Finding Silver Linings

- Mindset
- Intervention
- 10 min/day
- Client
- Yes

People tend to dwell on things that have gone wrong in their lives—a mistake they made at work, wrong things they said in a social setting or an evening that did not go as planned. People may think about such negative events or experiences so frequently that they begin to believe that their lives are filled with mishaps and disappointments. Focusing on negative experiences too much, however, can have a detrimental effect on one's life and wellbeing, and it can even lead to depressive thinking (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Moreover, an excessive focus on negative information has been identified in eating disorders (Dobson & Dozois, 2004) and in post-traumatic stress disorder (Buckley, Blanchard, & Neill, 2000).

Rather than dwelling on things gone wrong and focusing on the negative, we can look at the bright side of the situation. For instance, imagine that you made a mistake at work one day and received some critical feedback from your boss. Instead of spending the entire rest of your day and evening going over and over what you did wrong and why, focusing on the negative aspects of the feedback, you could look at the bright side of the situation by seeing the mistake and feedback as opportunities for growth and learning. As opposed to thinking about what you did wrong (which may lead to further negative thinking), you could think about what you could do differently, and perhaps better, next time (which may cascade into positive, hopeful thinking). This change in mindset, from negative to positive, is commonly known as "finding the silver lining."

Looking on the bright side of things is a key component of optimism, even when things go wrong. In a study that examined the effect of finding silver linings (and another optimism exercise known as goal visualization) daily for three weeks, participants were seen to experience greater engagement in life and less dysfunctional thinking (e.g., believing that making a mistake is a sign of weakness) at the end of the study (Sergeant & Mongrain, 2014). Interestingly, participants who were more pessimistic at the outset of the study experienced greater benefits, showing fewer depressive symptoms afterward.

This tool helps clients change their outlook on a negative situation or experience by looking at the bright side, which, in turn, will help them develop a healthier and more balanced perspective on difficult life situations.

Author

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Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients change their outlook on a negative situation or experience by looking at the bright side. By completing this exercise daily for at least two weeks, clients develop a healthier and more positive mindset and a more balanced perspective on difficult life situations.

Advice

- This exercise can be repeated to help clients create a new mindset. Regularly completing the silver linings exercise can help clients get in the habit of recognizing positive aspects of life and seeing the upside to challenging situations rather than fixating on the downsides. With repeated practice, clients will begin to naturally look for silver linings in otherwise difficult situations. Therefore, encourage clients to repeat this exercise often.
- The study by Sergeant and Mongrain (2014) revealed that the positive effects of doing this exercise seemed to wear off two months later, suggesting the need to repeat this practice periodically.
- This tool draws on the same process of re-appraisal that characterizes exercises like benefit-finding, where clients work with a traumatic or significant life event. This exercise can be considered a “light” version of benefit-finding.
- The following questions may be used to help clients come up with silver linings (Step 4):
  - Can you think of anything good that came out of the experience?
  - What did you learn from the situation?
  - Did you develop any strengths as a result of this situation?
  - How did it add more meaning to your life?
  - If you could, would you go back in time and change what happened, if it meant that you would not be the person you are now because of it?

References

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Finding Silver Linings

When things go wrong in life, we can very easily get caught up in thinking about how disappointed and regretful we feel, criticizing and blaming ourselves or others for the mishap and focusing entirely on what we have lost and what the situation has cost us. In this exercise, we are going to practice doing the opposite, because looking at the bright side of an otherwise grim situation builds optimism and resilience.

Step 1: Shift into a positive mindset

Make a list of things that make you feel like your life is enjoyable, worthwhile, and/or meaningful. These things can be as general as "being in good health" or as specific as "having a fireplace at home during winter." Come up with at least 5 things, and list these in the space below. The purpose of this step is to help you bring about a positive state of mind.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Step 2: Identify a recent difficulty

Now, think about a time recently when something did not go your way or when you felt frustrated, upset, or annoyed. For instance, perhaps you missed your train this morning, or maybe you spilled your coffee on yourself at work. In the space below, briefly describe this recent difficulty.

Step 3: Identify costs

What did this difficulty cost you? In the space below, write down the negative things that came out of this difficulty. For instance, some costs of spilling coffee over yourself at work may include experiencing unpleasant emotions, like embarrassment or anxiety; becoming distracted and falling behind; and having to wear a coffee-stained shirt to an important meeting.

1.

2.

3.

Step 4: Find silver linings

Now, rather than dwelling on the negative consequences of this situation, let us look at the bright side and consider what you gained from it. In the space below, come up with at least three positive things that came out of this difficulty. For example, some positives to come out of spilling coffee over yourself at work may include: connecting with the person who helped you in the kitchen; having a laugh with your colleagues, which lightened the mood of an otherwise stressful workday; and overcoming the anxiety/discomfort of walking around the rest of your day with a coffee-stained shirt.

1.

2.

3.