

## **Shaping ideal futures: Writing a letter to the future**

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS sample CrediT author statement

*Note: this paper is currently under review. Feel free to cite and/or disseminate.*

Michaéla Schippers: Conceptualization, Writing-Original draft preparation, Methodology, Visualization, Supervision. Bettina de Jong, Diana Rus & Huib Rommers Writing- Review & Editing. Huib Rommers: project administration

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the members of the Erasmus Centre for Study and Career Success (<https://www.irim.eur.nl/erasmus-centre-for-study-and-career-success/>) and Cristina Calin for their useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

## **Abstract**

The recent Covid-19 crisis and measures have created an extraordinary situation that has affected most people around the globe. Adapting to and coping with this unpredictable situation has proven challenging for many. Apart from the direct effects such as a loss of income, normalcy, and postponed healthcare, many people have experienced a loss of meaning in life, negatively affecting their mental health and well-being. This had led many people to experience a downward spiral of negative emotions, prompting immediate, survival-oriented behaviors and learned helplessness. An effective way to counteract this is to restore a sense of autonomy by writing about how to make the world a better place. This can be achieved by letting people reflect on an ideal world free of constraints, and contrasting this with the idea of the world that will come to pass if nothing changes. Prior research in the field of positive psychology has shown that brief interventions can help counteract many of the aforementioned negative consequences and even aid in developing a more positive future outlook that they act upon. In this paper, we highlight an intervention, that seems especially promising in this respect: Letters to the future. Writing about how and when one will contribute to this ideal future, is key in ensuring that this comes a step closer to becoming reality. Acting upon dreams and plans, can also have real-world positive consequences. In sum, based on positive psychology, goal-setting and life-crafting theory, we propose an intervention that offers ways to increase positive emotions, enhance social support, increase action repertoire and potentially kickstart societal change. As this intervention can be done online and is scalable, we propose to use the intervention on a wide scale to improve mental health and well-being worldwide, and at the same time make the world a better place.

## **Keywords**

Life crafting; Future crafting; Meaning in life; Positive Psychology intervention; COVID-19 crisis; Positive ripple effects

## **Highlights**

- Many people experienced a loss of meaning in life and a downward spiral in terms of mental health as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.
- Letters to the future, i.e. writing about an idealized world and reflecting on one's own contribution, could counteract this downward spiral and potentially create positive ripple effects for individuals and societies.
- Letters to the Future also seems promising in restoring a sense of purpose in life, increasing positive emotions and improving social support.

## Introduction

*“Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world.”*

– Harriet Tubman

*“Good writing facilitates the making of connections in a way that inspires openheartedness, thinking, talking, and action.”*

-- (Pipher, 2007)

Writing about a future idealized world has long been recognized as a powerful way to not only transform the way we look at the world but also to inspire positive action (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006; Pipher, 2007; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). Since trying to make the world a better place is something most would agree is worth striving for (Reisch, 2017), interest in how and why (young) people try to shape the world we live in has been gaining more research attention (Müller-Bachmann et al., 2022; Reisch, 2017). This might be even more important these days, as the recent Covid-19 crisis has created a unique challenge for the world and its inhabitants and measures taken to contain the spread of the virus have changed the lives of billions of people. This has unfortunately negatively impacted people’s mental and physical well-being (for reviews see Schippers et al., 2022; Schippers, 2020). For instance, many people have experienced life-changing losses and accompanying negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and depression (de Jong et al., 2020). In addition, it has led some people to experience grief-like emotions, for example, over the loss of normalcy or a loss of purpose in life (de Jong et al., 2020). During the crisis, opportunities for face-to-face sessions with psychologists were either very limited or not at

all possible in many countries (McDonnell et al., 2022), which means that many people with deteriorating mental health did not receive the needed care. Even now, waiting lists for psychological help are enormous (McDonnell et al., 2022). As mental health problems are on the rise, so is the need to contain and buffer their negative consequences (Schippers et al., 2022; Schippers, 2020). This calls for larger-scale interventions to improve mental health.

