



# The Effects of a Relationship-Focused Gratitude Intervention on Individuals' Gratitude, Mental Health, and Relationship Outcomes



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## Abstract

Recent research in positive psychology has provided evidence that online interventions are effective in increasing gratitude, which can then have subsequent positive effects on overall well-being and mental health (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Little research has been done on whether these benefits are also applicable to romantic relationships. This study examined the efficacy of an online gratitude intervention on improving individuals' gratitude, mental health, and romantic relationship outcomes in 130 college undergraduates. The intervention group demonstrated significantly greater increases in both general gratitude and gratitude toward one's partner than the active comparison group from pre- to post-intervention. This study supports prior literature in demonstrating the efficacy of online interventions in improving gratitude and provides evidence that gratitude interventions can be applied in romantic relationship contexts.

## Introduction

The prevalence of stress in college students is a persistent and growing problem. The 2017 National College Health Assessment revealed that the majority of students (45.1%) rated their overall stress in the past year as more than average stress, with 12% rating their stress as "tremendous." Hurst, Baranik, and Daniel (2012) conducted a meta-analysis to assess which stressors are most prominent for college students. The largest theme found in the literature was relationship-related stressors. To address the growing problem of college student stress, recent positive psychology research has focused on creating interventions to decrease stress and improve well-being. Helping to recognize access and time concerns, researchers have developed and established the efficacy of online mental health interventions (Nguyen-Feng, Greer, & Frazier, 2017). One simple yet effective skill that can be enhanced through online interventions is gratitude, which has proven to be an important tool in mental health outcomes (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). While many studies have explored the benefits of gratitude and gratitude interventions, little research has been done in applying these concepts to romantic relationships. The present study aimed to address the stressor of romantic relationships in college students by testing the effectiveness of an online, relationship-focused gratitude intervention in a sample of college undergraduates.

## Methods and Materials

**Participants:** This study consisted of 132 undergraduate students. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and in a romantic relationship of at least three months that was not a long distance relationship.

**Procedure:** Participants were randomly assigned to either the intervention or active comparison group. The intervention group completed two gratitude activities: listing reasons why one is grateful for his or her partner, and practicing and writing about savoring an interaction with one's partner. The active comparison group completed activities regarding relationship psychoeducational material. All participants received activities electronically for 12 consecutive days.

**Measures:** Participants completed an online assessment survey before and after the intervention with demographic questions and measures including perceived stress, distress, life satisfaction, general gratitude, gratitude toward one's partner, and relationship quality.

## Results

To assess changes over the course of the intervention, we calculated change scores for the participants between their post-intervention and pre-intervention scores for each measure. The intervention group had significantly greater change scores from pre-intervention to post-intervention for general gratitude ( $M = 0.61, SD = 0.73$ ) than the active comparison group ( $M = 0.29, SD = 0.82, t(123) = 2.38, p = 0.02$ ). The intervention group also had significantly greater change scores from pre-intervention to post-intervention for gratitude toward one's partner ( $M = 0.41, SD = 0.89$ ) than the active comparison group ( $M = 0.10, SD = 0.68, t(123) = 2.11, p = 0.04$ ). Differences between the two groups in change scores for the other measures were not statistically significant. Effect sizes are shown in Table 1.

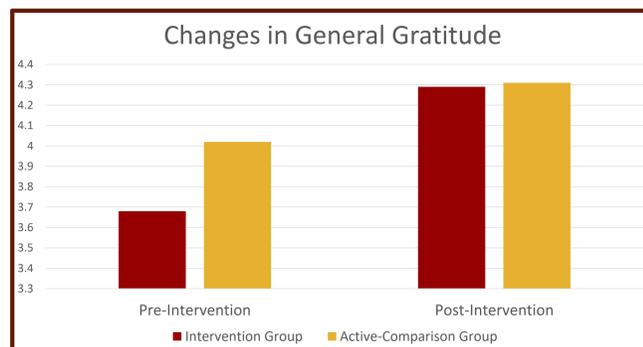
The intervention group and active comparison group showed significant differences at pre-intervention for the measures of both general gratitude and gratitude toward one's partner. In all other measures, there were not significant differences between the two groups at pre-intervention. There were not significant differences in scores between the intervention group and the control group at post-intervention for any of the measures, which included perceived stress, distress, life satisfaction, general gratitude, gratitude toward one's partner, and relationship quality.

Table 1. Effect Sizes of Within-Group and Between-Group Change Scores for Primary Measures

	Intervention Group	Active Comparison Group	Between-Group Effect Size
Perceived Stress	-0.48	-0.28	0.20
Distress	-0.37	-0.29	0.08
Life Satisfaction	0.24	0.07	0.17
Gratitude Toward Partner	0.45	0.15	0.30
Relationship Quality	0.08	0.05	0.03
General Gratitude	0.67	0.32	0.35

## Discussion

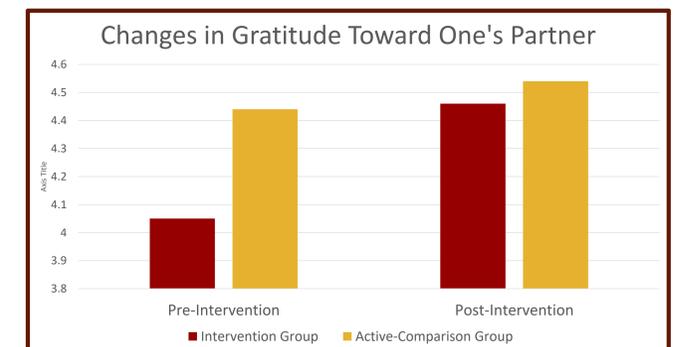
The present study aimed to address the growing concern of college student stress by targeting relationship-related stressors with a relationship-focused, online gratitude intervention. The gratitude intervention was successful in increasing participants' general gratitude and gratitude toward one's partner. The intervention group demonstrated significantly greater growth in both of these measures compared to the active comparison group. These results are in line with İşık & Ergüner-Tekinalp's (2017) online intervention study with college students that also led to significant increases in gratitude. Our study did not reveal significant differences between groups in any of the other primary measures: perceived stress, distress, life satisfaction, or relationship quality. However, participants in the intervention group did report larger ( $d = -0.48$ ) but nonsignificant decreases in perceived stress than the active comparison group ( $d = -0.28$ ). Our findings regarding these other primary measures (e.g. life satisfaction, stress, distress) contrast prior studies, such as İşık & Ergüner-Tekinalp's (2017) study, which demonstrated significant improvements in positive affect and life satisfaction. It is possible that increasing one's gratitude is not a direct mediator for increases in well-being; it is also possible that our participant sample size did not yield enough power to detect a significant effect for these measures of well-being and relationship quality. It is also possible that our sample did not have enough stress, distress, or relationship dissatisfaction at pre-intervention to show significant changes throughout the intervention. Future research could benefit from recruiting a larger participant sample that is more diverse in mental well-being and relationship satisfaction.



## GRATITUDE INTERVENTION ACTIVITIES

**WEEK ONE:** There are often many things in our relationships, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. What are three things that you are grateful from the last 24 hours in your romantic relationship? Try your best to be specific and write about things that are relevant to the past 24 hours.

**WEEK TWO:** Most people experience higher relationship satisfaction if they stop, slow down, and savor the good moments. Even everyday situations can have a greater positive influence on your relationship when they are fully processed and appreciated rather than rushed through or done on "autopilot." Below, briefly describe one interaction you had with your partner in the past 24 hours in which you savored the moment. What did you do to savor the moment, and what effect did this have?



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