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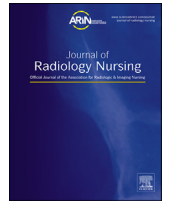
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Guest Editorial

The Silver Linings Journal: Gratitude During a Pandemic



The coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) pandemic interrupted global life at work and home in numerous ways, big and small, with increased stresses on nurses and other healthcare providers. As front-line providers, many nurses, including in radiology, may have shifted roles to care for critically ill patients affected by COVID-19. In addition, furlough, exposure risk, food and housing insecurity, and support for children, elderly, or sick relatives have generated uncertainty and anxiety about current and future lives. Despite recent efforts to improve resilience and well-being (Developing Resilience to Combat Nurse Burnout, 2019; Panagioti et al., 2017; Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2017), burnout continues to impact the nursing workforce in engagement, quality, and safety, with a foreboding outlook for mental health outcomes because of the pandemic (Annual Patient Safety & Quality Industry Outlook Report, 2019; Developing Resilience to Combat Nurse Burnout, 2019; PRC National Nursing Engagement Report: Trends and Implications with Nursing Engagement, 2019; Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2017).

Giving thanks is one of the oldest concepts in society, with practices at the core of most wisdom traditions and religions. In Judaism, sacrificial thanksgiving offerings are found in the first chapters of the Old Testament (Torah), and blessings are recited numerous times daily, including before and after meals. In Christianity, the Eucharist means “thanksgiving” with bread and wine serving as symbols of gratitude. The American secular holiday of Thanksgiving also is centered on gratitude. Robert Emmons, psychologist and world expert on gratitude, defines gratitude as recognizing goodness in our lives (which we might take for granted), frequently due to actions of another person (Emmons, 2010; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Emmons & Shelton, 2002). When grateful, we identify and appreciate the intention and effort involved in the actions on our behalf and the benefits generated (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Emmons & Shelton, 2002).

We each express gratitude toward others in different ways. Before COVID, we could offer a handshake, a pat on the back, or a hug when socially appropriate, in addition to more common direct verbal or written forms of communication. Now in the COVID social-distancing era, there are different means of expressing appreciation: a shout out at a Zoom work meeting, a thumbs up or heart emoji, a retweet, a daily or weekly email to your team inclusive of wins and achievements, or a monthly award for star colleague who went above and beyond in their duties and/or patient care. Research demonstrates that these small gestures can result in tremendous impact in well-being (Emmons, 2007a,

2007b, 2010; Emmons & Shelton, 2002). While we can impact others by expressing gratitude directly, we can greatly enhance our own well-being by articulating gratitude in written or spoken form, even to ourselves, which allows us to focus in the moment on what we appreciate and brings us joy, happiness, or satisfaction.

During moments of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, a grateful perspective is critical to sustain our positive attitude—to energize, to heal, and to bring hope. Positive psychology research demonstrates that positive emotions, including gratitude, are symbiotic with health and wellness, such that positive emotions promote happiness and flourishing, creating an upward spiral (Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman, 2011). In contrast, negative emotions are an important reminder of dangers or unfulfilled needs (Gruber et al., 2011). Being grateful is a free mindfulness practice to help us cope with anxiety and uncertainty by focusing on what we value, what is in our control, and what we can give back (Emmons, 2013).

As a means of continuing gratitude practices during the COVID era and beyond, consider selecting one of these gratitude mindfulness exercises to enhance your well-being:

Exercise #1: start a gratitude journal

In November, my father and I attended an event at local bookstore with authors of two new books, one on coaching and one on empathy. In browsing at the store afterward, I found a section of happiness and gratitude journals. This struck me as a wonderful way to instill a mindfulness practice focusing on gratitude into my life and that of my family. The following night at dinner, I pitched to my wife and three daughters that we each log at least one experience of being grateful daily. To my excitement, they were not only on board but we have continued our practice to date, including illustrations from the kids, engaged dinner discussions, and family bonding. This practice is not novel; writing three instances of gratitude a few times per week can improve wellness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Research on healthcare workers studying a 15-day gratitude exercise of logging “three good things” resulted in improved work-life balance for up to 6 months and significant benefits in happiness, depression, and emotional exhaustion (measure of burnout) for up to 1 year (Sexton & Adair, 2019). Start today!

Exercise #2: contrast and reframe past negative experiences

During this pandemic, it may be challenging to focus on positive emotions and experiences, given the magnitude of uncertainty. However, if we consider past crises and suffering, we can identify our vulnerability and appreciate aspects of life that we take for granted (Emmons, 2013). Think about the worst moments of your

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life—loss of a relative, illness, failure—and then, contrast with the present. Consider how you survived, endured, and flourished into the person you are today. Reframe those negative experiences by observing from a remote perspective. What learning emerged from the bad experience? What is the silver lining to express gratitude for in the present? Cultivating an attitude of gratitude can help foster psychological resilience that will help us cope with the current problem, identify what we can control, and move forward with positivity (Emmons, 2013).

Take this moment to focus on the goodness in the world and in your life. Learn the origin of the goodness. Although not perfect, life presents numerous daily opportunities to remain in control of our experience, be grateful, and express gratitude: an invigorating run, hugging your child, eating a ripe fruit, a colorful sunset, the sound of ocean waves. Document your gratitude daily or even a few times per week to unlock the physical, psychological, and social benefits (Sexton & Adair, 2019). Review past negative experiences for a fresh perspective on how they shaped you into your best self and appreciation for the present. Gratitude amplifies positive emotions to focus on the present and increase your resilience in facing future challenges.

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