



Stressed out over possible failure: The role of regulatory fit on claimed self-handicapping

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ABSTRACT

The self-protective mechanism of self-handicapping appears to be motivated by the need to protect ability attributions in the face of concern about possible failure. Indeed, the present research finds a correlation between trait self-handicapping and chronic prevention focus. Moreover, the present research examines the role of “regulatory fit” on the use of claimed self-handicapping by exposing high and low trait self-handicappers to performance situations framed in prevention or promotion terms. Consistent with our regulatory fit hypothesis, high self-handicappers (HSHs) handicapped significantly more (by reporting higher levels of stress) when the task was framed in prevention focus rather than promotion focus terms, and did so even when the viability of the handicap was dubious. Self-handicapping in the prevention focus condition was mediated by elevated feelings of evaluative concern. The findings suggest that conditions of regulatory fit (i.e., HSHs under prevention focus) can lead to increased use of self-handicapping.

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Self-handicappers are individuals who make excuses *before* a performance so that they have a preexisting handicap ready to rely upon in the event of possible failure. The literature has highlighted the attributional benefits accrued by self-handicapping: attributions for failure are ambiguated by the presence of a handicap (thereby protecting the individual from the potentially devastating attribution to lack of ability), whereas ability attributions for success are augmented (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett, & Fairfield, 1991). However, these attributional benefits are offset by substantial interpersonal costs (Hirt, McCrea, & Boris, 2003; Luginbuhl & Palmer, 1991; Rhodewalt, Sanbonmatsu, Tschanz, Feick, & Waller, 1995) as well as increased likelihood of task failure, underscoring the tradeoffs inherent in the use of this strategy (cf. Baumeister & Scher, 1988).

What factors lead someone to accept these tradeoffs and adopt a self-handicapping strategy? Hirt, McCrea, and Kimble (2000) found that high trait self-handicappers (HSH) respond to performance situations with elevated levels of evaluative concern: these individuals are uncertain about their ability to perform well and its implications for self. This finding suggests that HSHs may be particularly likely to frame a task in terms of the possibility of failure rather than as an opportunity for success. This analysis led us to consider the following questions: What are the consequences of task framing on the likelihood of self-handicapping? If a task was

framed in terms that underscore the likelihood of success, would HSHs no longer self-handicap? Or do HSHs always see the possibility of failure lurking in the shadows? Conversely, if a task was framed in terms that make salient the possibility of failure, would HSHs be even more likely to self-handicap? Might LSHs even engage in self-handicapping under these conditions?

The present research focuses on the effects of task framing on self-handicapping. Specifically, this work attempts to provide a potential link between trait self-handicapping and self-regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997). We examine whether tasks framed in terms of a prevention focus (underscoring the possibility of failure) increase the likelihood of self-handicapping relative to tasks framed in terms of a promotion focus (underscoring the possibility of success).

Self-handicapping as a self-protective strategy

A range of different behaviors can serve as potential handicaps, and the self-handicapping literature has distinguished between two broad classes of handicaps: acquired/behavioral self-handicaps and claimed/self-reported handicaps (Arkin & Baumgardner, 1985; Leary & Shepperd, 1986). Behavioral handicaps refer to more overt or active attempts at self-sabotage, such as becoming intoxicated or not studying before a test. Claimed self-handicaps refer to strategic claims of debilitating circumstances, such as stress, fatigue, and anxiety. Hirt, Deppe, and Gordon (1991) demonstrated the value of this distinction, illustrating a gender difference in the use of these different forms of handicaps. While both men

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and women engage in claimed self-handicapping, only men engage in behavioral forms of self-handicapping.

Although broad individual differences have been identified, research has focused primarily on the situational factors that induce self-handicapping. Berglas and Jones (1978) identified that non-contingent success feedback encouraged self-handicapping behavior, arguing that increased uncertainty and heightened expectations for future success play a critical role. More recently, Hirt et al. (2000) directly assessed participants' evaluative concern and illustrated that increased evaluative concern mediated the use of self-handicapping. This finding was pivotal to the present work for it substantiated the idea that concern about possible failure serves as the impetus for self-handicapping behavior. Our evaluative concern measure seemed closely linked to the notion that self-handicappers were adopting a prevention focus.

Self-regulatory focus theory

In an impressive body of research, Tory Higgins has distinguished between two types of motivational orientations: prevention and promotion focus (Higgins, 1996). Prevention focus is described as a drive to avoid negative outcomes (losses) and seek the absence of negative outcomes (non-losses), whereas promotion focus is described as striving to attain positive outcomes (gains) and avoiding the absence of positive outcomes (non-gains). According to Higgins (1997, 2001), promotion focus underlies higher-level concerns with accomplishment and achievement, whereas prevention focus underlies higher-level concerns with self-protection and fulfillment of responsibilities. From our perspective, self-handicapping appears consistent with a prevention-focused strategy of trying to avoid the negative feelings and attributions accompanying failure.

