



Perseverance of effort is related to lower depressive symptoms via authentic pride and perceived power



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ABSTRACT

Perseverance toward long-term goals has been tied to diminished depression. Few studies have considered mechanisms that might underlie the effects of perseverance. We tested the hypothesis that perseverance promotes greater resilience to depressive symptoms by enhancing positive self-conscious emotions (e.g., authentic pride) and positive self-valuation (e.g., sense of power). Participants ($N = 420$) completed self-report measures of perseverance, authentic pride, perceived power, and current depressive symptoms. Perseverance of effort was significantly related to lower depressive symptoms. Authentic pride and sense of power were both significant statistical mediators of the relationship between perseverance and depressive symptoms. Implications for future clinical research are discussed.

“Persistence leaves room for success ... allowing us to take pride in what we achieved, despite the challenges, instead of crying over where we've fallen short.”

—Carla Birnberg

1. Introduction

Depression is a global health priority. According to the World Health Organization (2017), depression accounts for fully 10% of the nonfatal disease burden worldwide. Nearly one in five US adults will experience Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) at least once in their lifetime (Kessler & Bromet, 2013). Subclinical depressive symptoms are even more common than MDD (Judd, Akiskal, & Paulus, 1997), and are associated with harmful dysfunction, increased risk for suicide and the development of MDD (Ayuso-Mateos, Nuevo, Verdes, Naidoo, & Chatterji, 2010; Judd et al., 1997). Given that depression is associated with high rates of suicidality, there is a pressing public health need for more understanding of how to prevent depression (Baldessarini, Pompili, & Tondo, 2006).

While much research has emphasized risk factors that may contribute to the development of depression, factors that instill resilience

to depression are less well understood (Dowrick, Kokanovic, Hegarty, Griffiths, & Gunn, 2008). The ability to persevere toward long-term goals despite obstacles and setbacks—also referred to as “grit” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007)—is one strength that could help protect against depression.

1.1. Perseverance and depression

While much of the literature on depression has historically focused on deficits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), a strengths-based perspective entails greater emphasis on identifying factors that can aid individuals in protecting against depression (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2012). Grit is a trait-like strength defined by the aggregation of two facets: perseverance of effort and consistency of interests toward long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Perseverance of effort represents sustained effort toward long-term goals despite the presence of setbacks, while consistency of interests represents passion and commitment toward long-term goals. Grit has been linked to greater life satisfaction, positive affect, and lower distress (Salles, Cohen, & Mueller, 2014; Singh & Jha, 2008; Vainio & Daukantaitė, 2015), but recent work suggests that these effects being are primarily driven by the

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perseverance of effort facet of grit. Perseverance is related to greater well-being (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004) and life satisfaction (Park, 2004). Moreover, findings of one meta-analysis (Crede, Tynan, & Harms, 2017) indicated that perseverance of effort was the only facet of grit that had unique predictive validity over other traits, such as conscientiousness, in relation to achievement and well-being outcomes. Taken together, perseverance of effort may be the facet of grit that is more relevant to well-being outcomes.

A small body of research suggests that perseverance of effort might foster resilience against depressive symptoms. Perseverance of effort, but not consistency of interests, was related to lower depression in a large sample of participants across 35 countries (Disabato, Goodman, & Kashdan, 2018). Further, consistent with the idea that depression is substantively tied to problems in working toward and attaining goals, two studies indicate that a lack of perseverance is related to depressive symptoms (d'Acremont & Van der Linden, 2007; Miller, Flory, Lynam, & Leukefeld, 2003).

Depression has also been linked to variables closely associated with a lack of perseverance, including a loss of motivation in the face of setbacks and failures (Hankin, Wetter, & Flory, 2012), less belief that one will conquer goals (Dickson, Moberly, Field, & O'Dea, 2016), and negative perceptions of goal progress (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 1996). Depressed individuals find goals to be more effortful (Cléry-Melin et al., 2011), more stressful (Lecci, Karoly, Briggs, & Kuhn, 1994), and less enjoyable (Meyer, Beevers, & Johnson, 2004; Winch, Moberly, & Dickson, 2015). Further, depression has been associated with perceptions that goals are more uncertain and difficult to achieve (Dickson & MacLeod, 2006). MDD has also been linked to low willingness to engage in high effort to obtain high reward (Cléry-Melin et al., 2011), particularly among those with a longer duration or more severe symptoms of depression (Treadway, Bossaller, Shelton, & Zald, 2012).

