MENTAL SUBTRACTION OF POSITIVE EVENTS

Difficulty: CASUAL | Frequency: 1X/WEEK | Duration: 15 MINS

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."

TIME REQUIRED

15 minutes. Try to make time to do this practice once per week, focusing on a different positive event each week. It might help to do this practice at the same time each week—before bed each Sunday evening, perhaps, or at lunch every Friday.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Take a moment to think about a positive event in your life, such as an educational or career achievement, the birth of a child, or a special trip you took.
2. Think back to the time of this event and the circumstances that made it possible.
3. Consider the ways in which this event may never have happened—for example, if you hadn't happened to learn about a certain job opening at the right moment.
4. Write down all of the possible events and decisions—large and small—that could have gone differently and prevented this event from occurring.
5. Imagine what your life would be like now if you hadn't enjoyed this positive event and all the fruits that flowed

from it.

6. Shift your focus to remind yourself that this event actually did happen and reflect upon 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 in your life. Allow yourself to feel grateful that things happened as they did.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

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.

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.

WHY TO TRY IT

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.

FOR MORE

For a variation on this practice in which you consider life without an important person in your life, consider this version of the "mental subtraction" practice, which is intended not only to increase feelings of gratitude but to strengthen a close relationship as well.

This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.