

How can gratitude help healthcare workers?

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Abstract

Have you ever felt stressed? It's not very pleasant. **Most healthcare workers feel stress every day.** Often that prolonged stress leads to emotional exhaustion. There are different ways to deal with this, but they can take too long or are expensive. What if there was a simpler way to reduce emotional exhaustion? Many studies show that gratitude can increase happiness.

We asked healthcare workers to write a letter of gratitude. We assessed their levels of emotional exhaustion before and after this assignment. After using our method, healthcare workers had lower levels of emotional exhaustion. They also said they were happier.

Introduction

Have you ever had too much homework? Or have you been very worried during a test? If you have, you've probably felt **stress**. Those worries can make your body feel bad, too. The good thing is that stress usually goes away. Having fun, doing exercises, and getting more sleep are good ways to make stress disappear. What if you are worrying every day, though?

Imagine you are a doctor or a nurse. You have to take care of other people. Every day your decisions have consequences on your patients' health and lives. You probably work long and unpredictable hours. You have to talk to worried patients' families. Pretty stressful, right?

This long-term stress can have negative consequences. It can lead to **emotional exhaustion**, which doesn't go away that easily. And it is pretty common among healthcare workers. **So how can they cope?** Most existing treatment for emotional exhaustion can take a long time or a lot of effort. For example, meditation helps but takes more time than healthcare workers usually have. What if there is a simpler tool to reduce emotional exhaustion?

Gratitude is a very powerful emotion. It improves our mental health and increases happiness. It helps us to sleep better, too. Some studies show that gratitude is better at doing this

than hope or compassion. **We wanted to use the power of gratitude to help healthcare workers.** But would it reduce emotional exhaustion? This is what we wanted to find out.



Working in healthcare can be very rewarding, but emotional exhaustion is common.

Methods

We created an online survey where we asked healthcare workers several questions to assess their level of emotional exhaustion. We then showed the participants their score and asked their opinion on it.

Afterward, we asked the participants to write a letter of gratitude (Fig. 1). Half of the participants had to focus the letter on themselves; that is, how the recipient's help was

important to them (**self-focused**). The other half had to focus on the recipient's qualities (**other-focused**). We analyzed the words the participants used. We wanted to see if there were more positive or more negative words.

A week later we asked for a **follow-up**. We wanted to see if the emotional exhaustion levels had changed. This would suggest our method was working.

Figure 1:

The instructions for the two types of gratitude letter we asked the healthcare workers to write.

Think of someone who has done something amazing for you and contributed to your well-being in a big way. Spend the next 7 minutes writing a genuine, kind and appreciative note.

Self-focused:

Part 1: Tell this person what they did, how it impacted you, and the benefits you received.

Part 2: Tell this person why it was important to you.

Other-focused:

Part 1: Tell this person what they did, how it impacted you, how it made you feel, and why it was important to you.

Part 2: Tell this person what it says about them, that they did this amazing thing for you. You might include what this says about your relationship to this person.

Results

A total of 1575 healthcare workers completed the first part of the study. They answered all our questions and wrote a gratitude letter. After a week 277 participants returned for the follow-up. We found out that:

- Emotional exhaustion levels were high at first.
- The high scores surprised most of the participants. Most of them wanted to do something about it.
- The higher these levels, the more negative words we found in the letters.

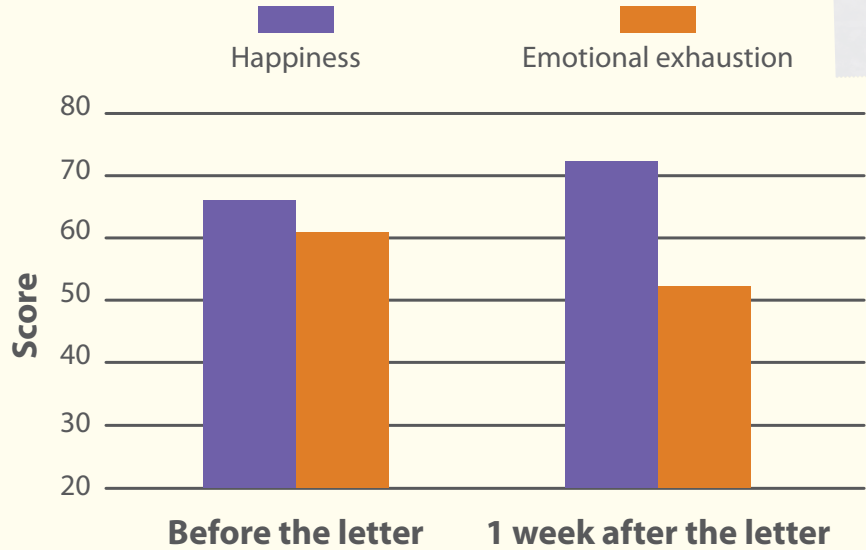
- At the follow-up, we realized our method seemed to help the participants (Fig. 2). It helped reduce their emotional exhaustion and improve happiness. Many said it was easier to think of things to be grateful for.
- The letter helped both groups – self-focused and other-focused.

**Please see
Figure 2 on Page 3**



Figure 2:
 Emotional exhaustion and happiness scores before and after the gratitude letter.

How did the gratitude letter affect healthcare workers' happiness and emotional exhaustion?



Discussion

Our gratitude letter method shows promising results. It's simple, cheap and takes very little time. Few participants returned for the follow-up. Yet the majority of them said they felt a lot better. Their emotional exhaustion levels were lower and they reported feeling happier. Receiving their emotional exhaustion score probably helped with that as well. It made them want to change and feel better.

Gratitude seems to shift the focus from bad to good things. Participants may have taken some of the best things in their lives for granted. After writing a gratitude letter, they said it was easier to think of things to be grateful for.

Conclusion

We all feel stressed sometimes. It doesn't always mean there is something wrong. But if you feel worried and tired often, maybe it's time to change something. If you have too many after-school activities, you could consider dropping one. Make sure you eat healthy food. Try to get enough

sleep and do something fun with friends or family. You could try some relaxation exercises like breathing slowly. You could even write a letter of gratitude, like in our study, or keep a journal.

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Glossary of Key Terms

Emotional exhaustion – Too much stress has piled up from work or personal life, making people feel drained, overwhelmed and tired.

Follow-up – After the first survey, researchers collect information after some time (in our case a week) to see if there is any difference.

Other-focused letter of gratitude – The focus is on the person who is receiving the letter. It describes what the recipient has done for the person who is writing the letter. It talks about the recipient's qualities.

Self-focused letter of gratitude – The focus is on the person who is writing the letter. It describes why they are grateful and what they are feeling.

Stress – Our body's response to pressure and worries. Sometimes we have headaches, we start sweating, become irritated, can't sleep, etc. Different things can cause stress, usually something that we think we can't cope with.

Check your understanding

- 1 We mentioned some of the stressful things about being a healthcare worker. Can you think of any other negative aspects? How about the positive aspects?
- 2 What is the difference between stress and emotional exhaustion?
- 3 Why do you think gratitude has such power over our emotions?
- 4 Think of someone who has done something amazing for YOU. Write them a short letter of gratitude. If you want, you can send or show it to them, or read it to them (in person or over the phone).