

Activity Overview

Title: Training for Wisdom: The Daily Diary Method

Target Virtue: Wisdom: Intellectual humility, Perspective-taking

Target Courses or Activities / Criteria: Writing courses, courses with low academic success rates, psychology courses, grammar courses for multilingual learners, courses on conflict resolution, debate, and/or negotiation

Summary: The practice of keeping a daily diary through third-person perspective taking (using she/her, they/them, he/him pronouns and referring to the self by name) showed significant gains in wise reasoning through the themes of: intellectual humility, recognition of change, consideration of other people's perspectives, search for compromise, and search for conflict resolution both in a 4-week and 1-week trial.

Key virtue outcomes: Grossman et al., (2021) found that daily use of a third-person diary enhanced wisdom (namely intellectual humility), consideration of other people's perspectives, and seeking conflict resolution. The authors observed significant gains in wise-reasoning in both 1-week and 4-week trials and recommend longer daily use for sustained growth.

Citation: Grossmann, I., Dorfman, A., Oakes, H., Santos, H. C., Vohs, K. D., & Scholer, A. A. (2021). Training for wisdom: The distanced-self-reflection diary method. *Psychological Science*, 32(3), 381–394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620969170>

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Training for Wisdom: The Daily Diary Method

After significant events, particularly adverse ones, wisdom can be trained by the simple task of daily journaling. Specifically, when using a third-person perspective (using she/her, they/them, he/him pronouns and referring to the self by name), journaling can promote helpful distanced self-reflections. This intervention challenges students to engage in the event-reconstruction method, rate the intensity of events, and include their own internal thoughts as sparked by the event. This will allow students to develop wisdom by broadening their perspectives and considering the bigger picture (e.g., other situational possibilities, benefits of conflict resolution).

Before You Start: Consider having your students complete the Defining Wisdom quiz and reflection before completing this activity. It may also be helpful to provide students with [this infographic](#) about what virtues are and why they matter.

Materials: A physical journal/diary with pen or pencil is highly recommended though a computer can be used.

Implementation Suggestions: This activity is recommended to be implemented after challenging or adverse events, whether it is related to personal life events or academically, like receiving a low score on exams or projects, and encouraged to be practiced for at least 1 week though wise reasoning can be further trained over longer periods of time. Upon completion of the intervention for the first time, remind students that this can be a tool in their belt for tackling future challenging or adverse events. Part 2, Reflections, can be altered to instruct students to select the most “extremely intense” (score of 6) event of the previous week.

Procedure:

Part 1. Diary-keeping (15+min/daily). Students are asked to keep a daily journal recalling the most impactful event in detail from a third-person perspective (using she/her, they/them, he/him pronouns and referring to the self by name) and including their stream of thoughts. For example, if their name were Chris, they might write, ‘Chris thinks . . .; Chris feels . . .’. If more than one major event occurred in one day, students are asked to select the most adverse or challenging one. Using the event-reconstruction method (Schwarz, Kahneman, & Xu, 2009), students are asked to provide the first name of the other person or persons involved in the event, contextual information (e.g., time of day, location), and a detailed description of the event. Additionally, students are asked to rate the intensity of the event on a scale ranging from 0 (not at all intense) to 6 (extremely intense). Day 7 of each week is a free-writing day where students are not instructed to utilize a particular self-reflective language.

Part 2. Reflection, to be done weekly. Before reflecting on the most recent social conflict or argument they had or the most recent annoying or irritating interaction, students are provided the definition of a difficult social event by the instructor:

Our social life can be a source of great joy, but it can also produce great distress. For instance, some people face conflicts or arguments with other people, such as an argument with a family member, a relationship conflict with one's partner, or a disagreement with colleagues at work.

Other people encounter social interactions with other people involving annoyances or other things that irritate them. For example, some people are annoyed/irritated by a friend who constantly monopolizes their conversations, a partner forgetting to do something they promised to do or having to eat at a restaurant they particularly dislike because a family member insists on having a birthday celebration there.

Then the instructor will set a 2-minute timer and instruct the students to vividly recall the situation they chose by reading their diary entry. Next, students are prompted to write at least one paragraph describing the thoughts that came to mind as they reflected on the event (5-10 minutes). Remind students that this practice of keeping a daily third-person diary and doing weekly reflections is a great tool to process and overcome challenging or adverse events.

Extensions:

At CultivateCharacter.com our approach to virtue cultivation is grounded in the belief that when students encounter virtue content through multiple modalities, it is more likely to stick. Below are potential extensions of the empirically-grounded virtue activities described above to help stretch your assignments and enhance the likelihood that your classrooms cultivate character.

Possible Extensions:

Environmental – Ask students to think of a person they find to be wise whether that is a friend, a parent or caregiver, a celebrity, or public figure. Have the students list examples of how this person has behaved in a wise way. Finally, ask students to select one example of behavior that they can translate into their personal, academic, or professional lives.

Cognitive – Ask students to write out a list of negative consequences of jumping to conclusions and taking action without considering all variables and possible outcomes. Then ask students to write out the benefits of considering outcomes before taking action.

Behavioral – Ask students to pair up with a partner and identify a topic they disagree on. It could be as simple as differing opinions on pizza toppings or something more volatile like a political issue (reproductive rights, immigration, the death penalty, etc.). Then ask students to briefly state their stance/opinion. Next, ask students to practice asking questions to further understand their partner. Inform students that the purpose of this exercise is not to influence their partner to agree with them, but that it gives them a safe and inclusive space to practice learning the art of follow-up questions (5 minutes). As a large group, or as an individual reflection, have students share their partner's stance/opinion, what they learned about why their partner has that belief, and what they learned about themselves during the interaction.

Affective/Somatic – Pose a two-option question and give students 15 seconds to choose. Afterwards, have them reflect on how they feel in body and mind, sharing if they wish. Then, present a similar question, but this time ask students to write out pros and cons before deciding. After sharing their answers and reasoning, prompt them again to notice how they feel. Conclude by asking students to compare the two strategies: Which felt better? How did quick decisions differ from deliberated ones? What was it like to weigh pros and cons before answering?

Motivations – Extrinsic: Provide extra credit for students who choose to write Day 7 diary entries in third-person perspective, or who complete any of the extensions listed. Intrinsic: Ask students to think about why it is personally important for them to consider the perspectives of others when making a group decision or resolving conflict.