



Commentary: processes of disengagement – letting go from the wanted future, the missed-out past, and coping with inevitable endings

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Abstract

Our commentary highlights the importance of the present special issue on disengagement from goals. The various contributions focus on as vital topics as people vexed by goals being blocked, stuck between going on versus letting go, and drowning in ruminations. They clarify that person and contextual factors, framing strategies, and emotional make-up play a role in dealing with such hardships. Reviewing the contributions also indicated that research on the processes of disengagement is especially scarce. To start closing this gap, we argue that research on the self-regulation strategy of mental contrasting, primarily used to specify the processes of active goal pursuit, can just as well be used to elucidate the processes of active disengagement. We present evidence about how mental contrasting promotes disengaging from desired futures and from missed-out pasts, and we highlight the non-conscious mechanisms that induce people to actively let go from unfeasible endeavors. We then address research on how people can disengage from upcoming inevitable endings. We conclude with applauding the courage of the editors to tackle goal disengagement, the black sheep of the psychology of motivation, and we discuss how fruitful further research on the topic will be for the individual and the society.

Keywords Processes of goal disengagement · Self-regulation · Mental contrasting · Counterfactual thinking · Inevitable endings

Introduction

The special issue on disengagement from goals is more than timely. In fact, it is necessary to conduct more research on this long-neglected theme as active goal disengagement is relevant for people's individual everyday lives, their long-term development, and the society. Only after active disengagement will we save individual, political, economic, and social resources that otherwise might be wasted (Havighurst, 1963; Richter et al., 2016). The scarcity of theory and findings on goal disengagement is wondrous as the literature in motivation psychology has been keenly focusing on goals. Unfortunately, research has almost exclusively studied goal engagement in the form of goal setting, goal striving, and goal attainment. Disengagement from unattained (as well as from attained) goals had to stand back (for a similar argument, see Brandstätter & Bernecker 2022).

Disengagement from goals: contributions to the Special Issue

A laudable exception to the neglect of the topic of goal disengagement is the work by Heckhausen et al., (2001, see also Wrosch et al., 2007) who have pointed to the benefits of successful disengagement from inevitable endings. Their work has been picked up as the starting point by several contributions to the special issue. For example, Candice Hubley and Abigail Scholer (in press) refer to COVID-frozen goals as goals that have been inevitably blocked by the events of the pandemic. The unfortunate role of rumination about such inevitable obstruction of goals and the need to find self-regulation strategies that save people from the ruminative mode and propel them into active disengagement is carved out. Their findings coincide with work by Nenkov & Gollwitzer (2012) where renewed pro vs. con deliberation during goal pursuit (post-decisional deliberation) produced defensive holding on to the goal via highlighting pros over cons. Similarly, Alysson Light and Emma Chodos (in press)

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show that being torn between goal engagement and goal disengagement, that is, experiencing an action crisis (Brandstätter et al., 2013), may have problematic consequences in terms of heightening negative feelings after receiving well-meant social support. Their findings indicate the need for research on strategies that help people actively disengage from goals and escape the action crisis. Suggesting a solution, Anne Holding et al. (in press) examine one way to increase active disengagement: People can set goals to disengage! Then the engagement principles of the goal literature should apply. And indeed, the authors find that autonomous goal engagement directed towards disengagement is more successful than controlled goal engagement, a finding that mimics the goal engagement literature. This finding is especially noteworthy as participants in the studies by Holding et al. (in press) had to generate identity goals (e.g., becoming a real estate agent). Identity goals are known to be particularly hard to disengage from (e.g., Gollwitzer et al., 2013; overview by Gollwitzer 2018).

Another question in research on goal disengagement is whether one could prevent an action crisis before it even occurs. Certainly, if people were perfect predictors and knew which goals will be best to pursue – if the subjectively feasible and desirable would perfectly correspond to the objectively feasible and desirable – then we could prevent action crisis from occurring. But life is not always predictable, and even if we successfully applied strategies that help us engage rationally, that is, invest in subjectively feasible and desirable goals, and refrain from investing in subjectively unfeasible and undesirable goals, we could still end up in an action crisis. What person and what context factors, then, will reduce the probability of an action crisis?

