

The power of thank you: Research links gratitude to positive marital outcomes

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Allen Barton is a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Georgia Center for Family Research. Credit: Cal Powell/University of Georgia

A key ingredient to improving couples' marriages might just be gratitude, according to new University of Georgia research.

The study was recently published in the journal *Personal Relationships*.

"We found that feeling appreciated and believing that your spouse values you directly influences how you feel about your marriage, how committed you are to it, and your belief that it will last," said study co-author Ted Futris, an associate professor in the College of Family and Consumer Sciences.

With the use of a telephone survey, the study asked 468 married individuals questions about their financial well-being, demand/withdraw communication and expressions of spousal [gratitude](#).

The results indicated that spousal expression of gratitude was the most consistent significant predictor of [marital quality](#).

"It goes to show the power of 'thank you,'" said the study's lead author Allen Barton, a former doctoral student in the College of Family and Consumer Sciences and current postdoctoral research associate at UGA's Center for Family Research. "Even if a couple is experiencing distress and difficulty in other areas, gratitude in the relationship can help promote positive marital outcomes."

The study also found that higher levels of spousal gratitude expressions protected men's and women's divorce proneness as well as women's marital commitment from the [negative effects](#) of poor communication during conflict.

"Importantly, we found that when [couples](#) are engaging in a negative conflict pattern like demand/withdrawal, expressions of gratitude and appreciation can counteract or buffer the negative effects of this type of interaction on marital stability," Futris said.

"This is the first study to document the protective effect that feeling

appreciated by your spouse can have for marriages," Barton said. "We think it is quite important as it highlights a practical way couples can help strengthen their marriage, particularly if they are not the most adept communicators in conflict."

Results from this study also replicated previous findings by documenting demand/withdraw communication to be a pathway through which [financial distress](#) negatively influences marriage.

"Demand/withdraw communication occurs when one partner tends to demand, nag or criticize, while the other responds by withdrawing or avoiding the confrontation," Barton said. "Although wife demand/husband withdraw interactions appear more commonly in couples, in the current study we found financial distress was associated with lower marital outcomes through its effects on increasing the total amount of both partners' demand/withdraw interactions."

"When couples are stressed about making ends meet, they are more likely to engage in negative ways—they are more critical of each other and defensive, and they can even stop engaging or withdraw from each other, which can then lead to lower marital quality," Futris said.

Gratitude, however, can interrupt this cycle and help couples overcome negative communication patterns in their relationship, patterns that may be a result of current stressors they are experiencing.

Gratitude was measured in terms of the degree to which individuals felt appreciated by their spouse, valued by their spouse and acknowledged when they did something nice for their spouse.

"All couples have disagreements and argue," Futris said. "And, when couples are stressed, they are likely to have more arguments. What distinguishes the marriages that last from those that don't is not how

often they argue, but how they argue and how they treat each other on a daily basis."

More information: To read the full article, visit [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... 1111/pere.12094/epdf](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pere.12094/epdf).

Provided by University of Georgia

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