

Can't shake old ideas? Wash them off, suggests new study

June 12 2017

Handwipes aren't just for germs anymore. Their uses may extend to more flexible thinking and reorienting one's priorities.

A pair of researchers at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management has found the physicality of cleaning one's hands acts to shift goal pursuit, making prior goals less important and subsequent goals more important.

The researchers' four experiments each began by bringing participants' attention to particular goals through word games or a short survey, a process called "priming." The participants were then asked to either merely evaluate or actually use a handwipe. Those who were asked to use the wipe became less likely to think of the previously primed goal, less likely to make behavioral choices consistent with it, and less likely to find it important. Furthermore, their focus was more easily reoriented towards a subsequently primed goal.

"For people who were primed with a health goal, for example, using the handwipe reduced their subsequent tendency to behave in a healthy manner—they were more likely to choose a chocolate bar over a granola bar," says Ping Dong, a PhD student in marketing who conducted the research with Spike W. S. Lee, an assistant professor of marketing.

Previous work has already shown that physical cleansing reduces the impact of previous psychological experiences, such as guilt arising from immoral behaviour. The current research unpacks the underlying mental

process: cleansing embodies a psychological procedure of separation. Wiping away dirt serves as a physical proxy for mentally separating ideas that linger from previous experience, hence preparing a "clean slate" for focusing on new ones.

This research examined cleansing's short-term rather than long-term impact on [goal](#) pursuit, points out Ms. Dong, who will join the faculty at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management later this year. While it may be premature to suggest that people intent on achieving goals should significantly alter their personal hygiene routines, the findings do suggest that when it comes to finding practical tricks for redirecting one's thinking away from old fruitless pursuits towards new and better ones, an antiseptic wipe may come in handy.

The study was published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Can't shake old ideas? Wash them off, suggests new study (2017, June 12) retrieved 16 August 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-06-ideas.html>

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