



The emergence of goal pursuit: Mental contrasting connects future and reality



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We studied how thinking about the future instigates goal pursuit
- Mental associations between future and obstacles foster goal pursuit
- Studies highlight the importance of integrating obstacles into future thinking for goal pursuit

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ABSTRACT

Mental contrasting of a desired future with the present reality strengthens the link between expectations and goal pursuit: The higher expectations of success, the more people engage in goal pursuit; the lower expectations of success, the more people let go or disengage from goal pursuit. In three studies, we tested if mental contrasting increases the link between expectations and goal pursuit by affecting the strength of mental associations between future and reality. We used lexical decision tasks to measure the strength of associations between future and reality for different domains of goal pursuit (i.e., interpersonal relations, achievement), and compared results in the mental contrasting condition to relevant control conditions (i.e., reverse contrasting and content control). In the mental contrasting condition but not in the control conditions emerged a strong link between expectations of success and the strength of associations between future and reality (Study 1, 2). The strength of associations between future and reality in turn mediated the link between expectations and self-reported as well as other-rated goal pursuit in the mental contrasting condition (Study 1, 2). Finally, the link between expectations and the strength of associations between future and reality in the mental contrasting condition vanished when the goal was attained (Study 3). Taken together, these results suggest that strength of future–reality associations are a mechanism specific to mental contrasting effects on goal pursuit.

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On self-help blogs on the internet, people often write about a period in their life, when they felt that they did not live up to their potential. Despite feeling capable of, say, being a better parent, giving a successful presentation for a job interview, or finding an idea for the book they always wanted to write, they report struggling with starting to engage in the pursuit of their wishes. When looking back, they remember oscillating between periods of fantasy, dreaming vividly about successfully attaining their wishes, and periods of frustration, mired in thoughts about the obstacles of implementing their wishes. However, neither the periods of fantasy nor the periods of frustration would help to move forward. It was not until one day, in a moment of insight, they made the connection between the desired future and the present reality

standing in the way of wish fulfillment that they saw what had to be done. They then made time to spend with their children, put in the needed effort to prepare the job presentation, or decided to take a creative writing class, and thereby realized their desired futures. Similarly, we propose that people make progress toward attainable wishes when they connect thoughts and images of fulfilling these wishes with reflections on the present reality that must be overcome.

Mentally contrasting a desired future (e.g., finishing a presentation over the weekend) with the reality standing in the way of realizing the desired future (e.g., a party on Saturday night) strengthens the link between expectations of success and goal pursuit (i.e. committing to and striving for a goal). The higher the expectations of success, the more likely people are to engage in tenacious goal pursuit. Yet, the lower the expectations of success, the more likely people are to let go or disengage from goal pursuit (Oettingen, 2012, for an overview). Yet, how does mental contrasting strengthen the link between

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expectations of success and goal pursuit? We suggest that when people engage in mental contrasting of feasible wishes (i.e., high expectations of success) they acquiesce that in order to achieve the desired future they have to put in effort to overcome the reality and thus form a strong mental association between future and reality. On the contrary, what leads people to let go or disengage from unfeasible wishes (i.e., low expectations of success) is seeing that trying to overcome the reality will most likely be in vain, thereby cutting off the relation between future and reality. Hence, mental contrasting should increase the link between expectations of success and the strength of associations between future and reality: the higher expectations of success the stronger the associations between future and reality, and the lower expectations of success the weaker associations between future and reality. To test these hypotheses, we measured the strength of associations between future and reality directly after mental contrasting (versus control conditions). We further predicted that by altering the strength of the associations between future and reality alongside expectations, mentally contrasting increases the link between expectations of success and goal pursuit. We tested these ideas in three studies.

Mental contrasting and goal pursuit

Mental contrasting is a self-regulation strategy that leads people to utilize their expectations for goal pursuit (Oettingen, 2012). When people engage in mental contrasting, they first imagine a desired future (i.e., positive images of wish fulfillment) and then elaborate the reality (i.e., potential obstacles and difficulties) that stands in the way of wish fulfillment. Thereby, the question of whether the desired future can be attained is raised (Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001). Based largely on past performances and experiences (Bandura, 1977, 1997) – including overcoming relevant obstacles and difficulties – expectations of success provide the answer, and guide subsequent goal pursuit. The higher expectations of success are, the more people commit to and strive for attaining the desired future (i.e., pursue the goal); yet the lower expectations of success, the more people let go or disengage from goal pursuit (Oettingen, 2000, 2012; Oettingen et al., 2001).

