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Self-affirmation Theory for Positive Behaviour Change

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Research has shown that the use of self-affirmation can help with multiple types of behaviour change, including the increase of physical activity, healthy eating patterns, medication adherence, smoking cessation, and even-improved study habits. Mary will review current findings and lead you through several positive self-affirmation experiences. You'll leave with renewed motivation and strategies that will help not only you but your clients as well.

I. What is Self-Affirmation Theory?

- A. Self-affirmation theory, proposed by C. Steele in 1988, is based on the idea that people tend to react strongly (and sometimes irrationally) when they feel their identity, integrity, or personal adequacy is threatened. The self-affirmation approach has been shown to help individuals reduce negative responses to perceived threats, and reduce the likelihood that they will react with denial or avoidance to new ideas. Because evidence shows that individuals are more open-minded after affirming their values and character strengths, the self-affirmation theory holds potential for helping pre-contemplators move towards healthy lifestyle behaviors. Self-affirmation could be a precursor to attitude change, and therefore increase the intention to change.
- B. Self-affirmation: a statement that affirms a person's sense of global self-integrity, positive self-beliefs, purpose and/or core values. According to the self-affirmation theory, even a single affirmation can buffer against psychological threat, thereby allowing for healthier decisions.
- C. Self-affirmation benefits:
 - * helps to change negative and destructive subconscious thought patterns
 - * keeps fears from inter-fear-ing
 - * re-trains the mind to think in a more positive, optimistic way
 - * focuses energy on goals and intentions
 - * helps in the acceptance of life events that cannot be changed
 - * improves self-esteem and confidence

II. Self-Affirmation template:

I am a _____, _____ (man/woman/person), living a _____, _____, _____ life, richly rewarded for my _____, moving towards a _____, achieving my goals of _____ . I am _____, _____, and _____.

III. Research Findings

- A. BMI, weight, and waist circumference decreased significantly in a university student self-affirmation group over 2.5 months, versus controls (Logel et al, 2012).
- B. 45.1% of clinical populations (CAD, HTN, asthma) using self-affirmation techniques achieved successful behavior change, vs 33.6% of controls (Peterson et al, 2012)
- C. 93 self-affirmed participants consumed significantly more fruits and vegetables over a 7-day period than controls (Epton et al, 2008).
- D. 199 middle-school students significantly increased their GPA and maintained a high level of motivation for 3 years after a self-affirmation induction (Sherman et al, 2013).

- E. People who had a self-affirmation induction rated themselves as being at higher risk for HIV and were more likely to purchase condoms and take educational materials (Sherman et al, 2000)
- F. Relative to controls, self-affirmed smokers rated negative graphic images of smoking consequences as more threatening and personally relevant, and they reported higher levels of self-efficacy around smoking cessation (Harris et al, 2007).

IV. Take the Signature Strengths Test (from the Values in Action (VIA) Institute) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

V. Working with Clients

- * Help develop an affirmations practice. Start with a plan.
- * Encourage clients to keep an affirmations journal and write in it every day for at least 3 weeks.
- * Use post-it notes or electronic reminders.
- * Suggest affirmations such as, "I make healthy choices." "My body is healthy, whole, vital and strong." "I honor my body and _____ (choose healthy foods) (choose to move it every 30 minutes)." "My body is always moving towards health and wellness."

VI. Affirmation Hints

- * Affirmations should be relatively short, brief, memorable, and always in the present tense.
- * Use positive words such as I am, Yes, Always, Can, Do, Accept, All.
- * Avoid negative words such as Not, No, Never, Can't, Don't, Won't, Shouldn't, But, Although, Instead, Despite.
- * Start the day off with morning affirmations. End with affirmations before falling asleep.
- * Try saying affirmations out loud to yourself while looking in the mirror.
- * Use technology: send yourself regular text messages or type an affirmation into your screensaver.

TAKE-AWAY POINTS:

1. Regular self-affirmation can help increase physical activity and can be a significant predictor of behavior change.
2. A self-affirmation induction can involve writing a personal self-affirmation, or the affirmation of one's most important values and character strengths.
3. A good self-affirmation is brief, positive, and worded in the present tense.

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