

Patients with depression find it easier to abandon unattainable goals

February 2 2017



Clinging to unattainable goals is linked to the onset of depression. However, depression can create opportunities for sufferers, as psychologists have now demonstrated in a study. Credit: Jan-Peter Kasper/FSU

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again!" This saying is drummed

into us from a young age, when our tower of building blocks keeps collapsing or we just can't get the hang of riding a bicycle. Perseverance is praised and we are told that only with the right motivation will we be able to achieve the aims we have set ourselves.

"That may hold true in many areas of life, such as work, sport or the family," says Prof. Klaus Rothermund of Friedrich Schiller University Jena (Germany). But an over-ambitious life plan can also prove to be a trap, adds the Professor of General Psychology. This is the case when the goals pursued are unattainable.

"Some people develop depression as a result of such futile efforts," says Rothermund. The fact that the goal remains unattainably distant, however hard a person tries, makes them experience helplessness and suffer from a loss of control. However, this must not inevitably be a psychological dead-end. Depression can actually create opportunities for sufferers, as Psychology student Katharina Koppe and Prof. Rothermund have now demonstrated in a study. In the *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, they show that patients with depression are significantly more successful than healthy individuals at letting go of unattainable goals.

Giving up in order to win

And from a psychological point of view, that is a great advantage. "The one who gives up wins," says lead author Katharina Koppe. "Even if that sounds paradoxical at first." The ability to disengage, according to the psychologists, represents an important adaptive function of depression. Put simply: If the discrepancy between a personal goal and current possibilities is too large, people would be better off looking for a more realistic goal and abandoning the old one.



In their study, the Jena University psychologists gave patients with depression and healthy participants the simple task of solving anagrams. For example, SIEGOT should be rearranged to make EGOIST. Credit: Jan-Peter Kasper/FSU

In their study, the Jena University psychologists gave patients with depression and healthy participants the simple task of solving anagrams. These are words in which the letters are in the wrong order. For example, the anagram SIEGOT should be rearranged to make EGOIST. The participants had to solve as many anagrams as possible within a specific time. What the participants did not know was that some of the anagrams were unsolvable, as it was impossible to rearrange them to form a meaningful word. "These unsolvable tasks represented

unattainable goals, which it was necessary to give up as soon as possible in order to use the time effectively," explains Katharina Koppe. It emerged from the experiment that the patients with depression spent less time in total on the unsolvable anagrams than the control group, while the time spent working on the solvable tasks did not differ between the two groups.

Crisis as an opportunity for personal development

Although this test involves a very simple type of task that cannot be equated one-to-one with other challenges of daily life, the psychologists do see in it important indications for a change in our view of depression. "The general lack of motivation that is typical of many patients with depression apparently gives rise to a greater ability to abandon goals, and one could use this in therapy," Prof. Rothermund says. One strategy could be to identify the unattainable goals that have led to the patients being depressed, and then specifically support the [patients](#) in disengaging themselves. "If we stop seeing [depression](#) simply as a psychological burden, which just needs to be removed through therapy, we might also be able to use the patient's crisis as an opportunity for [personal development](#)," says Katharina Koppe. First of all, however, considerably more research is needed on this topic.

More information: Koppe K and Rothermund K (2017) Let it go: Depression facilitates disengagement from unattainable goals. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 54, 278-284. [DOI: 10.1016/j.btep.2016.10.003](#)

Provided by Friedrich Schiller University of Jena

Citation: Patients with depression find it easier to abandon unattainable goals (2017, February 2)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-02-patients-depression-easier-abandon-unattainable.html>

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