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FEELING good

Future-directed therapy can complement past- and present-oriented therapies by helping you crystallize what to do and how to do it.



IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES

No doubt, these are anxious times. But a brighter future could be ahead—especially if you change your mindset.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

WE TEND TO THINK of talk therapy as focused largely on the past—usually on the ways our parents screwed us up. But among psychologists there's a growing interest in solving our problems and understanding what will make us happy by looking ahead.

Prospection, as it's known, is a uniquely human superpower:

We're the only animals who can vividly imagine scenarios we've never experienced. (Indeed, Martin E.P. Seligman, PhD, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and the director of its Positive Psychology Center, has argued that we should rename our species *Homo prospectus*.) Says Gabriele Oettingen, PhD, a professor of

psychology at New York University and an editor of the 2018 book *The Psychology of Thinking About the Future*: “The past is over, and we cannot change it. The future is where all our possibilities lie.”

Ancient humans used prospection to build temples and strategize battles; it’s how we plan and prepare for life’s next steps. But our thoughts about the future can affect our mood in the present, too. “Thoughts create emotions, so if you anticipate something great, like a wonderful vacation, you’ll get an immediate boost of positive emotion,” says Ann Marie Roepke, PhD, a psychologist in Seattle who has studied prospection extensively. Other research has found that happy people are better than glum ones at imagining positive future scenarios.

Of course, life isn’t one big upcoming vacation, and that sad truth brings up prospection’s main pitfall: Anticipating something unpleasant—especially if you tend to craft and obsess over worst-case scenarios—can trigger negative feelings about events that may never come to pass, Roepke says. A habit of faulty prospection has been linked to both depression and anxiety. And if you’re already feeling depressed or anxious, that can warp your ability to think clearly about the future. (For more about living with and moving past fear, anxiety, and trauma, see “Fear Less,” page 76.)

That’s where one application of

prospection comes in. When Jennice Vilhauer, PhD, worked as a clinical psychologist at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, she kept encountering patients with depression who weren’t feeling any better even after years of talk therapy. “They weren’t able to envision a better future for themselves or believe they could get there,” Vilhauer says. She developed a type of counseling called future-directed therapy (FDT), in which she asks patients to, among other things, contemplate their ideal future and then think through small, doable acts that could help them achieve it. A patient who is miserably lonely, for example, might articulate her desire for closer connections and then, with her therapist, brainstorm baby steps such as finding a local Meetup group. A 2013 study coauthored by Vilhauer found that patients treated with FDT showed significant abatement in depression and improved quality of life. Vilhauer has since used her method with people who have anxiety or self-esteem issues, or who simply feel stuck.

Other therapists are weaving similar future-minded approaches into their practice, in variations such as “hope therapy,” to help patients feel better by helping them strive for future goals. “It’s not like you think good thoughts and instantly become a CEO,” says Oettingen. “But you can kick-start a process that guides your decisions.”

LOOK AHEAD

Start envisioning tomorrow’s homemade French toast tonight. A study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* asked subjects to record four positive events that might reasonably happen to them the next day (for example, a job offer, or even just a text from a loved one). At the end of the two-week study, this group was significantly happier than those asked to write about neutral or negative happenings.

More research on prospection’s possibilities lies ahead. In the meantime, here are some strategies for imagining a brighter future now.

IF YOU TEND TO VIEW THE FUTURE AS A SERIES OF PROBLEMS

♦ **Try: Practicing great expectations.** “Too often we base our actions on what we expect will happen instead of what we want to happen,” says Vilhauer, who is also the author of *Think Forward to Thrive*. “We don’t realize we have a choice.” If you expect your new Hinge date to be another dud, you may arrive already rolling your eyes. But if you remind yourself that you want to find a satisfying relationship, then you can envision the encounter as a positive step in that direction. You’ll be more likely to put on a game face that sets you up for a greater chance at success.

♦ **Get prospective:** Vilhauer suggests writing down a future event that is troubling you (*I’m dreading going to work*). Then contemplate and write down a more desirable scenario (*I’d like a career that lets me use my creativity*). Be as specific as possible: Maybe you also crave independence, lots of interaction with coworkers, and increased responsibility. “Your attention shifts from what you’d rather avoid to what you want,” Vilhauer says. “You begin to see possibilities. That helps you consider new actions.”

