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Nigel Barber, Ph.D.

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Choke

What the secrets of the brain reveal about getting it right when you have to
by Sian Beilock, Ph.D.

When You Screw Up, Affirm Your Self-Worth

Self-affirmation helps us improve the next time around
Published on December 5, 2012 by Sian Beilock, Ph.D. in Choke

Failure is a part of life – at work, at school, and even in our relationships. In short, we screw up all the time. Fortunately, new research shows how we can learn from our mistakes. As it happens, preserving our self-worth helps our brains make sense of our blunders so we can do better the next time around.

Self-affirmation is the term psychologists often use to describe one way in which we can preserve our self-worth. When faced with the error of your ways, say, in a work situation (you just “choked” during a big pitch to an important client), you might remind yourself of your strong family ties or your musical aptitude. Thinking about alternative sources of value, important aspects of yourself not tied to your identity at work, is thought to help buffer you against the anxiety and stress that comes from failure in one part of your life. It turns out, affirming your values also helps your brain attune to the errors of your ways so you can learn from your mistakes.

In a paper published last month in the journal *Psychological Science*, psychologists Lisa Legault, Timour Al-Khindi and Michael Inzlicht took a peek inside people’s heads while they failed at a difficult self-control task. Critically, before folks screwed up they were either given the opportunity to affirm their self-worth or were not.

In the *self-affirmation condition*, people were asked to rank six values (aesthetic, social, political, religious, economic, and theoretical values) from most to least important and then write for five minutes about why the value they ranked highest was important to them. In the *non-affirmation condition*, though people ranked the same values, they were instead asked to write about why their highest-ranked value wasn’t that important. Next, everyone performed a self-control task where they had to press a button as quickly as they could every time the letter “M” appeared on the computer screen in front of them and do nothing every time the letter “W” appeared. The idea is that you have to exercise control to ONLY hit the button when the M appears; and when you do this task quickly, it’s not that easy. Critically, whenever someone made a mistake, for instance, pressed the button when the shouldn’t have, the word “Wrong!” appeared on the screen in big block letters.

While folks performed the self-control task, they were outfitted with a cumbersome cap full of electrodes that helped the scientists create a picture of a person’s brain activity. The psychologists were particularly interested in one particular neurological signal, called the ERN or error-related negativity. The ERN can be thought of as a neural alarm signal that goes off when people make a mistake. What Legault and her research collaborators wanted to know was whether self-affirmation changed the brain’s response to a mistake and what this might mean for self-control.

What the researchers found was quite interesting. Not only did folks who affirmed their self-worth beforehand make less errors than those who did

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
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not, but their brains seemed to be especially attuned to the mistakes they had made. It was almost as if self-affirmation allowed folks to be more receptive to their errors and correct for their mistakes.

The take home? When faced with information about your failures, affirming your self-worth may help orient you to your mistakes. When you face your blunders head on, it seems that you are more likely to learn from them and do better the next time around.

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Legault, L. et al. (2012). Preserving Integrity in the Face of Performance Threat : Self-Affirmation Enhances Neurophysiological Responsiveness to Errors. *Psychological Science*


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