



Circumventing anxiety during interpersonal encounters to promote interest in contact: An implementation intention approach[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Interest in sustained contact is boosted using implementation intentions.
- Desire for contact is increased without needing to reduce anxiety.
- Effects are found in both laboratory and naturally occurring interactions.
- Interest in contact is maintained over time.

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ABSTRACT

Interactions with new acquaintances are often filled with anxiety that can reduce the desire for long-term contact. The present research tested whether providing participants with implementation intentions (“if-then” plans) that specify how to act when feeling anxious boosted interest in sustained contact and close interpersonal distance. Implementation intentions led to increased interest in sustained contact during anxiety-provoking interactions in the laboratory (Study 1) and daily interracial interactions (Study 2). They also led to closer interpersonal distance in anticipation of interracial interactions (Study 3). Implementation intentions were more effective than forming goal-directed responses (Studies 1, 2, & 3), or not forming a self-regulation strategy (Studies 2 & 3), and were effective over multiple interactions and across time, despite being learned only once (Study 2). Participants across conditions reported similar levels of anxiety, suggesting that promoting an interest in sustained contact can be accomplished without reducing anxiety, but rather, by shielding individuals from the negative effects of anxiety during social interactions.

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Introduction

People have a strong desire to form close, meaningful relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). To develop social bonds, relationships must evolve past the initial getting-acquainted stage, during which building rapport is pivotal to the success of the relationship (Duncan & Fiske, 1977; Tickle-Degnan & Rosenthal, 1990). However, experiencing heightened levels of anxiety during these interactions can interfere with rapport-building processes, and ultimately hinder relationships from progressing past the getting-acquainted stage.

Social anxiety can heighten sensitivity to rejection-related cues (Heinrichs & Hoffmann, 2001), and is associated with concerns

about engaging in undesirable behaviors around others (Liebowitz, Gorman, Fyer, & Klein, 1985). In turn, individuals avoid (Herbert, Rheingold, & Brandsma, 2001; Vorauer, 2001), and disengage from anxiety-provoking encounters (Barlow, Louis, & Hewstone, 2009). Anxiety can also detrimentally affect relations between groups. Anxiety experienced during intergroup (e.g., cross-race) encounters leads to enhanced vigilance to signs of rejection (Vorauer, 2006), avoidance of cross-group interactions (Plant, 2004), and negative intergroup attitudes (Tausch, Hewstone, Kenworthy, Cairns, & Christ, 2007). Thus, the effects of social anxiety on the formation of relationships are widespread and largely negative.

Theoretically and empirically, the dominant approach taken to combat the adverse effects that anxiety has on contact has been an anxiety-reduction approach (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). Although well-validated procedures have been established within the clinical domain, particularly for those who suffer from chronically high levels of anxiety (Heeren, Reese, McNally, & Philippot, 2012), within the social psychological domain, strategies designed to reduce anxiety within specific social contexts (e.g., cross-race interactions) may only act as short-term buffers rather than long-

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term solutions (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). Strategies that are successful in reducing anxiety in the long term ultimately require extensive time, cognitive effort, and commitment to ensure success (Beck & Fernandez, 1998; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008).

Although reducing anxiety over the long term can be difficult, recent evidence suggests that individuals can effectively pursue goals when they are shielded from the negative effects of an affective state (e.g., anxiety) that typically blocks goal progress, even if the affective state is not removed (Bayer, Gollwitzer, & Achtziger, 2010). For example, Bayer et al. (2010) found that when participants developed a strategy to shield them from a positive mood that increased the amount of stereotyping they engaged in, they were shielded from the adverse effects of their positive mood without needing to reduce it.

In the present context, we theorized that when individuals possess the goal to have a positive encounter, delineating anxiety as an opportunity to engage in a goal-directed response would shield individuals from anxiety's pernicious effects on the interaction. Anxiety becomes a cue for action and goal-pursuit, rather than a hindrance to progress. Thus, we propose that in contrast to an anxiety-reduction approach, an alternative approach to improving interactions with new acquaintances is to *shield* individuals from their anxiety, thereby allowing them to engage in positive interactions and in turn develop interest in sustained contact. Drawing from research on goal pursuit (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006), in the present research we developed *implementation intention* strategies aimed at facilitating interest in sustained contact when individuals have the goal of engaging in positive interactions, but anxiety interferes with achieving this goal.

