"The gratitude attitude": growing evidence for medical and veterinary professionals

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ABSTRACT: Gratitude is a topic of increasing popularity across social media platforms, literature and the press. There is mounting evidence for its positive effects in mental health, physical wellbeing and creativity. Whilst specific studies in medical professionals are mostly limited to the human field thus far, there is wide scope for parallels to be drawn to veterinary practice. This article reviews recent literary findings and considers how gratitude could be implemented in the veterinary profession, both in practice and amongst individuals.

Keywords: gratitude; journalling veterinary

Introduction

Gratitude is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness," and originates from the Latin word *gratus*, meaning 'pleasing, thankful'. Gratitude can be directed towards others, specific events, possessions, animals and non-human entities; from appreciating a colleague switching shifts, to consciously acknowledging a warm bed to sleep in. Increasing studies have been carried out in the human medical field amongst caregivers, showing potential benefits in stress reduction, mental health and creativity. This article aims to give insights into these studies, and the proposition of utilising these findings in the veterinary profession.

Generalised gratitude studies have found that those who "count blessings" are more able to find positive qualities in those around them (Fredrickson, 2004). Gratitude has also been shown to increase positive emotions and smiling, whilst reducing anger and other negative emotions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Studies amongst college students found a linkage between gratitude and reduced suicide risk, which appeared to be predicated on the beneficial association of gratitude to negative mood and interpersonal functioning (Kaniuka et al., 2020). It is not solely emotional benefits, but positive physiological changes have also been noted, with decreases in facial tension and heart rate variability (Witvliet et al., 2010). These benefits should be potentially welcomed in a profession with known high levels of stress, mental health problems and elevated suicide rates.

Gratitude in the medical profession

Looking at potential medical and veterinary parallels amongst the literature, one randomised control trial investigated the effect of a "gratitude intervention" on staff in a hospital setting (Cheng et al., 2015). A mixture of doctors, nurses and occupational therapists, totalled 102 individuals included in the study from five public hospitals. Participants were asked to perform a journalling exercise twice weekly for a total of four weeks. The group was split into three; gratitude focus, hassles focus and a control group not involving journalling. The compliance rate was high (99%) as the research team sent reminders via email and text message to complete the exercises. Individuals were assessed at baseline before intervention, after the intervention (one month) and four months later using the standardised Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale and the 10-item Perceived Stress Scale. Results showed that the gratitude cohort had lower depressive symptoms

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and lower perceived stress compared to the hassle and control group. Data suggests that at the four month assessment, a further reduction in depressive symptoms was noted in the gratitude group, but it was not followed up as to whether this group continued to journal after the initial four week period; a limitation of this study in knowing the long-lasting effects of such interventions.

Mechanisms of gratitude action

The potential positive benefits for hospital staff highlighted in this study are clear, with many stressors being similar to those faced in the veterinary profession. To further understand how gratitude can bring about these improvements in perceived stress and depression scores, researchers articulated six potential mechanisms (Emmons & Mishra, 2011):

1. ***Coping with stress.*** The act of gratitude may improve positive thinking, active coping strategies and encourage seeking social support at stressful times. (Fredrickson, 2004)
2. ***Reduce counter productive emotions.*** It is proposed that gratitude reduces feelings of envy, resentment and regret, as well as counter-factual thinking. (Roberts, 2004)
3. ***Reduces materialistic pursuits.*** Seeking external "things" and pursuit of them are associated with reduced wellbeing (Kasser & Ryan, 1993).
4. ***Increased access to positive memories.*** An inability to recall positive memories has been associated with depression. (Dillon, 2015)
5. ***Improved relationships with others.*** Expressing gratitude and reciprocating improves relationships with others and encourages further assistance from then. (Algoe et al., 2008)
6. ***Improved physical health.*** Gratitude interventions have been shown to reduce the bodily complaints, increase sleep duration and efficiency, and promote exercise (Emmons & McCullough, 2003)

Gratitude integration for the individual

For individual veterinary professionals to start to consciously incorporate gratitude into daily life and be in receipt of the above benefits, a simple starting point from the literature, would be gratitude journalling. For example, the specific instruction given to hospital staff for the gratitude intervention was

> "Different things happen at work every day. Some are minor, some are important. Whether minor or important, sometimes you feel thankful that these events have happened to you. For example, you may feel thankful that your colleague swapped work schedules with you, or helped you in some way that made your job easier." (Cheng et al., 2015, p.179)

Simply, this involves taking a pen and paper, and writing down the events, people or objects that an individual has been grateful for over recent times. Examples from the above study included having a fully staffed department, receiving thank you cards, patients being in a stable condition, colleagues running errands, opinions being respected, being taught something new and the wonderment of being alive.

