

Public Abstract

First Name:Linda

Middle Name:S.

Last Name:Houser-Marko

Adviser's First Name:Kennon

Adviser's Last Name:Sheldon

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

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Title:Keeping your eyes on the prize versus your nose to the grindstone: The effects of level of goal evaluation on mood and motivation

The level at which a personal goal is evaluated by the individual pursuing it can lead to differing levels of mood and motivation during the process of goal pursuit. Though higher level primary goals provide meaning and direction in a person's life, evaluating progress on that primary goal (versus a more short term sub-goal) is risky. This notion was tested with a 2 x 2 experiment in which framing level (sub-goal or primary goal) and feedback valence (success or failure) were manipulated for participants (n=118) during a computer game in the laboratory. Positive mood and expectation to do well in the future decreased and negative mood increased the most for those who received primary goal/failure feedback. Study 2 was a short longitudinal experimental study that took place over 8 weeks throughout which college student participants (n=113) evaluated their progress on a primary goal (Grade goal) versus sub-goal (Study hours goal) for a specific course that they were taking. Success or failure varied naturally for individuals and progress was self-evaluated. Evaluating progress on a primary goal was associated with more extreme mood. Specifically, when progress was lacking, the primary goal focus was associated with decreases in mood and expected performance. These results indicate that a person might be better off evaluating goal progress at the lower, sub-goal level, especially when receiving negative feedback. This research has implications for a wide variety of personal goals and behavior change, such as career plans, weight loss, exercise, and smoking cessation. For difficult goals, it might be best to "keep your nose to the grindstone."