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EGO DEPLETION

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

Research shows that goal-directed behaviours such as evaluation and choice-making, to the extent that they requires self-control and cognitive effort, draws on a limited and finite resource of mental energy (see Kahneman, 2011; Moskowitz, 2012; Muraven, 2012; Vohs, Kaikati, Kerkhof, & Schmeichel, 2009). Self-control – as ‘a deliberative, conscious, effortful, and resource-intensive process of restraining an impulse in order to reach a long-term goal or follow a rule’ (Muraven, 2012, p. 111) – is tiring. This means that people can become *ego depleted*. In a classic series of studies, for instance, Baumeister et al. (1998) showed that people who had to make a choice about which speech to give subsequently persisted for less time on a puzzle than those who had been given no choice. Research suggests that there may, indeed, a biological basis to this. Brain activity requires glucose, and this may be ‘consumed faster than it can be replenished under heavy cognitive demand’ (Muraven, 2012, p. 118). One study showed, for instance, that people whose glucose levels were enhanced did not become ego depleted (Gailliot, Plant, Butz, & Baumeister, 2007).

One consequence of this is that a person’s goal-directed activities are always in competition with each other for a limited pool of internal resources. If we spend a lot of time, for instance, evaluating where to get our hair cut, we may be less willing to spend time deciding which party to vote for in an election.

However, this also means that our desire to progress towards our goals is always competing against a desire not to expend resources. This may be a critical tension in the human system, as it means that the person may tend to skip particular stages of the goal progress process – particularly, perhaps, evaluation and planning – and subsequently fail to actualise their goals.

Research does also show, however, that to some extent this ego depletion effect can be counteracted. For instance, the invocation of positive affect through watching a comedy negated the effects of ego depletion; and self-affirmation seems to have a similar impact. In addition, just as people can build up their physical muscles, there is also evidence that people can develop ‘regulatory strength’ by repeated acts of self-control. That is repeated self-control efforts may bolster a person’s ability to persist in evaluating and pursuing their goals (Cavallo & Fitzsimons, 2012).

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