

Final Thoughts



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Julie is a compassion fatigue specialist who brings a unique perspective and approach to support the sustained energy and passion of animal workers. Her company, Rekindle LLC, offers on-site compassion fatigue training to veterinary hospitals, animal shelters, and other animal organizations.

Julie has more than 20 years of experience within the veterinary field and with leading organizations. She has developed and executed training, workshops, and 1:1 coaching for major companies in the animal health industry. She obtained her certification as a compassion fatigue specialist through the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology and has also completed training from The Figley Institute and Traumatology Institute. Julie's clients also gain from her experience as a certified health and wellness coach and corporate wellness specialist.

An Attitude of Gratitude

When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around. —Willie Nelson

Clients are a paradox. They contribute to both our compassion satisfaction and our compassion fatigue: in essence, both the good and not-so-good parts of our job.

Sometimes it feels as though no matter how hard we try, we just can't satisfy some clients. We are lucky if we even get a "thank you" from them. I know we didn't come to veterinary medicine for the thanks and praise, but it sure would be nice sometimes, wouldn't it?

It seems like everywhere you turn, the public is suspicious of veterinarians (and their practices). You know those commercials: "Don't pay those high prices at your vet when you can get the same meds here for a fraction of the price!" I even hear it from my family and friends. "Wow, I can't believe how much it cost for me to take my dog to the vet. The surgery was over \$3000!" I want to say, "Yes, but your dog is still alive, isn't he? Where's the gratitude?"

Gratitude can be defined as "an emotion expressing appreciation for what one has, as opposed to what one wants."¹ Robert Emmons, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, the founding editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, and the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude, puts it this way: "It's an affirmation



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of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we've received...[and] we recognize that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves."²

It's not just our clients who could use a lesson in gratitude. Sometimes we need one too.

Accepting Gratitude

On a recent trip to Cornell, a veterinary student, Nick, said to me, "Perhaps we are looking for gratitude from the wrong place. Instead of wishing the client was more grateful, maybe we should be looking for it from our patients?" But how in the world can we ever know if an animal is grateful for the care we have provided? I think it's easier than you might think.

First of all, think about the amazing skill you have to communicate with a nonverbal patient. It's a true superpower. Your patients can't tell you what is wrong, yet you decipher their signs, symptoms, and nonverbal communication to figure out what is wrong and then make it better. Superpower? No doubt.

We have all seen animals express gratitude. Social media is full of videos like the shelter dog that gets adopted and goes crazy jumping up and down and licking his new owner. Maybe you've had a cat that, after recovering from a urethral blockage, purred his face off and rubbed himself all over you. Even farm animals display gratitude. I guide weekend tours at a farm animal sanctuary, and we see it all the time.

For example, Jersey calves Emerson, Calvin, Russell, and Bernard were just 3 days old when they arrived at the sanctuary. They were all extremely sick with *Giardia* and *Escherichia coli* and required round-the-clock bottlefeeding.

These little calves spent their first few months living in a barn stall because they were too weak and too sick to be outside. But then the day came when they were turned out into their "big boy" field, and the gratitude and joy they expressed was undeniable. You can see it on YouTube: [youtube.com/watch?v=si4ijr-KRho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=si4ijr-KRho).

So while we have all seen grateful animals, have we taken that gratitude in? Have we accepted it? Have we let it recharge us?

Cultivating Gratitude

According to Dr. Emmons' studies, we can deliberately cultivate gratitude, which has the power to³:

- Heal
- Energize
- Change lives

When we're appreciating something, we let go of our ego and connect with the present, which has benefits of its own. Remembering to be grateful for these things—be they objects, experiences, or people—can increase not only our pleasure in them, but our own energy and harmony with the rest of the world.^{4,5}

Here are some ways to bring more gratitude into your experience and your life.

Create a gratitude journal: Spending a few minutes every morning or evening to write down the things for which you are grateful can go a long way in reminding you about what is good in your life.

Find 3 things a day: At bedtime, before drifting off into dreamland, my husband and I like to rattle off 3 things from the day that made us grateful. Some days, there are big things like a new speaking engagement, but other days, it

might be smaller things like the feel of clean sheets. They are all worthy of gratitude.

Make a gratitude bulletin board: Whether at home or at work, make a space to hang up the thank-you cards you receive, notes that came with a plate of goodies from a client, cards that came with flowers, badges from conferences you attended, and items from family and friends that are significant to you and for which you are appreciative.

Write a thank-you letter: Many of us know someone who at some time made a difference in our lives, and who we never really thanked or told how they inspired us. This person may be a college roommate, certain professor, coach, colleague, friend, or family member. Write them a letter, and (if possible) read it to them face-to-face.

Bring gratitude into your family: While families eating meals together has become scarcer over the years, when your whole family does sit down for a meal, exchange high and low points of your day. Sharing low points teaches children resiliency and how to manage the difficulties life throws at us.

Pay it forward: I wish I had told my grandmother how much I appreciated her and her wisdom before she died many years ago. But since I can't, I instead show my gratitude by extending kindness to other senior citizens I encounter in the world. It may be just a smile, or a conversation, or a door held open, but it is all infused with appreciation for the elders of our society.

Have gratitude reminders: If you have trouble remembering to connect to gratitude, then link something

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We often forget to take the time to recognize the people who are working right alongside us—the ones who care just as much as we do. Take the lead, and see for yourself what a difference a daily attitude of gratitude can make in your life.

you do—be it driving, brushing your teeth, making coffee, washing your hands, leaving work, or some other everyday task—with the act of bringing to mind things you are grateful for.

Right this moment, think of something you are grateful for and spend a few seconds thinking about it. Do you feel that shift in your energy and your mood? I always do.

Gratitude at Work

Being grateful with our coworkers can completely transform a workplace. Let it begin with you.

The next time someone calms a fractious cat, hits a rolling vein, helps with a difficult client, volunteers for the euthanasia, cleans up the operating room, offers to do data entry, or otherwise helps with an unenviable task, express your heartfelt gratitude with a sincere *thank you*. We often forget to take the time to recognize the people who are working right alongside us—the ones who care just as much as we do. We all want to feel appreciated. Take the lead, and see for yourself what a difference a daily attitude of gratitude can make in your life. ■

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