In this respect, previous research has identified positive psychology interventions such as writing about the future to be powerful in improving mental well-being (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). For instance, writing about the best possible self and life crafting (i.e., writing about one's ideal life and making concrete plans and changes based on the writing) have been shown to positively impact a sense of meaning in life, health, and (student) performance (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006; Schippers et al., 2020; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). Importantly, these types of interventions have been found not only to alleviate psychological distress but also to positively affect well-being, purpose, and performance and to be scalable and cost-effective (Duckworth et al., 2005; Kaplan et al., 2014). Surprisingly, although different authors have discussed how positive change could be brought about by relatively small interventions like physical activity in community-based contexts (Pipher, 2007; Wilson et al., 2019; Wilson, 2011), an evidence-based or evidence-informed large scale intervention at making individuals' lives and the world a better place seems to be lacking.

In this paper, we propose a scalable intervention developed by the first author designed to have people reflect on an ideal future for our world. The intervention is inspired by life crafting interventions (de Jong et al., 2020; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019) and is aimed at helping

individuals develop meaning in life and build an action repertoire to make the world a better place. We base our argument on the notion that most people need to be in charge of their lives and therefore, they need to have a sense of autonomy and meaning in life (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). Indeed, meaning in life, that is the feeling that one has a sense of purpose, coherence, and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016), is a key human need that individuals tend to strive for (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019). Moreover, research indicates that people with a higher sense of meaning in life, have better physical health, reduced mortality risk and lower levels of depression and loneliness (Kim et al., 2022). Previous work also suggests that meaning in life can be positively impacted by targeted interventions (Kim et al., 2022; Ryff, 2014). For instance, meaning in life can be positively impacted if people reflect on “futures that matter” (i.e., engage in sensemaking in terms of possible and preferred futures), and are given an active role in shaping such futures ( Schippers & Ziegler, 2019; Whyte et al., 2022). Indeed, making sense of possible futures may be just as important as making sense of the past (Hernes & Schultz, 2020) and increasing attention has been devoted to understanding how the future can be shaped (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022). Importantly, whereas sensemaking has been found to be an important activity to help individuals gain clarity in ambiguous situations, “sensegiving” entails also influencing the sensemaking processes of others (Weick et al., 2005). Thus, we argue that imagining and shaping not only our own futures but also the future of the world might be a powerful tool to kickstart action and might aid in solving “wicked social problems” (cf., Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022; Millward-Hopkins, 2022; Walton, 2014; Yeager & Walton, 2011). This is rooted in the notion that people who imagine a better future (for themselves and/or the world) will have a more positive and optimistic mindset. This, in turn, will allow them to focus on the resources and opportunities available to them and actively take charge of things rather

than being victims of current circumstances ( Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019).

Below, we first discuss how positive psychology interventions such as reflecting on an ideal world may enhance well-being and the experience of meaning in life. Next, we briefly outline the elements of our proposed intervention and how they can contribute to meaning in life.

Finally, we outline how this intervention can be scaled up.

### **Positive psychology interventions, well-being and meaning in life**

During the Covid-19 crisis, several studies showed that positive psychology interventions could buffer the negative effects of the crisis, such as loneliness and depression (Brouzos et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2022). Positive psychology is the “scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development” (Duckworth et al, 2005; p. 629). In their conceptual framework, Duckworth et al (2005) discern three broad domains: pleasure, engagement and meaning. Positive psychology interventions often demonstrate effectiveness aimed at cultivating these domains. This can be by (1) the undoing effect (2) instilling hope (3) building of buffering strengths (4) the upward spiraling effect, and (5) narration (Duckworth et al., 2005) see also (Seligman et al., 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A recent meta-analysis has shown that positive psychology interventions increased well-being, strengths, and quality of life, as well as decreased depression, anxiety, and stress, and that these gains were maintained after three months follow-ups (Carr et al., 2021). Thus, the immediate effects and the effects over time have been well-documented (Carr et al., 2021). Moreover, these interventions have been shown to enhance happiness and

their effects can largely be influenced by our actions and behaviors, such as choosing and/or writing about enjoyable goals to strive for (Dekker et al., 2020; Higgins et al., 1997; Schippers et al., 2020; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

Interventions that require writing about the ideal self (or world), have shown especially great promise in enhancing well-being and meaning in life (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006; Carver et al., 1999; Peterson & Mar, 2004). Importantly, it has been shown that writing about the ideal future self has the inherent capacity to bring about change (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). Indeed, when people write about their ideal future, they connect with this future and are able to see more possibilities where they can contribute to making changes. Moreover, once individuals increase their own well-being and meaning in life, their agency is likely to increase, which, in turn, may have positive ripple effects via a process of emotional contagion and ‘sensegiving’ (Barsade, 2002; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019; Weick et al., 2005). This may especially be the case for ideal goals with a focus on hopes and aspirations (Higgins et al., 1997).

