

Envisioning Best Possible Self

The “best possible self” intervention invites students to imagine themselves in the future, “where they have achieved everything desired, after working hard towards it” (Carrillo et al., 2019, p.2). Students are then encouraged to write all they can about this future self and what they hope to have achieved to become that person. Sheldon and Lyuobirmsky (2006) share that “writing about one’s possible selves. . .allows an opportunity to learn about oneself, to illuminate and restructure one’s priorities, and to gain better insight into one’s motives and emotions” (p. 175). The original creator of the activity encouraged participants to write about their best possible self for 20 minutes, for four consecutive days, but recent studies have shortened that amount, or even introduced it as a drawing activity for younger children, with similar results (Sheldon & Lyuobirmsky, 2006; Owens & Patterson, 2013).

Grade Level: All

Materials: Paper, writing or coloring utensils

Duration: 10-15 minutes, single session. Repeat as needed.

Implementation: 1. Decide what time of day you will set aside for the activity each day.
2. Introduce students to the idea of imagining the future and the possibilities of who we can become
3. Provide students 10-15 minutes to write about or draw a representation themselves at their best, enjoying a future activity.

Does it work?

A study done at the University of Missouri asked 67 students to either focus on expressing gratitude for blessings in their life, focus on optimism by envisioning their best possible selves, or pay attention to the details of their lives (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). After completing an initial writing assignment about their topic and several weeks of independent practices, researchers found that all three exercises immediately reduced negative emotions. Those in the “Best Possible Selves” (BPS) condition experienced the most increased positive emotions with the gratitude condition coming second. The BPS condition “prompted the highest degree of self-concordant motivation; that is, participants indicated greater identification with and interest in continuing to do the BPS exercise, relative to the others” (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006, p. 80). This study supports the importance of both gratitude for life events and optimism when envisioning future life events. Additional studies suggest that writing about our best possible selves can result in immediate increases in positive emotion with limited long-term benefits (Bean, 2019, p. 250).

For younger students, you might consider having them draw their best self, rather than write about it. One study has tested this process to see if it has the same effect as the writing intervention. Of the 62 children ages 5-11 in after-school care/day camp programs that were studied, 23 students were asked to draw a picture of themselves in a future condition at their best (participating in something they enjoy), 22 students were told to draw something they were grateful for, and the control group was asked to draw about something that happened during the week (Owens & Patterson, 2013). Not only did this study reflect similar results to those of other best self interventions, the students’ self esteem was significantly improved in the best possible selves intervention, with no change in the gratitude or control groups (Owens & Patterson, 2013).

References:

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