COMX 485.01: Communication and Health

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Social relationships are the cornerstone of a healthy life. People with whom we formally and informally relate help enhance the quality of our lives in profound ways. Most obviously, they help us accomplish our basic goals in life by providing us with all kinds of “social support.” Less obviously, however, they provide us with opportunities to exchange love, affection, gratitude, humor and forgiveness. Research has recently suggested that these opportunities to communicate provide us with both objective and subjective health outcomes. The purpose of this course is to help you discover how human communication and interpersonal relationships intersect to affect our physical and psychological well-being. More broadly, this class is about how communication can make our lives happier, healthier, and more satisfying lives.

In this class, you will learn:

- Various ways in which health can be defined, and how health relates to social relationships.
- How specific types of communicative behaviors (disclosure, affection, gratitude expressions, etc.) relate to health.
- How intimate communication benefits us, and promotes physical and psychological health.
- Why social relationships are essential to successful aging.
- Why positive emotions are beneficial to experience and express as often as possible.
- How public social policy and discourse can be connected to well-being.
- Various ways in which research on health and communication can be conducted.

Required Readings


Additional required weekly readings, and a weekly schedule of those readings are available on the Moodle online course supplement, in the “syllabus” section.
Assignments

This course will have two major written assignments. Both work together to help you understand how and why communication can correlate with health and well-being.

Graduate students must see me about an additional graduate-level assignment.

Communicating Gratitude

Communication part (the letter) due 3/2, Analysis part (the paper) due 3/11

Gratitude is the emotional experience people have when they believe they have received or gained something valuable as a result of someone else’s actions (Solomon, 1977). Although some people are more inclined to feel more or less gratitude than others on a routine basis, nearly everyone has equal opportunity to experience at least brief states of positive emotion related to gratitude (such as gladness) at various times. As we will discuss in this course, experiences of gratitude are related to such beneficial states as increased positive emotions, increased likelihood of being kind to others, increased self-esteem, and for some people, better sleep, increased optimism, and increased feelings of connectedness to others (Emmons, & McCullough, 2003; Rash, Matsuba, & Prkachin, 2011).

The purpose of this assignment is to help you experience and generate gratitude in your life, and to understand the effects of doing so in a scholarly, informed way. This assignment has two parts: the communication component, and the analysis component.

To begin, choose a person in your life whom you’d like to thank for something important and powerful they did for you. The person should be someone who you know, who has meant a lot to you, and who you could easily contact by phone or in person — maybe it’s your mother, favorite uncle, sibling, a former coach, teacher, or a long-term friend. They may or may not know they did it, but what matters is that you feel a deep sense that they granted you something that you feel grateful about. Ideally, this person should be someone who you have not properly thanked before.

The communication part (the letter) of this project is to write this person a letter of gratitude. Carefully describe what he or she did for you, and exactly how it affected your life. Describe to them what it means to you that they did what they did, and how it made you feel. Close by describing to them your vision of the future with them.

Then, contact the person and ask them to visit with you, either in person or over the phone. Don’t give any specifics — just say that you want to talk with them for a few minutes. When you talk with them, read the letter aloud. You can then give them the letter.

Bonus: Come to our “gratitude night” and read your letter to the person there (invite the person to come if they are in town, or arrange to talk with the person over the phone at that time), or you can record your reading and post it somewhere that we can watch it as a class (e.g., Youtube) during gratitude night. If you want to read more about the history and experience of the concept of gratitude night, see Seligman (2005), pages 72-74.

The analysis part (the paper) of the assignment is for you to write up what happened as you carried out this assignment and how you felt doing so. This paper should be written in essay format, and have the following content:
• Who did you write the letter to (who is this person to you?), and why did you decide to write the letter to him/her? What did you feel or think as you were writing this letter?

• How did the other person react to your expression of gratitude? And how were you affected by their reaction? How long did these feelings last after you presented your letter?