A multitude of experimental studies showed that mental contrasting bolsters the relationship between expectations of success and goal pursuit. Using various indicators of goal pursuit such as cognitive (e.g., making plans), affective (e.g., feelings of anticipated disappointment in case of failure), motivational (e.g., feelings of energization, systolic blood pressure), and behavioral indicators (e.g., observed effort, actual achievement), these studies found the described pattern of results, no matter whether the indicators of goal pursuit were assessed via self-report or observations, or whether immediate effort or sustained effort over weeks was needed (Kappes, Oettingen, & Pak, 2012; Kappes, Singmann, & Oettingen, 2012; Oettingen, 2000; Oettingen, Mayer, Thorpe, Janetzke, & Lorenz, 2005; Oettingen et al., 2001, 2009; Oettingen, Mayer, Stephens, & Brinkmann, 2010; Oettingen, Mayer, & Thorpe, 2010; summary by Oettingen, 2012). Importantly, in these studies, mental contrasting did not change the expectations of success itself; rather it made them relevant for goal pursuit (Oettingen et al., 2001, 2005). That is, the higher expectations of success were the more participants in the mental contrasting condition showed immediate and tenacious goal pursuit. In contrast, the lower expectations of success were the more participants let go or disengaged from goal pursuit.

Strength of mental associations between future and reality

How does mental contrasting increase the link between expectations of success and goal pursuit? The model of fantasy realization (Oettingen, 2000, 2012; Oettingen et al., 2001) argues that mental contrasting of feasible wishes leads people to see the reality (e.g., a party on Saturday night) as *standing in the way* of attaining the desired future (e.g., finishing a project presentation over the weekend). In mental contrasting, participants first imagine the desired future; the future thereby

sets the context for imagining the reality. Imagining the reality right after imagining the desired future activates reality information in relation to the desired future, pointing out that the attainment of the desired future depends on overcoming the reality standing in the way. For example, a person might first imagine how happy she would feel if she could finish the project presentation over the weekend. When mentally turning to the present reality of being invited to a party on Saturday night, she may immediately think about how this party impedes the desired future of completing the assignment. By understanding the reality in the context of the future, mental contrasting raises the question: Can I overcome the reality that stands in the way of wish fulfillment? Expectations of success provide an answer to this question, become activated, and should subsequently inform how people form the mental associations between future and reality.

In particular, the higher the expectations of success, the more people should realize that they can overcome the reality. In contrast, the lower expectations of success, the more people should realize that trying to overcome the reality will most likely be in vain. Thereby mental contrasting establishes a meaningful relation between future and reality in line with expectations of success. Specifically, if expectations of success are high, mental contrasting should change the meaning of reality so that participants see the reality as an obstacle towards goal pursuit such as the party in the example above is standing in the way of reaching the desired future. In contrast, participants with low expectations, as it is in vain to attain the desired future, should not see the reality as an obstacle, in the example above, the party is now a fun event, not connected to finishing the project presentation. Consistently, in a series of studies, we found a strong link between expectations of success and seeing the reality as an obstacle towards reaching the desired future. The higher the expectations of success, the more people perceived the reality as an obstacle, yet the lower expectations of success, the less they perceived the reality as an obstacle (Kappes, Wendt, Reinelt, & Oettingen, 2013).

Importantly, we predicted that constructing a relationship between future and reality will affect the strength of associations between future and reality. Theories on how relational information is stored in memory (De Houwer, 2009; Dickinson, 2009; Mitchell, De Houwer, & Lovibond, 2009) show that the strength of associations between two events expresses relational information about how the events relate to each other. If one event, for instance, is believed to be strongly related to the other, then strong associations are formed between them. However, if one event is believed to be unrelated to another event, the strength of associations between them is weakened. In line with these ideas, we hypothesized that the higher the expectations of success, the stronger the mental association between future and reality, indicating the strengthened relationship between future and reality. In contrast, we predicted that the lower the expectations of success the weaker the mental association between future and reality; expressing the weakened relationship between future and reality.

Finally, we propose that the strength of the associations between future and reality mediate the link between expectations and goal pursuit in the mental contrasting condition. Strong associations imply that the desired future cannot be thought of anymore without the reality; hence the reality should act as a reminder that action is needed to attain the desired future. Consequently, when the desired future is brought to mind, the subsequent activation of present reality will ensure that effort is invested in goal pursuit. On the contrary, weak future–reality associations imply that even when explicitly thinking about the desired future, the respective reality will not become activated; hence no reality urges people to act on their desired future. Thereby, when the desired future is brought to mind, the reality will fail to evoke effort allocation for goal pursuit.

Indulging, dwelling, and reverse contrasting

People engage not only in mental contrasting, but predominantly in other forms of thinking about the future (i.e., indulging, dwelling, and

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