

Reflection exercises on two life skills and three downstream outcomes

1. Resilience: See the silver lining



Resilience describes a person's capacity to cope with changes and challenges and to bounce back during difficult times. The more resilient someone is, the better they are at getting through tough times, and the better their chances at recovering from experiences of adversity (Gilligan 2004).

Key message: Sometimes things don't turn out the way we expected, but we can learn from these experiences and move on even stronger.

Exercise: Think about an upsetting experience you have had recently. It could be a small example (e.g., I missed the bus this morning). Rather than focusing on the frustration of the experience, reflect on three positive things about it. Maybe it offered you time to send a message to a friend, buy some breakfast, or see the sunrise.

Outlook: In the next weeks, try to pass on your insights to someone else. How can you use this example to help others? How can you leverage it to impact someone in a positive way?

2. Ability to connect: Improve your perspective taking



Conflicts with others can fuel negative emotions like frustration and sadness. We naturally interpret situations from a first person perspective, being concerned with our own thoughts and reactions. By becoming a detached observer and considering a third person perspective, studies indicate that we can reduce our level of distress and anger.

Key message: It's easy to get wrapped up in our own heads when we argue with someone else – taking the position of a neutral observer helps to re-connect with that person.

Exercise: Think about a major disagreement you had with someone (your partner, a friend, a family member) in the past months. Think about this disagreement from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved, a person who sees things from a neutral point of view.

- How might this person think about the disagreement?
- How would they view the behaviors and perspective of the other person?
- How might they find the good that could come from it?

Outlook: In the next weeks, devote some time to properly listen to others (instead of simply exchanging views or acknowledging information). Focus on what they're saying without judging or interrupting, and do your best to be present in the moment, being supportive and receptive. In doing so, you set the foundation for authentic interpersonal encounters and gain a more accurate picture of who others are.

3. Well-being: Find your Ikigai



Psychologists have found repeatedly that people with a strong sense of purpose experience more resilience, a stronger sense of wellbeing and even better cognitive functioning. Purpose in life fosters resilience in part by protecting the brain against the negative effects of stress. People who have a strong sense of purpose live longer than those who don't have a clear purpose.

Key message: Purpose is fundamental for our well-being - mattering, ultimately, matters.

Exercise: Discover, foster, and pursue your unique purpose, your ikigai (i.e., "reason for being", or "reason for waking up in the morning"; Buettner, 2005).

- Why do you get up in the morning?
- When are you most alive?
- What does being successful mean to you?
- What can you do to make a difference in one person's life, today?

Outlook: In the next weeks, try to keep track of what you say no to, if you say yes to living *purposefully*. What do you deliberately reject or exclude from your life that helps you to feel that you contribute and matter. Does your well-being increase by doing so?

4. Social integration: Just like me



There's little doubt that humans are social beings. Feeling close to others contributes to our overall feelings of happiness and fulfillment. But although we live surrounded by people, loneliness and isolation are still some of the biggest social challenges of the 21st century. One can have a wide social network and interact regularly with others and still feel lonely or disconnected. Realizing that people, even those who seem different from us, are just like us, can become a basis of real connection.

Key message: You are not alone – even if it feels like it sometimes.

Exercise: Think about an experience in which a sense of connection has come naturally to you. Maybe it was a moment when you deeply felt your love for your partner or a close friend.

Then, bring someone to mind who you don't know very well, maybe someone who seems different from you, or even someone you're in a minor conflict with. You're unlikely to feel the level of closeness to that person that you feel with friends or family, but we know that some feeling of connection is possible. Hold this person in mind as if they were right in front of you. Then, say to yourself:

- *This person has a body and a mind, just like me*
- *This person has feelings, emotions, and thoughts, just like me*
- *This person has felt sad, disappointed, angry, or hurt, just like me*
- *This person has experienced physical and emotional pain, just like me*
- *This person has experienced moments of peace and happiness, just like me*
- *This person wishes to have fulfilling relationships, just like me*
- *This person wishes to be healthy and loved, just like me*

Now take a moment to sense how you're feeling. What do you experience? Now as you hold this person in mind, send them good wishes:

- *May they be well, may they be happy, may they be healthy, may they live with ease.*

Outlook: Write a gratitude letter to someone you care about. Let the person know you value and care for them. Putting your gratitude in writing makes you more aware of your positive emotions and is bound to make you feel closer to others, thereby deepening your connection to the other person.

5. Academic achievement: Use your strengths



University life can be quite hectic. You're juggling your career, classes, family, and friends. Sometimes it is very challenging to succeed in your coursework. It's human nature to want to correct weaknesses. But knowing your strengths and effective coping strategies can have a much more substantial effect for being successful.

Key message: No one is perfect. Concentrating on your strengths is key.

Exercise: Think about an experience/situation at university where you overcame a tough academic situation, and were still able to perform at your best and be optimally effective.

- How were you able to do it?
- What worked well for you?
- What strategies or coping mechanisms have you used?
- What help and support did you get from others?
- What have you learned from that experience?
- What is important to keep in mind for next time?

Outlook: In the next weeks, try to engage in this mini exercise once a day:

1. Breathe in for 6 seconds. Hold it for 2 seconds. Breathe out for 7 seconds.
2. Recite a personalized identity statement that emphasizes a positive quality for 5 times. E.g., *"I am ambitious and strong,"* or *"I am enough"*.
3. Mentally rehearse three important things you need to do today.
4. Repeat your identity statement for 5 times.
5. Finish with another centering breath cycle, breathing in for 6 seconds, holding for 2 and then exhaling for 7.

The reflection exercises were inspired by or stem from a number of online resources from websites, such as: [Greater Good in Action](#), [Positive Psychology](#), and [Psychology Today](#).