• Did you recall the experience in the days that followed the reading of the letter? If so, how did this recollection affect your sense of health and well-being (mood, energy, etc.).

• Given what you have learned about gratitude experiences and expressions in class, what is your assessment of this activity? In what ways is expressing gratitude a positive experience, and in what ways is it perhaps less positive? The best papers will refer to specific course content in this discussion, and frame the experience in terms of that relevant content.

When you turn in your analysis, please attach a copy of the gratitude letter as well. Overall I would expect this paper to be between around three pages, not including your letter. In addition, the essay must be formatted with the following aspects:

- 1” margins on all sides
- 12-point Times New Roman font
- double-spacing between lines (neither more nor less)
- name in upper left corner
- page numbers in the upper right corner
- staple in the upper left corner

References from above

Read these before you begin the assignment if they sound interesting to you. They might help you explain some of your experience and be useful as you write your paper.


Your Last Week in Missoula 50 points possible

You will need to “do” this assignment before you actually write up the report for it, so be sure to plan time (I recommend a minimum of two weeks) before the assignment is due for both practice and writing.

The purpose of this assignment is to illuminate how your social life is related to your experiences of competence (a feeling of being capable or expert in bringing outcomes in your activities), autonomy (a feeling of mastery and control over your life), and relatedness (the feeling that you are close and connected with others), and how these “nutriments” are linked to your sense of well-being. Research suggests that this type of exercise can enhance your appreciation of things in your life that you might not
regularly think about. That is, when you live as if you were experiencing things for the last time, you are more likely to experience them as you would for the first time (Kurtz, 2008; Lyubomirsky, 2013).

To begin, I would like you to plan a seven-day period (Monday – Sunday), during which you will fully and faithfully (to the most possible extent) imagine that this is your final week in Missoula, and that in the week after this one, you are about to move away from your school, job, friends, and family, for an unknown, indefinite period of time. Your main experiential goals each day are to use all of your senses (sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing), and capture as many memories and experiences as you can, so that you can take these with you after you have left.

During these seven days, you will keep a daily diary of your thoughts, feelings and observations about your most memorable experiences (“sacred moments”), and your sense of well-being each day. For every day that you are having your experiences (again, a Monday-Sunday) plan a time at which you will write in your journal. This should be a time and a place where you feel comfortable and not rushed or intruded upon. Use the diary form that I provide you for each entry. You will turn these in with your paper.

This report should have two main sections:

1. Description of Experiences
2. Academic Research Explanations for your Experiences

Description of Experiences
In this section of your paper, I would like you to describe your top three “sacred moments” that you recall over the course of the week. What was the memory, and why was it memorable or sacred to you? Please elaborate on the details (the most specific things you remember), and be sure to include a description of your scores for competence, relatedness, autonomy, negative affect, and positive affect for those days (you can get those scores from your journal). I would also like you to elaborate on how other people played a role in this experience for you. Other than those details, there are no right or wrong answers to what you may have experienced, and both positive and negative experiences are equally valid. I only ask that you focus on the aspects of the experience that made it a memorable or “sacred” experience for you, and why those aspects were important to your experience. This part of the assignment will be assessed primarily on the quality of your descriptions, the complexity of your thoughts about your experiences, and the depth of your analysis regarding why those aspects were important – not on whether your experiences were positive or negative or “right” or “wrong.”

Academic Research Explanations for your Experiences
In this section, you’ll analyze your top three sacred moments through the lens of empirical research. Examine each of those three experiences, and figure out what “type” of experience each was. For example, was it an experience of kindness, social support, disclosure, gratitude, humor, or something else?

