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Gratitude as a protective factor against helplessness: Implications for well-being among working professionals

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Abstract

The present study examined gratitude as a potential protective factor against helplessness and explored its implications for the well-being of working professionals. In fast-paced organizational environments, employees often experience lack of control over outcomes, leading to feelings of helplessness which can reduce motivation and emotional functioning. Gratitude, as a positive psychological resource, is theorized to buffer such negative effects and sustain mental well-being. The objectives of the study were to assess levels of helplessness, gratitude and well-being among working professionals, to examine the associations between these variables, and to determine whether gratitude moderates the negative influence of helplessness on well-being.

The research adopted a quantitative, correlational design using a sample of 200 working adults. Standardized psychological scales were administered, including the Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS), Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) and the WHO-5 Well-Being Index. Results revealed a strong negative correlation between helplessness and well-being, while gratitude showed a significant positive association with well-being. Moderation analysis using Hayes PROCESS Model 1 further indicated that gratitude significantly buffered the negative impact of helplessness; individuals with higher gratitude exhibited less decline in well-being even when helplessness levels were elevated.

These findings suggest that gratitude functions as a resilience-enhancing resource that preserves emotional health in demanding work environments. The study carries practical implications for workplace wellness programs, highlighting the value of gratitude training, peer appreciation practices, positive feedback systems and recognition-based leadership. Incorporating gratitude-based interventions in organizational settings may reduce burnout, support emotional stability and promote sustainable psychological well-being among employees.

Keywords: Gratitude, helplessness, well-being, working professionals, positive psychology

Introduction

In contemporary organizational environments characterized by fast decision cycles, high expectations, and limited personal influence over outcomes, many employees confront chronic pressure that diminishes their perceived sense of control. When individuals repeatedly experience situations where efforts do not yield change or recognition, they may internalize a belief that outcomes are independent of action a cognitive state termed learned helplessness (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978) ^[1]. This state is strongly linked to lowered motivation, emotional exhaustion, burnout, depressive mood and reduced overall well-being.

However, recent psychological inquiry highlights that some inner resources allow adults to stay emotionally steady even under adverse conditions. One such resource is gratitude, a life orientation defined by noticing, valuing, and emotionally appreciating positive aspects of life—whether relationships, opportunities, achievements, or even small daily comforts. Wood, Froh & Geraghty (2010) ^[8] note that gratitude is not merely a state but a trait-like protective factor that consistently predicts greater happiness, positive emotion, resilience, and life satisfaction. This suggests that a grateful mindset may not only enhance well-being but may actively buffer individuals from the psychological harm of perceived powerlessness.

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Gratitude and Psychological well-being

Research overwhelmingly supports gratitude as a strong predictor of well-being. Wood *et al.* (2010)^[8] found that gratitude uniquely predicts happiness and life satisfaction even when controlling for personality traits. A large meta-analysis confirmed that gratitude interventions significantly enhance well-being across age groups and cultures (Harbaugh *et al.*, 2023; *as indexed in PMC10393216*)^[5]. Gratitude journaling and expression practices improve emotional stability, reduce stress markers, and increase positive affect (Emmons & McCullough, 2003)^[3].

Further evidence shows that gratitude enhances resilience, strengthens social bonds and improves coping—all crucial for workplace functioning (Algoe, 2012)^[2]. These outcomes contribute to improved mood, motivation, work engagement and overall life satisfaction.

Helplessness and its impact on well-being

The theory of learned helplessness posits that repeated uncontrollable experiences reduce the motivation to act, weaken agency, and diminish hope (Abramson *et al.*, 1978)^[1]. This mechanism significantly lowers psychological well-being, confidence and life satisfaction. Studies link helplessness to depression, emotional withdrawal, and burnout and reduced productivity in adults.

In workplace contexts specifically, helplessness arises from low decision autonomy, repeated failure, job instability and relentless performance pressure. Research suggests that workplace helplessness predicts emotional exhaustion and burnout, ultimately impairing overall well-being (Psychology & Russia, 2022)^[7].

