

Your personality type influences how much self-control you have

January 23 2008

A new study from Northwestern introduces personality types used frequently in consumer research to the realm of self-improvement. People are motivated by one of two fundamental needs: they are either “promotion-focused,” seeking products that will help them achieve hopes and aspirations, or they are “prevention-focused,” seeking items that help achieve a need for safety and security. According to the research, people are better able to exercise self-control when they choose goal-pursuit strategies – such as diets or money management – that “fit” with their promotion or prevention focus.

“This research has important implications for consumer welfare,” explain Jiewen Hong and Angela Y. Lee (both of Northwestern University) in the February issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*. “While self-help remedies are saturating the market, resisting temptations remains a strenuous process and a constant struggle for many people. The data reported in this research offer an important step toward understanding self-control and highlight the benefits of adopting the right goal pursuit strategies.”

Given their concern for growth and accomplishments, promotion-focused individuals experience “fit” when they adopt strategies that strive toward gains. They experience “nonfit” when they adopt vigilance strategies that guard against losses, the researchers explain. In contrast, prevention-focused individuals experience “fit” when they adopt vigilance strategies to address their concern for safety and security.

In the study, adoption of strategies that “fit” was reflected in having promotion- or prevention-focused individuals list either how they anticipated they would achieve their aspiration (i.e., “What are some things you can do to make sure everything goes right”) or how they would fulfill their obligation (i.e., “What are some of the things you can do to avoid anything that could go wrong”)

In one study, participants who had filled out the questionnaire were then asked to choose between an apple and a chocolate bar as a snack. A remarkable 80 percent of those who had been asked to think about strategies that “fit” with their focus chose the apple, while only 20 percent of those who adopted conflicting strategies chose the apple.

Another experiment had particularly important real-world implications, gauging research participants’ willingness to get tested for hepatitis. Getting diagnostic screening for most medical conditions is considered inconvenient, unpleasant, and a hassle – it requires self-control to get tested, especially if you consider yourself low-risk.

Among participants who perceived themselves to be at low risk, those who adopted goal pursuit strategies that fit their promotion or prevention focus were more willing to get tested for hepatitis than those who were asked to think about strategies that did not fit with their pre-determined focus.

Importantly, people seemed unaware of these effects and didn’t select strategies that fit their focus when offered the choice.

“[We] find that when people adopt goal pursuit strategies that fit with their promotion or prevention focus, they have better self-control. In contrast, their self-control is weakened when they adopt goal pursuit strategies that conflict with their focus,” the researchers explain.

They conclude: “Self-control is not just about doing the right things, but also about doing things the right way.”

Source: University of Chicago

Citation: Your personality type influences how much self-control you have (2008, January 23) retrieved 22 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-01-personality-self-control.html>

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