Meet the Future You

Can you imagine who you’ll be ten years from now? If you’re like most people, probably not. A study by UCLA psychologist Hal Hershfield, PhD, measured the brain activity of subjects as they were asked to think about their current self, their self in ten years, and other people. The surprising result: The way the brain lit up for future selves was more like the way it lit up for other people than the way it did for current selves. “The consequence of viewing the future self as a different person is that we feel less empathy for it,” says Hershfield. “Without empathy, we aren’t as motivated to take care of that person.” You may be less inclined to save money for “her” benefit, for instance—why hand over hard-earned cash to a stranger when you can buy

what you want right now? On the other hand, research has shown that learning to put yourself in your someday shoes helps you make better long-term decisions. In a 2018 study by Hershfield and colleagues, subjects who were asked to write a letter to their future self were more likely to engage in healthy behavior, such as exercise, in the days that followed.

Cecilia Dintino, a clinical psychologist with a private practice in New York City, encourages her clients to ask their inner wise elder for advice: “Ask your future self a question like *How can I deal with my feelings of insecurity at work?* Then write a letter from her offering wisdom. Set a timer for ten minutes and let it flow. People are always so surprised by what comes out.”

IF YOU’VE EXPERIENCED A SETBACK

♦ **Try: Writing about new opportunities.** A 2018 study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* involved subjects who had experienced a significant adverse life event (a car accident, the death of a loved one). Once a week for one month, participants wrote for 15 minutes reflecting on whether, despite the pain engendered by their loss, any future doors might open as a result. Afterward, they rated themselves higher in aspects of post-traumatic growth (such as relationship quality, personal strength, and hope for the future) compared with those who were instructed to simply write factually about their everyday life.

THIS IS (FUTURE) US

The mayo jar your partner left on the counter—overnight—may seem a legitimate justification for World War III. But what if you took the long view and asked yourself what that same conflict would look like a year from now? A study of 322 people in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* asked participants to write their thoughts about a recent event where “things went really badly” between them and a romantic partner or close friend.

One group was instructed to write about the dustup from a present perspective; the other reflected on what they would think about the incident when looking back at it in a year. The future-perspective takers showed less partner blame, greater insight, and more forgiveness, says Igor Grossmann, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Waterloo in Canada: “In the heat of the moment, we are not always the wisest. Thinking about a conflict from this distanced perspective allows you to cool off and see the big picture.” So take a deep breath and count to 365.

of happiness that lasted for weeks.

And it's good for more than boosting mood. Cecilia Dintino, an assistant clinical professor of psychology at Columbia University Medical Center and a therapist in New York City, recommends the technique to her clients, many of them women age 60 and older who are unsure about their next chapter. “I encourage them to just let their imagination go—for example, *I will become the foremost authority on surviving divorce with grace*. It helps you think outside the box for the new life you want to step into.”

♦ **Get prospective:** Writing about your future awesomeness, describing it to another person, or drawing yourself can make you feel better. To help you *act* on the incredible future you, it's important to also describe how you might realize your vision, suggests Dintino.

IF YOU KEEP STUMBLING ON THE WAY TO A LIFE GOAL

♦ **Try: Mental contrasting.**

Oettingen's research has found that there might be such a thing as too much positive thinking. In an early study, she asked women enrolled in a weight loss program to imagine how successful they would be. A year later, the more victorious they had imagined themselves, the fewer pounds they had lost. Why? Their mind had already taken a victory lap, Oettingen explains: “This can drain you of the energy you need to take action in pursuit of your goals.” The solution involves purposefully imagining the desired future as well as potential obstacles and how you could respond to them. Research by Oettingen and others shows that mental contrasting has helped people stick to an exercise routine, earn better grades, and more.

♦ **Get prospective:** Consider a desire you have some control over. For a few minutes, vividly imagine that wish coming true. How would you feel? Now imagine what challenges might stand in the way and consider how you might cope with them. To help you do this, Oettingen has developed an app called WOOP (Wish Outcome Obstacle Plan). Your future might look brighter through not-quite-rose-colored glasses.

“The brain is a problem-solving machine. If you articulate what you want, it will start to work on helping you generate ideas and solutions to make that come true.”

—JENNICE VILHAUER, PHD

♦ **Get prospective:** Roepke, the lead researcher, notes that this study was small and that more research is needed before the exercise can be widely recommended as a self-help intervention for serious trauma. But the method is a forward-looking variation of the popular and widely recommended practice of expressive writing developed by psychologist James W. Pennebaker, PhD. For now, writing about the possibilities created by a breakup or a job loss might help you see your future in a new way.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE BIG DREAMS

♦ **Try: Imagining your ideal future self.** We often get so caught up in

our to-do list that we don't take time to step back and envision all the amazing options available to us. Contemplating your best-possible future self is a thoroughly studied intervention proven to boost well-being. Developed two decades ago by Laura King, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of Missouri, the original exercise instructed subjects to imagine themselves in the future after they had worked hard to achieve their dreams and everything had gone as well as possible. They were asked to write about their vision for 20 minutes at a time for several days. The result: a jump in subjects' feelings