

Self-affirmation and health

What is the research question?

We are bombarded by warnings about the ways in which our lifestyle may damage our health. We know we should take sufficient exercise, eat enough fruit and veg, and limit how much we eat fatty, sugary, or salty foods, like crisps, chocolate, cakes and ice cream. If we drink alcohol we should do so in small amounts and on only a few days each week. We should not smoke and avoid those who are. We should practice safer sex and prevent sunburn. We should get enough sleep.



Evidence suggests that observing these guidelines for our lifestyle would be very likely to increase how long we live and how healthy we are as older adults. Yet, evidence also suggests that many of us fail to meet these guidelines and carry on as if there is no danger or it does not apply to us. Why?

Why does this happen?

Such warnings make our lives more difficult – we are surrounded by tempting food and drink, for instance – and can feel like threats to our freedom and pleasures. It is often easier to disregard the warning than to respond to it.



At Sussex we have a programme of research that recognises these warnings often make us feel bad. We have shown that if we ask participants in our studies to think about some positive aspects of themselves – such as their values or the things they like about themselves – before they read information about the risks involved in, say drinking alcohol or eating too little fruit and vegetables, they are more likely to respond positively to the information and think about trying to change.

Our research is based on a theory called “Self-Affirmation Theory”, which is a theory about why people react negatively (or “defensively”) to important information. This theory assumes that we are very highly motivated to protect our view of ourselves as competent, principled people and we resist information when it threatens our belief that we are in control and sensible. This has been called “defensive resistance”.

Could it be that warnings about the ways in which our lifestyles damage our health threaten our sense of being sensible, rational and in control? If they do, could this be one of the reasons why we so often resist such warnings? This is what we are trying to find out.

What is “Self-affirmation” and how is it induced?

One of the exciting implications of applying Self-Affirmation Theory to this problem is that the theory suggests a way in which we can overcome defensive resistance. As its name suggests, this is by self-affirmation.

One of the central assumptions of the theory is that if people experience a threat in one aspect of their lives, they can reduce that threat if they think about important positive things about themselves, such as the good things they believe in, or feel, or do, or stand for. This is what it means to self-affirm.

The theory suggest that reminding yourself of who you really are and what you stand for – for example, your important strengths, values or relationships – enables you to see the big picture and reduces the potential damage that the new threat can do to your sense of self-adequacy. The key consequence of this is that it also then allows you to face up to the information without having to dismiss it. That is, self-affirmation may reduce defensive resistance to important information.

Applying self-affirmation to health warnings

Imagine a smoker who looks at a warning image on her cigarette packet depicting a dead body in a mortuary. At some level, the image reminds her that smoking puts her future self at risk of an early and unpleasant death. This is not good news for her sense of self-adequacy.

However, what if we encouraged the smoker to first think about the things she liked about herself? We could give her three minutes to write down as many positive things about herself as she could. According to Self-Affirmation Theory, if we then showed her some cigarette packets with unpleasant images on, she would be less likely to downplay the threat that it posed to her.

This is exactly what we did in one of our studies (Harris, Mayle, Mabbott, & Napper, 2007). We found that if we randomly allocated smokers to a self-affirmation condition in which they listed their desirable characteristics (experimental condition) and other smokers to a condition in which they listed everything they had eaten in the previous 24 hours (control condition), the self-affirmed smokers were more likely to rate the images as unpleasant, threatening and relevant to them, had more negative thoughts about smoking, and – importantly – expressed greater desire to quit. They were still more motivated to cut down one week later. Indeed, the effects on motivation to quit were strongest in those who smoked most, which is important as resistance is often strongest in people who are most threatened, such as those who smoke most.

What is the evidence that self-affirmation works?

In our research we have found that young people who are asked to self-affirm before they see a health message often respond better to that message than those who are not asked to self-affirm. They want to cut down on alcohol or cigarettes, take more exercise, use

sunscreen or eat more fruit and vegetables. It does not appear to matter if the health information is novel and tells them about a threat they had not heard about before, or is something they knew already.

We are exploring why this works and how it can be developed for practical use.

Papers

Here is a list of some papers in which you can find out what we did and found:

Epton, T., & HARRIS, P. R. (2008). Self-affirmation promotes health behavior change. *Health Psychology, 27* (6), 746-752.

HARRIS, P. R., Mayle, K, Mabbott, L., & Napper, L. (2007). Self-affirmation reduces smokers' defensiveness to graphic on-pack cigarette warning labels. *Health Psychology, 26*, 437-446.

HARRIS, P. R., & Napper, L. (2005). Self-affirmation and the biased processing of threatening health-risk information. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 31*, 1250-1263.

If you'd like to know more about this research, here are contact details:

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