

Summary of Research

August 2013



Self and Well-Being Study: The role of psychological needs

If you'll recall, you were recently involved in a study where you were asked to read a set of instructions and write about what you imagined for four weeks. This report is meant to summarize the results of this research.

Background Information

A "possible self" is what a person believes is possible for themselves in the future. Possible selves are extensions of your own self, but in the future. For example, if you are currently a runner, you may have a possible self of running a 5km race in the future.

Previous research has found that writing about a general possible self is associated with increased well-being. In other words, when people are asked to write about how they imagine themselves in 5 to 10 years, it usually produces a positive mood.

Researchers have also found that asking people to write about their possible selves specific to exercise leads to increased exercise behaviour.

While these findings are promising in terms of their outcomes on increasing well-being and exercise behaviour, researchers have not examined the impact of the possible selves writing task on people other than university undergraduate students. Nor have researchers examined the long term benefits of the writing task.



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Purpose

Therefore, the purpose of our study was to examine if writing about a physical activity possible self over 9 weeks increased well-being and physical activity behaviour.

Methods

If you'll recall, as a participant in this study, you were first asked to complete a questionnaire. This is referred to as the "baseline questionnaire". After completing the baseline questionnaire, you were randomly assigned to one of three groups.

Groups 1 and 2 read instructions to write about a physical activity possible self. Group 3 was the control group, and participants in this group were asked to write a list of what they did in the past 24 hours (see column to the right). The purpose of the control group was to ensure that the writing task wasn't a placebo. After the study was complete, individuals assigned to the control group were given access to the physical activity possible selves writing instructions.

All participants were asked to write for ten minutes, once a week for 4 weeks. One week following the last writing activity, participants completed another questionnaire called the "post-test questionnaire". Then, one month later, participants completed another questionnaire called the "1-month follow-up questionnaire".

The reason we asked participants to complete the 3 questionnaires was because it allows us to compare averages across the three time points. Using this method, we can determine if the post-test questionnaire and 1 month follow-up questionnaire responses were different from the baseline questionnaire because of the writing task.

Physical Activity Possible Self Instructions

Think about your life in the future. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your physical activity goals. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. Think of this as a realization of the best possible physically active life you could ever have hoped for. We are interested in your impression of yourself 5 to 10 years from now. More specifically, we would like you to think about yourself in the future as a person who is a healthy, physically active person. You follow a healthy lifestyle which includes engaging in regular physical activity. Five to ten years from now, you are at a healthy weight and have the energy to carry out your daily tasks. When you think about yourself five to ten years from now as a healthy regularly physically active person, what images come to mind? Consider yourself in the future and anything you consider to be related to physical activity. Some examples of physically active future selves include: possible selves about weight, activity levels, engagement in different activities, energy, and health. There are no right or wrong best possible selves. In all cases you are identifying the best possible way that things might turn out in relation to your physical activity in the future, in order to help guide your decisions now. So we'd like to ask you to continue thinking in this way over the next few weeks, following up on the initial writing that you're about to do. Now write about what you imagined. Please write for a minimum of 10 minutes.



Control Group Instructions

Please take a moment to think about what you did during the last 24 hours. That is, create a mental outline of what you did during that time. Please write out these activities in a list format. Next, choose one of the activities you listed and write about it in even more detail. You want to dissect the activity you previously listed into smaller pieces to describe exactly what you did. Repeat this process until you have written for a minimum of 10 minutes. Be as detail oriented as possible, but try to leave out emotions, feelings, or opinions pertaining to your plans. In other words, focus on exactly what you did.

Results

When we examined the effect of the writing task one week after completion, we found that people who were assigned to write about their physical activity possible self had an increase in positive mood. However, when we looked to see if this effect was still found 1 month later, it was not there. Therefore, this result indicates that the possible selves writing task significantly increased positive mood compared to a decrease in mood seen in the control group 1 week after the writing tasks.

Unfortunately, no other significant effects were found for the effect of the possible self writing task. There was no difference in physical activity behaviour between groups, and no differences in feelings of vitality or meaning.

Implications

The one significant finding that the physical activity possible self group increased positive mood compared to the control group is promising because previous research has found that even transient increases in positive mood can create upwards spirals. In other words, if someone feels positive mood at one point, it could broaden their attention and promote other positive feelings or thoughts.

That said, the effectiveness of the physical activity possible selves writing task needs to be replicated in future research to ensure reliability.

The finding that no other outcome variables were affected such as physical activity or other indicators of well-being indicates that this writing task was largely unsuccessful. Although previous possible selves writing intervention have shown to be effective for increasing physical activity, previous research has relied on university undergraduate students who were recruited for a study to become more active. In the current investigation, we tested the generalizability of the possible selves intervention outside of university students and in a general population of people who may not have wanted to change their activity levels. Therefore the results of this research are important because they indicate this writing task may not be effective outside of university students.



Conclusion

Writing about yourself in the future as physically active may produce positive moods. However, in this investigation, it did not affect physical activity behaviour.

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