

Don't feel appreciated by your partner? Relationship interventions can help

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When we're married or in a long-term romantic relationship, we may eventually come to take each other for granted and forget to show appreciation. A new study from the University of Illinois Urbana-

Champaign finds that it doesn't have to stay this way.

The study examined why perceived gratitude from a spouse or romantic partner changes over time, and whether it can be improved through relationship intervention programs.

"Gratitude almost seems to be a secret sauce to relationships, and an important piece to the puzzle of romantic relationships that hasn't gotten much attention in research studies until recently. And in couple relationships, it's not just about being appreciative for your partner but also about feeling appreciated by your partner."

"Gratitude for couples is very interpersonal and something that is exchanged between partners," said Allen Barton, assistant professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, part of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at U. of I. and an Illinois Extension specialist. Barton is lead author on the paper.

The study analyzed data from a [randomized controlled trial](#) with 615 [low-income](#), help-seeking couples who signed up for an online relationship intervention program. Both partners had to participate in order to qualify for the study.

Couples assigned to the treatment group in the study participated in one of two online relationship education interventions, OurRelationship and ePREP, both of which provide couples with principles and practices to better communicate, understand conflict, and address problems in their relationship. Each program ran for 6 weeks and included online lessons and activities, as well as periodic meetings with a relationship coach.

A control group was assigned to a waitlist and did not receive intervention until after the study was completed. The researchers

collected data through surveys before program participation began and at two-, four-, and six-month follow-ups.

Barton and his colleagues first looked at factors that predicted lower levels of perceived gratitude among the control group. They found that individuals who felt less appreciated by their partner were more likely to be female, married, and have children. Older age was also associated with a decline in perceived gratitude over time.

"These findings make sense. When we first meet somebody, we're very mindful to show our appreciation. Over time, this tends to get lost, and people may not realize that neither partner feels as appreciated as they would like to be. From other research we have done, we know that ensuring partners feel acknowledged and valued will go a long way in promoting the quality of their relationship," Barton stated.

The researchers also found that, for those assigned to the control group, perceived gratitude remained at the same level throughout the duration of the study despite improvements in communication, satisfaction, and other relationship variables. Thus, while other aspects of the relationship may be more likely to fluctuate or increase, gratitude is not something that seems to improve by itself over time, Barton said.

But can it get better with some outside assistance?

To answer that question, the authors examined whether perceived gratitude increased by participating in either of the two online relationship interventions.

Results indicated couples in the intervention group did, in fact, report improvement in partner gratitude relative to individuals in the [control group](#).

"We found that levels of perceived gratitude improved as a result of participating in these online relationship interventions, which have been shown to improve overall couple relationship quality across several dimensions. The effect on gratitude was not as large as program effects on some of the other aspects, which isn't surprising because the program wasn't focusing on gratitude, but there was still a measurable effect," Baron explained.

Some relationship programs have been directed solely towards improving gratitude, but those have shown mixed results, Barton noted. When people express gratitude because they've been asked to do so as part of a program, it may come across as insincere and be less effective.

"Gratitude is a unique construct that seems to be lower in more established relationships, but it can be improved through efficacious relationship intervention programming. It has been an overlooked dimension that makes for healthy, supportive relationships. Our findings indicate we should develop programming that aims to improve levels of perceived [gratitude](#), but it shouldn't be the sole focus; it should be one component of the [intervention](#)," he said.

Barton's advice to couples is to be mindful of the power of saying "thank you."

"If you're married or in a romantic relationship, as simple as it may seem, make sure to regularly give specific, sincere compliments to your spouse or romantic partner. I also encourage couples to ask each other if there are areas where one person doesn't feel appreciated and then work to remedy that," he said.

"It takes a lot of work to make a family happen, and that work becomes all the more challenging when your efforts aren't acknowledged. So just ensuring there's a regular rhythm in a relationship where both partners

are expressing appreciation and both partners feel valued is important."

The study focused on low-income couples, who were at or below 200% of the federal poverty line for a family.

"Financial strain can be a stressor for couples, and lower-income individuals tend to have higher relationship instability," Barton noted. "Decades of social science research indicate that having strong marriages and couple relationships matters for individuals, for children, and for communities. A lot of factors influencing [couple relationships](#) are difficult to change but this—feeling appreciated by your [partner](#)—is one important factor that, as we show in this study, can be changed by effective interventions."

Couples seeking help with their relationship can participate in the Strong Couples Project that is currently disseminating the ePREP program tested in this study. This project, offered through Illinois Extension and directed by Barton, is available free of charge to qualifying participants nationwide.

The findings are published in the journal *Behavior Therapy*.

More information: Allen W. Barton et al, Trajectories of perceived gratitude and change following relationship interventions: A randomized controlled trial with lower-income, help-seeking couples, *Behavior Therapy* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.beth.2023.07.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2023.07.014)

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