Antonia Kreibich et al. (in press) argue that self-awareness might be a personality variable that shelters against an action crisis as it is linked to a problem-solving orientation, and the experience of an action crisis can be attenuated via problem solving. Maik Bieleke et al. (in press) focus on personality variables linked to active goal pursuit. They find that chronic if-then planning impedes leaving an action crisis and hampers disengagement, but it fosters reengagement to alternative goals. However, Henderson et al., (2007; see also Gollwitzer 2014) have shown that forming if-then plans is content independent and thus can foster disengagement if the plans are geared to the low likelihood of goal attainment; they also find that such if-then plans can be worded in a way so that either flexible or rigid disengagement behavior will follow. Bieleke et al. (in press), looking at another personality variable, argue that boredom avoidance also supports reengagement. Further addressing reengagement, Casandra Timar-Anton et al. (in press) observed that following successful goal disengagement, people's commitment to subsequent alternative goals is comparatively strong. These

contributions address reengagement, a topic which, similarly to disengagement, has been neglected in the motivation literature.

Finally, focusing on the emotional consequences of failed disengagement, especially on the emotion of regret, Zita Mayer and Alexandra Freund (in press) observed that postponing, or what the authors call shelving a goal, will lead people to be less regretful than when people fully disengage. Thereby the article points to the emotional difficulties that letting go of goals brings along, another neglected research topic. An exception here is the classic work by Eric Klinger who has conducted studies and extensively written about the emotions of invigoration, frustration, and depression as part of the incentive disengagement cycle (Klinger, 1975). The recent gap of research on the emotional consequences of disengagement starts to be filled by the contribution of Farina Rühls et al. (in press). The authors used the cyberball ostracism paradigm and found that – as Klinger has postulated and observed – lowered desirability after disengagement went along with reestablished well-being.

In sum, as the editors of the current volume, Cathleen Kappes and Kaspar Schattke, in their summary have pointed out, the readers of the special issue will learn about the beneficial consequences of disengagement from the unachievable, about the personality factors that foster or impede an action crisis, and about emotional concomitants of partial versus full disengagement. But what do we know about the processes that trigger the problem-solving activities needed for letting go, for overcoming the action crisis, and for guaranteeing the beneficial consequences of goal disengagement?

Processes of disengagement

There exist theory and research findings from the fields of self-regulation, thinking about the future, and goal engagement that have illuminated disengagement processes. They pertain to embedding images of the obstacle that potentially thwarts goal attainment into fantasies of having already attained the desired future. While such mental contrasting of the desired future with the obstacle of reality has mostly been described in the context of surmountable obstacles, leading to actively engaging in goal pursuit, mental contrasting is equally effective for actively disengaging from goals – when obstacles are perceived as insurmountable (see Fig. 1). It is important to note that mental contrasting triggers active engagement as well as active disengagement rather than passively falling into action or inaction (Oettingen et al., 2001; overview by Oettingen 2012).

What is currently your most important Wish or goal?

To become a music star

What is the best future Outcome you associate with fulfilling your wish or goal?

My fans admire me

What is the most critical Obstacle of reality that stands in the way of fulfilling your wish or goal?

Having no free time anymore

Fig. 1 *The Three Steps of Mental Contrasting*

Disengagement from Desired Futures

Mental contrasting leads to active engagement to reach a wished-for future when the obstacle is deemed surmountable; when the obstacle is deemed insurmountable, however, mental contrasting leads to active disengagement from the desired future. Obstacles may be insurmountable because they are deemed not worth to be overcome or not possible to be overcome. Active disengagement via mental contrasting may occur on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral level. For example, mental contrasting led people to actively refrain from planning how to attain the desired future, rendered them “cool” when anticipating failing to reach the goal, and actively held people back from investing effort and other resources in goal pursuit. These patterns of results have been shown across different life domains (e.g., academic, interpersonal, and health).

