

Gratitude Practice #3

Your Inner “George Bailey”

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Duration: 20 minutes

Frequency: Flexible/as needed

Level of Difficulty: Moderate

Overview: The timeless holiday classic *It's a Wonderful Life* is not only a great movie, but also offers us some valuable clues about the importance of gratitude and how to best practice it. Without trying to give away too much, the film's protagonist (named George Bailey) becomes suicidal due to a setback, and decides to take his own life to help provide his family with a life insurance settlement. At this moment, he is rescued by a guardian angel named Clarence, who proceeds to take George on a whirlwind tour of what his world would look like had he never been born. George witnesses his brother passing away prematurely, his children never being born, his beloved hometown in shambles, and his beautiful wife struggling. In short, rather than simply asking George Bailey to reflect on what he was thankful for, Clarence did something altogether different: He showed George a world in which these blessings had never actually come to pass in the first place. Clarence's approach demonstrated to George just how special and extraordinary those gifts in fact were.

Although this sounds good in theory, and makes for a good movie, it begs a simple question: Does it actually work? It just so happens that two researchers were interested in whether this lesson from *It's a Wonderful Life* could help people in the real world. They decided to look specifically at married couples, and to explore the role of a specific type of gratitude exercise on marital satisfaction. One group of subjects was asked to simply write a brief story describing how they met their spouse. But the second group of subjects was instructed to write a brief story imagining what their life might look like had they never met their spouse. In other words, they were asked to tap into their inner “George Bailey.” The results turned out to be quite surprising.

Although it might seem on the surface that the second exercise could perhaps be a bit of a downer, the findings from this study supported the exact opposite conclusion. In short, participants in the “George Bailey” condition ended up reporting that they felt significantly more satisfied in their relationship, along with feeling happier overall, than those in the control condition.

Why the difference? Timothy Wilson, one of research psychologists responsible for the study, stated that the exercise helped these relationships seem “surprising and special again, and maybe a little mysterious—the very conditions that prolong the pleasure we get from the good things in life.” In other

words, the "George Bailey" strategy seems to help turn things we might normally take for granted into something special once again.

Instructions: Take a moment and reflect on one person, opportunity, or experience in your life that brings you happiness or joy. This might be your spouse, a close friend, your job, your child, or something else altogether. Bask for a brief time in whatever feelings arise when you think about this part of your life, and notice whatever comes up for you. Think back to when, and under what circumstances, this good thing first entered your life. *Write this down:*

Next, write down all the various ways in which this person or experience might have *never* come into your life in the first place. For example, if you met your spouse one day at a coffee shop, imagine all the ways in which that might not have occurred were it not for this fortunate timing. Expand your thinking, and reflect further on all the events and decisions, from the seemingly tiny to much more significant ones that could have happened differently to prevent this goodness from entering your life. *Write some of these thoughts:*

Then, imagine what your life would be like today had it not been for this good fortune, and had this person or opportunity not entered your life. Reflect on the joys and feelings of happiness connected to this source of gratitude—and how this would all be missing from your life if it were absent. *Write some of these down:*

Finally, bringing yourself back to the here and now, remind yourself that this person, opportunity, or experience is in fact a part of your life. Allow yourself to feel a deep sense of thankfulness and gratitude for their presence, and take a moment to savor how your life is better because of it. *Write any reactions to this:*

Key Points to Consider:

- ✓ Try focusing on different areas of your life (e.g., interpersonal relationships, your career, experiences you cherish).
- ✓ Some people find that having a consistent time to practice this skill helps to turn it into a habit. You might find that doing it, for example, each weekend can set a good tone for the coming week.
- ✓ Experiment with frequency. There's no hard and fast rule for how often or rarely to engage in this practice, so play around with it to find the right balance for you.

How and why it works: Although different from many other gratitude techniques, the "George Bailey" technique has been shown to have powerful effects on our happiness and life satisfaction. Many of us find it all too easy to take positive aspects of our lives for granted, particularly as time goes on. This practice helps to counteract this tendency, and to help us gain greater appreciation for the good things in our lives. Indeed, by imagining the absence of these good things, we can gain even greater thankfulness for their presence.

Notes/Impressions:
