

**Coping**

Exercise



15 min



Client



No

A Letter from Your Best Day to Your Bad Days

Mental time travel is a uniquely human ability that facilitates the reconstruction of past events. However, when recalling the past, priority tends to be given to information consistent with current self-images and beliefs, resulting in a subjective and biased view of the self [1]. The mood congruency effect states that memories congruent with the current mood are more likely to be recalled [2]. Thus, people with depression, for example, are more likely to recall negative autobiographical memories with a greater sense of vividness and visual detail - and recall them faster compared to positive ones. In short, people in positive moods recall more positive information, and people in negative moods recall more negative information. Unsurprisingly, this tendency can make it difficult to feel optimistic when we feel low, unmotivated, or uninspired [3].

While the process of retrieving positive stimuli can be effortful, recalling positive memories is intrinsically rewarding. Indeed, remembering positive emotions and events in detail is associated with lower cortisol levels, fewer negative self-appraisals, and better mental health even after major stressors [4]. Further, recalling memories of better times elicits positive feelings tied to the original experience, enhances emotion regulation and resilience, and ensures successful adaptation to stress [5].

Unfortunately, even the most vivid memories are never exact reproductions of those initial experiences, and our current mindset tends to shape the details we remember [6]. Given the negativity bias, the inaccuracy of memory, and the benefits of recalling positive experiences, it is important to find techniques to make this process easier. One way to help recall positive memories of better days is through writing.

Writing about good days and better moments as they happen significantly boosts the ability to recall this information because we do not have to rely on potentially inaccurate memories [1]. This tangible and lasting reminder of better days can trigger a change in the present, serve as an ongoing reminder of resiliency and resources, and help individuals cope in times of suffering [3].

In this exercise, clients will write letters from their best days to inform their bad days. Clients will create a lasting reminder of the strength, resiliency, and inner resources that helped them on their good days and emphasize that better days have happened before, and they will happen again.



Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

This exercise aims to help clients capture exceptional moments, situations, and days when things are better. By penning a letter from their best day to their bad days, clients give themselves a lasting reminder of these better moments that can trigger a change in the present, serve as ongoing reminders of resiliency, and help them cope in times of suffering.



Advice

- Clients must write a letter about their better days when they feel good, instead of relying on a memory of better times. It can be difficult to recall these moments accurately when people feel low, unmotivated, and uninspired, so letters should be penned as these better moments occur.
- Some clients may express resistance to letter writing, perhaps due to the lack of confidence in their writing ability, a general dislike of writing, or disinterest in the process, for instance. Clients should be reminded that their letters 1) will remain anonymous and do not have to be shared with anyone outside of your sessions and 2) do not have to be lengthy. Clients may also find it helpful to think of this exercise as a way to capture their thoughts and feelings so they can recall what happened when things were a little better. They are reminded of the inner resources they can use to actively help themselves when having a bad day.



References

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2. Vanderveren, E., Aerts, L., Rousseaux, S., Bijttebier, P., & Hermans, D. (2020). The influence of an induced negative emotional state on autobiographical memory coherence. *Plos One*, 15, e0232495.
3. O'Hanlon, B., & Bertolino, B. (2012). *The therapist's notebook on positive psychology: Activities, exercises, and handouts*. Routledge.
4. Askelund, A. D., Schweizer, S., Goodyer, I. M., & van Harmelen, A. L. (2019). Positive memory specificity is associated with reduced vulnerability to depression. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 3, 265-273.
5. Speer, M. E., Bhanji, J. P., & Delgado, M. R. (2014). Savoring the past: Positive memories evoke value representations in the striatum. *Neuron*, 84, 847-856.
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A Letter from Your Best Day to Your Bad Days

Life is not perfect, and there are always good days and bad days, highs and lows. On your bad days, it can be hard to see how tomorrow will be any better. However, even on the worst days, it is helpful to remember the days - or even the little moments - that were better and remind yourself of the times when you felt good, powerful, healthy, hopeful, or more optimistic.

It can be difficult to remember your better days when you feel low, tired, unmotivated, or uninspired. It is helpful to write about your best - or better - days as they happen, while the positive thoughts and feelings are still vivid and fresh in your mind.

This exercise will help you capture your best moments by writing a letter to yourself on your better days to read on your bad days. Your better days might be when you are in a better mood, feel happier or more optimistic, or feel that things are going just a little better.

When you have penned this letter, it will become a lasting resource that will help you accurately recall the details of better times. On the bad days, reading your letter will help you cope with the challenges you face and remind you of the moments, situations, and sometimes entire days that go differently.

Step 1: Before you begin

Before you begin writing your letter, remember a few points. The information below will help you get the most out of this exercise to allow you to capture your best moments and remember them on the days when things are not so good.

- You should write this letter on a day when you feel good, optimistic, powerful, motivated, healthy, or functional, and while these memories are vivid and fresh in your mind.
- Your letter should be addressed to yourself to read on your bad days.
- You should approach this exercise with a kind, compassionate, and gentle attitude towards your future self.
- You do not need to write pages of content; your letter does not need to be long unless you want it to be.
- You do not need to worry about spelling or grammar.
- This letter is for you, and you do not need to share it with anyone if you do not wish to.

Step 2: Writing a letter from your best day to your bad days

On a day when you are feeling particularly good, the following prompts will guide you through the letter-writing process. While these prompts will help you write your letter, you may wish to include additional details. For instance, you might like to start your letter with a general message of support and kindness before completing the prompts.



Make sure that you are comfortable, relaxed, and feeling positive. Now that you are ready, take some time to think about this day, notice how you feel, and reflect upon these positive feelings before penning your letter.

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Date: _____

Dear _____ [your name],

I know you are having a hard time now, but this letter will remind you that things won't always be like this. There will always be better days.

The advice I would like to give you for coping with this challenge is:

I know that you are likely to forget this on the bad days, but something that you should keep in mind is:



I want you to look back on this day and remember how well you:

A large, empty rectangular box with a light gray background, intended for the user to write their reflection on how well they did on a specific day.

You should remember the things you find helpful in times like this. The activities that might help you now are:

A large, empty rectangular box with a light gray background, intended for the user to list activities that are helpful during difficult times.

Before you finish reading this letter, remember what makes you feel more hopeful. Something that may give you hope right now is:

A large, empty rectangular box with a light gray background, intended for the user to write down what gives them hope at the moment.

With love,

_____ [your name]



Step 3: Reflection (after writing the letter on a good day)

- How did it feel to write your letter?
- How did writing this letter help you appreciate your better days?
- What aspect of writing your letter did you find most rewarding? Why?

Step 4: Reflection (after reading the letter on a bad day)

- How did you feel before reading your letter?
- How did you feel after reading your letter?
- In what ways did reading the letter from your better day help you in the present?
- What did your letter remind you of that you had forgotten?
- What did you find most beneficial when reading your letter?