

Original article

Impact of a personal goals management program on the subjective well-being of young retirees

L'effet d'un programme de gestion des buts personnels sur le bien-être subjectif des jeunes retraités

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Abstract

A personal goal-based intervention was offered to retired people aged 50 to 65 years with the objective of increasing their subjective well-being. The program aimed to help the participants set, plan, and pursue their personal goals through a learning process based on literature on goal intervention. At the end of the program, the experimental group ($N = 117$) had improved significantly more than the control group ($N = 177$) on the majority of the goal and subjective well-being indicators, and this gain was maintained six months later. The enhanced well-being observed in the participants after the intervention stemmed from the mediating effect of the goals and was thus due to the greater focus on goals. Some ideas to make the program more effective are discussed.

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Résumé

Une intervention axée sur les buts personnels est offerte à des retraités de 50 à 65 ans en vue d'augmenter leur bien-être psychologique. Le programme présenté ici a pour objectif de promouvoir l'expression, la planification et la réalisation de projets personnels grâce à une démarche d'apprentissage basée sur une synthèse de la documentation relative à l'intervention sur les buts. Suite à la démarche, les participants du groupe expérimental ($n = 117$) se sont améliorés significativement comparés au groupe témoin ($n = 177$) sur la plupart des indices relatifs aux buts et au bien-être subjectif et cette amélioration s'est maintenue six mois après la fin de l'intervention. Le mieux-être observé chez les participants après l'intervention provient de l'effet médiateur des buts. Les gains en bien-être subjectif découlent donc du rehaussement des buts. Certaines indications permettront une application plus efficace du programme *Gestion des buts personnels*.

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Mots clés : Buts ; Bien-être subjectif ; Retraité ; Intervention

1. Introduction

Early retirement is becoming increasingly common, but little research has been done regarding its impact on individual lives and well-being. Although the majority of retirees consider

themselves happy, others become distressed with all the free time, socially isolated, and sometimes, really depressed. Many retirees think it is difficult to find meaningful activities (Jonsson et al., 2000; Jungmeen and Moen, 2001). This life transition can be facilitated by educational and preventive interventions that provide opportunities, not just to improve quality of life and actualize potential, but also to identify coping strategies to deal with typical problems at this stage of life. It appears that setting new goals and looking to the future can

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benefit those going through the transition to retirement (Lo and Brown, 1999; Nuttin, 1987; Schmuck and Sheldon, 2001).

The goal intervention described in this article was designed as a preventive strategy that promotes well-being through a learning process focusing on the development of attitudes and abilities that help retirees realize personal projects that give meaning to their life. This program was intended for retirees who do not have mental health problems but who feel the need to enhance their quality of life. It is based on a strong theoretical and empirical foundation that links the presence and attainment of personal goals to subjective well-being (SWB). In fact, the benefits of being goal-oriented are one of the most widely accepted tenets in general psychology (Ford, 1992; Schmuck and Sheldon, 2001). Before documenting this relationship between personal goals and subjective well-being, we will define the latter variable and identify its indicators since it constitutes the ultimate objective of this program.

1.1. Subjective well-being (SWB)

The SWB concept used here is multidimensional, not normative, and is based on subjective experience (Bouffard and Lapierre, 1997; Diener, 1994). It corresponds to a positive personal evaluation of one's situation. The markers chosen were positive experience with retirement, happiness (short-term), Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being indicators (personal growth, self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, environmental mastery, purpose in life, autonomy), and distress. Thus SWB is operationalized through both positive and negative, as well as cognitive and affective variables, in accordance with current models of mental health (e.g. Labelle et al., 2001). With this wide range of indicators, it was easier to identify the possible effects of the intervention.

1.2. Personal goals and SWB

The relationship between personal goals and SWB can be examined from various angles. Austin and Vancouver (1996) identified different goal-related dimensions. Here we will only consider the steps in the goal realization process — goal setting, planning, and pursuit — followed by the evaluation of the outcome and of the overall process.

1.2.1. Goal setting and SWB

Personal goals are based on self-conceptions and fundamental psychological needs and are situated in a particular social context as well as a broader cultural context. Thus, in his or her own ecological niche, each person must translate internal and external imperatives into concrete, personalized plans appropriate for each stage of life (Nurmi, 1998) in order to ensure personal survival and well-being. This goal-setting/selection operation is extremely important because it translates motivation into action, focuses energy, supports self-regulation of behaviour, and optimizes personality functioning (Bandura, 1997).

The presence of personal goals is predictive of several SWB indicators (Lecci et al., 1994); it is positively related to life satisfaction and purpose in life and negatively to depression (Cantor, 2003; Emmons, 2003). This presence of goals has proved to be a truly therapeutic instrument (Poehlmann and Brunstein, 2000; Salmela-Aro et al., 2000). In short, it is clear that being goal-oriented is beneficial for one's mental health (Lapierre et al., 2001; Nuttin, 1987; Schmuck and Sheldon, 2001).

If desires are not transformed into *firm intentions*, they will never be achieved (like many New Year's resolutions) and will give rise to regret, negative affects, or various types of pathology. In our intervention, the participants were asked to make a comprehensive list of their aspirations, ambitions, and goals, select their priorities, choose a clear, concrete objective formulated in terms of a target-behaviour, and make a firm resolution to work towards attaining this objective with the group's support.

1.2.2. Goal planning and SWB

Planning is a mental exercise that prepares for action; it includes activities that help to achieve the selected goal: exploring possibilities, looking for ways to achieve it, defining steps, identifying circumstances conducive to initiating action, identifying the required skills, foreseeing obstacles and planning strategies to deal with them, and seeking help if necessary (Watson and Tharp, 1997). Certain strategies that are very useful in goal planning are also beneficial to SWB: anticipating the outcome and *ways to achieve it*, problem-solving, dealing with stress, as well as simulating the action, which is a particularly effective strategy (Taylor and Pham, 1996). On the other hand, resignation, hopelessness, feelings of incompetence in problem solving (D'Zurilla and Sheedy, 1991) are detrimental to SWB at this step. "Defensive pessimism" (imagining the worst) increases the effort needed to improve performance, but is burdensome emotionally and can cause exhaustion (Cantor and Blanton, 1996; Norem, 2001). Gollwitzer (1996) has shown that good planning is accompanied by a state of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral *readiness*. In this state of mind, people take action and persist despite difficulties. Planning has proved to be particularly effective to reduce anxiety associated to exams for university students (Bouffard et al., 2001).

In this step of our intervention, the participants were asked to make a detailed plan for achieving their goal. This complex operation was done with the emotional support of the group, and its suggestions for concrete actions.

1.2.3. Goal pursuit and SWB

Numerous studies indicate that pursuing a goal or moving towards an objective enhances SWB. In a longitudinal study, Brunstein (1993) showed that it is the progress towards the goal that improves SWB and not the reverse. The results obtained by Lawton et al. (2002) indicate that commitment in a goal-directed activity explains a significant part of the variance in positive affect. The positive impact of pursuing a goal on the quality of the experience is clearly shown in Csikszentmihalyi's

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