A daily investigation of psychological flexibility and goal pursuit

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Introduction

- People who are psychologically flexible accept, harness, and seldomly avoid distress that inevitably arises during goal pursuit. Psychological flexibility (PF) allows people to achieve their valued goals and thereby live meaningfully (i.e., with purpose and in accordance with their values).
- PF and goal pursuit are dynamic processes that unfold over time. Thus, research methods should adequately capture these changing processes. To date, however, PF has primarily been examined at the trait level. This study is the first to implement a daily adaptation of the trait Personalized Psychological Flexibility Index (PPFI).
- Given that we expect to see daily fluctuations in PF (i.e., acceptance, harnessing, and avoidance), we hypothesized that daily PF would have a high proportion of within-person variation.
- Trait PF measures are meant to assess global PF tendencies (i.e., how psychologically flexible people are on average). Accordingly, self-reported patterns of PF should (to some degree) reflect how people cope with goal-related distress on a daily basis. We explored the extent to which trait PF predicts daily PF subscales, expecting trait PPFI subscales to positively predict daily PF.

- In general, people who are psychologically inflexible struggle with goal pursuit. They respond to goal-related distress by avoiding goal-related challenges rather than problem-solving. For others, harnessing and accepting distress makes goal pursuit more meaningful and worthwhile. We examined this process at the daily level, predicting that people would make more effort and progress towards goals and experience less goal-related distress on days they harness and accept their negative emotions more and avoid these emotions less.

Method

Participants. 309 adults from Florida, recruited from the community (Mean age=34.78 years, SD=15.39), with elevated depression and/or social anxiety.

Procedure. Participants described an important goal at baseline. Each day for two weeks, they rated the extent to which they used harnessing, acceptance, and avoidance as coping strategies in addition to their level of goal-related distress, effort, and progress. We analyzed data in R using multilevel modeling (days nested within person).

Baseline measure. Personalized Psychological Flexibility Index (PPFI)

Daily measures. Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with the following statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree):

- Harnessing (e.g., "Today, I used particular unpleasant emotions (such as anger, anxiety, sadness, guilt) as motivation to pursue this goal.")
- Avoidance (e.g., "Today, I put off difficult or stressful tasks related to this goal.")
- Acceptance (e.g., "Today, I accepted any negative thoughts and emotions that arose related to this goal.")
- Goal-related effort: "Today, I put in effort towards this goal.
- Goal-related progress: "Today, I made progress towards this goal.
- Goal-related distress: "Today, I experienced distress related to this goal.

Results

Table 1 Descriptives of and correlations between daily PF subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within-person</th>
<th>Between-person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Daily harnessing</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Daily acceptance</td>
<td>0.39***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Daily avoidance</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- More than half of the variability in each of the three daily PF subscales was attributed to within-person factors.
- Within-person acceptance and harnessing were strongly correlated (i.e., on days people reported greater acceptance of negative emotions, they also reported greater harnessing of negative emotions).

Table 2 Trait PPFI subscales predicting daily PF subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait harnessing</th>
<th>Trait acceptance</th>
<th>Trait avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily harnessing</td>
<td>Trait harnessing</td>
<td>0.05***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily acceptance</td>
<td>Trait acceptance</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily avoidance</td>
<td>Trait avoidance</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
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- Each trait PF subscale was positively related to its corresponding daily subscale.
- Participants who reported greater trait acceptance used avoidance less often compared to those with lower trait acceptance.

Table 3 Daily PF subscales predicting outcomes related to daily goal-pursuit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily goal-related effort</th>
<th>Daily goal-related progress</th>
<th>Daily goal-related distress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily harnessing</td>
<td>Daily acceptance</td>
<td>Daily avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.36***</td>
<td>0.32***</td>
<td>13.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.39***</td>
<td>0.39***</td>
<td>14.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-0.39***</td>
<td>-18.14</td>
<td>-0.37***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- On days people harnessed and accepted more, they made more effort and progress towards their goals.
- On days characterized by greater avoidance, people reported more goal-related distress and less effort and progress.
- People harnessed their emotions more on days they felt more goal-related distress.
- The amount of goal-related distress participants felt on a given day was unrelated to their use of acceptance.

Discussion

- Much of the variability in daily PF was explained by within-person differences, supporting our conceptualization of PF as an unstable construct (i.e., one that fluctuates naturally within individuals over time).
- The higher participants scored on trait PPFI subscales, the higher their average scores were on the corresponding daily subscales. However, effect sizes were relatively small, perhaps because trait PF does not capture more granular information about how people’s coping patterns change over time.
- As expected, goal-related effort, progress, and distress fluctuated depending on type of coping strategy used. Avoidance and harnessing both predicted greater distress. Importantly, these strategies differed in how they predicted effort and progress (i.e., positively vs. negatively). Although problems with goal pursuit are common in people who experience high levels of distress, therapeutic (e.g., ACT-based) approaches suggest that goal pursuit depends more on how one copes with (e.g., harnesses) their distress than their level of felt distress alone.
- Although we cannot make causal inferences, our research provides a first step in understanding how components of PF unfold in response to daily goal-related stressors and behaviors.

References