



Circadian variations in claimed self-handicapping: Exploring the strategic use of stress as an excuse



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HIGHLIGHTS

- High trait self-handicappers handicap more during on versus off peak times.
- Claimed self-handicapping was mediated by participants' level of evaluative concern.
- On peak self-handicappers invented an alternative handicap when none were present.
- High trait self-handicappers showed increased evaluative concern when on peak.
- Self-handicapping is a strategic behavior that requires available resources.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 July 2016

Accepted 30 July 2016

Available online 2 August 2016

Keywords:

Self-handicapping

Circadian rhythm

Self-protection

Evaluative concern

Resource demands

Self-reported stress

ABSTRACT

The current research examines the effects of resource availability, assessed here via individual differences in circadian typology, on the use of claimed self-handicapping. Participants high in trait self-handicapping were more likely to claim stress when told it would negatively affect their score on an upcoming intelligence task (versus when told stress would not affect their score). However, this effect emerged only during on-peak (as opposed to off-peak) times, suggesting that the use of self-handicapping depends upon available resources. Further analyses showed that reported stress was mediated by the participants' evaluative concern. Interestingly, participants high in trait self-handicapping reported increased tiredness during on-peak times but when told stress would *not* impact their scores, suggesting that they invented an alternative self-handicap to excuse anticipated poor performance in the handicap-absent condition. These findings emphasize not only the resource needs required to engage in strategic self-handicapping, but also illustrate that awareness of evaluative concern is intensified when individuals have their full contingent of resources.

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Ninety-nine percent of the failures come from people who have the habit of making excuses.

[George Washington Carver]

Success is a universally desired but often elusive outcome. When successful individuals offer tips, they often mention one should avoid making excuses. Indeed, we know that people often make excuses for failures after the fact. Moreover, the literature on self-handicapping indicates that people may preemptively secure excuses prior to

performance in order to preserve self-esteem and maintain competence beliefs (Harris & Harris & Snyder, 1986; McCrea & Hirt, 2001).

First introduced by Berglas and Jones (1988), self-handicapping is commonly defined as “actively seeking or creating situations which will interfere with performance and therefore create an explanation for possible failure outside of individual ability attributions” (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985). By doing so, the self-handicapper accrues significant attributional benefits enabling him/her to discount the role of ability in the event of task failure, which is blamed instead on the handicap.

Self-handicapping occurs in a variety of forms, ranging from acts of self-sabotage such as drug or alcohol use to claims of debilitating conditions like stress or illness (Leary & Shepperd, 1986). Research has identified stable individual differences in the propensity to engage in self-handicapping (Jones & Rhodewalt, 1982), such that only high trait self-handicapping individuals (HSH) tend to engage in this behavior. The literature has also uncovered situational factors such as the receipt

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of non-contingent success feedback that increase the likelihood of self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978).

However, self-handicapping is viewed as a perplexing phenomenon for individuals who value success: Why would an individual deliberately sabotage their chances for success to preemptively create an excuse for potential failure? In a review of this literature, Baumeister (1997) noted that such self-destructive behaviors are characterized by both **threatened egotism** and **self-regulation failure**, factors that often result in emotional distress (cf. Baumeister & Scher, 1988).

To date, research has emphasized threatened egotism as a motivator of self-handicapping. Tesser, Martin, and Cornell (1996) conceptualized self-handicapping as one of several self-protective mechanisms within the “self-zoo” which serve to maintain a positive self-evaluation (see also Hirt & McCrea, 2002). Furthermore, Hirt, McCrea, and Kimble (2000) illustrated that feelings of *evaluative concern* serve as a key mediator of self-handicapping. Evaluative concern involves uncertainty about one's performance, coupled with a fear about potential failure. Hirt et al. (2000) found that high trait self-handicappers report elevated levels of evaluative concern when faced with a threatening task, motivating the strategic use of self-handicapping to protect self-esteem.

However, little research has examined the implications of conceptualizing self-handicapping as self-regulation failure. Baumeister (1997) used the term self-regulation failure to refer to a breakdown in an individual's normal way(s) of regulating or controlling one's behavior. The paucity of work examining this question is surprising and unfortunate, given the vast amount of work devoted to ego depletion and its implications for self-destructive outcomes such as addiction (Sayette & Griffin, 2011), aggression (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007), overeating (Hofmann, Rauch, & Gawronski, 2007), and unethical behavior (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011). The present research begins to forge this gap by examining the extent to which the use of self-handicapping depends upon one's available mental resources. Specifically, we ask whether individuals are more likely to self-handicap when they lack sufficient resources, or whether self-handicapping is a resource-demanding process more likely to occur when individuals possess their full contingent of resources.