These written interventions often have three main elements that build on each other: finding a passion, making a concrete plan, and making it public (Schippers et al. 2020; see Figure 1). In the next section, we will outline a specific positive psychology intervention and will discuss how these three different elements may contribute to increased meaning in life and well-being.

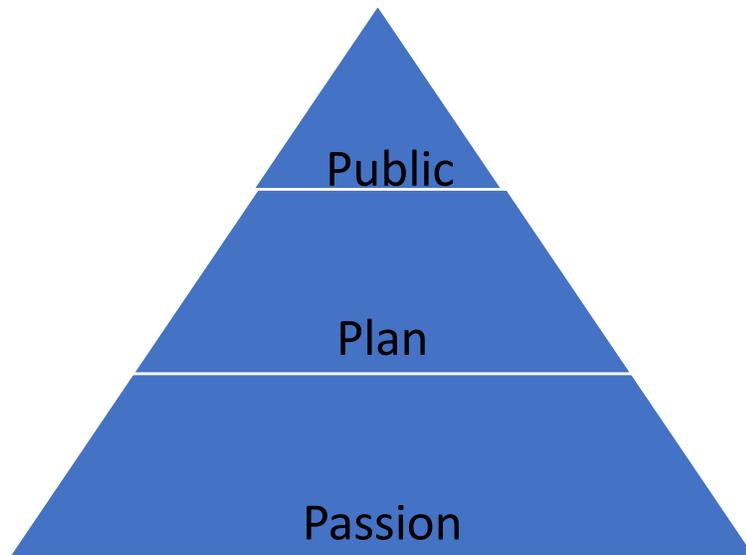


Figure 1: 3 P's of finding purpose and meaning

### **Letters to the future: A positive psychology intervention**

Given that many societal conditions are accepted as a “given” and/or difficult to change, many people have the idea that they can barely influence the fate of the world through their thinking, writing and actions (cf. Reisch, 2017). Moreover, because people tend to find writing about an ideal world to be difficult, they give it little thought (cf. Reisch, 2017). Therefore, some authors have suggested that writing about how to make the world a better place should be part of students' regular curriculum (Bomer & Bomer, 2001). Indeed, integrating writing about the future into the school curriculum has been linked to a variety of positive effects, such as increased health (King, 2001), optimism (Malouff & Schutte, 2017), a social impact mindset and sense of purpose (Hudig et al., 2022), as well as increased academic performance (Morisano et al., 2010; Schippers et al., 2020; Schippers et al., 2015).

Letters to the future ([Letters to the Future Challenge - Ikigai TV](#)) is a positive psychology intervention aimed at promoting meaning in life and potentially inspiring societal change (Dyer, 2010; Westley et al., 2009) consisting of three parts : (1) passion (contrasting an ideal future world with a future that continues as is; (2) plan (making concrete action plans to achieve this ideal future) and (3) public (discussing these plans with others). The elements laid out in Table 1, provide the context for developing a potentially effective “letters to the future” intervention that can give people hope and purpose, increase well-being and may inspire positive societal change initiatives.

Specifically, in the first part of the intervention, people are asked to contrast two possible futures by asking them to reflect on: (1) “what does the future look like if you and current events continue unchanged?”, and (2) “what is the ideal future if you can determine yourself how the future will look?” (see Table 1). In that sense, people are asked to contrast an ideal future with a future where nothing changes. Helping people envisage a future for the world that is attractive and energizing, is key in prompting actual (behavioral) change (Oettingen, 2012; Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2010; Oettingen et al., 2018). Indeed, by thinking about the consequences of not taking action, the goal framing effect would predict that people are more likely to take action (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). In the second part of the intervention, after writing and reflecting on what the ideal future can look like, participants are asked to formulate and prioritize concrete goals, identify obstacles, and make plans on how to achieve those goals. This part is similar to the part used in life crafting (Schippers & Ziegler, 2019) and goalsetting (Schippers et al., 2020) interventions. The third and final step includes discussing the goals with others and trying to put these into concrete actions. It is important that people share their thoughts with others and make

their convictions and goals known to a broader public (Hudson et al., 2018). This is likely to provide a sense of responsibility in pursuing these goals and it may also spark inspiration and a call to action for others.

