

Handwritten Thank-You Notes Have Surprising Consequences

The win-win benefits of handwritten notes tend to be underestimated.

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Most People Undervalue the Benefits of Handwritten "Thank-You" Notes

For their recent study, Kumar and Epley conducted three different experiments in which study participants wrote various letters expressing gratitude and then predicted how surprised, happy, or potentially awkward they thought the recipient would feel when he or she received a handwritten note of appreciation.

Their results showed that people expressing gratitude underestimated how pleasantly surprised recipients would be to receive a handwritten "thank you" and how positive the expression of gratitude made recipients feel. On the flip side, people who wrote thank-you letters overestimated the potential awkwardness that someone receiving a heartfelt thank-you note would experience.

Additionally, the researchers found that the prosocial gesture of expressing gratitude in a handwritten note boosts positive emotions and well-being for both the letter-writing "expresser" and the recipient of the stated appreciation.

Kumar and Epley speculate that egocentric bias often leads expressers of gratitude to systematically undervalue the positive impact that expressing appreciation and thankfulness has on recipients. As the authors write, "Wise decisions are guided by an accurate assessment of the expected value of action. Underestimating the value of prosocial actions, **such as expressing gratitude, may keep people from engaging in behavior that would maximize their own — and others' — well-being.**" They hope that putting the benefits of handwritten "thank-you" notes in the spotlight will inspire people from all walks of life to express gratitude more frequently in their day-to-day lives.

"We looked at what's correlating with people's likelihood of expressing gratitude — what drives those choices — and what we found is that predictions or expectations of that awkwardness, that anticipation of how a recipient would feel — those are the things that matter when people are deciding whether to express gratitude or not," Kumar said in a statement. "What we saw is that it only takes a couple of minutes to compose letters like these, thoughtful ones and sincere ones. **It comes at little cost, but the benefits are larger than people expect.**"

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About The Author

Christopher Bergland is a retired ultra-endurance athlete turned science writer, public health advocate, and promoter of cerebellum ("little brain") optimization.