Higgins and colleagues have conceptualized and investigated regulatory focus as both a person and situational variable. Individual differences in regulatory focus exist, such that some individuals are chronically promotion focused or prevention focused. However, situations can be framed in terms of promotion or prevention focus. Roney, Higgins, and Shah (1995) demonstrated the impact of situational task framing on motivation. They found that the way in which performance feedback was given to participants induced different regulatory foci. Specifically, positive-outcome focus feedback led to a promotion focus, resulting in better performance and increased persistence relative to a negative-outcome focus feedback, which resulted in a prevention focus.

It is tempting based on the results of Roney et al. (1995) to conclude that situational inducement of a prevention focus would undermine motivation and performance for all participants. But can a situational manipulation of task focus overcome chronic individual differences in the tendency to self-handicap? Could LSHs be induced to self-handicap simply by framing a task in prevention focus terms? Indeed, the picture gets more complicated when we consider possible interactions with chronic individual differences. Shah, Higgins, and Friedman (1998) found that participants' motivation and performance were both greater when faced with a task framed in terms consistent with their own chronic self-regulatory focus. Individuals with chronic promotion focus demonstrated higher motivation and better performance on tasks framed in terms of promotion-oriented goals and performed more poorly on tasks framed in terms of prevention-oriented goals, with the opposite being true for individuals with chronic prevention focus. Higgins and colleagues have labeled this notion "regulatory fit" and consistently demonstrated that participants perform better when situationally induced regulatory foci match their chronic

tendencies (Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Higgins, 2000; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003).

Thus, it appears that the match between chronic and situationally induced regulatory focus is key to predicting the motivational and performance consequences for a given individual. Based on these findings, the present research sought to examine possible interactions between situationally induced regulatory focus and chronic individual differences in self-handicapping. Extrapolating from the work on regulatory fit (e.g., Shah et al., 1998), we might expect that inducing a prevention focus would *increase motivation and performance* for high self-handicappers, *decreasing their likelihood of self-handicapping*. However, our predictions are just the opposite: we anticipate that prevention focus framing will *increase self-handicapping* for those whose chronic individual differences match the situational framing. On the surface, this prediction of greater self-handicapping under conditions of regulatory fit may strike the reader as contradictory to the results obtained by Higgins and his colleagues. Indeed, we base these novel predictions on the findings of Idson, Liberman, and Higgins (2000), who found that both imagined and experienced prevention failure on the part of chronic prevention focus participants resulted in the most intense negative affect. This finding fits quite well with our past work (Hirt et al., 2000), which has identified evaluative concern as a critical mediator of self-handicapping. Thus, if it is the case that HSHs have chronic concerns with avoiding failure, it stands to reason that these individuals in a challenging performance setting would experience greater evaluative concern and be more motivated to engage in self-handicapping as a means of self-protection. That is, we predict greater use of self-protection by high self-handicappers under prevention focus conditions precisely because the situational framing resonates to their chronic concerns with avoiding failure. Conversely, we speculate that promotion focus framing might serve to decrease self-handicapping among HSHs by diverting attention away from prevention failure and highlighting instead potential gains rather than losses.

Achievement goals and self-regulatory focus: Their link to self-handicapping

We are not the first to posit a connection between self-handicapping and achievement goals. Several notable studies, primarily in the educational and sports psychology literatures, have linked self-handicapping to avoidance-oriented goals. Midgley and Urdan (2001) found that students endorsing avoidance goals tended to engage in self-handicapping more than students not endorsing such goals. Moreover, Elliot and Church (2003) reported that self-handicapping was accompanied by performance-avoidance goals, and was *not* accompanied by performance-approach goals. Thus, there appears to be support for the notion that self-handicapping is related to avoidance goals. However, no research has yet documented whether high trait self-handicappers (HSHs) are more likely to have chronic prevention focus. Clearly, this point is critical to our predictions. To address this issue, we conducted a pretest of 109 students in which we gave them both Jones and Rhodewalt's (1982) self-handicapping scale (SHS) as well as Higgins, Friedman, Harlow, Idson, Ayduk, and Taylor's (2001) regulatory focus questionnaire (RFQ). The RFQ is an 11 item scale that measures chronic promotion and prevention orientations. Results indicated that SHS scores were significantly positively correlated with prevention scores ($r(108) = .34, p < .001$) and significantly negatively correlated with promotion scores ($r(108) = -.28, p < .01$). Thus, it appears that higher SHS scores are indeed associated with chronic prevention focus.

However, despite these suggestive correlational results, there have been no studies which have investigated whether *manipula-*

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