

# How practicing gratitude helps nurses avoid burnout

By Jill Suttie, PsyD

**B**urnout and emotional exhaustion were ongoing risks for nurses long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Now these hazards have only worsened. According to the National Institute of Health Care Management, 62% of RNs report feeling sadder and more depressed than they were before this public health crisis.

As nursing and healthcare leaders explored ways to combat burnout among nurses, some focused on the practice of gratitude. A 2013 study by Bono and colleagues published in the *Academy of Management Journal* found that practicing gratitude at work improves how people handle stress and boosts health.

This research highlights the benefits for nurses in particular: When nurses feel grateful and express thanks to a colleague, it helps build positive relationships and increases their sense of meaning and satisfaction on the job. Further research done by Adair and colleagues, published in 2020 in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, also found that practicing gratitude is linked to lower emotional exhaustion among nurses and other health professionals.

“After studying the literature around resilience, well-being, burnout, and gratitude, I became a full convert,” said Perry Gee, PhD, RN, a nurse scientist, and an American Nurses Association (ANA) member studying wellness. “Gratitude is one of the main interventions we could use to help increase nursing resilience.”

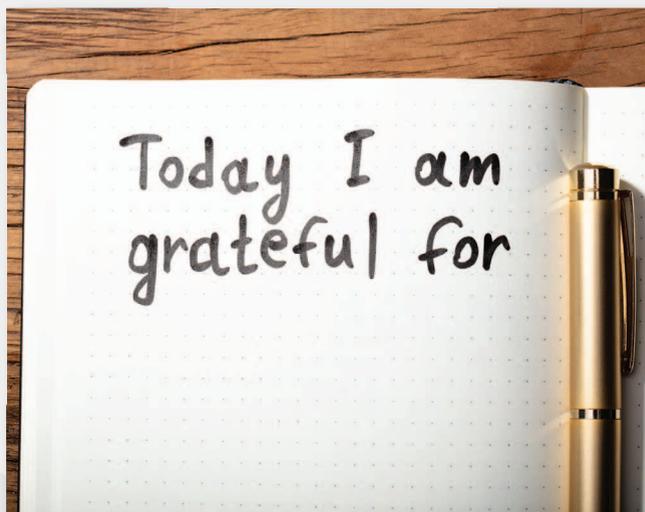
*gratitude*

## Which gratitude practices are right for nurses?

For nurses, wellness interventions need to be fast, easy to implement, and effective. The following practices can be easily adopted as daily or weekly habits.

**Gratitude journaling.** The basic instruction for keeping a gratitude journal is to write down two to five things you are grateful for, two or three times a week. Express gratitude for things small or large, and always something specific and personal to you.

**Gratitude letter.** Writing a gratitude letter involves thanking someone who touched your life considerably but who you never properly thanked—then, ideally, reading the letter to this person. According to research published by Adair and colleagues in 2020 in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, taking just 7 minutes to write a gratitude letter is enough to significantly improve the well-being of health professionals, suggesting it’s possible to weave this practice into a nurse’s busy schedule.



**Gratitude huddle.** This is an opportunity for people to share things they’re grateful for in a group setting and build a sense of community. Huddles can happen during a staff meeting or routine shift changes.

## Gratitude as part of an overall wellness program for nurses

Evidence suggests that practicing gratitude can improve nurses’ resilience, but it’s not a cure-all. Organizations need multipronged strategies for nurse wellness, and nurses shouldn’t be forced into gratitude when an overall approach to caring for their safety and well-being is absent.

Introducing gratitude programs seems to work best when viewed as authentic and part of workplace culture rather than as one-off exercises. If nurse leaders embrace gratitude and practice it consistently, this approach is more likely to substantively help nurses thrive.

“Just pausing every day to say, ‘thank you’ to a colleague feeds the giver as well as the receiver, which definitely builds resilience,” said Laurie Combe, MN, RN, NCSN, president of the National Association of School Nurses, an organizational affiliate of ANA. “We need to take these moments for our own self-care if we want to be able to care for our patients.”

**Learn more about how to bring the science of gratitude into nursing by visiting the Gratitude Practice for Nurses ([gratitudefornurses.org](http://gratitudefornurses.org)) campaign, run by the American Nurses Foundation (which also provided funding) and UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center.**

— Jill Suttie is a staff writer and contributing editor for *Greater Good*. Portions of this article were previously published in *Greater Good*, the online magazine of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley ([greatergood.berkeley.edu](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu)).