

Optimism isn't always healthy

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People are generally optimistic, believing they'll do better in the future than they've done in the past. This time around, I'll actually use that gym membership. I'm sticking to the diet this time. Now is the time to start saving for a down payment on a house. However, a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* reveals that this "optimism bias" can lead us to make immediate choices that go against our long-term goals.

Ying Zhang, Ayelet Fishbach (both of the University of Chicago), and Ravi Dhar (Yale University) identify how different mindsets work in conjunction with an optimistic attitude. They found that when people think about the goal in terms of progress, they are more likely to make a detrimental decision – such as eating an unhealthy snack. However, when people focus on commitment to a goal, they are more likely to choose an action consistent with its attainment.

"For example, when [a] workout is framed as progress toward the goal of being healthy, going to the gym elicits the perception of partial goal attainment and suggests that it is justified to enjoy a tasty but fatty cake," the researchers explain. "In contrast, when [a] workout is framed as commitment to the goal of being healthy, going to the gym signals being healthy is important and thus suggests that one should refrain from the tasty but fatty cake to ensure the final goal can be attained."

In the first study, the researchers asked one group of participants to indicate how often they went to the gym last year. Another group was asked to predict how often they expected to go to the gym next year – a yet-to-be-achieved goal. Those who were asked to think about exercise

as a future endeavor were more likely to take a bottle of spring water over a can of sugared soda than those who were asked to think about the exercise they had already completed.

Similarly, in another experiment, participants were asked to visualize and write about either the process or completion of a gym workout session, a manipulation of the optimism bias. Then, participants were asked to estimate the duration of their next workout and to complete a survey that measured their interest in healthy foods.

“Relatively little is understood about how thinking optimistically about future goal pursuit can impact the immediate decision to pursue the ongoing goal, and what the direction of the impact would be,” the researchers write. “Accordingly, this research suggests that marketers should consider not only the tradeoffs among the alternatives when making a choice, but also the relationship of this choice to past or future choices.”

Citation: Ying Zhang, Ayelet Fishbach, and Ravi Dhar, “When Thinking Beats Doing: The Role of Optimistic Expectations in Goal-Based Choice.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2007.

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