

A conversation with Professor Peter Gollwitzer, August 3, 2015

Participants

- Professor Peter Gollwitzer – Professor of Psychology, New York University
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Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Professor Peter Gollwitzer.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Professor Peter Gollwitzer of New York University as part of its investigation into anti-procrastination interventions. Conversation topics included procrastination interventions and their applications.

Procrastination interventions

The existing literature on procrastination tends to focus on understanding its causes, which can include ego depletion (the state of having exhausted one's finite reserves of self-control), multitasking, anxiety, and self-handicapping (for the purpose of finding self-protective reasons for failure). Professor Gollwitzer, however, thinks that it is more important to focus on finding self-regulatory strategies that are effective at reducing procrastination, regardless of the cause. Research so far indicates that interventions focused on changing behavior are more effective at reducing procrastination than interventions focused on coping with adverse personal attributes.

Universally applicable behavior interventions

Professor Gollwitzer believes that interventions that improve goal selection (i.e., commit to goals that are desirable and feasible) and detailed planning of when, where and how to implement them (i.e., make if-then plans) are the most effective at changing behavior, regardless of personal attributes.

A combined goal selection and planning intervention

Professor Gollwitzer has worked with Professor Gabriele Oettingen on a joint intervention called Mental Contrasting with Implementation Intentions (MCII). MCII combines Professor Oettingen's technique of mental contrasting (visualizing a desired future and contrasting it with present obstacles) with Professor Gollwitzer's technique of forming implementation intentions (making specific plans for when, where, and how to start working toward these goals).

MCII is summarized in the four-step Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan (WOOP) strategy:

1. Identify a desirable and feasible goal.
2. Identify the positive outcome of achieving the goal.
3. Identify the obstacles to achieving the goal.
4. Make specific "if-then" plans for how to overcome these obstacles.

There is a WOOP app (www.woopmylife.org) available that helps people to employ this strategy in working toward goals without the help of a professional, such as a therapist or coach. Systematic studies on the effectiveness of the app are under way.

Goal-setting interventions

Profs. Edwin Locke and Gary Latham have tested successful interventions wherein participants set specific outcome goals for what they want to accomplish in a given time frame. This has proven to be more effective than setting no goals, and more effective than setting vague goals such as “do your best.”

Combined MCII and goal-setting interventions

MCII and goal-setting interventions are effective individually, and could be more effective when combined. Professor Gollwitzer is interested in working with Profs. Locke, Latham and Oettingen to develop a combined MCII and goal-setting intervention.

Interventions targeted to specific groups

There are several other interventions that may be successful in reducing procrastination in specific cohorts of people.

Mindset interventions

Mindset interventions involve activating cognitive procedures to create a mental state that is conducive to performing a particular task. For example, an implemental mindset makes it easier to make and act on plans, whereas a deliberative mindset makes a person more sensitive to desirability and feasibility issues.

Growth mindset (incremental theory) interventions

According to Professor Carol Dweck, people who have a fixed mindset believe that personal attributes are stable, and those who have a growth mindset believe that personal attributes can change. A person with a growth mindset is more likely to work toward personal growth and learn from negative feedback, while a person with a fixed mindset is more likely to procrastinate as things do not seem to appear changeable anyway. The applicability of growth mindset interventions to prevent procrastination may be limited to people who have a fixed mindset.

Willpower interventions

Professor Roy Baumeister has devised interventions to increase willpower by regularly practicing self-control. According to Professor Gollwitzer, these interventions may only be effective at reducing procrastination in people who suffer from depleted resources (ego depletion).

Self-efficacy interventions

Self-efficacy theory also has limited applicability to procrastination. It only helps people who are blocked because they are insecure about their capabilities (i.e., suffer from low self-efficacy feelings).

Applications of procrastination interventions

Education

Educational psychologists typically believe that motivating someone to learn a subject such as math by explaining the feasibility and importance of the skill does increase the time they spend studying and the enjoyment they derive from the task. However, research shows that there is only a moderate correlation between motivation and action, and that self-regulatory strategies are needed in order to turn motivation into action.

Anxious-avoidant relationships

People who are anxious-avoidant tend to avoid discussing relationship problems with their significant others for fear of creating new problems and making the relationship more complicated. Classic motivation psychology recognizes that avoidance causes problems in relationships, but few interventions have been proposed beyond telling people not to be avoidant because it is counterproductive. Professor Gollwitzer believes that while giving people self-efficacy and convincing them of the desirability of the outcome is important, it needs to be coupled with self-regulatory strategies to incite action. A study conducted by Professor Oettingen and one of her doctoral students found that anxious-avoidant people who applied MCII to their relationship problems were more likely to communicate with their significant other about the problems.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at
<http://www.givewell.org/conversations>*