

Cultivating Gratitude Through Counterfactual Thinking

Gratitude

Exercise

15 min.

Client or Group

Yes

Thinking about alternatives to our own pasts is central to human thinking and emotion. Such thoughts are called counterfactual thoughts (Epstude & Roese, 2008). We engage in counterfactual thinking to imagine how an outcome of some negative life event could have turned out differently. Suppose you were late for a morning meeting because you slept through your alarm; you might think to yourself, "Had I set multiple alarms, this would not have happened." In this instance, you are comparing your actual self to a hypothetical self who is better off, a phenomenon known as upward counterfactual reasoning. This type of counterfactual reasoning tends to unleash regrets.

On the contrary, one can compare one's actual self to a hypothetical self who is worse off, a phenomenon known as downward counterfactual reasoning. For example, suppose you thought to yourself, "Had I not woken up when I did, I would have missed the meeting completely!" Such a thought would likely make you feel somewhat better.

Counterfactual thinking can be used in the context of positive psychology to elicit gratitude and appreciation for positive events in our life. Within positive psychology, gratitude exercises generally involve acknowledging and appreciating the presence of an event/thing/person, for example, "I'm glad I have X in my life." However, another way to cultivate gratitude is to acknowledge the absence of an event/thing/person, for example, "Imagine if I had never met X!"

Emerging evidence suggests that counterfactual thinking heightens the meaningfulness of life events (Kray et al., 2010). Kray and colleagues examined the relationship between counterfactual thinking and personal meaning and found that thinking about how pivotal events and relationships might have unfolded differently actually solidifies their meaning and significance in one's life. By considering what might have been, individuals construct life stories that are more meaningful (Kray et al., 2010).

This tool invites clients to bring to mind a pivotal, positive life event, and explore what it would be like if this had not occurred in their life. The exercise aims to help clients bring to life feelings of gratitude and appreciation for the good things in their lives.



Author

This tool was adapted from Kray et al.'s (2010) experimental exercise 'From What Might Have Been to What Was Meant to Be' by Lucinda Poole and Hugo Alberts.



Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients cultivate feelings of gratitude and appreciation for the good things in their lives.



Advice

- It is important for clients to consider a turning point that changed them for the better. Although the turning point may have caused negative emotions to arise in the short term, it should be something that the client feels had a significant positive contribution on his or her life in the long run.
- It does not matter if the client's 'turning point' event seems insignificant or trivial, such as a piece of advice from a colleague compared with the death of a loved one. What matters is the positive outcome that the event had on the client's life.



Suggested Readings

Epstude, K., & Roese, N. J. (2008). The functional theory of counterfactual thinking. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 12(2), 168-192.

Kray, L. J., George, L. G., Liljenquist, K. A., Galinsky, A. D., Tetlock, P. E., & Roese, N. J. (2010). From what might have been to what must have been: Counterfactual thinking creates meaning. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 98(1), 106.

Tool Description

Instructions

This exercise invites you to bring to mind a pivotal, positive life event, and explore what it would be like if this had not occurred in your life. How would your life be different?

Step 1: Identify a positive turning point in your life

Recall a time in your life in which rapid, intense, and clear change occurred in response to a positive event or experience, such that you and your life was never the same again. This so-called 'turning point' may have been initiated by you or from forces outside of your control. An example of a turning point is meeting one's future partner in a supermarket cue.

Step 2: Imagine a different reality

Now, imagine that this pivotal turning point had never occurred. Imagine that you are you now, but that this significant positive event had never occurred. How would your life be different? What good things would you have missed out on? Explore this through writing about the following:

Which of your positive personal attributes (i.e., strengths) would be less developed?

What life events and experiences would you have missed out on?

Which positive relationships would you have missed out on?

Which helpful or empowering beliefs were shaped by this event?

Which of your values were shaped by this event?

What else might be different?

Step 3: Reflection

- How do you feel now? What feelings or emotions are here?
- What did you learn from the exercise?
- What impact has the occurrence of this event had on your life? How has it shaped who you are today?
- How personally meaningful do you consider this particular event to be?
- To what extent do you feel fate played a role in the occurrence of this event in your life?
- What other events have had a substantial impact on your life?