

Reflecting on Values Promotes Love, Acceptance

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No one enjoys being told that their behavior is harmful to themselves or others. In fact, most people respond defensively when confronted with evidence that their behavior is irrational, irresponsible, or unhealthy. Fortunately, research has shown that just a few minutes of writing about an important value can reduce defensiveness. Previous research by David Sherman at the University of California at Santa Barbara and his collaborators have shown that coffee drinkers are more willing to accept information that drinking coffee harms their health if they first write a few sentences about their most important value.

Although researchers have known for decades that reflecting on important values reduces defensiveness, they have not identified why this simple practice opens people to unpleasant facts they would rather avoid. For decades, scientists assumed that writing about important values boosts self-esteem, or makes people feel good about themselves, and this makes them less defensive. Yet, many studies failed to support the idea that boosts to self-esteem or positive mood explains why writing about important values reduces defensiveness.

In a new experiment, Jennifer Crocker and Yu Niiya from the University of Michigan and Dominik Mischkowski from the University of Konstanz, suggest that previous researchers have it wrong; writing about important values doesn't reduce defensiveness by boosting the self; instead, it enables people to transcend the self by focusing on people or things they care about beyond themselves. In two experiments, they found that writing about important values makes people feel loving and connected, and that these other-directed feelings account for reduced defensiveness.

In the first study, the researchers asked participants to rank six values—social life, religion/morality, science, business, arts, and government. One group later wrote for 10 minutes about why their most important value was important to them, while the control group wrote for 10 minutes about how their least important value might be important to others. Afterwards, they rated how much writing the essay made them feel love, empathy or other emotions.

In the second study, participants were smokers and nonsmokers. Like the first study, participants wrote about an important or unimportant value. This time, however, they next read a fake article claiming that smoking increases the risk of abdominal aortic aneurysms, a bulge in the main artery of the heart, and the quality of the research described in the article.

The results for both studies were very strong. In both studies, those who wrote about an important value felt more loving and connected after writing the essays than those who wrote about an unimportant value. And specifically in the second study, writing about an important value made smokers less defensive—they were more accepting of the article's claim that smoking harms health if they wrote about an important value instead of an unimportant value.

“These studies raise the prospect that reminding people what they love or care about may enable them to transcend the self and may foster learning under difficult circumstances,” the authors explained in the July issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

The researchers speculate that the love and connection people feel after writing about important values could affect hormones related to care giving, such as oxytocin. Because oxytocin increases trust, it might account for reduced defensiveness in people who take a few minutes to reflect on their important values.