



Drawbacks of Reappraisal

Reappraisal Reconsidered: A Closer Look at the Costs of an Acclaimed Emotion-Regulation Strategy

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Principle

Changing the story you're telling yourself is a powerful tool, which doesn't mean it's easy to learn for everyone or that it should be used in every situation.

Quote

“two fundamental drawbacks of reappraisal: First, people are often unable to use reappraisal successfully, and second, even when successful, using reappraisal to feel better is not always functional.”

So What - Application

If people aren't good at reappraising their thoughts and use the skill at inappropriate times, what next?

#1 Individually we could become curious about recognizing and improving our own skill level in reframing our thoughts.

#2 We could ask ourselves in a given situation if reframing is the right tool to use.

#3 We could ask ourselves how much control we have in this situation and save reframing for when we don't have as much control.

#3 As a coach, I could create clear training with sufficient practice that people become more skilled in cognitive reframing.

The Research Story

Two researchers from University of Toronto and Franklin & Marshall College take a close look at the costs of cognitive reframing. Reframing your thoughts about a circumstance is a well-researched, broadly used strategy. The researchers' concern is that people may come to the conclusion that cognitive reframing is easy to use and that it's always going to work. They use existing research to create a framework for when cognitive reframing may not be the best choice.

First they found that only about half the people in previous studies could use reappraisal successfully. If you're good at it, it can help reduce depressive symptoms, but the concern is that if you're not good at it, using it frequently could do more harm than good.

Second, they found that reframing your thoughts isn't as useful in some situations, including during times of high-intensity stressors. In one study they found that in Latinx people in high-oppression situations (living in the USA with perceived racial oppression) attempting reappraisal a lot was associated with more depression.

For me, one interesting point is that in the article about oppressed Latinx individuals, they asked them how often they try reframing their thoughts, but didn't teach them how. I think there's a difference between naturally trying to think of ways to "feel better" and being taught the skill of recognizing the story you're telling yourself and reframing it to alter the resulting emotions. However, at the same time, reframing your thoughts to feel better in an unfair oppressive situation can end up creating new negative emotions about feeling better. For example, you may feel bad about being the kind of person who lets an oppressor get a free pass.

In another interesting study, firefighters who tried to reappraise more often when it probably wouldn't work (like in high stress lab situations) were more at risk for PTSD symptoms after traumatic events. So if you want to feel better, but aren't good at reappraising, it can be worse to keep trying it.

Examples of situations where it's not useful to reframing thoughts to feel better include trying to feel better in unfair situations may promote being taken advantage of, in scary situations which may promote riskier behavior, and in abusive situations which may promote staying longer and exposing self to harm. Feeling better can reduce the motivation to take action, so reframing isn't as useful in situations where you have more control.

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