

Could more effective goals be the key to treating depression?

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Credit: University of Liverpool

The findings of a new study suggest the treatment of people with clinical depression could be improved by helping them set positive, achievable goals.

Psychology researchers from the University of Liverpool, Edith Cowan University, Australia, and the University of Exeter analysed the link between clinical depression and how people experiencing the condition set and pursue personal goals.

The research examined personal goals set by 42 people diagnosed with [clinical depression](#) and another 51 with no history of depression.

Avoidance goals

Both groups listed their personal approach and avoidance goals:

- Approach goals – focus on reaching a desirable outcome, for example, improve my marathon time.
- Avoidance goals – focus on preventing an undesired outcome, for example, avoid getting upset over the little things.

Lead Author, Associate Professor Joanne Dickson from Edith Cowan University, who is also an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Liverpool, said the study found that people experiencing depression were not less motivated than those without depression.

Disengaging

Associate Professor Dickson, said: "This was backed up by the fact that both groups listed a similar number of goals and valued their [personal goals](#) similarly. However the group with depression were more pessimistic about achieving their goals and had more difficulty generating goals focused on positive outcomes.

"The group with depression were also more likely to give up on goals they saw as unattainable and at the same time reported greater difficulty

in setting new goals to pursue.

"While disengaging from unattainable goals is thought to help break a cycle of goal failure, negative thinking and depression this is complicated by the difficulty in setting new goals for people with depression."

Positive outcomes

Unfortunately, this pattern of goal pursuit may exacerbate depression according to Professor Dickson.

She adds: "If we can develop better ways to help people with depression set goals that are achievable and focused on positive outcomes, and assist them in identifying ways to achieve their goals, it is likely to enhance a sense of well-being.

"Personal [goals](#) are integral to many therapies such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Behaviour Activation Therapy used to treat depression. Therefore, a better understanding of personal goal processes shows promise in developing more effective treatments for depression.

"Building confidence and self-belief around goal pursuit may also provide a useful strategy in preventing the onset of [depression](#).

More information: Joanne M. Dickson et al. Goal Fluency, Pessimism and Disengagement in Depression, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0166259](#)

Provided by University of Liverpool

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