Gratitude as a buffer against helplessness

The broaden-and-build theory suggests that gratitude increases positive emotion, broadens perspective and builds long-term psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001)^[4]. These resources—optimism, meaning, coping skills—work as counterforces to helplessness.

Meta-analyses confirm that gratitude decreases depressive symptoms and negative attribution patterns common in helplessness (Lambert *et al.*, 2012)^[6]. A recent study found that gratitude significantly promotes well-being even under stress, indicating a compensatory buffering effect (Harbaugh *et al.*, 2023)^[5].

Thus, literature supports the hypothesis that gratitude *may moderate* or neutralize the negative link between helplessness and well-being.

Objectives of the study

- To assess levels of helplessness among working professionals.
- To measure gratitude and well-being in the sample.
- To examine the relationship between helplessness and well-being.
- To determine whether gratitude serves as a protective factor.
- To test if gratitude weakens the negative impact of helplessness on well-being.

Hypotheses

- **H₁:** There will be a significant negative correlation between helplessness and well-being.
- **H₂:** There will be a significant positive correlation between gratitude and well-being.

- **H₃ (Moderation Hypothesis):** Gratitude will moderate (buffer) the effect of helplessness on well-being, such that individuals with higher gratitude will show less reduction in well-being compared to those with lower gratitude.

Conceptual Framework

Helplessness —————> Negative Effect —————> ↓ Well-Being

| Moderated ↓ by
▼

Gratitude (Protective Factor)

Gratitude is hypothesized to weaken the strength of the negative arrow, offering protection.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, correlational research design aimed at examining the relationship between helplessness, gratitude, and well-being among working professionals. A moderation-based framework was used to determine whether gratitude buffers the negative effect of helplessness on well-being. Data were collected using standardized psychological tools and statistically analyzed.

Sample

The present study adopted a quantitative, correlational research design aimed at understanding the relationship between helplessness, gratitude and well-being among working professionals. The purpose of this design was to examine how helplessness influences levels of well-being and whether gratitude functions as a protective psychological factor. The design further allowed for statistical testing of moderation, helping determine whether gratitude weakens the negative impact of helplessness on employee well-being. This approach was appropriate considering the variables were psychological in nature, measurable through standardized scales, and required statistical inference rather than experimental manipulation. The sample consisted of 200 working professionals, selected through purposive sampling with snowball extension. Participants belonged to varied sectors, including corporate offices, government departments, educational services and private business organisations. Only individuals currently employed with at least one year of work experience were included to ensure adequate workplace exposure. The age range was set between 25 and 50 years, capturing early to mid-career professionals likely to experience workplace pressure, responsibility, and potential role-based helplessness. Individuals with diagnosed severe psychiatric conditions or undergoing psychological treatment were excluded to maintain sample reliability and reduce clinical interference. This sample size was considered adequate for correlational and moderation analysis, offering sufficient statistical power for meaningful interpretation.

Three standardized psychological instruments were used for data collection. The Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS) was selected to assess perceptions of powerlessness, lack of control and expectations of failure. This scale contains Likert-type items that measure the extent to which individuals feel incapable of influencing outcomes in their lives or workplace roles. Higher scores indicate greater

levels of helplessness, making the instrument suitable for identifying risk patterns in professional environments characterised by stress or limited autonomy.

To measure gratitude, the widely-used Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) was administered. This scale consists of six statements rated on a 7-point agreement scale designed to capture trait gratitude, that is, how often respondents recognise, acknowledge and emotionally appreciate positive aspects of their lives. Higher scores on the GQ-6 reflect a stronger disposition toward gratitude. The tool is frequently used in positive psychology studies, particularly those assessing emotional resilience and strengths-based well-being. Its brevity and reliability made it appropriate for working adults completing self-report measures within limited time availability.

Well-being was measured using the WHO Well-Being Index (WHO-5), a short but scientifically robust tool designed to assess subjective psychological well-being. The scale includes five positively-worded statements, each rated on a Likert scale, that evaluate mood, vitality, life satisfaction and overall emotional functioning. Higher scores reflect higher levels of well-being, making the scale effective in detecting mental state variations in occupational populations. Its simplicity, strong validity and international applicability enabled smooth administration across diverse professional backgrounds.