Journalling overall is cited to avoid stigma that might be associated with other mental health interventions such as therapy sessions, and is without reference to personal problems and weaknesses (Cheng et al., 2015). There may be perception that journalling must be a daily task, leaving open potential for self-deprecation if the task is missed, but studies note that journalling was optimal twice weekly, with more demanding timescales having potential to backfire and be disruptive (Cheng et al., 2015). The evidence of regular, but less frequent grateful reflection is further backed up by other journalling studies. University students tasked to journal just once weekly, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic regarding their expectations for the upcoming week (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). The same group reported fewer physical complaints and reported spending significantly more time exercising.

In practical terms, the evidence above suggests that twice weekly journalling of events and entities that individuals are grateful for, has multiple potential benefits. This evidence removes the potential perception that benefits are only apparent when performed daily. This is an important point for those in veterinary practice to note; the experience of the author is that many may be discouraged by feeling that it is a large time commitment and ineffective unless daily frequency.

Gratitude integration for the veterinary workplace

The potential benefits of gratitude for individuals are clear, however early work also suggests that when performed in groups, it can have benefits for group creativity. Gratitude motivates group members to collectively process information more effectively, which renders them better able to produce creative solutions. A group gratitude task showed favourable results even compared to a group "positive mindset" task, which yielded more ideas, but of lower quality and value (Pillay et al., 2020).

Suggestions to integrate gratitude into the veterinary workplace include:

- Gratitude exercises prior to meetings and rounds, asking each member of the team to note a gratitude event. (Pillay et al., 2020).
- Studies suggest that in an employer-employee relationship, the most successful forms of gratitude expression were one to one, verbal expressions. These should be specific to certain events to ensure sincerity (Beck, 2016).
- Physical gifts and monetary thanks were highly rated by participants in studies, although these ranked lower than one to one praise (Beck, 2016).
- Integrate gratitude into practice culture, actively encourage acknowledging a job well done between colleagues. Focus on leaders setting an example, and create an effective "gratitude culture" in a workplace.
- Creating a gratitude board in a communal area, where members of staff contribute on an ongoing basis, and reflect at the end of the week.
- Encourage gratitude between team members, but also from clients - in medical nursing, a reduced burnout rate has been cited in those that had grateful patients (Converso et al., 2015).
- Practice appreciation of staff, acknowledging the achievements and strengths of their team publicly. This might be via social media, practice newsletters or other communications tools - although it is suggested written digital methods rank significantly lower than individual praise (Beck, 2016).
- Encouragement of reflection time and journalling opportunities, as individuals, or in a team.

Limitations of gratitude

As previously mentioned, self-induced pressures to make gratitude journalling a daily task and chore are a potential risk. Remedying this is the evidence for the effectiveness of a lower frequency practice. On reflection of a journalling task investigation, one author cites how gratitude can

potentially open potential for feeling indebted to others and hence the need to reciprocate (Emmons & McCullough, 2003); the concern is that this can lead to feelings of resentment and an aversive state. Simply the awareness of this risk, and hence consciously practicing gratitude in the mindset of 'giving without expectation of receipt,' will alleviate these dangers as the pressures to payback kindness received are reduced. Care should also be taken to ensure that gratitude is sincere as it can devalue interactions otherwise (Beck, 2016).

Conclusion

The potential positive benefits of gratitude across emotional, mental and physical health are extensively cited. Encouraging evidence from hospital sectors further supports the need to trial further integration of gratitude into veterinary workplaces and individual routines. Specific studies in the veterinary sector would be encouraged.

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