

Self-affirmation

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The theory of self-affirmation is a psychological theory that was first proposed by Claude Steele (1988) with the premise that people are motivated to maintain the integrity of the self. The ultimate goal of the self is to protect an image of its self-integrity, morality and adequacy. On the whole, integrity is defined as the sense that one is a good and appropriate person and the term "appropriate" refers to behavior that is fitting or suitable given the cultural norms and the salient demands on people within their culture. This theory explains why people respond in such a way to restore self-worth when their image of self-integrity is threatened. In this theory, people would respond to the threat using the indirect psychological adaptation of affirming alternative self resources unrelated to the provoking threat. As a result, these "self-affirmations" enable people to deal with threatening events and information without resorting to defensive biases, by fulfilling the need to protect self-integrity in the face of threat. In fact, this self affirmation allows people to respond to the threatening information in a more open and even-handed manner.

Self-affirmation and threats to the individual self

People tend to interpret relatively uncomfortable information in a way consistent with their existing beliefs (see confirmation bias), a phenomenon which is associated with valued aspects of self-identity. The need to protect a valued identity is a major source of such biased processing. Fortunately, people identify with multiple values. Researchers discovered that providing people with affirmation opportunities on alternative sources of self-integrity lead to a less biased evaluation to threatening information. Self-affirmation increases the openness of people to ideas that are difficult to accept.

Specifically, affirmation leads to attitude change by means of a more careful consideration of the information rather than through heuristic processing. Moreover, self-affirmation studies suggested that discomfort resulting from cognitive dissonance could be overcome if their self-integrity is enhanced through the affirmations of an alternative domain of identity.

For example, when encountering threatening health information, people often try to resist the information and persist with their unhealthy habits. In this case, self-affirmation can be used to help them be aware of potential risks and they may be more willing to consider the information, leading to higher motivation to engage in corrective reactions. In addition, self-affirmations encourage people to take a more global view on their self-integrity. When doing a threatening task, people who perceive themselves as having more abilities would feel less stressed as their overall feelings of self-integrity rely less on their performance on that particular task.

Self-affirmation at the collective level

Besides reducing threats to the individual self, self-affirmations could also reduce threats to the self at a collective level, i.e. when people confront some threatening opinions or humiliating comments

about the groups they belong to, such as race, gender, or affiliation with a location or sports team.

The usefulness of self-affirmation is portrayed in the experiment conducted by David Sherman. American "patriots" were given to read a report arguing "Islamic terrorism can be understood in terms of the social and economic forces of the Middle East" and "existence of flaws in US foreign policy to the fostering of terrorist attacks". When these participants were asked to self-affirm prior to reading the report (to write about an important value unrelated to their national identity), patriots became more open to the report. Self-affirmation also helps eliminate self-serving bias and group-serving bias, which is prevalent in attributions and group judgments. In conclusion, by affirming some aspects of the self, and unrelated to their group, an individual is able to maintain an overall self-perception of worth and integrity.

Factors affecting self-affirmation

Culture imposes some effect on the process of self-affirmation. In individualistic cultures, the self is more emphasized, and independence stands out; meanwhile in collectivist cultures, kinship is emphasized and interdependence plays a significant role. Collectivists are less likely to be motivated to protect the self-integrity since self esteem is less emphasized in their culture. However, the general process that affirmation reduces defensive responses to threats appears to be culturally invariant. Self-esteem also affects the self-affirmation process. People who affirm themselves in one aspect when they are facing threats to another aspect are believed to have more psychological support with which to self-affirm. Previous studies proved that high self-esteem individuals have more affirmational assets, and hence are more resilient to threatening incidents. People with high self-esteem are more likely to rely on self-affirmation than other defensive mechanism such as rationalization. Generally, self-affirmation increases people's open-mindedness and flexibility. However, the domain from which the threat and affirmation emerge is important. In the case that the threat and affirmation come from the same domain, self-affirmation would lead to a decrease in open-mindedness and flexibility. Further research is needed to determine the conditions under which affirmations lead to open-mindedness.

Applications

Fighting against stress by affirming love from your partner

Self-affirmation is an effective tool when we are faced with life pressures. Specifically, personal relationships, such as romantic relationships, are a noteworthy resource of affirmation during stressors. The affirmation process can be done by writing down positive statements about our partners, such as how they care about us and how we appreciate the love from our partners.

Relieving the strained relationship with partners

Several different factors contribute to the stability of interpersonal relationships. Upward social comparison, the process of contrasting ourselves with someone who is more capable, may pose a threat to the relationships. The risk generally arises after we compare ourselves with others and realize that our partners are more proficient than us. When dealing with this kind of within-relationship threat, especially for closer relationships, the potential threat can be alleviated by affirming and giving emphasis to the warmth and kindness in the relationship.

The others

The technique of self affirmation can also be used in multiple ways.

By writing down our desirable characteristics before a threat, we are less biased when we see threatening health messages. This can be applied in some group-based cigarette cessation programs. For smokers, after receiving a self-affirmation intervention, they will have a lower defensiveness towards graphic cigarette warning labels. With lowered defensiveness towards those warning labels, smokers will have a stronger intention to quit smoking. Self-affirmation can also be utilized in different settings. For example, there is evidence that shows that by using self-affirmation, heavy drinkers will have a higher self-perceived risk as well as a higher intention to reduce alcohol consumption.

In a study concerning risky sexual behavior of undergraduates, those who received a self-affirmation intervention before viewing an AIDS-educational video had a higher self-perceived risk of contracting AIDS than the control group. Moreover, those self-affirmed students were also more likely to buy condoms after watching the video.

However, all of these research studies disguised the intent of the affirmation intervention, sometimes portraying the intervention as a separate study to the subsequent measurement. In a cautionary tone about the broad applicability of this intervention, research indicates that self-affirmation has no effect when the participant is fully informed about the purpose of the study.