Be thankful for hard times.** Sometimes being grateful is necessary, even for difficult life challenges. This can be challenging during a rough patch, but gratitude can spur a sense of compassion and make the situation feel more manageable. Think about the difficult team member who makes you want to avoid the team lounge or the client who never seems to be satisfied. What if you felt grateful for interactions that provided opportunities to practice patience, kindness, and conflict management? The next interaction, even if not enjoyable, may not fill you with a sense of dread.
- 6 Focus on your strengths and the strengths of those around you.** When the focus is on the negative, forgetting the positive (eg, your strengths vs your weaknesses) is easy.
- 7 Commit to celebrating instead of complaining for a week.**
- 8 Develop a family activity.** For example, have your children list what they are thankful for when you put them to bed.
- 9 Volunteer.** Giving back is a great way to express gratitude.
- 10 Keep a visual reminder.** Choose an object that you associate with gratitude (eg, a piece of jewelry, a “Count Your Blessings” sign), and wear the jewelry frequently or put the sign where you will see it regularly to help you remember to count your blessings.
- 11 Share gratitude at mealtimes.** Why practice this mealtime tradition only once a year on Thanksgiving Day? Sharing gratitude more frequently with those with whom you are dining can help strengthen connections.

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JENNIFER BRADTKE, PsyD, is a licensed clinical psychologist who has served as director of the counseling center at Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine (Saint Kitts) since 2014. Her program development background took her to Qatar—where

she developed the Office of Health and Wellness for Northwestern University—and Saint Kitts. Jennifer’s clinical interests include working with multicultural populations, group psychotherapy, and positive psychology.

FUN FACT: Jennifer’s cat is named Umm Ali, after an Egyptian desert she fell in love with while living in the Middle East.