

Self-Affirmation's Effect on Personal Development

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Introduction

Threats

Each day, individuals are faced with adversity where they must maintain the integrity of the self to combat the issue in question (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Psychological threats, or “the perception of an environmental challenge to the adequacy of the self,” represent “...an inner alarm that arouses vigilance...” stress, and self-protective defenses (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). The daily challenges that individuals face include a range of personal problems, like feelings of personal anxiety and suffering from the burdens of poverty (Burd & Burrow, 2017). When confronted with self-threatening events or information, an individual's adequacy of the self is challenged, along with their happiness and self-image (Nelson et al., 2014). Psychological threats “focus attention and an immediate need to mobilize physiological and psychological resources to combat [the threat].” This prompts rationalizations or defensive responses (Sherman, 2013), and the mental resources that can otherwise be used to improve oneself are entirely consumed (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Thus, the struggle to combat the deflated self-image often results in the prevention of optimal performance and [personal] growth because energy consumption is used to enforce defense responses rather than developing positive adaptations (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). When faced with threats that challenge the adequacy of the self, individuals cannot combat its negative effects, as energy is allocated toward reinforcing the self-image through self-protective defenses. This energy consumption impedes an individual's ability to prosper and develop due to the threat.

Self-Affirmation Theory

The self-affirmation theory is “...rooted in the premise that people are motivated to maintain a view of the self that is ‘adaptively and morally adequate...competent, good, coherent,

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unitary, stable, capable of free choice controlling important outcomes” (Nelson et al., 2014).

Like white blood cells in the physical immune system, self-affirmation is seen as a facet of the larger network of the psychological immune system (Nelson et al., 2014). White blood cells and self-affirmation are often compared as they both work to protect individuals from impending threats—like disease or psychological threats.

In standard affirmation practices, individuals write about, review (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), or complete a questionnaire (Sherman, 2013) about central values. Then they choose one of the few they deem most important to them (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), like religion, social values, humor, kindness, or relationships with friends or family. A key aspect of this practice is that affirmations “...are self-generated and tailored to tap into each person’s particular valued identity” (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). These personal values that an individual deems most important are the internalized standards used to evaluate one’s integrity (Sherman, 2013). Thus, one must “...foster a sense of adequacy in a personally valued domain, [rather than] a perception of overall excellence” (Cohen & Sherman, 2014) for the practice to be effective.

The self-affirmation theory is designed to combat the deflation of self-image by taking advantage of individuals’ flexible self-system (Sherman, 2013). A critical understanding of the practice is that individuals “...have many responses in their ‘psychological immune system’ that they can draw on” (Sherman, 2013). Thus, self-affirmation motivates a narrative of oneself as a resilient and adaptive individual rather than a definitive self-concept (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Taking advantage of one’s flexible self-system results from affirming overall self-integrity, or the view of the self as capable and adaptive (Sherman, 2013).

The self-affirmation system arises in response to threats and only disengages once an individual’s concept of self is restored (Burd & Burrow, 2017). By affirming one’s values when

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confronted with a threat, an individual reinforces self-integrity, alleviating stress and curtailing immediate reactivity (Burd & Burrow, 2017). This practice serves as "...a psychological time-out" (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), permitting individuals to affirm their narrative of self-integrity and put the threat in this context, ultimately reducing stress (Sherman, 2013). Affirming personal values allows an individual to maintain a healthy narrative of the self, which decreases the severity of stressors because of increased security in their self-worth (Sherman, 2013).

Ultimately, affirmations boost self-resources, broaden the perspective with which people view information and events, and lead to an uncoupling of the self and threat (Sherman, 2013). The assurance in identity that results from affirmation permits individuals to feel confident in the self and its resources, further boosting courage and determination in one's capabilities. The self-affirmation theory has been proven to curb the crippling implications of threats made to an individual, thus promoting self-development in various disciplines—education, health, and personal well-being.

Education

Stress

Being a student runs a high risk of encountering daily stressors—tests, grades, peer relations—that threaten one's sense of self-adequacy and integrity (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). However, research proves that affirmation can reduce this stress. A study tested catecholamine levels, an indicator of sympathetic nervous system activation, in college students around the time of their most stressful midterm exam. Compared to baseline levels, the control group showed an increased epinephrine level while the affirm groups showed no change (Sherman, 2013). Because affirmation broadens the sources of self-worth, individuals can reduce evaluative stress when an important aspect of their life feels threatened (Sherman, 2013). Several reproductive

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studies have confirmed the study's results, reinforcing the benefits of the self-affirmation practice for stressed students. Self-affirmation does not eliminate stress; however, it promotes confidence in inherent skills within individuals. So, affirmation increases students' confidence in themselves and their abilities, which is essential in deterring the negative effects of psychological threats in the educational environment.

