



Secular and Spiritual Gratitude Writing Exercises Benefit Gratitude, Stress, Positive Mood, and Spirituality

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Introduction

- Much empirical research has found that the practice of gratitude improves mental health, mood, resiliency, and well-being (Llenares et al., 2020; Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2016). Gratitude has thus become a central theme in positive psychology.
- Activities like writing letters of gratitude and making lists of things one is grateful for have been shown to enhance gratitude itself, along with happiness and well-being (Toepfer & Walker 2009).
- Researchers have studied how spiritual gratitude is similar to or different from secular gratitude and whether the benefits of each are comparable.
- Rosmarin et al. (2011), discovered that spiritually-based and secularly-based gratitude had a positive influence related to happiness, life satisfaction, positive affect, and gratitude. Rosmarin et al. (2011) also noted that stress has been shown to influence spiritual gratitude and vice versa.
- The present study aims to understand the effects of a short-term gratitude exercise, compared to previous studies which used a multi-week intervention.
- **Hypotheses**
 1. The secular and spiritual groups would exhibit higher scores on gratitude and positive affect and lower scores on stress and negative affect.
 2. On the spirituality outcome measure, the spiritual group would show higher scores in comparison to the secular and control groups.

Methods

- A total of 57 participants (30 females, 25 males, and 1 non-binary individual) completed this survey. The average age was 32 years (range = 18 to 80 years).
- Most respondents were White ($n=50$) and all other ethnic groups comprised the remainder of the sample ($n=7$).
- Participants in this study were randomly assigned to one of three groups— Secular, Spiritual, or Control.
- **Secular Group:** ($n = 19$) was asked to, “Write about an experience in your life that has shaped who you are, for which you are grateful. Explain the event in full detail, trying to use all five senses.” “Write about the reasons you are grateful for this experience. As you re-imagine this experience and its impact on you, reflect on how the gratitude feels in your body.” “Write a brief note of gratitude to someone or an aspect of this experience that was particularly impactful for you.”
- **Spiritual Group:** ($n = 19$) was asked to, “Write about a spiritual experience in your life that you are grateful for. Explain the event in full detail, trying to use all five senses.” “Write about the reasons you are grateful for this experience. As you re-imagine this experience and its impact on you, reflect on how the gratitude feels in your body.” “Write a brief note of gratitude to the Deity/Higher Power you believe made this happen.”
- **Control Group:** ($n = 19$) was asked to, “Write about the food you ate yesterday, explain in detail what each meal consisted of, about the snacks or beverages consumed during the day and the environment in which you were eating.”
- Participants entered their text into text boxes in the online experiment tool. Writing tasks lasted 10 minutes. After the writing task, participants proceeded to fill out the study measures.

Measures

- The Gratitude Questionnaire-6 was used to measure levels of gratitude. This measure is designed to assess multiple facets such as intensity, frequency, span, and density of gratitude (McCullough, et al., 2002).
- In the present study, the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 showed an unacceptably low Cronbach’s $\alpha = .58$. For the present study, a shortened version of the scale was used. This three-item subscale had a Cronbach’s $\alpha = .72$.
- The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule was used to assess both positive and negative affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).
- The Perceived Stress Scale four-item version was used to assess individuals’ perceptions of stress (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983).
- The Spirituality Scale was used to assess individual’s experiences of spirituality (Delaney, 2005). The spirituality scale is a comprehensive instrument designed to index multiple aspects of spirituality including: “beliefs, intuitions, lifestyle choices, practices, and rituals” (Delaney, 2005, p. 145).

Results

- Multivariate analysis of covariance revealed statistically significant group differences on the multivariate composite of gratitude, stress, affect, and spirituality, Wilk’s $\Lambda = .57$, $F(10, 94) = 3.06$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta^2 = .25$. Univariate analyses of covariance revealed statistically significant groups differences on gratitude $F(2, 51) = 8.63$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = .25$, stress $F(2, 51) = 3.61$, $p = 0.034$, $\eta^2 = .12$, positive affect $F(2, 51) = 13.38$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = .34$, and spirituality $F(2, 51) = 5.13$, $p = 0.009$, $\eta^2 = .17$, but no group difference on negative affect $F(2, 51) = 1.43$, $p = 0.250$, $\eta^2 = .05$.
- Pairwise comparisons revealed that both secular and spiritual gratitude groups were significantly higher on gratitude, positive affect, and spirituality, as compared to the control group. Only the secular gratitude group was lower than the control group on stress.

Table 1
Means and Standard Errors for Study Outcomes by Group

Outcome	Control Group		Secular Gratitude		Spiritual Gratitude	
	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE
Gratitude	18.25 _a	0.37	20.28 _b	0.38	19.99 _b	0.37
Stress	10.52 _a	0.53	8.51 _b	0.53	9.60	0.52
Negative Affect	18.38	1.40	15.48	1.41	15.51	1.39
Positive Affect	27.90 _a	1.58	39.40 _b	1.59	35.07 _b	1.57
Spirituality	97.39 _a	3.18	111.59 _b	3.21	107.07 _b	3.18

Note. Means with different subscripts differ at the $p < .05$ level by the least significant difference test.

Discussion

- The results of the present study largely confirm the hypothesis that secular and spiritual gratitude letter-writing exercises improve gratitude, positive affect, and spirituality, as compared to a control group.
- The present study also found spiritual grateful writing led to higher levels of gratitude compared to a control group and this is also consistent with previous studies (Rosmarin et al., 2011).
- This study provides a beginning in this regard and demonstrates that both secular and spiritual gratitude interventions have beneficial effects on positive psychological outcomes.
- **Limitations**
 - First, this is a small study of a convenience sample of participants. However, the participants varied considerably in age.
 - Second, the gratitude measure, a key outcome in this study, did not behave as expected, and therefore, an alternative scoring of three items was identified for reliable use.
 - Third, although this is an experiment and causal statements can be drawn from our results, generalizations should be made with caution as our manipulations were specific to writing and our measures were all self-reported.
 - This study provides a beginning in this regard and demonstrates that both secular and spiritual gratitude interventions have beneficial effects on positive psychological outcomes.