The Gratitude Witnessing Effect in Adolescents

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INTRODUCTION
• Past gratitude research has often overlooked the experience of witnesses—namely, those observing someone sharing gratitude with a benefactor
• This study explored the “gratitude witnessing effect” in adolescents

METHOD
• We recruited adolescents (N = 296; ages 14-19; grades 9-12) from a public high school in Florida via the Character Lab Research Network for a pre-registered, single-timepoint study
• Assigned to 1 of 3 conditions:
  - Letters were written by a hypothetical peer to a parent, teacher, or friend
  - Letters varied as to whether they:
    1. Expressed gratitude (for kind acts received)
    2. Reported positive news (e.g., winning a game)
    3. Described neutral events (e.g., going to class)
• Adolescents completed brief pretest measures, read their assigned letters, then completed posttest measures
• Analyses: Regressed change predicting posttest scores from hypothesized condition dummy codes (controlling for pretest scores)

RESULTS
• Relative to neutral letters, adolescents who read gratitude letters experienced greater increases in positive emotions ($\beta = 0.13, p = .006$) and elevation ($\beta = 0.16, p = .002$), and marginally larger decreases in gratitude ($\beta = -0.07, p = .07$)
• Those who read gratitude and positive letters experienced similar boosts
• No significant effects for negative emotions, life satisfaction, or connectedness

DISCUSSION
Observing gratitude may provide hedonic benefits for witnesses in part because those letters are positively-valenced

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Relative to those who read neutral letters, adolescents who read gratitude and positive letters reported greater increases in positive emotions and elevation.