

World Mental Health Day 2018: An invitation to engage in self-affirmation

World Mental Health Day, October 10, is a day for global mental health education, awareness and advocacy against stigma first celebrated in 1992. The 2018 theme is “Young People and Mental Health in a Changing World”. For more about World Mental Health Day and Australia’s Mental Health Week, please visit www.1010.org.au.

In celebration of World Mental Health Day 2018, we invite you to engage in a self-affirmation task the next time you experience stress in the course of your work. This jar can be a repository for this task and the affirmations you create. You are invited to return to this activity – reading prior affirmations or writing new ones – when you experience stress in the course of your work.

What are self-affirmations?

Self-affirmations are any act that demonstrate the adequacy of the self (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Adverse events, especially failures or set-backs in self-relevant domains, can threaten one’s sense of self-efficacy. According to Self-Affirmation Theory (Steele, 1988), self-affirmations can serve to bolster a sense of efficacy in another domain, attenuating the negative effects of the adverse event.

Self-affirmations as a buffer against stress

Self-affirmations buffer against the negative consequences of stress (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Reducing stress may be one mechanism to promote mental health and wellbeing (Emanuel et al., 2018).

How do self-affirmations serve this function? Self-affirmations encourage individuals to bring to mind resources that could help to cope with a stressor (Sherman & Hartson, 2011). Self-affirmations also encourage an approach orientation, guiding constructive problem-solving (Creswell et al., 2013), reducing defensiveness in the face of threat (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), and preventing ruminative thoughts about failure (Koole et al., 1999). The underlying mechanisms via which self-affirmation produce these outcomes occur at the neural level (e.g., Cascio et al., 2016; Falk et al., 2015; Legault et al., 2012).

There is a caveat: knowing about the link between self-affirmations and its benefits can decrease the efficacy of engaging in them (Sherman et al., 2009). The good news, however, is that allowing informed individuals to *choose* to engage in self-affirmation can restore those benefits (Silverman et al., 2012).

How do I engage in self-affirmation?

A key aspect of self-affirmations is that their content is self-generated and tailored to tap into your own particular values (Sherman, 2013). On the back of this sheet, you will find instructions for one version of a self-affirmation task used widely in the research cited here. We hope you choose to complete it and revisit it during times of stress!

References

For a recent comprehensive overview of self-affirmation research, see: Cohen, G.L., & Sherman, D.K. (2014). The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65, 333–371.

Cascio, C. N., et al. (2015). Self-affirmation activates brain systems associated with self-related processing and reward and is reinforced by future orientation. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 11(4), 621-629. • Creswell, J. D., et al. (2013). Self-affirmation improves problem-solving under stress. *PLoS One*, 8(5), e62593. • Emanuel, A. S., et al. (2018). Spontaneous self-affirmation is associated with psychological well-being. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 23(1), 95-102. • Falk, E. B., et al. (2015). Self-affirmation alters the brain’s response to health messages and subsequent behavior change. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112(7), 1977-1982. • Koole, S. L., et al. (1999). The cessation of rumination through self-affirmation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(1), 111. • Legault, L., et al. (2012). Preserving integrity in the face of performance threat. *Psychological science*, 23(12), 1455-1460. • Sherman, D. K. (2013). Self-affirmation: Understanding the effects. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 7(11), 834-845. • Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2006). The psychology of self-defense: Self-affirmation theory. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 183-242. • Sherman, D. K., & Hartson, K. A., (2011). Reconciling self-protection with self-improvement: Self-affirmation theory. In: M. Alicke & C. Sedikides (Eds.) *The Handbook of Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection*, pp. 123–151. New York, Guilford Press. • Sherman, D. K., et al. (2009). Psychological vulnerability and stress. *Health Psychology*, 28(5), 554. • Silverman, A., et al., (2012). Self-affirmation as a deliberate coping strategy. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49, 93–98. • Steele, C. M. (1988). The psychology of self-affirmation: Sustaining the integrity of the self. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21, 261-302.

*This activity was organised by the Faculty of Science Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Working Group.
Should you have any questions, please email science.edi@unsw.edu.au.*

MY VALUES

Part I

Consider the list of values below. Circle the two or three values most important to you, using the 'other' category as needed.

- creativity
- relationships with family and friends
- political views
- independence
- learning and gaining knowledge
- money, wealth, or status
- your social/cultural/racial identity
- honesty or integrity
- helping society
- connection with nature/the environment
- athleticism, fitness
- spirituality or religion
- sense of humour/having fun
- Other: _____

Part II

Now, look at the values you picked as most important to you, and think about times when these values were important to you.

Draw a blank slip of paper from the jar for each value you selected. For each, please describe in a few sentences why that selected value is important to you. Focus on your thoughts and feelings, and don't worry about spelling, grammar, or how well written it is. Then, list the top two reasons why that value is important to you.

Part III

Finally, on a scale of 1–5, where 1 is highly disagree and 5 is highly agree, rate the following statements in relation to your selected values:

1. These values have influenced my life. ____
2. In general, I try to live up to this value these values. ____
3. These values are an important part of who I am. ____
4. I care about these values. ____

If you revisit this task at a later time, you can read your prior entries, or write new entries about your selected values. If you'd like a clean version of this page, please visit

www.science.unsw.edu.au/our-faculty/EDI