

MENTAL SUBTRACTION OF RELATIONSHIPS

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

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

It's easy to take the important people in our lives for granted, but research suggests that if we experience and express gratitude for them, our relationships will be stronger and our lives will be happier. This exercise is designed to stoke feelings of gratitude for one of these people—such as a romantic partner or close friend—by asking you to think about what your life might have been like had you never met 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.

TIME REQUIRED

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

HOW TO DO IT

1. Take a moment to think about an important relationship in your life, such as a romantic relationship or close friendship.
2. Think back to where and how you met this person.
3. Consider the ways in which you might never have met this person and never formed a friendship or relationship—for example, if you hadn't decided to go to a certain party, taken a certain class, or moved to a certain city.
4. Write down all of the possible events and decisions—large and small—that could have gone differently and prevented you from meeting this person.
5. Imagine what your life would be like now if events had unfolded differently and you had never met this person. Bring to mind some of the joys and benefits you have enjoyed as a result of this relationship—and consider how you would feel if you were denied all of them.
6. Shift your focus to remind yourself that you did actually meet this person and reflect upon the benefits this relationship 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 and this person is now in your life.

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.

Mostly female participants in an American study were asked to think about what their lives would have been like if a

positive event, such as meeting a romantic partner, had 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.

Who has tried the practice?

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Mental subtraction counteracts our tendency to take positive events in our lives—such as meeting a great person—as givens. When we consider the circumstances that led to a chance encounter, we may be surprised by how unlikely that meeting actually was, and how lucky we were that it happened as it did. While it can be painful to think about not having met someone close to us, 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 a positive event from your past, consider [this version](#) of the “mental subtraction” practice.

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](#).