Once you have identified the type and quality of experience, your first objective is to locate, read, and outline at least three academic sources (peer-reviewed studies or academic book chapters) that examine how the type of experience you had (whether it was an experience of kindness, social support, disclosure or whatever), affect one’s sense of autonomy, competence, and/or relatedness. It is reasonable to believe that you will need to look through many more than three studies to settle on the study that best applies to your specific experience. It is also possible that some academic sources will apply to your experience quite well, even if they are on broader topics than your specific experience. Try to engage this process early, so that if you run into challenges locating research, or have questions about whether or not a particular article would apply, you can see me in good time for some assistance.
Whatever sources you locate and decide to use, the studies must be primary sources published in academic journals or academic book chapters. I will not accept non-academic secondary sources that describe study findings (such as a website that describes the findings of some other studies). The best place to locate primary reports of empirical research on gratitude is in PsychInfo (database available through the Mansfield Library – on the library website, search under “P” in the Databases – A-Z index). Once you find the studies that are most interesting to you, read the methods, results, and discussion sections, and highlight/outline the main findings that you would like to discuss.

Once you have highlighted/outlined the main findings in each study for yourself, begin writing your paper. Organize the paper by your experiences. For each one, explain what it was about the experience that made it memorable for you. Finally, explain to me why, using the research findings as evidence, the experience was so memorable, important, or “good.” A key mission of this part of the paper is to explain your experience from an academic standpoint. Thus, this part of the paper will be graded on the academic content. Most importantly, it will demonstrate your ability to examine your personal experiences through research findings.

Conclude your paper by summarizing what you think are the most important lessons from this experience. What is that you will take with you from this experience, or what do you believe are the most important lessons that others should know?

Other details
Again, you will turn in your diary entries along with your paper. In addition to a cover page in APA style, you must have a bibliography (also in APA style). Each source you cite in your text must be cited in your bibliography, and vice-versa. In total, this paper could be around five – eight pages of text, not including your journal entries, the APA style title page, and the bibliography.

Presentation Due: Final week of class 10 points possible

At the end of the semester, you’ll briefly present one of your assignments to the class. Inspire us. Make us laugh. Make us cry. Your presentation should be about 5 minutes, and have the following components:

Introduction
Grab the audience’s attention with an informative, but gripping piece of information about your experience (either your last week in Missoula, or your gratitude project).

Discussion
Tell us the story of your project. What kinds of things did you experience? For the time that you were engaged in the process, and for the weeks after, what, if anything did you notice about your health and well-being? Visual aids (photos, mood charts, etc.) will be included in the best presentations.

Conclusion
Close your presentation with a memorable, take-home message about the main lesson you learned in your project. Make it inspirational, touching, funny, or just awesome.

Exams - 150 points possible (50 each exam)
Course Policies

1. **Attendance and Participation**
   Because the course involves discussion of the readings each week, attendance is essential. I will take attendance at least six times in this class. Being absent during two of those times (i.e., one full week’s worth of class meetings) will reduce your grade by one full letter. Missing four and six classes will reduce your grade by one and two additional letters respectively (thus, missing six classes would result in the highest possible grade being a “C.”) You must let me know if you know ahead of time that you will be absent. In such an event, your responsibility is to find out what you missed and to get the lecture notes from one of your classmates. Once you review those notes, I encourage you to come speak with me about any questions you might have about the discussion you missed.

2. **Exam policy**
   The exams will be taken in class, and can be taken alone or collaboratively with one other person. For each exam, I will distribute an online survey that allows you to declare whether you wish to take the exam alone or collaboratively. If you choose to take the exam collaboratively, you may choose one partner to work with. Your partner must be declared in advance, and both partners must agree to take the exam with each other. You will be allowed to choose a specific partner, or ask me to assign you a partner.

   You can choose the same format for each exam, or choose different formats or different partners.

3. **Late Work**
   If you know that you will be missing a class, you should make an effort to submit your assignments early. Assignments become late when they are turned in after the class period of their due date. Whereas no quizzes can be submitted after the due date, other late assignment will receive a 10% penalty for each weekday that it is late. The assistants in the main office do not mark times or dates on papers that are turned in to them.