Implementation intentions

Implementation intentions are if-then statements in the form of "If situation X arises, then I will do Y!" They specify a situational cue as the "if," which is joined with a goal-directed response as the "then" (Gollwitzer, 1999). If-then plans are generally more effective than goal intentions of "I will do Y!" in helping people strive toward their goals because they specify exactly when and how a goal-directed response should be employed to reach a focal goal.

The goal-directed response of an implementation intention is automatically activated when the cue is perceived, and so individuals need not acknowledge the cue in order for the strategy to be effective (Bayer, Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Moskowitz, 2009). Moreover, once learned, implementation intentions operate automatically and without conscious intent. For example, individuals who form an implementation intention with anxiety as the cue and feeling confident as the goal-directed response (e.g., "If I feel anxious, then I will tell myself to be confident!") would not need to actively think to themselves "I feel anxious" in order for anxiety to activate feelings of confidence.

Individuals would also not need to actively rehearse the implementation intention in every anxiety-provoking interaction they engage in for the cue to continually activate the goal-directed response. This automaticity makes implementation intentions an optimal strategy for cognitively taxing interactions (e.g., cross-race ones; Trawalter, Richeson, & Shelton, 2009), and interactions in which individuals must focus their attention on making positive impressions, attending to their partner's behaviors, or attending to other goals of the interaction.

An implementation intention that specifies a negative state (such as anxiety) as an opportunity to engage in goal-directed behavior should shield the individual from the negative effects of the cue, but should not necessarily distract the individual from recognizing and experiencing the cue. As another example, a dieter might specify a cue that impairs goal progress as desiring to eat cake, and select the goal-directed response to eat an apple. When the individual walks past, for example,

a bakery filled with cakes, the goal-directed response would be activated to eat an apple. The individual would still see the bakery and the cakes because the goal directed response did not specify for the individual to divert attention from the cue (i.e., the cakes in the bakery). Instead, the goal-directed response would shield the individual from the negative effects of this cue that would derail goal progress (e.g., the tempting odor of the cakes).

We propose that a similar process is likely to work with anxiety experienced in interactions with new acquaintances. For example, an individual who forms the implementation intention "If I feel anxious, then I will tell myself to be confident!" would still experience anxiety even after the goal-directed response to feel confident has been activated, because the response was not developed to distract the individual from their anxiety or directly reduce anxiety (e.g., telling oneself to relax; Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2008). However, despite the fact that the individual would still experience anxiety, anxiety had been delineated as an opportunity to engage in behavior relevant to making goal-progress, and so the goal-directed response would shield the individual from the impairments that anxiety could have on the interaction (e.g., disengaging from the interaction).

The present research

We examined the effectiveness of implementation intentions for improving interest in contact in three anxiety-provoking interaction contexts. Specifically, we tested these strategies in dyadic interactions in the laboratory (Study 1), daily interracial interactions in the field (Study 2), and anticipated interracial interactions in the laboratory (Study 3). We designed the implementation intentions with anxiety as the cue, and a goal-directed response that was meant to shield participants from their anxiety and help them stay on track toward achieving their overarching goal of having successful interactions. As previously discussed, when an implementation intention specifies behaviors that aid in achieving a focal goal, but not how to directly cope with the experienced cue (e.g., anxiety), individuals are shielded from the negative effects of the cue without reducing it (Bayer et al., 2010). As the goal-directed responses in our implementation intentions did not specify how to *reduce* the cue of anxiety (e.g., deep breathing, telling oneself to relax), but specify instead how to *shield* participants from their anxiety (e.g., directing their attention to the task at hand), we predicted that individuals who learned implementation intentions would not experience less anxiety than those who were only provided with a goal-directed response. Moreover, given that implementation intentions are automatically activated once learned, we hypothesized that they would operate well beyond the first anxiety-provoking interaction to facilitate interest in sustained contact with several different partners, and over time—a hypothesis we tested in Study 2. In sum, our overarching goal consisted of demonstrating the effectiveness of implementation intentions for improving intentions and behaviors related to positive contact in a diversity of anxiety-provoking interaction contexts.

Study 1

Structured games are a well-established method for developing closeness between new acquaintances in laboratory settings (e.g., Fraley & Aron, 2004; Page-Gould et al., 2008; Reis et al., 2010). In Study 1, unacquainted dyad members participated in a structured game in the laboratory that helped partners become acquainted, while simultaneously eliciting feelings of anxiety. Specifically, participants took turns signing and guessing American Sign Language (ASL) words with an interaction partner. Rather than seeing their partner's hands during the task, participants felt their partner's hand within an enclosed box—a task that prior research has found to be highly anxiety-provoking (Koslov, Page-Gould, & Mendes, in preparation).

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