

Self-affirmations may calm jitters and boost performance, research finds

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When the stakes are high, people in positions of low power may perform better by using self-affirmations to boost their confidence, according to new research published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

"Most people have experienced a time in their lives when they aren't performing up to their potential. They take a test or have a performance review at work, but something holds them back," says lead researcher Sonia Kang, Ph.D. "Performance in these situations is closely related to how we are expected to behave."

The researchers conducted three experiments to measure performance in pressure-filled situations. When participants were in a position of high [power](#), they tended to perform better under pressure, while those with less power performed worse. Self-affirmations, however, helped to level the playing field and effectively reduced the power differences. The study was published online in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* on April 17, 2015.

"You should reflect on things that you know are good about yourself," says Kang, an assistant professor of organizational behavior and [human resource management](#) at the University of Toronto. "Anyone has the potential to do really well. It's how you respond under pressure that makes a key difference."

In the first experiment, 134 participants (60 percent women) were

assigned in same-sex pairs to portray a recruiter or job candidate in a competitive negotiation involving the setting of salary, vacation time and other job benefits. To increase the pressure, half of the paired participants were told the negotiation was an accurate gauge of their negotiating skills. Participants in the low-pressure situation were told the exercise would teach them negotiation concepts and was not an accurate gauge of their negotiating abilities.

Job candidates, who had a lower power role, performed significantly worse in the high-stakes negotiations than those in the low-pressure group. Recruiters, who held a more powerful role, actually performed better under pressure because their initial expectations for success were magnified, Kang says.

In a second experiment, 60 male MBA students were paired together as the buyer or seller of a biotechnology plant. The sellers, who were in a position of power, were more assertive under pressure and negotiated a higher selling price, while the buyers performed worse under pressure.

The final experiment used the same biotechnology plant exercise with 88 MBA students (33 male pairs and 11 female pairs), but all participants were told the exercise would gauge their negotiating skills to raise the stakes. Before the negotiation, half of the participants wrote for five minutes about their most important negotiating skill, while the remaining half wrote about their least important negotiating skill. Buyers who completed the positive self-affirmation performed significantly better in negotiating a lower sale price for the biotechnology plant, effectively reducing the power differences between the buyer and seller.

Writing down a self-affirmation may be more effective than just thinking it, but both methods can help, Kang says. Before a performance review, an employee could write or think about his best job skills. Writing or thinking about one's family or other positive traits that aren't

associated with the high-stakes situation also may boost confidence and performance.

"Anytime you have low expectations for your performance, you tend to sink down and meet those low expectations," Kang says. "Self-affirmation is a way to neutralize that threat."

More information: Kang, S.; Galinsky, A.; Kray, L.; and Shirako, A. (2015). Power Affects Performance When the Pressure Is On: Evidence for Low-Power Threat and High-Power Lift. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(5).

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