

Mental Subtraction of Positive Events

Imagine a good thing in your life never happened — then appreciate that it did.

15 min practice + 5 min journal

Standard practice

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Casual



1 Why you should try it

It's easy to take the good things in life for granted, but research suggests that the more we stop to appreciate what we have, the happier and healthier we are. This exercise is designed to help you increase feelings of gratitude for positive events in your life by visualizing what your life would be like without them. By getting a taste of their absence, you should be able to appreciate their presence in your life more deeply — without actually having to lose them for real.

It's like being in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* — or Joni Mitchell's song "Big Yellow Taxi," where "you don't know what you've got till it's gone."

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 different positive event. Same time each week helps (Sunday night, Friday lunch).

2'

3'

4'

3'

3'

2 Choose the event

MIN

Take a moment to think about a positive event in your life — getting into this school, meeting a particular friend, a job, a trip, a person who showed up at the right time. Pick one; use a different event each session.

3 Rewind to the circumstances

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Think back to the time of this event and the circumstances that made it possible. Who was involved? What had to line up?

4 List the ways it might never have happened

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Write down all the possible events and decisions — large and small — that could have gone differently and prevented this event from occurring. A missed email, a different seat, a friend who almost didn't invite you.

3 Imagine the life without it

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Imagine what your life would be like now if you hadn't enjoyed this positive event and all the fruits that flowed from it. Let it be a little uncomfortable; that contrast is the point.

3

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Return and appreciate

Shift your focus to remind yourself that this event actually *did* happen and reflect on the benefits it has brought you. Now that you have considered how things might have turned out differently, appreciate that these benefits were not inevitable. Allow yourself to feel grateful that things happened as they did.

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:** How did the "life without it" feel in your body? Did gratitude arrive on its own when you came back, or did you have to reach for it?
- **Prompt:** People usually predict that this exercise will feel worse than it does (that's the study's headline). Did it?

4

Evidence that it works

Koo, M., Algoe, S. B., Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2008)

Participants were asked to think about what their lives would have been like had a positive event never happened; other participants either simply thought about the event or thought about how it was not surprising that the event had happened. The participants who practiced "mental subtraction" — they considered their lives without the positive event — reported feeling more positive states and more gratitude than the other participants did.

5

Why it works

Mental subtraction counteracts our tendency to take positive events in our lives as givens. When we consider the circumstances that led to an event, we may be surprised by how unlikely that event actually was, and how lucky we were that it happened as it did. While it can be painful to think about not having experienced an important positive event, this scenario provides a negative contrast against which our current situation can be favorably compared.

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.

Koo, M., Algoe, S. B., Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2008). It's a wonderful life: Mentally subtracting positive events improves people's affective states, contrary to their affective forecasts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(5), 1217–1224. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013316>

Adapted for PSY 251 from Greater Good in Action, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley — original at https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/mental_subtraction_positive_events. Practice sources: Minkyung Koo, Ph.D.; Sara Algoe, Ph.D.; Timothy Wilson, Ph.D.; Daniel Gilbert, Ph.D. (study authors). Timings, session structure, and journal rules are Prof. Magee's and override the website's.