

## AFFIRMATION

*Encyclopedia of sport and exercise psychology*

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## AFFIRMATION

Affirmation is the act of reflecting on core aspects of the self such as important values, relationships, and personal characteristics (e.g., religion, music, or sports). Previous research shows that self-affirmation interventions can reduce psychological and physiological stress and defensiveness, while boosting personal responsibility and performance. Self-affirmation interventions and theory have promising applications in sports and exercise including facilitating achievement and helping individuals respond adaptively to setbacks.

### Self-affirmation theory

The social psychologist Claude Steele proposed self-affirmation theory in 1988. It holds that individuals are motivated to maintain self-integrity: a sense that one is a person of worth, morally adequate and effective at making changes in one's life. There are many routes to self-integrity, and affirmations of the self in one part of life (e.g., reflecting on being a good father) can buffer threats in other parts of life (e.g., poor performance). Affirmations in the context of threat can protect the self and allow people to respond with reduced stress and defensiveness because they are reassured that they possess integrity and worth.

When an event such as a sports loss or failure to complete a workout regimen threatens a valued self-image (e.g., being a good athlete or motivated exerciser), people are at risk of responding defensively by rejecting responsibility or giving up. If however the person affirms an important personal value before the threat, their sense of moral adequacy and efficacy can be reinforced and protected. Within social psychology, interventions involving values affirmations often take the form of having individuals reflect and write briefly about an important personal value such as relationships with friends and family. Writing about important personal values can fulfill the global need for self-integrity and enable people to constructively respond to threatening events. **Reduction of defensive strategies**

Sport and exercise present psychological threats (e.g., the fear of low performance) that can impact one's personal and public image. There is empirical evidence that people can

respond to these threats by construing situations as less threatening to personal worth and well-being. For example, athletes may use defensive strategies such as attributing more internal causes for success than for failure (e.g. “I won because of my ability”, but “I lost because of the weather”: self-serving biases), denying their team’s responsibility for a negative outcome or exaggerating their role in victory (group-serving biases), or claiming handicaps (e.g., claiming back pain before a competition to have an excuse for failure or to enhance credit for success: claimed self-handicapping). These defensive strategies help maintain self-integrity by reducing threats, but can limit achievement when personal responsibility is denied and failure is attributed to external causes. Self-affirmation can reduce engagement in these maladaptive strategies.

For instance, a field study demonstrated how self-affirmation can lower athletes’ engagement in self-handicapping strategies. Claimed self-handicapping was assessed before and after an affirmation intervention. First, coaches asked their athletes to report to what extent handicaps such as physical pain or stress could disrupt their training. Using a classic self-affirmation study design, athletes assigned to an affirmation condition ranked a list of values (e.g., relationships with friends) from the most important to the least important, and then wrote an essay about their most important value. Athletes in a no-affirmation control condition ranked the same values, but wrote an essay on why their least important value might be important to someone else. Athletes in the affirmation condition claimed fewer handicaps after the intervention (no difference in the control condition).

Field studies with athletes immediately after competition examined their attributional patterns for victories and defeats. The studies demonstrated that an affirmation manipulation reduced self-serving and group-serving attributional biases. Without affirmation, winning

team members claimed that their efforts and their team’s were more responsible for the outcome of the game than losing team members’. These findings were observed for players as well as non-player fans, such that collegiate fans were less defensive in their attributions about their team’s outcomes when they affirmed a value central to their university. In health psychology, affirmed individuals are less defensive and more open to learning about their health risks, and more likely to take behavioral steps to address drinking, diabetes or excessive weight. One study found that overweight women who completed a self-affirmation lost more weight than women in a control condition, suggesting that the threat and stress stemming from their appearance may have hindered their attempts to diet and exercise.

### **Reduced Stress**

Self-affirmation can reduce physiological and psychological stress responses. Compared to a control group, participants who affirmed personal values by reporting their thoughts and feelings about an important value had lower salivary cortisol responses, a marker of stress, in a stressful laboratory task. In a longitudinal study, compared to control students who had a marked increase, students who affirmed personal values two weeks prior to an academic evaluation did not have increased cumulative epinephrine levels from baseline

(an indicator of stress measured in urine).

### **Increased Performance**

Whereas threat depresses performance, affirming core values could alleviate threat and improve performance. In both laboratory and field studies, self-affirmations have improved academic performance among people confronting a negative stereotype about their ability (e.g., it improved the academic performance of African-American and Latino-American, but not White, students in mixed middle schools in the United States). These effects persist for years by changing the narrative that students tell themselves about their ongoing experience, thereby instigating recursive processes and positive feedback loops.

In sum, sports research demonstrates that self-affirmation reduces athletes' defensiveness, whereas other research shows that it helps addressing health problems, reduces stress responses, and boosts academic performance. Future research should address the specific effect of self-affirmation on the stress, performance, and commitment to a training regimen among both athletes and exercisers.

**See also:** Attribution Theory; Identity; Self-appraisal/Assessment/Perception; Self-Handicapping; Self-Presentation; Stereotype Threat; Team Attributions

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