

For Couples, Gratitude Is a Boomerang

Expressing appreciation for the little things leads to bigger things, such as building stronger ties and sustaining relationships

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It's easy to take our better halves for granted. We may neglect to thank our partners for, say, picking up milk on the way home, preparing dinner or devoting Saturdays to coaching a child's soccer team. Over time, we may stop noticing what they do to make our lives better and perhaps focus too much on what we feel they don't do.

This familiar dynamic can be bad news for relationships. A growing body of research finds that couples who regularly express appreciation to each other, even for minor things, enjoy a stronger, more satisfying and committed bond.

Gratitude and reciprocity are rooted in human and animal evolution, according to a white paper reviewing recent research that was published in May by the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley. The paper cites, for instance, studies of favors apparently given and repaid among species ranging from chimpanzees (exchanging grooming for food) to vampire bats (sharing regurgitated blood). Such actions improve the fortunes of the individuals on both sides of the transaction and of the social group.

In human relationships, researchers say, gratitude serves a "find, remind and bind" function: It can help us to find good partners, remind us of their value and create a lasting bond. When we value our partners, it makes us feel closer to them and motivates us to stay invested in the relationship. When a partner feels appreciated, he or she is motivated to exhibit positive behaviors and attitudes in return.

There's mounting evidence that gratitude helps to solidify and sustain bonds. In 2011, for example, Dutch researchers published a study based on following newlyweds for four years. They found that when one partner engaged in behavior such as undertaking extra chores, it not only elicited gratitude in the other partner but also motivated them to act in ways that supported the relationship. The Berkeley white paper also cites various studies suggesting that feelings of gratitude help "individuals and relationships weather challenging situations," such as financial distress, caring for aging parents and fighting against cancer and depression, by buffering against their negative effects.

Unfortunately, we're not particularly adept at spotting a partner's good deeds. In a study by American, Dutch and Canadian researchers published earlier this year in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 426 individuals were asked to track any minor sacrifices they or their partners made for the other, such as socializing with a partner's friends instead of

their own, and to report their daily satisfaction with their relationship. On average, participants missed half of their partner's self-reported sacrifices, leaving those doing the good deeds feeling unappreciated. When sacrifices were noticed and appreciated, researchers found a boost in the receiver's gratitude, which benefited both partners' satisfaction with the relationship.

We often underestimate the impact that our gratitude has on others, which may make us less likely to express it. In a study published in June in the journal *Psychological Science*, participants were asked to write a letter of gratitude to someone in their life. They were also asked to anticipate the recipient's reaction—specifically, how happy or surprised they would be to receive the letter and how awkward it might make them feel. The researchers then sought reaction from the recipients themselves.

They found that participants significantly underestimated the positive reaction of recipients and overestimated the awkwardness they would experience. Lead researcher Amit Kumar of the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin hopes that the study “will encourage people to express more gratitude in their daily lives and not assume that others already know how thankful we are.”

Not every “thank you” carries the same weight. In a 2016 study published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, researchers videotaped 370 intimate conversations between couples in which one partner expressed gratitude to the other. Lead researcher Sara Algoe of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that the most valued sort of thanks focused on the specifics of the partner's effort, not just the act itself. Instead of thanking your partner for buying a beautiful sweater, for example, it's better to emphasize how much you appreciate his going to your favorite store and remembering your favorite shade of blue.

When feelings of appreciation are lacking in an otherwise healthy relationships, Dr. Algoe suggests trying a simple mental exercise, where you imagine all the things that could have gone wrong to prevent you from meeting your partner in the first place. “We get used to the positive things in our lives,” she says, “and the gratitude you feel for simply having met your partner can be a good reminder of how lucky you really are.”