

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Avoidance Goal Pursuit Depletes Self-Regulatory Resources

Oertig, D., J. Schuler, et al. (2013). "Avoidance Goal Pursuit Depletes Self-Regulatory Resources." *Journal of Personality* 81(4): 365-375.

Key Words: Self-regulation, goals, resource depletion, avoidance goal

Summary/Conclusions

Prior research has explored self-regulation as a resource that depletes with frequent use. How individuals frame and pursue goals may rely upon self-regulation resources. In two studies, researchers examined the effects of avoidance (prevention-focused) goal pursuit on self-regulation resources and subject well-being. In both studies participants preference for avoidance goals were correlated with surveyed self-regulation resource depletion. The second study also discovered that avoidance goal pursuit was a negative predictor of subjective well-being.

Limitations of Information

The study relied on a series of surveys from university undergraduate students. The surveys asked about goals focused around academics, affiliation, or leisure. It is unclear if other goal topics would produce similar results. The study sample was predominately Caucasian women in Switzerland, which may have different results using Colorado's probation population. The length of the study was one month. Self-regulation may deplete more quickly or slowly depending on other variables.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Approach Versus Avoidance Goals

Prior studies have identified self-regulation is a limited internal resource. Once self-regulation resources are depleted, a person may stop self-regulating themselves and give up on the thought or behavior change efforts. The current article examined if avoidance goal pursuit depletes self-regulation resources.

Utilizing two different studies, researchers surveyed 283 respondents on whether they preferred avoidance or approach-focused goals, the availability of self-regulatory resources, and individual's neuroticism. Avoidance goals are directed at preventing an undesired outcome. An example of an avoidance goal is "I don't want to fail my test". Approach focused goals are focused on the desired outcome, an example is "I want to find a decent job". Participants completed an initial set of surveys and were surveyed again a month later. The first study found that avoidance goal pursuit was correlated with self-regulation depletion. The study cites "participants pursuing a greater proportion of avoidance goals exhibited a decline in resources over the course of the month". While higher levels of neuroticism led to lower levels of present self-regulation resources, even when controlling for neuroticism avoidance goals resulted in significant resource depletion.

In a second study, researchers used the same study design but added a subjective well-being survey and focused on the upcoming winter/holiday break. All the prior approach/avoidance goals

were revised to relate to the holidays. The results were similar to the first study, but also confirmed that subjective well-being was also negatively impacted by avoidance goal pursuit. These results have implications for case planning, treatment goals, and relapse prevention.

Practical Applications

- ✓ Try reframing goals to help clients focus on positive outcomes. For example, rather than focusing on ways the client is not supposed to spend their time, focus on positive structured ways the client can spend their time.
- ✓ Change avoidance goals to approach goals by focusing the goal on a positive outcome (e.g. change "I will try not to fail my next test" to "I will receive at least a 'C' on my next test").
- ✓ Practice forming approach goals with your own professional development.
- ✓ Check in with probationers on their feelings about case plan goals. If they are feeling exhausted, you may consider problem-solving ways for them to become re-energized with their goals.
- ✓ Affirm progress on thought/behavior change. This may help individuals feel more supported with change efforts.
- ✓ For clients that struggle with substance abuse, consider suggesting activities that can occupy their time. This may help clients replenish pro-social self-regulation resources.

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