**Table 1:** Elements and description of a “letters to the future” intervention

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Tasks involved</b>
1. Present and future world without any changes	<p>What does the current world look like and how does it influence people’s lives?</p> <p>What will the future (5-10 years ahead) look like if you and the forces around you don’t change, and humanity continues on its’ current trajectory?</p>
2. Ideal best possible world if there are no constraints	<p>Imagine what your ideal world would look like if there were no constraints. Envision an active role you would like to play to achieve this world.</p> <p>Contrast this with the writing in section 1.</p>

<p>3. Specifying and formulating concrete goals</p>	<p>Keeping your ideal world in mind, reflect on the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-What can you do in your direct environment, and outside of it?</li> <li>- How can your knowledge and skills improve the world?</li> <li>- How can (and will) you make a difference and create a positive ripple effect in the world?</li> <li>- Write down concrete goals</li> </ul>
<p>4. Prioritize goals, goal attainment and “if-then” plans</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prioritize the goals you came up with in section 3</li> <li>- Describe first steps, something that you can do today, in reaching these goals</li> </ul>
<p>5. Identifying and removing obstacles</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify and describe ways to overcome obstacles to your goal-achievement plans</li> </ul>

<p>6. Sharing your vision and public commitment</p>	<p>Establish a format to share your vision with the world:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicate and discuss goals with friends and family</li> <li>- Make a vision board and share on social media</li> <li>- Write a blog or a film in which you explain your dreams</li> <li>- Publish via a “Letters to the future” channel (e.g., <a href="#">Next Step – Great Citizens Movement</a>).</li> </ul>
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**Discussion**

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis continues to have a negative physical and mental effect on individuals. Moreover, the world is currently being plagued by a number of other crises such as the climate crisis, cost-of-living crisis and geopolitical instability that are also likely to negatively impact people’s well-being. Inspired by positive psychology interventions, such as life crafting interventions (de Jong et al., 2020; Schippers & Ziegler, 2019), in this paper we have proposed an intervention that can aid in promoting a sense of meaning, increase well-being and may help contribute to positive societal change (cf. Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009; Igras et al., 2021; Reisch, 2017). Specifically, we have outlined a “letters to the future” intervention in which

people can write about the ideal world they have in mind as opposed to the world that will come to pass if nothing changes. This allows individuals to develop an action repertoire and be very concrete on what and how they can contribute to making sure this ideal world will be co-created (e.g., [Letters to the Future Challenge - Ikigai TV](#)).

In general, it has been shown that positive psychology interventions enhance well-being and decrease depressive symptoms (for a meta-analysis see Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Other research has suggested that these interventions enhance performance, while diminishing stress, burn-out as well as anxiety (for a review see Meyers, van Woerkom & Bakker, 2013). Moreover, prior research suggests that interventions that are aimed at harnessing post-crisis opportunities, like being forced to rebuild personal and societal life, are particularly helpful in restoring collaborative resilience and strengthen a common desired future (Goldstein, 2012).

Importantly, although different authors have discussed how positive change could be brought about by relatively small interventions (Pipher, 2007; Wilson et al., 2019; Wilson, 2011), an evidence-based or evidence-informed large scale intervention at making individuals' lives and the world a better place seemed to be lacking. Therefore, informed by positive psychology theoretical frameworks and interventions like life crafting, we proposed a future crafting intervention 'letters to the future' based on the following elements 1) describing the present and future when nothing changes 2) writing about ideal future 3) specify- 4) prioritize concrete goals 5) planning 6) shared vision. Importantly, this intervention is short, can be run online and can be easily scaled up.

The next step would be to test the potential benefits of this type of inexpensive, short, and scalable interventions amongst the broader public, which we already started doing ([Letters to the Future Challenge - Ikigai TV](#)). Prior research has also shown that format and duration of interventions are important factors in determining their effectiveness. For instance, it has been advised to use these for relatively older, motivated, and or depressed individuals (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Note that a combination of different positive psychology interventions may enhance their potential positive effects (Morisano et al., 2010; Vancouver & Day, 2005).

We hope that by writing about the ideal world and making concrete plans to change it via everyday actions, we may bring the ideal future a bit closer, one step at a time.

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