

Finding Silver Linings

Describe something that went wrong — then find three honest ways it wasn't all bad.

15 min practice + 5 min journal

Standard practice

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Moderate



1 Why you should try it

We all tend to ruminate on things that have gone wrong in our lives — a mistake at work, an evening that didn't go as planned. We might even think about them so often that our lives seem filled with these mishaps and disappointments. Focusing on them too much, however, can cast a pall over our lives and even be associated with depressive thinking.

Looking on the bright side even when things go wrong is a key component of optimism, which research links to lower rates of depression, a better ability to cope with stress, and more relationship satisfaction, among other benefits. While finding the silver lining on a negative experience might (understandably) make you fear turning into a Pollyanna, many of us have a tendency to look on the bright side too rarely, not too often. This exercise is designed to help you achieve a healthier balance.

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, each on a fresh setback — the study ran daily for three weeks.

3'

3'

6'

3'

3 MIN Five things that make life worthwhile

List five things that make you feel like your life is enjoyable, enriching, or worthwhile at this moment — as general as "being in good health" or as specific as "this morning's coffee." This shifts you into a positive frame about your life in general before you look at the hard thing.

3 MIN The recent setback

Think about the most recent time something didn't go your way, or when you felt frustrated, irritated, or upset. In a few sentences, briefly describe the situation in writing — just the facts.

6 MIN Three silver linings

List three things that can help you see the bright side of this situation. Example — you missed your bus: (1) you got some exercise running for it; (2) you're fortunate to live where another bus came 10 minutes later, or where buses run at all; (3) ten years from now you won't remember this morning. Make yours honest, not saccharine.

3 MIN Reread and rate

Read the whole page back. Rate the situation 1–10 for how bad it feels now versus when you started. Notice which of the three linings did the most work.

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:** Did the silver linings feel true, or like spin? What's the difference, for you?
- **Prompt:** Which kinds of setbacks resisted the exercise entirely? Why might that be?

4 Evidence that it works

Sergeant, S., & Mongrain, M. (2014)

Participants who completed a set of optimism exercises (this exercise and the Goal Visualization task) daily for three weeks reported greater engagement in life and less dysfunctional thinking (e.g., believing that small failures make one a failure as a person) at the end of the study than they had at the start of it. Participants who had a tendency to be pessimistic especially benefited from the exercise and showed fewer depressive symptoms afterward. However, these effects seemed to wear off two months later, suggesting the need to repeat this practice periodically.

5 Why it works

Looking on the bright side of life in general, or of a bad situation in particular, can increase happiness by boosting your sense of self-worth, motivating you to go after your goals, and enhancing your enjoyment of life. Regularly completing the silver linings exercise can help you get in the habit of recognizing positive aspects of your life and seeing the upside to challenging situations rather than fixating on the downsides. With repeated practice, you may find that it comes more naturally to look on the bright side, even when faced with difficulties in your life.

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.

Sergeant, S., & Mongrain, M. (2014). An online optimism intervention reduces depression in pessimistic individuals. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 82(2), 263–274. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035536>

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