

# 5.2

## PROMOTION AND PREVENTION FOCUS

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

Another well-established dimension, closely related to approach–avoidance but not synonymous, is promotion–prevention, from Higgins’s (1997) ‘regulatory focus theory’. As with approach and avoidance (Elliot & Niesta, 2009), regulatory focus theory has focused on personality differences, although it has also been discussed in relation to goals (Scholer & Higgins, 2012). A promotion focus is characterised by a concern with the presence or absence of gains (positive changes from the status quo), eagerness, and an attunement to ideals and wishes. A prevention focus is characterised by a concern with the presence or absence of losses (negative changes from the status quo), vigilance, duty, and a desire for security. A promotion is akin to approach, but people with a promotion focus both approach gains (e.g., ‘I want to make new friends’), and also avoid the status quo (e.g., ‘I don’t want my friends to stay the same’). Similarly, while a prevention focus is similar to avoidance, those with a prevention focus will approach the status quo (e.g., ‘I want my friends to stay the same’), and strive to avoid losses (e.g., ‘I don’t want to lose friends’).

In contrast to the approach and avoidance dimension, promotion or prevention have not been hypothesised to be directly associated with positive affect. Rather, it depends on the situation. More specifically, in a situation of opportunities, a promotion focus may be best, but a prevention focus may be best in situations of loss. Moreover, the theory suggests that different psychological problems may be associated with different stances. In particular, people with a promotion focus may be more likely to experience depression and sadness, as they fail to progress towards their expected goals (Fujita & MacGregor, 2012). By contrast, prevention focused people may be more likely to experience anxiety and apprehension. Interestingly, too, if someone is very prevention-focused, then they may struggle to experience much happiness in their life. After all, this is not what they are aiming for. At best, what they will tend to experience is calm and relief. The same thing holds for people with a tendency towards promotion: if they spend their life trying to get new experiences, then they are unlikely to experience too much calm and respite.

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