

# 3.3

## MODERATORS OF THE HELPFULNESS OF FEEDBACK

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Supplementary material for Integrating counselling and psychotherapy: Directionality, synergy, and social change (Sage, 2019).

While research tends to suggest that feedback and monitoring enhance goal progress (Harkin et al., 2016), it is also possible that levels of monitoring can lead to reduced goal achievement. This may be the case when the goal is a feeling state, or something else that is involuntary to achieve, for instance someone who is experiencing impotence. A man, for instance, who keeps checking whether or not he has an erection, may undermine this achievement (Lieberman & Dar, 2009). Relaxing monitoring may be particularly difficult when goals are important, avoidance goals, when the person is feeling anxious, when people are accountable for their performance (e.g., in a job), when people have a high need for closure or control (Lieberman & Dar, 2009). At its extreme, this may present as obsessive compulsive disorder, whereby people deal with difficulties in monitoring progress (where goals may be vague, non-time bounded and internal states) by increasing attempts to monitor (Lieberman & Dar, 2009). For example, the person with a handwashing obsession is striving after an unobtainable, avoidant goal – to be absolutely free of dirt – and through a high need for control or closure, the person tightens, rather than relaxes, monitoring attempts. Hence, psychological wellbeing would seem to be related to the ability to both tighten, and relax, progress monitoring procedures.

Both positive feedback on progress towards the goal, and negative, may have the potential to promote goal-directed behaviour (Fishbach & Finkelstein, 2012). Positive feedback is likely to enhance self-efficacy beliefs, as well as expectations of positive outcomes, and therefore may enhance commitment to a goal. In support of this, research on *goal gradients* shows that people's effort, or motivation, tends to increase as they get closer to a goal (Lieberman & Forster, 2012): for instance, a marathon runner who starts to sprint once they see the finishing line, or a student who spends the night before she has to submit writing her essay. This may be why specific deadlines can be effective because they steepen the goal gradient and thereby enhance commitment. Negative feedback, by contrast, can undermine self-efficacy and hope, increase negative affect, and thereby reduce goal commitment. We can see here the potential for a vicious spiral for depression: a person feels that they have failed, lose commitment, and fail further. On the other hand, positive feedback on progress, which indicates a person is closer to their goals, may reduce effort because the person feels less compulsion to achieve that endpoint. In this respect, negative feedback on the degree of goal progress may be most effective at enhancing goal-directed behaviours. Negative feedback may be most helpful when goals are proximal and easy to achieve, whereas positive feedback may be most helpful when pre-existing goal commitment is initially low. That is, when people already have high goal commitment, negative feedback may be most useful; but positive when people need encouragement. As people gain greater expertise, they shift towards a preference for negative feedback. Negative feedback, in terms of recognising a goal has been failed, may also be important to instigate the goal disengagement process (see below).

Feedback may also differ in whether it is ‘process focused’ ‘outcome focused’ (Freund, Hennecke, & Mustafic, 2012). Process focus brings to the fore the means by which goal progress takes place, which outcome focus places the principal emphasis on achieving the end. As indicated earlier, process focus is more associated with intrinsic goals, while outcome focus is more associated with extrinsic achievements. However, these may also be linked to the stages of the directional process: with a focus on outcomes more likely at the predecisional and postactional phases, and a focus on process most likely during the pre-actional phase. During action itself, Freund et al. suggest that this may be dependent on whether the goal is urgent or not, with a greater focus on the outcomes for urgent goals, while non-urgent goals gives more opportunity to focus on the process. Interestingly, research suggests that people become less outcome focused, and more process focused, as they get older, perhaps because they become aware that, with less time remaining, they are less likely to achieve their goals (Freund et al., 2012). In terms of wellbeing, an outcome-focus may be more problematic, particularly when goals are difficult to attain and goal progress is hampered by setbacks. An outcome focus does have the advantage of having clear goals to be matched against. However, process focused has the advantage that a sense of achievement can be experienced throughout the duration of the goal-directed activity. Given, as we have seen, the tendency of people to refocus on another goal once one is completed, an outcome focused orientation may leave little opportunity for pleasure.

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