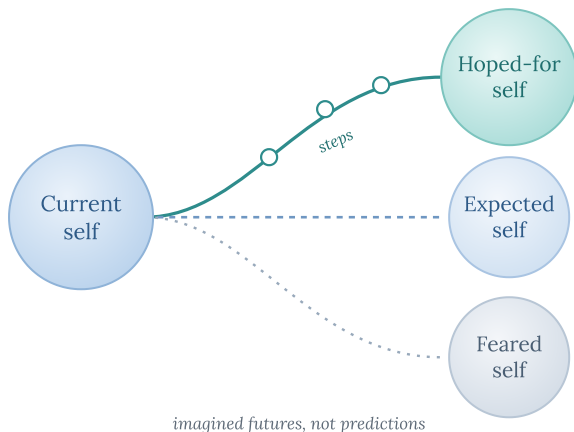


Possible Selves

Who I hope, expect and fear to become

Psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius proposed that the way we see ourselves includes not only who we are now, but who we **might become**. These imagined future selves shape our motivation, emotions and choices in the present, often without our noticing.



Why possible selves matter

- **They motivate:** a hoped-for self gives something to move toward; a feared self, something to steer away from.
- **They give meaning to now:** today's effort makes sense in light of who we are trying to become.
- **They can change:** new experiences, relationships and life stages reshape them, so they can also be revised on purpose.

01 Three kinds of possible self

Often held at the same time, in the same area of life

HOPED-FOR

Who I'd love to become

A future self we wish for: connected, healthy, capable, at peace.

"A calmer parent who can laugh with my kids."

EXPECTED

Who I think I'll become

The self we realistically anticipate if things carry on as they are.

"Still busy, but managing better."

FEARED

Who I dread becoming

A self we want to avoid. It can be just as vivid, and as motivating.

"Someone who snaps and pushes people away."

02 What makes a possible self motivating

i Vivid and specific

A clear picture guides action better than a vague wish.

Markus & Nurius, 1986

ii Balanced

A hoped-for and a feared self in the same area give both a pull and a push.

Oyserman & Markus, 1990

iii Linked to strategies

Possible selves help most when tied to concrete next steps.

Oyserman et al., 2006

iv Feels reachable

A future self that seems plausible, not out of reach, keeps effort going.

Oyserman et al., 2006

What research suggests

Writing about a "best possible self" improved wellbeing and mood in an early study (King, 2001), and a meta-analysis found small but reliable benefits for optimism and positive feelings (Carrillo et al., 2019).

03 My possible selves map

Choose one area of life

The area of life I'm thinking about work, health, relationships, parenting, study...

MY HOPED-FOR SELF

MY EXPECTED SELF

MY FEARED SELF

Steps toward my hoped-for self: 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____

TRY IT · BEST POSSIBLE SELF

Write about a future that has gone well

Imagine yourself some years from now, when things have gone as well as they realistically could. Write for 15–20 minutes about *what your life looks like, who you are with, and what you are doing*. Try it on a few different days.

A feared self is useful as a signpost, not a sentence. If it brings more worry than direction, **pair it with a hoped-for self and one small step**, and bring it to your next session.

SOURCES

Carrillo, A., Rubio-Aparicio, M., Molinari, G., Enrique, Á., Sánchez-Meca, J., & Baños, R. M. (2019). Effects of the Best Possible Self intervention: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS ONE*, 14(9), e0222386. · King, L. A. (2001). The health benefits of writing about life goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27(7), 798–807. · Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41(9), 954–969. · Oyserman, D., Bybee, D., & Terry, K. (2006). Possible selves and academic outcomes: How and when possible selves impel action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(1), 188–204. · Oyserman, D., & Markus, H. R. (1990). Possible selves and delinquency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59(1), 112–125.