



## Self-affirmation impacts behavioral intentions but not preferences for delayed outcomes



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We test the effect of self-affirmation on behavioral intentions and delay discounting.
- Number of health risks was included as a moderator.
- Self-affirmation increased general intentions among people with more health risks.
- However, self-affirmation did not impact specific consumption intentions.
- Self-affirmation did not impact preferences for immediate vs. delayed rewards.

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### ABSTRACT

Numerous studies indicate that focusing on one's important values or attributes, a process known as self-affirmation, facilitates forming intentions to change one's behaviors in self-threatening domains. However, little is known about the mechanisms that underlie these effects. The present study tested the pre-registered hypothesis that self-affirmation increases intentions to change health-relevant behaviors among participants with relatively high health risks as a result of broadening their temporal perspectives. Among participants with relatively high health risks, self-affirmation indeed led to greater general intentions to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables, but not specific consumption intentions. Furthermore, there was no significant effect of the self-affirmation manipulation on temporal perspective, as assessed by a monetary delay discounting task. These findings confirm the beneficial effects of self-affirmation on general intentions to change health-relevant behaviors among those with a relatively high health risk, while drawing further attention to the need to elucidate the underlying psychological mechanisms of self-affirmation.

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One fundamental problem that deters behavior change is the tendency to respond defensively to persuasive attempts to change one's behavior (Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1997; Kunda, 1987; Liberman & Chaiken, 1992). When people do not want to change their behavior, they may attempt to discredit unwelcome information by forming hypercritical evaluations, counterarguments, or alternative explanations (Ditto & Boardman, 1995; Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Liberman & Chaiken, 1992). Given that people tend to prefer information that reminds them of their positive attributes (Brown & Dutton, 1995), information that highlights one's shortcomings can be a potent threat to one's positive self-views. One promising approach to overcoming resistance to self-threatening information involves leading people to think about their most important values or past actions, a process known as self-affirmation (Steele, 1988).

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Self-affirmation theory posits that highlighting sources of one's self-worth reinforces one's self-integrity, which, in turn, facilitates responding to a self-threat in a more objective manner (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Given that health-related behavior change often is experienced as particularly self-threatening, self-affirmation theory holds considerable promise to explain whether or not people accept health information, and, in turn, adopt intentions to change their health behaviors (Harris & Epton, 2009). Numerous studies indeed have found that self-affirming prior to reading health information leads people to practice more objective information processing of otherwise threatening information (Reed & Aspinwall, 1998; Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). Further supporting the predictions of self-affirmation theory in the domain of health behavior change, recent meta-analytic reviews of studies of self-affirmation and health have found that self-affirmation has a small to medium-sized positive effect on people's self-reported intentions to change their behavior (Epton, Harris, & Kane, 2015; Sweeney & Moyer, 2015). Furthermore, self-affirmation has a medium-sized effect on health behaviors, including

physical activity (Falk et al., 2015), fruit and vegetable consumption (Epton & Harris, 2008), alcohol consumption (Armitage, Harris, & Arden, 2011), and adherence to medication (Wileman et al., 2014), with some longitudinal studies finding effects extending over 1 month (Harris et al., 2014; Wileman et al., 2014).

Although numerous studies have indicated that self-affirmation reduces defensiveness and facilitates behavior change, surprisingly little is known about *how* self-affirmation impacts health outcomes. An empirically supported mechanistic account of self-affirmation may help to further refine self-affirmation theory as a whole. Furthermore, identifying the mechanism(s) that underlie self-affirmation effects offers practical benefits, such as increasing understanding of the specific conditions under which self-affirmation is most effective, thereby helping to further clarify why researchers do not always find significant self-affirmation effects (e.g., Meier et al., 2015). To this end, the present article examines one potential mechanism that may explain how self-affirmation affects health-related outcomes: changes in temporal perspective.

### 1. Self-affirmation and temporal perspective

Several studies suggest that self-affirmation leads people to adopt a broader perspective from which to view information. One example comes from research examining whether self-affirmation facilitates a broader perspective of the self-concept. Drawing on research indicating that the self is multi-faceted and that salient components of one's self-concept fluctuate across time (Markus & Wurf, 1987), a series of studies examined whether self-affirmation broadens people's perspective of the self (Critcher & Dunning, 2015). Specifically, these authors found that when non-affirmed individuals were faced with a self-threat, momentary feelings of self-worth related particularly strongly to performance in the threatened domain, reflecting a more constricted self-concept. Conversely, for self-affirmed individuals, their feelings of self-worth related to their general self-views rather than to their performance in the threatened domain, reflecting a broader self-concept. Furthermore, the broadened perspective afforded by self-affirmation mediated the effect of self-affirmation on defensiveness in response to a self-threat (Critcher & Dunning, 2015).

