

Optimism and Health: The mediating effect of personal goals

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Theoretical Background

Over the past decades, both dispositional optimism and goal adjustment have been recognized as important variables in self-regulatory processes and as vital predictors of mental and physical health (e.g., Scheier et al., 2001; Wrosch et al., 2003). Recent studies examining the interplay of these two constructs in facilitating health outcomes suggest that adaptive goal adjustment might mediate the beneficial effects of optimism on health (e.g., Rasmussen et al., 2006; Salewski & Vollmann, 2007). In particular, the ability to define and commit to alternative goals when important goals became attainable turned out to be an important factor.

However, this raises the question whether characteristics of current personal goals (number, importance, attainability, commitment) are also related to optimism and health outcomes (satisfaction with life, affect balance, self-rated health). Therefore, the major aims of the present study were to examine (a) the relationships between goal characteristics, optimism and health outcomes, and (b) the possible mediating effects of goal characteristics on the beneficial health effects of optimism.

Participants & Measures

N = 111 participants in a vocational rehabilitation program; Age: 18-61 years, *M* = 36.7 years, *SD* = 8.4; Sex: 39 women (35.1%) and 72 men (64.9%)

Dispositional optimism: LOT-R (Scheier et al., 1994)

6 items, $\alpha = .55$

Affect balance: PANAS (Krohne et al., 1996)

Positive affect: 10 items, $\alpha = .86$; Negative affect: 10 items, $\alpha = .85$
Affect balance = positive affect - negative affect

Satisfaction with life: SWLS (Diener et al., 1985)

5 items, $\alpha = .80$

Self-rated health

1 item: "How would you evaluate your current health status?"

Goals and goal characteristics: adapted from GOALS (Pöhlmann & Brunstein, 1997)

40 life goals assigned to 10 goal domains (achievement, intimacy, affiliation, altruism, variation, power, development, tranquility, physical fitness, autonomy)

Rating for each goal (yes/no):

Existence: "Do you pursue this goal?", *N* of pursued goals: *M* = 31.5, *SD* = 7.4

Ratings for each pursued goal from 1-not at all to 7-very much:

Importance: "How important is this goal for you?", $\alpha = .94$

Attainability: "How probable is that you attain this goal?", $\alpha = .94$

Commitment: "How much effort do you invest to attain this goal?", $\alpha = .95$

Calculation of three goal characteristic fit-indices from 0-good fit to 6-bad fit:

|importance - attainability| \Rightarrow good fit: important goal has a high availability

|commitment - importance| \Rightarrow good fit: high commitment when goal is important

|commitment - attainability| \Rightarrow good fit: high commitment when goal is attainable

Results

Relationship between goal characteristics, optimism and health outcomes

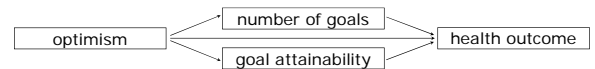
Bivariate correlations

	optimism	affect balance	satisfaction with life	self-rated health
optimism		.52**	.42**	.26**
affect balance			.32**	.37**
satisfaction with life				.12
number of goals	.34**	.25**	.11	.02
importance	.01	.08	.17	.10
attainability	.43**	.49**	.46**	.33**
commitment	.10	.28**	.12	-.10
import - attain	-.41**	-.35**	-.37**	-.27**
commit - import	.04	-.04	-.02	.14
commit - attain	-.28**	-.25*	-.08	-.05

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

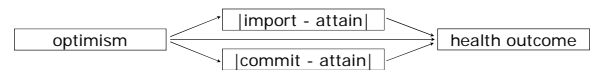
Mediating effects of goal characteristics on beneficial health effects

Multiple mediation analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) for each health outcome



	total/direct effect: optimism	indirect effect: goal attainability
affect balance	.92**/.64**	.25 (BAC 95% CI .11-.44)
satisfaction with life	.60**/.40**	.23 (BAC 95% CI .10-.42)
self-rated health	.64**/.41	.31 (BAC 95% CI .09-.59)

Note. ** $p < .01$; no significant indirect effects for number of goals



	total/direct effect: optimism	indirect effect: import - attain
affect balance	.85**/.72**	.12 (ns)
satisfaction with life	.66**/.53**	.25 (BAC 95% CI .11-.46)
self-rated health	.73**/.57*	.33 (BAC 95% CI .10-.68)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; no significant indirect effects for |commit - attain|

Discussion

The results show several relationships between optimism and goal characteristics. More specifically, optimism was positively associated with number of pursued goals and perceived attainability of these goals. In particular, optimists regarded their important goals as more attainable and were more committed to their attainable goals. This suggests that optimism might facilitate an adaptive adjustment of personal goals. Additionally, several goal characteristics were found to be related to better health-related outcomes, indicating that in particular perceiving ones important personal goals as attainable might promote mental and physical health.

Furthermore, optimism was positively related to affect balance, satisfaction with life and self-rated health. More importantly, these positive relationships between optimism and health-related outcomes were at least partially mediated by the higher perceived attainability of (important) personal goal. Thus, the beneficial effects of optimism on health seems to be influenced, at least to some extend, by an adaptive adjustment of personal goals.

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