



Dysphoric adolescents' causal explanations and expectancies for approach and avoidance goals

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Abstract

Relatively little research has studied emotional disturbance from a motivational perspective. The current study aimed to investigate personal goal systems at different levels of analysis, namely, personal goals, associated causal explanations and goal expectancies, as a function of dysphoria. Dysphoric ($n = 28$) and non-dysphoric ($n = 28$) adolescents (16–18-yr-olds) selected from a larger school sample completed tasks that measured number of approach goals and avoidance goals, causal explanations for goals, and perceived likelihood and control estimates for idiographic goals. As predicted dysphoric adolescents, relative to controls, generated a combination of more avoidance goals and fewer approach goals, and thought of more reasons that explain why goals would not be achieved and fewer reasons that explain why goals would be achieved (irrespective of goal type), and considered avoidance goal outcomes as more likely to occur and approach goal outcomes as less likely to occur. In addition, dysphoric adolescents anticipated less personal control in implementing their goals than controls. Overall, the data identified distinct personal goal systems that function differently in dysphoric and non-dysphoric adolescents.

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Introduction

From a clinical perspective studies have shown a sharp increase in rates of mood-disturbance with the onset of adolescence (e.g. [Petersen et al., 1993](#); [Hankin et al., 1998](#)). Rates of depression, as well as new cases of depression rise dramatically during mid to late adolescence ([Hankin, Abramson, & Siler, 2001](#)). The 1-yr prevalence rates of clinical depression have been shown to increase six-fold from 3% to 18% between the ages of 15 and 18 years ([Hankin et al., 1998](#)) and according to [Petersen et al. \(1993\)](#), 25% to 40% of adolescents report experiencing depressed mood. Yet beyond these basic facts it remains relatively unclear how mood disturbance affects the psychological functioning of adolescents, particularly in relation to motivation. The current study examines personal goal systems associated with dysphoria in late adolescence.

Late adolescence is an important transitional stage in human development and typically represents a time for discerning future directions and goals in life. Idiographic goals represent an important aspect of personal motivational systems, as they give a sense of meaning, purpose and direction in peoples' lives which, in turn, create frameworks for interpreting everyday life experiences. The actual process of striving to achieve personal goals is thought to be an important aspect that facilitates psychological growth and personality development ([Sheldon, Kasser, Smith, & Share, 2002](#)). Yet it may be the case that distinct forms of personal goal systems are related to psychological well-being. For whilst personal goals represent attempts to move from a present state towards some desired state (approach) they may also represent attempts to move away from some undesired state (avoidance).

Over the past 30 years, several theorists have proposed that distinct approach and avoidance motivational systems underlie mood, personality and emotional susceptibility (e.g. [Gray, 1982](#); [Cloninger, 1987](#); [Fowles, 1988](#); [Davidson, 1998](#)). Although these motivational models vary, they have in common the proposition that neurophysiological systems underlie distinct approach and avoidance type motivational processes (for a review see [Elliot & Covington, 2001](#)). For instance, [Gray's \(1982\)](#) early influential biological model proposes two distinct motivational systems: a behavioural inhibition system (BIS) and a behavioural activation system (BAS). The BIS represents sensitivity to signals of non-reward, punishment and novelty, and is considered responsible for feelings of sadness, anxiety and fear in response to aversive cues. The BAS represents sensitivity to signals of reward and escape from punishment, and is thought to be responsible for feelings of happiness, elation and hope. [Fowles \(1988, 1994\)](#) applied Gray's two motivational systems to a range of psychopathological conditions. Fowles argues that depression is characterized both by high BIS and low BAS activity. To date, few empirical studies have explicitly studied Fowles' theoretical assumptions.

In more recent years, personality and goal theorists have become interested in the importance of the approach-avoidance distinction in the study of peoples' idiographic goals (e.g. [Elliot & Thrash, 2002](#)). Essentially these theorists define approach and avoidance goals in similar terms to [Gray's \(1982\)](#) early description of the BAS and BIS. That is, approach goals are focused on positive outcomes and goal orientation involves trying to move towards or to maintain a desirable end state whereas avoidance goals are focused on negative outcomes and goal orientation involves moving away from or inhibiting undesirable end states (e.g. [Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997](#)). This nascent research indicates that approach goals, relative to avoidance goals, are positively related to measures of subjective well-being (SWB) whereas avoidance goals, relative to approach

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