

Best Possible Self

Write, nonstop, about a future in which your life has gone as well as it possibly could.

15 min practice + 5 min journal

Standard practice

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Moderate



1 Why you should try it

Sometimes our goals in life can be elusive. But research suggests that building optimism about the future can motivate people to work toward that desired future and thus make it more likely to become a reality.

This exercise asks you to imagine your life going as well as it possibly could, then write about this best possible future. By doing so, research suggests that you'll not only increase your happiness in the present but pave the way for sustained happiness down the line.

2 The session — Prof. Magee's 15-minute protocol

Follow these timings, not the website's. Set a timer. One session = the 15 minutes below, then 5 minutes of journaling immediately after. At least 4 sessions in your 2-week window, a different life domain each time — the study ran daily for two weeks.

2'

11'

2'

2 MIN Pick a domain and picture it

Imagine your life in the future. What is the best possible life you can imagine? Choose one area for this session — career, academic work, relationships, hobbies, health, where you live — and picture it vividly. Use a different domain each session.

11 MIN Write continuously

Write, without stopping, about what you imagine this best possible future to be. Be *specific*: if it's a job, exactly what you do, with whom, where; if it's a relationship, what a Tuesday looks like. Focus on the future — not on how your current life falls short or the barriers you've hit. Imagine a brighter future in which you are your best self and your circumstances change just enough to make this life happen. Be as creative as you want; ignore grammar and spelling.

2 MIN Extract one step

Read it back. Underline the single most concrete detail. Write one thing you could do this week that points toward it.

3 Then journal — 5 minutes, by hand

- Top of the entry: **date and time**. Entries without both lose credit.
- Write for **5 minutes without stopping** (about 300 words). Messy is fine; stopping is not.
- Before / during / after: how did you feel at each point? Be specific — body, mood, thoughts.
- What surprised you? What felt fake, awkward, or easier than expected?
- **Prompt**: What did you write that you'd never said out loud? Did it feel like permission or like pressure?

- **Prompt:** Optimism is supposed to increase motivation. Did the "one step" actually happen?

4 Evidence that it works

Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006)

People who completed the Best Possible Self exercise daily for two weeks showed increases in positive emotions right after the two-week study ended. Those who kept up with the exercise even after the study was over continued to show increases in positive mood one month later.

5 Why it works

By thinking about your best possible future self, you can learn about yourself and what you want in life. This way of thinking can help you restructure your priorities in life in order to reach your goals. Additionally, it can help you increase your sense of control over your life by highlighting what you need to do to achieve your dreams.

6 Know the research — for your presentation (APA 7)

In your presentation you will explain, **from memory and without notes**, the evidence behind each practice — who studied it, when, and what they found — plus something *not* written on the GGIA site or on this handout. Read these papers (SJNY library or Google Scholar), then follow their citations forward to find **your own article** — one more peer-reviewed study on this topic that is not the source study here (due Sun Dec 6). Take photos along the way; they are your slides.

Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). How to increase and sustain positive emotion: The effects of expressing gratitude and visualizing best possible selves. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1(2), 73–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760500510676>

Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology*, 9(2), 111–131. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.9.2.111>

Adapted for PSY 251 from Greater Good in Action, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley — original at https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/best_possible_self. Practice sources: Laura A. King, Ph.D., University of Missouri; Jeffrey Huffman, M.D., Harvard Medical School. Timings, session structure, and journal rules are Prof. Magee's and override the website's.