How does mental contrasting achieve such active disengagement? Cognitively, the associative links needed for goal pursuit are dissolved. For example, the associative links between the future and the obstacle and between the obstacle and the instrumental means to overcome the obstacle, are broken up (e.g., Kappes & Oettingen 2014; Kappes et al., 2012). Emotionally, feelings of enthusiasm and energy are sapped, even participants’ blood pressure goes down (Oettingen et al., 2009). These processes run off outside of awareness. Importantly, they mediate active behavioral disengagement, that is, they are linked to people actively walking away from their goal pursuit (overview by Oettingen & Sevincer 2018). In sum, mental contrasting is an effective strategy that people can use to prospectively program themselves to actively dismiss their goals.

Disengaging from missed-out pasts

Mental contrasting can even help people disengage from missed-out pasts, that is, desired counterfactual pasts. These

counterfactual pasts often come in the form of scenarios starting with “if only...!”. Such thoughts can spur feelings of regret, disappointment, and resentment that may vex people for months and years. But there is a potential remedy. Mental contrasting of wishes for these longed-for but never realized pasts, reduces feelings of regret, disappointment, and resentment. The findings hold for counterfactual pasts that had been under people’s control (e.g., if I only had applied for the open position) or not (e.g., if only my dog had not died; Krott & Oettingen 2018a). Mental contrasting of such counterfactual pasts even has beneficial behavioral consequences. For example, people who were induced to mentally contrast did perform better than those focusing on the counterfactual past only and better than a no treatment control group, in a subsequent, unrelated standardized intelligence test (RAVEN; Krott & Oettingen 2018b). Mental contrasting relieved participants from their counterfactual emotions so that they could now focus on the present, leading them to even excel in an unrelated intelligence test.

Disengaging from foreseeable, inevitable endings

So far, we have been talking about processes of disengagement from future goals and missed-out pasts: People have the option to stay or to leave. However, often we must leave, must say good-bye, a period in our life ends. We are faced with the ending of a party, the ending of a weekend, of a vacation, of our time in school, with the end of our professional life, and eventually also with the end of life. Heckhausen et al., (2001) and Wrosch et al., (2007) have pointed to the importance of disengaging from such inevitably endings for well-being and health. However, research on how people can successfully cope with such foreseeable, inevitable endings is scarce. How can we effectively say good-bye when foreseeing inevitable endings? Schwörer et al., (2020) observed that people benefitted from coping in a *well-rounded* way. That is, the more people had established a sense of closure, a feeling that they have done all that they could have done, the more they experienced positive affect, little regret, and an easy transition into the next life phase. Even simply being reminded (vs. not) of the upcoming ending led to more positive affect and less regret, which translated into better focus and stronger performance in a subsequent attention task (Stroop). In sum, accepting an inevitable ending in a well-rounded way is a process furthering successful disengagement from old times allowing people to focus on and successfully engage in the challenges of the present.

Conclusion

There is hardly any topic in the psychology of motivation which deserves more research attention than the topic of disengagement. On an individual level, we are confronted with a host of life circumstances where we want or need to let go and say good-bye. On a societal level, we are also confronted with situations of saying good-bye; modern technologies and societal developments may force us to change our habits, customs, or amenities that we grew fond of. Despite the strong need for research, the topic of disengagement has not been popular in psychology, probably because it smells of giving up. All the more courageous are the editors of the present special issue. We trust that their courage will be rewarded by a host of new lines of research on disengagement from goals. Especially research on the processes of disengagement, though existing as described above, can be clearly extended. Thereby, ideas and findings from fields neighboring psychology may be fruitful. A case in point is research on the phenomenon of escalation of commitment as discussed in behavioral economics. This research shows that negative feedback fosters disengagement more in goals framed as losses than gains (e.g., Doerflinger et al., 2022). Thus, it may well be that different processes underlie disengagement from goals that are differently framed. Illuminating these and other potential processes of disengagement will – importantly – pave the way to creating interventions supporting people to disengage from goals that are either deemed not that desirable after all or simply not feasible.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest * No Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest.
 * No Research involving human participants and/or animals.
 * No Informed consent.

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