1.2. Potential mediators of the link between perseverance and depression

Despite the documented link between perseverance and depressive symptoms, little research has examined mechanisms by which perseverance might influence depression. We propose that perseverance promotes greater resilience to depressive symptoms by enhancing positive self-conscious emotions and self-valuation related to achievement in goal pursuit.

1.2.1. Pride as a mediator

Self-conscious emotions are emotions that are evoked by self-reflection and self-evaluation (Tangney & Tracy, 2012). While research has examined the role of negative self-conscious emotions—such as shame and guilt—in depression, the role of positive self-conscious emotions is less well understood (Orth, Berking, & Burkhardt, 2006). Pride is a positive self-conscious emotion that reflects satisfaction with the self and one's achievements (Tracy & Robins, 2004). Research has distinguished two facets of pride: authentic and hubristic. Authentic pride has been characterized by words such as “accomplished” and “confident” and is based on a specific action or accomplishment (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Hubristic pride, on the other hand, has been characterized by words such as “arrogant” and “conceited”, and stems from global attributions of one's value that may not be founded in specific actions or accomplishments (Tracy & Robins, 2007).

Perseverance promotes goal-directed behavior, and so is conceptually expected to increase feelings of authentic pride in one's achievements (Grant & Higgins, 2003; Weidman, Tracy, & Elliot, 2015). Empirical findings indicate that authentic pride in one's success promotes continued perseverance on difficult tasks (Weidman et al., 2015).

According to the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), the experience of positive emotions helps to broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires and build personal resources. While depression has been related to a lack of positive emotionality overall, pride may be more robustly related to depression than

are other positive emotions. That is, in cross-sectional studies, depressive symptoms have been found to be highly related to trait-like deficits in pride (Gilbert, 2000), and to blunted pride responses to standardized stimuli presented in laboratory studies (Gruber, Oveis, Keltner, & Johnson, 2011), and these effects appear more robust than for positive emotions such as happiness or amusement (Gruber et al., 2011). Longitudinal studies indicate that deficits in pride can precede and predict increases in depressive symptoms (Orth, Robins, & Soto, 2010).

Taken together, this research suggests that perseverance can foster pride, and that pride can predict depressive symptoms. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the link between perseverance and depression may be mediated by authentic pride.

1.2.2. Perceived power as a mediator

Perseverance has been related to positive self-perceptions, including greater self-esteem (McFarlin, Baumeister, & Blascovich, 1984), self-efficacy (Di Paula & Campbell, 2002), agency (Umemoto & Nakanishi, 2010), and self-worth related to achievement (Higgins et al., 2001), while depression is consistently related to low self-esteem and efficacy (Lam & Power, 1991; Street, 2002).

Here we focus more on the specific self-perception of power, which is defined as the self-perceived ability to influence others (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012). Evidence suggests that among facets of self-valuation, perceived powerlessness may be particularly related to depression (Gilbert, 2000). Self-ratings related to low power, as reflected in ratings of inferiority and subordination, have been robustly correlated with depressive symptoms in both clinical and nonclinical samples (Allan & Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert & Allan, 1998; Gilbert, Mcewan, Bellew, Mills, & Gale, 2009; Troop & Baker, 2008; Wyatt & Gilbert, 1998) and with severity of depression history in a diagnosed sample (Sturman & Mongrain, 2008). When asked directly about their self-perceptions of power, persons with depressive symptoms report experiencing a lack of power in their interactions with others (Tang-Smith, Johnson, & Chen, 2014).

There is also reason to believe that perseverance could be particularly helpful in combatting feelings of powerlessness. Individuals are afforded more influence by others when they have established a reputation as being successful, high-performing, and competent (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Perseverance may aid individuals in gaining power because it helps them achieve goals, attain success, and garner a positive reputation. Perseverance increases the ability to act with agency and produce intended effects on the environment (van Dijke & Poppe, 2003). Individuals who persevere in the pursuit of their goals are more likely to achieve their goals, perform at a higher level, and develop greater competence and skills over time (e.g., Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, & Ericsson, 2011). As such, perseverance is likely to help individuals gain a reputation of achievement, performance, and competence – thereby giving them more power vis-à-vis others and enhancing their personal sense of power. In sum, persevering toward one's goals may enhance feelings of a genuine sense of one's own power, thereby playing an important role in resilience to depressive symptoms.

1.3. The present study

In the current study, we first aimed to replicate previous findings that perseverance would be related to lower depressive symptoms. We then tested the hypotheses that authentic pride and sense of power would statistically mediate the relationship between perseverance and depressive symptoms.

2. Method

Procedures were approved by the university ethics board before data collection began. Participants verified that they were at least 18 years old, and then completed written informed consent procedures.

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