   If you are sick when an assignment is due and want to turn it in late, you must provide a legitimate doctor’s note that indicates the days that you were unable to attend class. This must be turned in with your completed assignment. Exams will be administered only on the days scheduled. No exam can be made up without a valid and legitimate excuse. Valid and legitimate will be decided on the basis of evidence provided. Note that valid and legitimate never involves plane tickets, vacations, outdoor recreation, or any other random and unverifiable excuses. Dr.’s notes must be originals (no photocopies, carbons, faxes, or emails). If an absence is known ahead of time, you must make arrangements before the assignment is due.

   If you will miss class due to a university-sponsored activity, you are required to (a) introduce yourself prior to missing class, (b) provide a copy of your travel schedule that indicates the days you will be missing, and (c) discuss with me your plans for making up the work.

   **A Note on Computer Problems:** You are responsible for knowing how your computer works and the potential problems of using it. Save your work frequently, take care of your discs, make sure that your computer is using an updated virus-protection program, and make every attempt to print your papers ahead of time. Given the computer resources on this campus, I cannot reasonably accept computer-related excuses for late work.
4. **Written Work**
   All papers must be typed, double-spaced, and in the appropriate format (APA). It is a good idea to keep a back-up copy of all your assignments.

   All papers must be stapled in the upper left-hand corner.

5. **Academic Misconduct**
   According to the University of Montana Catalog, “Plagiarism is the representing of another’s work as one’s own. It is a particularly intolerable offense in the academic community and is strictly forbidden. Students who plagiarize may fail the course and may be remanded to Academic Court for possible suspension or expulsion… Students must always be very careful to acknowledge any kind of borrowing that is included in their work. This means not only borrowed wording, but also ideas. Acknowledgement of whatever is not one’s own original work is the proper and honest use of sources. Failure to acknowledge whatever is not one’s own original work is plagiarism.” I want to add to that it also is not appropriate to submit papers written by yourself for previous or other courses.

   All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the student conduct code. Please see the Student Conduct Code for definitions and consequences of cheating and plagiarism at: www.umt.edu/SA/VPSA/index.cfm/page/1321

6. **Incompletes**
   See the University of Montana Catalog for more information. These are very rarely granted, and only under the most unique circumstances.

7. **Auditing and Credit/No Credit options**
   According to the University Catalog, the Credit/No Credit grade option exists “to encourage students to venture into courses where they might otherwise hesitate because of uncertainty regarding their aptitude or preparation....” It does not exist as protection from poor performance after the 30th day of the semester. So, if you decide to audit this class or desire the credit/no credit grade option, you must indicate this decision to me within the first 30 days of the semester. I cannot grant any grade-option changes past that time. *If you wish to apply this course to your major, minor, or general education requirements, you must take it for a traditional letter grade.*

8. **Unique Needs**
   I want everyone to have a fair chance at doing well in class. If you have unique needs that help you overcome some challenge to your learning, please see Disability Services for Students (DSS) in the Lommasson Center (Room 144; phone: 243-2243). They will help you determine what types of resources are available to help you and will provide you with a letter to me detailing those resources. We will work together to make sure that you begin with a “level playing field” for your performance in this course.

9. **If you participate in University-sponsored activities (e.g., sports, debate, etc.) AND you will be missing assignment due dates or exams for related activities:** I need a letter from your coach documenting your participation, as well as copy of your schedule indicating which days of class you’ll need to miss due to your activity. You are responsible for getting notes and making arrangements to turn in your assignments/take exams.

10. **A note about civility**
    This is a professional setting, in which your success requires attention, engagement, and respect. Civility can be enacted in many ways, but perhaps one of the more recent issues to challenge
classroom civility is in the use of electronic communication devices during class time. I reserve the right to impose a no-screen policy in this class if electronic communication devices are being used for non-class related activities. If you have personal issues to attend to during a specific class, it is acceptable to excuse yourself from class and return when you are ready.

