

Emotional Distress Regulation Takes Precedence Over Impulse control: If you Feel Bad, Do It!

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Written by:

Dianne M. Tice, *Department of Psychology, Case Western Reserve University*

Ellen Bratslavsky, *Department of Psychology, Case Western Reserve University*

Roy F. Baumeister, *Department of Psychology, Case Western Reserve University*

Introduction

This article attempts to explain why control over impulsive actions aimed at immediate gratification or pleasure breaks down when people are dealing with emotional distress.

Generally speaking, impulse control requires that a person reject short-term pleasure or reward in favor of long-term goals. For example, a person who wants to lose weight must resist the urge to eat a super-size chocolate bar and wash it down with a Vanilla Shake. The short-term pleasure negates the long-term goal. This article argues that when a person is experiencing emotional distress, impulse control breaks down and the person will engage in behaviors that are contrary to their normal state of control. Thus, the central idea of this study was "that impulse control may fail because emotionally distraught people give primacy to affect regulation."

Several theories are presented that describe manifestations of behaviors related to emotional distress. The first of these is "regulatory failure." The types of activities that fall into this category are linked to self-regulation, eating, smoking-cessation, drinking, gambling, compulsive shopping, violence and the capacity to resist the breakdown of impulse control itself.

Another theory is "self-destructive behavior." Some forms of distress lead to self-destructive tendencies. Guilt will often elicit feelings of self-loathing and the desire to suffer or be punished. This leads to an abandonment of the pursuit of desirable goals and overrides normal, healthy behaviors in favor of more risky or even dangerous behaviors.

"Capacity" is the ability to resist the temptation of loss of impulse-control in the face of emotional distress. Lack of capacity indicates a breakdown in the rational thought process, thus allowing the individual to engage in self-destructive and self-defeating behaviors.

"Motivation" is yet another area effected by emotional distress. Apathy, rebellion and loss of self-efficacy may create a defeatist attitude and override the desire to achieve long-term results.

All of the theories stated above are examples of how distress causes a priority shift from normal self-regulation to abandonment of self-regulation in order to attain a sense of feeling better. Capacity and/or motivation are the major areas of vulnerability when distress occurs.

The Experiments

The study consisted of three experiments with three premises:

1. That people under emotional distress would consume larger quantities of fatty, tasty foods than those not experiencing distress as an affect regulation strategy. The researchers predicted that an induced sad, distressed mood would lead to an increase in eating in the control group while the "mood freeze" or "experimental group" would show no such increase.
2. Delay of gratification: That people under emotional distress would impair impulse control only when moods were perceived as changeable and to demonstrate that individual differences in self-controlling tendencies could moderate the effect of impulse-control breakdown.
3. That people under emotional distress will tend to procrastinate or waste time instead of pursuing long-term goals.

In the first experiment, subjects were separated into two groups. The experimental group was subjected to a mood freeze technique in which they were told that eating will not improve their moods and in fact would prolong the mood that they were in. The control group was given no such instruction. The two groups were then instructed to read a sad story and write about it, projecting themselves into the story. Afterwards, the two groups were sent to different rooms where food was present.

The results were largely consistent with the predictions in that the control group ate more than the experimental group. The perception that eating makes a sad person feel better was confirmed.

The second experiment was similar; however, the concept of "delayed gratification" was introduced. A game of "fishing" was devised in which the subjects were told that "fish" were allowed to propagate in a pond at a certain rate. As the fish population increased, so did the possibility of catching more fish in less time. Thus, both groups knew that waiting longer meant better results. The control group was told nothing. The experimental group was told that catching fish earlier, rather than delaying gratification would not change their moods. Then the two groups were exposed to a scenario that promoted distress.

The findings suggest that a failure to delay gratification is contingent upon the belief that one's mood will improve. In other words, the control group who believed that their mood would improve through instant gratification broke down early, whereas the experimental group, who believed that nothing would improve their mood, delayed gratification.

The third experiment investigates the propensity for procrastination when a person feels sad or distressed. As with the other experiments, this study involved students who were engaged in various homework assignments or practice sessions. One group was given a positive feel-good scenario to read and project themselves into and the other group was given a negative and distressing version. All students then had the option of continuing with their school activity or diverting their attention to more pleasurable tasks such as games or videos.

The results showed that those people who were placed into a bad mood were more likely to procrastinate instead of preparing for a test or returning to their original tasks. Thus, the ability of a person to regulate his or her behavior deteriorates when that person is feeling bad.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the studies that distress, low morale and depression can indeed affect the cognitive process of self-control. In all of the experiments, the propensity for someone to pursue instant gratification in order to feel better outweighed the normal protection of self-regulation and, as a result, behaviors such as dieter's going on eating binges and people in recovery from drugs, alcohol or tobacco fall into relapse.

Other self-destructive behaviors also occur, which include compulsive gambling, aggression and violence. Finally, procrastination occurs when one's morale is low and, as a result, the focus on the long-term goal is sacrificed to the need to feel better now.

On a positive note, it was found that a person who is able to maintain a cognitive approach to a mood downturn, may be able to "think his way" out of the loss of control and focus on the long-term payoff.