Following ethical approval, participants were approached through professional networks, workplace email circulation, and digital survey links. They were informed about the study's purpose, confidentiality assurance, voluntary nature of participation, and approximate time required to complete the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. The survey, consisting of demographic details and the three psychological scales, took approximately 10-12 minutes to complete.

After completion, responses were scored in accordance with their respective manuals and compiled for analysis. The data were then processed using statistical methods. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were used to understand score patterns, followed by Pearson's correlation to assess relationships among variables. To test whether gratitude moderated the impact of helplessness on well-being, moderation regression analysis (Hayes PROCESS Model 1) was employed. The statistical plan allowed for precise examination of whether high gratitude levels reduce the negative consequences of helplessness on well-being among working professionals.

Result and Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether gratitude serves as a protective factor against helplessness in the prediction of well-being among working professionals. Quantitative analysis demonstrated strong and meaningful relationships between all variables. As anticipated, helplessness was significantly and negatively correlated with well-being, indicating that individuals who experience higher levels of powerlessness tend to report lower emotional wellness, reduced motivation and diminished satisfaction with life. This supports existing findings in clinical and occupational settings where lack of control has been linked to burnout, depressive symptoms and reduced psychological functioning (Abramson *et al.*, 1978) [1]. The results further showed that gratitude was significantly and positively correlated with well-being. Participants who

scored higher on gratitude reported greater levels of psychological health, positive mood, and overall life satisfaction.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and inter-variable correlations (N=200)

Variable	Mean (M)	SD	Helplessness	Gratitude	Well-being
Helplessness	48.21	11.34	—	-.41**	-.56**
Gratitude	31.84	6.92	-.41**	—	.63**
Well-being	17.55	4.88	-.56**	.63**	—

Note: $p < .01^{**}$, indicates highly significant correlations

Table 2: Moderation Regression (Hayes PROCESS, Model 1)
Predictor: Helplessness (X), Moderator: Gratitude (M), Outcome: Well-being (Y)

Regression Model Output	B	SE	T-Value	P-Value
Constant	12.04	1.08	11.15	< .001
Helplessness (X)	-0.31	0.07	-4.42	< .001
Gratitude (M)	0.48	0.09	5.33	< .001
Interaction (X*M)	0.017	0.005	3.40	.001

Table 3: Interaction Interpretation

Gratitude Level	Effect of Helplessness on Well-being
High Gratitude (+1 SD)	$\beta = -0.18 \rightarrow$ weak negative effect
Average Gratitude (Mean)	$\beta = -0.31 \rightarrow$ moderate negative effect
Low Gratitude (-1 SD)	$\beta = -0.46 \rightarrow$ strong negative effect

This aligns with extensive research showing gratitude as a key driver of emotional balance, resilience, positive affect, and subjective well-being across multiple adult populations (Wood *et al.*, 2010; Emmons & McCullough, 2003) [8, 3]. These findings confirm that gratitude is not simply an emotional state, but a stable psychological strength that enhances wellness in day-to-day functioning.

The most noteworthy outcome of the study was the significant interaction effect, confirming that gratitude moderates the relationship between helplessness and well-being. Moderation results indicated that the negative impact of helplessness on well-being was strongest among individuals with low gratitude, weaker among those with moderate gratitude, and least harmful among individuals with high gratitude. The interaction plot clearly illustrated that even when helplessness was present, professionals with higher gratitude maintained comparatively better well-being scores. This suggests that gratitude offers psychological cushioning, reducing the level of emotional disruption typically caused by helplessness.

The finding aligns with the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotion, which argues that gratitude widens cognitive perspective, fosters positive interpretation, and builds long-term coping resources (Fredrickson, 2001) [4]. Gratitude may also mitigate helplessness by reshaping attribution patterns: instead of viewing setbacks as uncontrollable or permanent, grateful individuals may experience failure as temporary, manageable, or buffered by supportive resources in their lives. The ability to notice what is positive, even in stressful environments, could therefore reduce emotional exhaustion and protect well-being.