In this work, we operationally define resource availability in terms of an individual's circadian cycle. Research indicates that people have different types of circadian rhythms (Monk et al., 1997), with some individuals experiencing morning peaks and evening troughs (“morning people”), and others experiencing morning troughs and evening peaks (“evening people”). Moreover, through their effects on processing resources, many social psychological outcomes are affected by circadian processes. Bodenhausen (1990) demonstrated that individuals were more effective at inhibiting stereotypic responding when making judgments at their peak (circadian match) than at their non-peak time of day (circadian mismatch). Bodenhausen (1990) argued that increased reliance upon stereotypes served as a resource-saving heuristic during circadian mismatch, when we are “less motivated or less able to engage in more systematic and careful judgment strategies” (p. 321). Later studies using a similar experimental paradigm have shown that individuals are more likely to show immoral behavior (Gunia, Barnes, & Sah, 2014) and transference effects (Kruglanski & Pierro, 2008) under conditions of circadian mismatch than circadian match.

Based on these findings, we might hypothesize that self-handicapping would occur more often under conditions of circadian mismatch. Because self-handicapping is a response to anticipated self-regulatory failure and the evaluative concern associated with it, we might expect self-handicappers to more acutely experience such evaluative concern during their off peak times when their mental resources are low. Such a view would conceptualize self-handicapping as a resource conservation heuristic similar to stereotyping: under circadian mismatch conditions, self-handicappers may feel they do not have the necessary resources to perform well, so will take a “shortcut” and create an excuse to cover themselves for potential self-regulatory failure.

Despite the intuitive appeal of this hypothesis, we propose an alternative prediction. If self-handicapping is truly a strategic process whereby individuals manipulate the situation to produce self-protective ability attributions, self-handicapping may instead be a resource-demanding process more likely to occur during one's peak times. Hirt, Deppe, and Gordon (1991) argued that for self-handicapping to be effective, self-handicappers must be capable of forecasting the attributional costs and benefits of implementing various handicaps. Consideration of the viability of potential handicaps should require cognitive resources, and thus we might expect self-handicapping to occur more when resources are abundant than when they are compromised. Moreover, the underlying motivation to self-handicap itself presupposes that self-handicappers are attentive to their level of evaluative concern. Nebel (1995) found that individuals are more sensitive to their affective and physiological states under conditions of circadian match than mismatch (see also Nebel et al., 1996). This work suggests that self-handicappers might likewise be more aware of or attentive to their feelings of evaluative concern under conditions of circadian match. Hence, there is reasonable evidence to hypothesize that being at one's peak might be necessary to fully experience the evaluative concern that motivates self-handicapping.

As an initial investigation into this question, we first wanted to assess people's intuitive beliefs about the resource dependency of self-handicapping. Anecdotally, in conversations with colleagues and fellow researchers, when we posed the question of whether self-handicapping occurs primarily when resources are low or abundant, we were struck by the consistency with which people assumed that self-handicapping was a reflexive, “System 1” (Kahneman, 2011) process. In order to quantify the prevalence of this belief, we conducted a pilot study in which we directly assessed the relative frequency with which people thought self-handicapping was more likely to occur at peak versus non-peak times. We presented a group of 110 undergraduate students² (45 men) who had just been introduced to the construct of self-handicapping in their introductory social psychology course with a scenario describing two target persons taking an important test (see Supplementary material available online for the full scenario). We described one target as a morning person and the other target as an evening person (within subjects variable) and manipulated whether the test was held in the morning or in the evening (between subjects variable; 55 participants per condition). All participants were asked to (1) choose which student would be more likely to self-handicap, and (2) state whether people are generally more likely to self-handicap at their peak/non-peak time of day. Consistent with our anecdotal evidence, the results indicated that respondents overwhelmingly shared the belief that people self-handicap more at their off-peak times. In the morning test condition, 76.4% of participants (42 out of 55) asserted that the “evening” person was more likely to self-handicap, and 80.0% (44 out of 55) believed that people in general self-handicap more at their non-peak time of day. In the evening test condition, the preference reversed and 83.6% of participants (46 out of 55) instead thought that the “morning” person was more likely to self-handicap, for they similarly expressed the belief (87.2% or 47 out of the 55 participants in this condition) that people self-handicap more at their non-peak time.

To gain further insight into the reasons underlying participants' beliefs, we examined their open-ended justifications for their responses. For the majority of participants who believed that people self-handicap more at their non-peak time, content analyses indicated that participants consistently argued that the target without her full contingent of resources would feel more likely to fail (e.g., “at her non-peak time of the day, she will have less energy and feel less confident in her abilities when faced with challenges”), and thus would be more likely to embrace the opportunity to make an excuse. There was a small minority of participants who expressed the sentiment that people might self-

² Sample size was determined solely by the number of students enrolled in the course and the number of students who attended class on the day the study was conducted.

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