

Understanding What You Can Control in Your Life

Objective

To increase the sense of control you have in your life by identifying things you can control.

You Should Know

You might feel that you have little or no control over what happens to you, no matter how hard you work or how careful you are. Sometimes things go wrong in spite of your best efforts. However, if you believe that all of your experiences, both good and bad, are caused by luck or fate, it can lead to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, anxiety, or depression.

What You Should Do

Rate the following statements, where 1 = this does not apply to me at all to 10 = this always applies to me.

___ I feel I have very little control over my life and what happens to me.

___ I rarely get what I deserve.

___ I avoid setting goals or making plans because there are too many bad things that can happen along the way.

___ I am often pressured into doing things or making decisions I later regret.

___ Bad luck has caused many of the disappointments in my life.

___ In spite of my hard work and effort, my accomplishments go unnoticed.

___ Getting a good job depends mainly on being in the right place at the right time.

___ I often feel hopeless and powerless about situations in my life.

___ I just make my decisions by flipping a coin.

Review the statements you checked off and add up your total score: _____

If your score is above 50, you probably feel you have little control in your life and you might experience depression, anxiety or feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.

Can you think of situations where those beliefs about control impacted your decision to change or improve your life? Describe.

Next, you will focus on things you *can* control.

Describe a situation when you accomplished a task that you set out to complete. For example, completing a home improvement or creative project. Describe what you accomplished. What skills and strengths did you use to accomplish it? How did you feel about yourself afterward?

Describe an accomplishment you are proud of that required your planning, motivation, and/or problem-solving skills. For example, raising a child, quitting smoking, or planting a garden. Describe what you accomplished. What skills and strengths did you use to accomplish this task? What goals and intentions did you set for yourself? How much effort did it require? How did you feel about yourself afterward?

Describe a time when your efforts made you feel valuable, effective, and successful. For example, volunteering at a food pantry or running a 5K race. What did you do? How did you feel during the activity? How did you feel afterward?

Next, identify three small, achievable goals that are important or interesting to you. Include your desired date of completion. Then, answer the questions that follow each goal.

For this example, Jim wants to improve his photography skills while meeting new people.

Goal #1 _____

(Jim: To take an adult education class in photography by next spring.)

Steps I need to take to make this happen:

(Jim: 1) Search online for local photography classes; 2) Visit my local camera shop for suggestions; 3) Determine how much tuition I want to pay; 4) Register for the class.)

The things I can control within those steps are:

(Jim: All of these things are under my control, except for the pricing of the classes and the availability of the classes. But I will select which class I register for based on those factors.)

The strengths and skills I can use to address those steps are:

(Jim: I will use my research skills to find a class that meets my needs. I will also use my organization skills by creating a list to track my class options and narrow down my choices.)

People and resources that can support me in achieving this goal are:

(Jim: In addition to asking my camera shop for recommendations, I can reach out to my social media connections for suggestions.)

Goal #2 _____

Steps I need to take to make this happen:

The things I can control within those steps are:

The strengths and skills I can use to address those steps are:

People and resources that can support me in achieving this goal are:

Goal #3 _____

Steps I need to take to make this happen:

The things I can control within those steps are:

The strengths and skills I can use to address those steps are:

People and resources that can support me in achieving this goal are:

Of course, even with planning, things do not always go as planned. It is important to use self-compassion instead of beating yourself up or blaming other people/circumstances.

Using the photography class example, it turned out that the registration was full, so Jim was unable attend. Instead of saying, "I'm so stupid for waiting too long to register," he can say, "I'm disappointed that I'm not able to attend the class by the spring, but I will register early for the summer class and add a reminder in my calendar."

Who can you count on for support and help if you are unable to meet a goal, in spite of your best efforts?

Reflections on This Exercise

Has this exercise increased the sense of control you have in your life? Explain.

Has this exercise changed the way you see the role of luck and chance in your past successes or lack of success? Explain?