From a workplace standpoint, gratitude may help professionals cope better with lack of control, workload pressure, performance uncertainty, and organisational complexity. Employees high in gratitude might be better equipped to remain hopeful, motivated and emotionally regulated, even in environments where outcomes are

unpredictable or responsibilities are demanding. Conversely, those who lack gratitude may be more vulnerable to burnout, pessimism and psychological decline when helplessness rises.

In summary, the findings strongly support the central hypothesis of the study: gratitude functions as a protective factor, buffering the negative effect of helplessness on well-being among working professionals. Gratitude does not remove stress or helplessness, but it significantly reduces the emotional damage they cause. This highlights gratitude as a practical and scalable tool for workplace mental-health enhancement.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study highlight the crucial role of gratitude in shaping emotional well-being among working professionals. Results confirmed that helplessness significantly reduces well-being, while gratitude independently enhances psychological health, optimism, and emotional stability. Most importantly, gratitude was found to moderate the relationship between helplessness and well-being, indicating that professionals with higher gratitude remain more resilient and emotionally balanced even when helplessness is present. Those with lower gratitude, however, experience a sharper decline in well-being under similar psychological strain.

This suggests that gratitude functions as a psychological buffer, a mental safeguard that protects individuals from the deteriorating impact of helplessness. In contexts where professionals may feel powerless or overwhelmed, gratitude helps maintain a sense of meaning, agency, and positivity. Therefore, cultivating gratitude is not only beneficial for boosting well-being, but also vital for reducing the vulnerability associated with helplessness and workplace stress. The study reinforces gratitude as an accessible, low-cost, and powerful tool for psychological sustainability in corporate and professional environments.

Practical Implications

The findings of the study carry meaningful implications for organisational policy, workplace wellness planning, and individual self-care. At an individual level, cultivating gratitude through practices such as keeping daily appreciation lists, maintaining gratitude journals, and consciously reframing setbacks into opportunities for learning may enhance emotional resilience. Expressing appreciation to colleagues and developing habits of noticing small positive moments throughout the workday can further strengthen optimism and well-being. At the organisational level, gratitude-based wellness programs, recognition rituals, appreciation-driven team interactions and the inclusion of reflective gratitude exercises in workshops or mindfulness sessions can foster a healthier emotional climate. Integrating gratitude into HR wellness modules may promote psychological safety, strengthen interpersonal relationships and contribute to sustainable well-being. From a leadership perspective, managers play a crucial role in modelling gratitude through acknowledgment, encouraging supportive communication, and offering feedback that includes recognition instead of solely evaluation. When gratitude is embedded into workplace culture, it has the potential to reduce burnout, increase motivation, enhance work relationships and build emotionally resilient teams.

Limitations of the study

Despite contributing valuable insights, the study is subject to several limitations. The use of self-report measures may have introduced social desirability or response bias, potentially affecting accuracy of responses. The sample was drawn from specific professional sectors, which may limit generalizability to broader work populations or other industries. Additionally, the correlational design restricts causal conclusions; although relationships were identified, the study cannot definitively state that gratitude reduces the impact of helplessness. The moderation effect was examined statistically, but qualitative insight into subjective emotional experiences was not explored. Moreover, well-being and emotional states are dynamic and may fluctuate over time thus a longitudinal or time-based research design could provide richer developmental understanding of these relationships.

Future scope for research

Future studies may build on the present findings by adopting longitudinal or experimental designs to determine causal influence of gratitude training on helplessness and well-being. Comparative studies across different sectors such as corporate, education and healthcare could provide deeper understanding of workplace-specific emotional demands. Further research may also incorporate variables like burnout, job satisfaction, stress, resilience and coping to develop a wider psychosocial model. Qualitative interviews or narrative-based approaches could add depth to the lived experience of helplessness and gratitude in professional settings. Additionally, implementing gratitude interventions and measuring pre-post shifts in well-being may strengthen evidence for applied workplace programs. Future work may also focus on identifying organisational structures that facilitate or hinder gratitude-based culture building.

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