Further support for the broadening effects of self-affirmation comes from research on construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010), which posits that as psychological distance from an object or event increases, people will use increasingly abstract mental representations. Construing information abstractly leads people to focus on the core, defining features of an event, rather than on concrete, incidental features. For example, temporally distant events are more likely to be represented in terms of their superordinate goals (i.e., why they are performed), whereas closer events are more likely to be represented in terms of their subordinate goals (i.e., how they are performed; Liberman & Trope, 1998). In this vein, relative to non-affirmed individuals, people who are self-affirmed are more likely to construe actions in terms of their why-related, superordinate aspects, rather than in terms of their how-related, subordinate aspects (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009; Sherman et al., 2013; Wakslak & Trope, 2009). Such findings suggest that self-affirmation facilitates adopting high-level, abstract mental representations.

Just as temporally distant events are construed in a more abstract than concrete manner (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002; Liberman & Trope, 1998), there also is evidence that abstract construals facilitate a more distant, future-oriented temporal perspective. When people focus on the abstract features of an event, relative to the concrete features, they estimate that events will occur further in the future (Liberman, Trope, McCrea, & Sherman, 2007) and that more time will be needed to complete a task (Kanten, 2011). These findings that abstract construals facilitate a future-oriented temporal perspective, in combination with the above-reviewed findings that self-affirmation facilitates construing information abstractly, provide an empirical basis

for the novel hypothesis that the abstract mental representations afforded by self-affirmation may lead to a future-oriented temporal perspective. Testing this hypothesis could help explain how self-affirmation impacts intentions to change health-related behaviors, as discussed next.

### 2. Temporal perspective and health outcomes

An abundance of research suggests that adopting a future-oriented perspective is a key determinant of health-promoting behaviors (Hall, Fong, & Sansone, 2015). Thus, changes in temporal perspective have the potential to be particularly important within the context of studies of self-affirmation and health outcomes. For many health behaviors, there is an inherent trade-off between immediate pleasures and potential future health benefits (Fuchs, 1980; Piko, Luszczynska, Gibbons, & Teközel, 2005). As a result, when people decide to change a health behavior, they must place some value on future outcomes. Numerous studies indeed suggest that thinking about and valuing future outcomes is associated with various health-promoting behaviors, including smoking cessation, eating fruits and vegetables, engaging in physical activity, maintaining a lower body mass index, and avoiding the use of drugs and alcohol (Adams, 2009; Adams & Nettle, 2009; Daugherty & Brase, 2010; Hall, Fong, & Meng, 2014; Hall et al., 2012; Henson, Carey, Carey, & Maisto, 2006; Keough, Zimbardo, & Boyd, 2010; Wardle & Steptoe, 2003; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). In addition to correlational studies, there is also experimental evidence that causally links adopting a future-oriented perspective with changes in health-promoting behaviors (Hall & Fong, 2003).

### 3. Delay discounting

Although a number of related terms have been used to describe people's orientation towards future outcomes, the present research focuses specifically on people's preferences for immediate vs. delayed rewards. To this end, we examine delay discounting, or the tendency for rewards to decrease in subjective value as the time for obtaining the reward increases. An individual's discount rate reflects how quickly a reward loses value as it becomes farther away in time. We examine the impact of self-affirmation on delay discounting for two reasons. First, numerous studies have indicated that unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, alcohol, and overeating, are associated with higher discounting rates (Bickel, Jarmolowicz, Mueller, Koffarnus, & Gatchalian, 2012). Second, whereas other measures of temporal perspective require people to reflect upon their general behavioral tendencies (e.g., the Consideration of Future Consequences scale, Strathman, Gleicher, Boninger, & Edwards, 1994), delay discounting tasks assess explicit decisions similar in structure to decisions made in daily life between smaller, sooner and larger, later rewards.

Although individual differences such as personality relate to delay discounting (Mahalingam, Stillwell, Kosinski, Rust, & Kogan, 2014), there is an emerging literature suggesting that discount rates are malleable (Koffarnus, Jarmolowicz, Mueller, & Bickel, 2013). Discount rates change in response to therapeutic interventions (Black & Rosen, 2011; Landes, Christensen, & Bickel, 2012), such as interventions that provide working memory training (Bickel, Yi, Landes, Hill, & Baxter, 2011). Furthermore, intertemporal preferences are impacted by a variety of experimental manipulations, such as those that manipulate the saliency or perception of time (Peters & Büchel, 2010; Ungemach, Stewart, & Reimers, 2011; Read, Frederick, Orsel, & Rahman, 2005), the presence of others (Baxter, Trimber, & Luhmann, 2014), concrete vs. abstract thinking (Malkoc, Zauberman, & Bettman, 2010), and the magnitude of rewards from previous decisions (Dai, Grace, & Kemp, 2009).

Some studies incorporate pre- and post-tests to capture changes in delay discounting within individuals (e.g., Bickel et al., 2011; Bixter et al., 2014; Black & Rosen, 2011; Kimura et al., 2013). Furthermore,

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