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Believing in free will makes you feel more like your true self

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Do we have free will? This is a question that scholars have debated for centuries and will probably continue to debate for centuries to come.

This isn't a question I can answer, but what I am interested in is "what happens if we do (or do not) believe in free will?" In other words, does

believing in free will matter in your [daily life](#)?

My [colleagues](#) and I at the [Existential Psychology Lab](#) at Texas A&M University study the psychological outcomes of belief in free will. While contemplating my next research project, I realized at some point in our lives, we all want to understand who we are – it's human nature. So, we decided to explore how believing in free will influences our sense of self and identity.

What is free will?

Free will is generally understood as the ability to freely choose our own actions and determine our own outcomes. For example, when you wake up in the morning, do you hit snooze? Do you put on your workout gear and go for a run? Do you grab a hot cup of coffee? While those are simple examples, if you believe in free will, you believe there are a limitless number of actions you can engage in when you wake up in the morning, and they are all within your control.

Believing in free will helps people exert control over their actions. This is particularly important in helping people make better decisions and behave more virtuously.

For instance, research has found that promoting the idea that a person doesn't have free will makes [people become more dishonest](#), [behave aggressively](#) and even [conform to others' thoughts and opinions](#). And how can we hold people morally responsible for their actions if we don't believe they have the free will to act any differently? Belief in free will allows us to [punish](#) people for their immoral behaviors.

So, not only is there a value to believing in free will, but those beliefs have profound effects on our thoughts and behaviors. It stands to reason that believing in free will influences how we perceive ourselves.

You might be thinking, "Of course believing in free will influences how I feel about myself." Even though this seems obvious, surprisingly little research has examined this question. So, I conducted [two studies](link) to suss out more about how believing in free will makes us feel.

What believing in free will makes us feel about ourselves

In the first study, I recruited 304 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk and randomly assigned them to write about either personal experiences reflecting a high belief in free will, like changing career paths or resisting drugs or alcohol, or experiences reflecting a low belief in free will, such as growing up in poverty or working under an authoritative boss. Then, they were all asked to evaluate their sense of self.

Participants who wrote about experiences reflecting low belief in free will reported feeling less "in touch" with their true selves. In other [words](link), they felt like they did not know themselves as well as the participants who wrote about experiences reflecting high belief in free will.

Then, I conducted a follow-up study testing one's sense of authenticity, the feeling that one is behaving according to their own beliefs, desires and values.

I recruited another group of participants from Amazon Mechnical Turk, and like the first experiment, randomly assigned them to write about personal experiences demonstrating high belief in free will or low belief in free will. Then, they all completed a decision-making task where they had to make a series of choices about whether to donate money to charity or to keep the money for themselves.

Afterwards, participants were asked how authentic they felt while making their decisions. Participants in the low free will group reported feeling less authentic than participants in the high free will group.

So, what does this all mean?

Ultimately, when people feel they have little control over their actions and outcomes in life, they feel more distant from their true, authentic selves. They are less in touch with who they are and do not believe their actions reflect their core beliefs and values.

We believe this is because belief in free will is linked to feelings of agency, the sense that we are the authors of our actions and are actively engaged with the world. As you can imagine, this sense of agency is an important part of a person's identity.

The importance of feeling like you are in charge of your life applies to significant actions like moving or getting a new job or pondering the big questions in life. But it also applies to the minor decisions we make throughout the day.

Here's one simple, though relatable, decision I am faced with every morning. When I wake up in the morning and decide to put on my workout gear and go for a run instead of hitting snooze, I might feel like I am the primary decision-maker for this morning routine. Additionally, I am most likely acting on the part of me that values physical health.

But what if I wake up, and I feel like I can't exercise because I have to go to work or some other external factor is making it difficult to go? I might feel as if someone or something else is controlling my behavior, and perhaps, less like my true self.

So, do you have free will? Do any of us? Remember, the question the

isn't whether it exists or not, but whether you believe it does.

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