Identity Threat

The daily stressors that students are confronted with have the potential to decrease self-integrity, thus influencing academic performance. Members of marginalized groups, like African Americans and Latinos, face an additional stressor: their identity. Minorities are often concerned that they will be associated with and perceived as the negative stereotypes associated with their ethnicity rather than "... accorded respect and judged on their merits" (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). This mentality is an example of a social identity threat—"awareness that one can be devalued based on one's group" (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). The research was conducted at three racially mixed middle schools where students were randomly assigned to a control or affirmation group. The results of the study show that affirmation practices significantly improve the grade point average (GPA) of the identity-threatened groups in their core courses—English, math, social studies, and science (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). The study continued to track the identity-threatened groups' official grades for their remaining time in middle school and found that the affirmation intervention resulted in persisting effects that slowed the decline of their GPA (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Since middle school is "...a key transition [period] marked by feelings of inadequacy and a quest for identity" (Cohen & Sherman, 2014), the research highlights the importance of timing in the practice of self-affirming. The mutualistic relationship between low self-integrity and stagnation is terminated when an individual is affirmed during a

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recursive cycle. The negative feedback loop is then replaced with a positive feedback loop, allowing the practice of affirmation to result in lasting change.

Health

Defensiveness and Openness

When faced with important, threatening health information, individuals perceive a challenge to their adequacy, resulting in the arousal of self-protective defenses—denial, rationalization, and behavioral adaptations. When an individual is diagnosed with a disease, the mind couples the threat with inadequacy, as the diagnosis suggests that he/she "...has [maladaptive behavior] or acts wrongly" (Sherman, 2013). The practice of self-affirmation allows individuals to assess an appropriate level of threat, reducing the self-threatening nature of the peril; thus, reducing defensiveness and facilitating openness (Sherman, 2013). One study shows that self-affirmed people are more open to feedback for an untreatable disease. At the same time, other research demonstrates that affirmation made at-risk individuals more open to taking a diabetes screening test (Sherman, 2013). The practice of self-affirming provides individuals with the skill of assessing a situation outside of a personal context. When self-affirmed, individuals could evaluate the severity of the diagnosis outside of the threatening implications on one's self-image—allowing individuals to dissociate the diagnosis and self-adequacy. Since self-affirmation practices decreased the perceived level of threat an individual faced, it allowed the patient to withdraw the self-protective defenses that arose. Thus, once the self-protective mechanisms, like defensiveness, were withdrawn, the individual could accept feedback and aid, which led to increased health.

Behavioral Adaptations

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When faced with self-threatening health information, individuals tend to seek control. Behavior like heavy drinking and participating in chemically induced escapes (Cohen & Sherman, 2014) allow individuals to cope with the threat. While these defensive responses protect self-integrity in the short term, they often prove self-defeating (Cohen & Sherman, 2014) and detrimental to the already poor status health. A healthier coping mechanism that studies prove to curb defensive reactions is affirmation. Several studies confirm that "...self-affirmation increased individuals' intentions to reduce negative health behaviors (e.g., reduce caffeine consumption)" (Burd & Burrow, 2017). Furthermore, affirmation interventions produce positive behavioral adaptations in patients with chronic health conditions. A study on African American hypertension patients resulted in the affirmed group "...increasing their adherence to prescribed medicine use" (Sherman, 2013). Like the benefits of self-affirmation on stress and defensiveness, affirmed individuals are less likely to partake in destructive behaviors—like drinking or not taking prescribed medicine—because of the increased confidence in one's abilities to cope with a threat.

Well-Being and Life Satisfaction

Nelson et al. (2014) conducted a study utilizing samples of South Korean and American participants to evaluate the benefits of self-affirmation on hedonic and eudemonic well-being. While hedonic well-being involves "...the experience of frequent positive emotions and infrequent negative ones", eudemonic well-being "...represents living life per [one's] true self" (Nelson et al., 2014). Eudemonic well-being encompasses "...the fulfillment of psychological needs, the experience of meaning and purpose in life, and engagement in flow experiences"—enjoyable and absorbing activities (Nelson et al., 2014). To quantify eudemonic well-being researchers measured autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Nelson et al., 2014). The study

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deemed the impact of self-affirmation contingent on the participant's control. Affirmed South Korean participants demonstrated an increased meaning and flow, but only when initially exhibiting a low level of eudemonic well-being at baseline (Burd & Burrow, 2017). Similarly, U.S. participants who demonstrated low eudemonic well-being at baseline resulted in improved eudemonic and hedonic well-being after self-affirming for several weeks (Burd & Burrow, 2017). This study conducted by Nelson et al. (2014) demonstrates the conditions in which self-affirmation varies; the impact of the practice is heavily dependent on culture and baseline prosperity levels. Self-affirmation requires individuals to reinforce their core values constantly, so the practice increases eudemonic well-being by reminding the individual of the values of their 'true self.' This results in engagement in fulfilling acts rather than socially accepted norms meant to reinforce society's ideal image.

Conclusion

Every day individuals are faced with threats, ranging in severity, that challenge one's self-adequacy. While stress and self-protective defensives are aroused, the practice of self-affirmation allows an individual to assess the asperity of the situation and find confidence in one's abilities by confirming their self-adequacy. Self-affirmation is beneficial while confronting psychological threats in the disciplines of education, health, and personal well-being. However, the individuals most significantly benefitting from this practice belong to the most threatened domains—minorities, the chronically ill, and the low esteemed. While self-affirmation is said to broaden the perspective of individuals with high self-esteem or self-worth, further research is necessary to determine if self-affirmation practices generally apply to society, not just the struggling subgroups.

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