



# Self-handicapping and the Five Factor Model of personality: mediation between Neuroticism and Conscientiousness

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## Abstract

The current study is an investigation of the relationship between self-handicapping and the Five Factor Model as measured by the NEO-PI-R [Costa, P. T. & McCrae, R. R. (1992). *NEO-PI-R Professional Manual*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources]. In keeping with previous findings for the construct of procrastination, we found that self-handicapping was positively related to Neuroticism and negatively related to Conscientiousness. Stepwise multiple regression indicated that the facets of Depression, Self-Consciousness, Impulsiveness, and Vulnerability contributed unique variance to self-handicapping. Additionally, the Conscientiousness facets of Competence, Dutifulness, and Self-Discipline were most strongly related to dispositional self-handicapping. Finally, analyses using partial correlation indicated that the construct of self-handicapping mediates the negative relationship between Neuroticism and Conscientiousness reported in previous studies. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Self-handicapping; Personality; Five factor model; Conscientiousness; Neuroticism

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## 1. Introduction

Jones and Berglas (1978) describe self-handicapping as a strategy to protect or enhance one's self-esteem in situations in which self-esteem may be threatened. Where one's feelings of self-worth could potentially be harmed, attributions of personal failure may be avoided by engaging in a number of activities, including drinking alcohol, failing to study or practice, and lack of sleep. These activities all represent viable means of self-handicapping. To further explain this phenomenon, Jones and Berglas (1978) suggest that self-handicapping is a way of reducing responsibility for one's performance in the eyes of the performer, as well as in the eyes of the audience. By engaging in activities that typically compromise one's ability, persons who self-handicap can plausibly attribute causes for failure to external factors (e.g. effort) rather than

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internal factors (e.g. ability; Hobden & Pliner, 1995; Murray & Warden, 1992). Avoiding internal attributions for failure is especially important for self-handicappers as they believe that ability traits are more innately determined (Rhodewalt, 1994). Consequently, failure in the face of adequate effort likely damages self-handicappers' fragile sense of self-esteem.

### *1.1. Self-handicapping and personality*

Previous studies investigating self-handicapping and personality traits have focused on aspects of neuroticism (e.g. self-esteem, depression, and anxiety). Zuckerman, Kieffer, and Knee (1998) investigated a number of aspects of neuroticism in two studies on self-handicapping. In the first study, they reported a negative relationship between self-handicapping and grade point average and a positive relationship between self-handicapping and avoidance coping. Results from the first study support their hypothesis that self-handicappers attain lower levels of academic achievement and tend to rely on avoidant coping strategies of withdrawal and negative focus. When under stress, self-handicappers can be expected to focus on the most negative aspects of the stress-provoking situation and retreat from the challenge it represents. In the second study, Zuckerman et al. (1998) found a negative relationship between dispositional self-handicapping and self-esteem. Rhodewalt (1990) describes the role that self-esteem plays in self-handicapping. According to Rhodewalt, self-esteem acts as a barometer for feelings of threat, which trigger self-handicapping behavior. In other words, when one's self-esteem is threatened, self-handicappers are signaled to withdraw. This has led researchers to hypothesize that instability in self-esteem may be related to a greater use of self-handicaps. Indeed, Newman and Wadas (1997) found that differences in the use of self-handicaps between persons with stable versus unstable self-esteem were much stronger than between persons with generally high versus low self-esteem. Again, however, variability in self-esteem implicates sensitivity to situational stress and to negative evaluations of self-worth.

Other researchers have pointed to a relationship between self-handicapping and depression. For instance, Nurmi (1993) and Weary and Williams (1990) reported that depressive symptoms are endorsed significantly more by self-handicappers. Nurmi (1993) also reported a relationship between expectations for failure and self-handicapping, which further implicates a positive relationship to Neuroticism and sensitivity to threat cues. Schouten and Handelsman (1987) examined a social view of depression as a form of immunity from personal responsibility in challenging situations. By evaluating participants' responses to hypothetical case studies, researchers found a usefulness "...of depression as a public form of self-handicapping," (p. 108) where personal responsibility is diminished for apparent life failures. In other words, depressive symptoms may be used as a means of relieving responsibility and a form of self-handicapping. Furthermore, Zuckerman et al. (1998) found a positive relationship between self-handicapping and negative affect, which is closely related to global Neuroticism including depression and anxiety (Watson & Clark, 1997). In addition to self-esteem and depression, anxiety has further been linked to self-handicapping. For instance, Ryska, Yin, and Cooley (1998) measured anxiety levels before performance in self-handicappers. They found elevated levels of anxiety in self-handicappers compared to controls.

The studies discussed above examine self-handicapping and individual trait differences in aspects of Neuroticism. However, to our knowledge, no studies have been conducted examining the relationship between self-handicapping and more comprehensive models of personality. The

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