11. Help on campus
Life and relationships are complicated, and college can be a challenging, even if meaningful experience. Please know that we have excellent professional resources on campus to help you manage a variety of issues that you might encounter. The College of Education has assembled a useful list of campus resources that might help.

**Course Calendar**
*Calendar is subject to change*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Due dates and Reminders</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Course introduction</td>
<td>Bring to class on Thursday: completed WHO Quality of Life Survey (find on Moodle)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/25, 1/27, 1/29</td>
<td>What is “Health” and Why is Communication Important to it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Key terms and concepts for understanding research on health and communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/1, 2/3, 2/5</td>
<td>An overview of the health benefits of social relationships</td>
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<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Overview of The Harvard Study of Adult Development, and issues around aging well</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/18, 2/10, 2/12</td>
<td>No meeting 2/15 (President’s Day)</td>
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<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Social support, comforting, and advice-giving</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/15, 2/17, 2/19</td>
<td>Exam 1: 2/22</td>
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<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Expressing gratitude, compassion, and kindness</td>
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<td>2/22, 2/24, 2/26</td>
<td>Gratitude night, 3/2, 7:30pm: Specific location TBA</td>
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<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Affectionate communication</td>
<td>Due on 3/2: Communicating Gratitude – Bring the letter only for gratitude night</td>
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<td>2/29, 3/2, 3/4</td>
<td>Humor</td>
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<td>Week 7</td>
<td>Self-Disclosure</td>
<td>Due on 3/11: Communicating Gratitude – analysis paper (attach letter)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3/7, 3/9, 3/11</td>
<td>The Role of Space and Design in Well-Being</td>
<td>Plan your “last week in Missoula” experience now. Include time for both experiences and research.</td>
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<td>Week 8</td>
<td>Emotional experience and expressions</td>
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<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Love and Attachment, continued. Forgiveness</td>
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<td>Week 10</td>
<td>Presentations</td>
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<td>3/28, 3/30, 4/1</td>
<td>Closing words on communication and health</td>
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<td>Week 11</td>
<td>Final Exam: 3:20-5:20 Wednesday, May 11</td>
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**COMX 485: Communication and Health Course Readings**
(all readings other than chapters in the Vaillant book are available on Moodle)

**Week 1: Definitions of health and the importance of communication**

(By Thursday) Gurung, R. (2006). Cultural approaches to health


*Also for Thursday…*

Assess and reflect upon your current overall health using the World Health Organization’s Quality of Life survey (on e-res or Moodle). What does the World Health Organization seem to define as “health” or “quality of life?” What are some reasons why you believe your health and quality of life are “good” or “bad”?

**Week 2: Key terms and concepts for understanding research on health and communication**


**Week 3: An overview of the health benefits of social relationships, and issues of aging well**


Vaillant, Chapters 1 and 2, and Appendix A

**Week 4: Social support, comforting, and advice-giving**


**Week 5: Expressing gratitude, compassion, and kindness**


Vaillant, Chapter 4

**If you are interested in more information on this topic:**

[Robert Emmons’ lab](http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/labs/emmons/PWT/index.cfm)


**Week 6: Humor**


**Week 7: Affection**


**If you are interested in learning more about this topic:**


**Week 8: Self Disclosure**


If you are interested in other information on this topic:

James Pennebaker's webpage on writing and health
(http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/homepage/Faculty/Pennebaker/Home2000/WritingandHealth.html)

Week 9: Space and Design


Week 10: Emotional experience and expressions


Vaillant, Chapter 2, pp. 60-82.

If you are interested in more information on this topic:

Barbara Fredrickson’s Online Mood Tracker (http://www.positivityratio.com/)


Week 11: Spring Break

Week 12: Love


Week 13: Forgiveness


Vaillant Chapter 3.
Week 14: Aging well


If you are interested in more information on this topic: Laura Carstensen’s Stanford Center on Longevity (http://longevity.stanford.edu/)

Week 15: Presentations