

Memory as Motivator

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What do we do with our memories when we don't have closure? In research conducted at the University of Arkansas, participants with still-open autobiographical memories were significantly more likely to meet assigned goals than those who had found closure.

"Memory is extremely powerful," said Denise R. Beike, associate professor of psychology. "Are there reasons you might want to keep a memory open? Yes. One reason is that you can use it to help you be inspired and motivated toward some goal."

Working with graduate students Laura P. Adams and Karen Z. Naufel, Beike asked 120 participants to remember a time that they had not met a goal. Individuals recalled some personal experience, perhaps missing the due-date for a class assignment or the deadline for an application. Half of the participants were then instructed to write about their memory in a way that encouraged a sense of closure. The other half wrote in a way that would leave the memory open.

All participants were instructed to work toward a goal, playing an Internet version of the game 20 Questions sometime within the following 24 hours. They were also asked to e-mail the researchers if they were able to beat the computer. The researchers were able to monitor which participants visited the game's Web site.

Only 20 percent of those who had closed memories actually visited the Web site, and just 15 percent subsequently e-mailed the researchers. In contrast, the participants with open memories of missing a deadline were

much more likely to complete the goal: 37 percent logged on to the Web site, and 29 percent e-mailed the researchers to report success.

Beike noted that the study of autobiographical memory, the memory of life experiences, had been neglected for years in psychological research. Prior to her research, evidence for using memory as a motivator came from stories, not controlled laboratory demonstrations. She and her graduate students drew on Beike's earlier research to design an experiment testing how people use open memories "in the here and now."

"The great thing about memory - what most people think is a terrible thing - is that memory is not perfect, and it is changeable," Beike said. "It's a fundamental finding of psychology in the last century that memory can change from day to day.

"Much of the reason we remember is because it causes us to have some kind of emotional experience. Memory helps us learn a lesson about the past, reminds us why we feel close to someone or makes us laugh when we think about something that happened. These are many of the functions of remembering," Beike said. "I'm particularly interested in how the process of remembering experience helps us adapt to and adjust to that experience and also how it influences future behavior."

While the term "closure" is frequently used in popular discussion of processing memories related to a tragedy, Beike notes that emotional content exists with both pleasant and unpleasant memories. People have a sense of closure when they are able to recall life experiences without getting wrapped up in the emotions.

"It doesn't matter how long ago something happened, but if you remember it and it doesn't pull at you emotionally, you have closure on it," Beike said. "It's under your control. You can choose to remember the

emotions or not."

Beike's earlier research had looked at the emotional content of memory and the factors that influenced whether a memory was closed or open. She has used various "retelling strategies" to guide how people think about a memory. She may ask them to focus on one aspect of their memory of a life experience, such as recounting just the facts without recalling their feelings. Beike's previous research has showed that people who focus on the facts are more likely to report a sense of closure.

"When your attention is focused on the facts and not what you felt, the emotions take a back seat," Beike said. "Another way is to just talk about all the things that you feel you understand, which also increases a sense of closure."

Other perspective-retellings can keep the emotions alive and the memory open. When researchers ask people to recall all the emotions they felt or to discuss all the questions that still remain, people report less sense of closure.

"If people remember what they still don't understand, they also remember a whole lot of emotions," Beike said. "It's that sense of all those emotions that gives people the feeling they don't have closure on the memory."

Rather than seeking closure, Beike suggests there are times when people may want to retain the emotional content of an autobiographical memory to make strategic use of the memory. Her recent research confirms anecdotal use of open memory as a motivational tool. In future research, she hopes to go back to the laboratory to learn more fine details about the relationship between motivation and memory.

"Memory is so much of being a human being. It is part of who you are,

an essential piece of self," Beike said. "Memory restructures what you are doing in the here and now."

Beike, Adams and Naufel presented their research at the 2006 annual convention of the Association for Psychological Science.

Source: University of Arkansas

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