

Best Possible Future Selves Exercise

Optimism is a powerful tool for increasing happiness and life satisfaction because it boosts positive feelings about the future, increases self-efficacy, and leads to self-fulfilling prophecies. The goal of this exercise is for you to experience the power of hopeful and optimistic thinking, goal commitment, and enhanced zest.

Instructions

Previous research has persuasively shown that writing expressively about oneself and one's feelings has numerous benefits for health, emotional adjustment, hope, and well-being. In this exercise, you will visualize and write about your "best possible future selves." Possible selves have been defined as personalized representations of goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and comprise all of the futures that a person can envision for his or herself – that is, their "most cherished self-wishes" (Allport, 1961). Writing about one's possible selves thus can enhance self-regulation because it provides an opportunity to learn about oneself, gain insight into and restructure one's priorities, identify discrepancies between actual and desired behaviors, and better understand one's motives and emotional reactions. Writing about one's life goals may also be beneficial because it can clarify "goals in conflict" (Pennebaker, 1998), as well as bring greater awareness and transparency to one's priorities, motivations, and values (Emmons, 1986, Little, 1989; Omodei & Wearing, 1990). Thus, this exercise may serve to integrate life experiences into a meaningful framework – called "making meaning" - and allow one to gain a feeling of control and purpose. Finally, imagining success at one's life goals can up psychological well-being (King, 2001), improve performance (Pham & Taylor, 1999), boost psychological adjustment (Rivkin & Taylor, 1999), and bring to bear a variety of benefits associated with positive thinking (Fordyce, 1983; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Ultimately, all of these benefits are hypothesized to increase and sustain your happiness level.

Adapting the writing procedure developed by King (2001), you will write for *20 minutes at a time* about different experiences and topics.

Here are your specific instructions:

"Visualize your life in the future. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of all of your life dreams. Now, write about what you imagined."

Do this for 20 minutes per day for three days in a row. Some research indicates that writing on paper, not a computer, involves a deeper structure in the brain that could produce powerful results, so that could be an optimal approach. This is not an exercise designed to be shared with others necessarily, so write freely. If anxiety emerges, try to just jot down words, phrases or bullet points that capture your thoughts. The goal is to complete all three days in some detail.