‘Teacher, I May Not Do Well on the Test Next Week Because I May Have to Babysit My Sister’

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After reminding students about an upcoming Introduction to Psychology exam a student approached me and asked, “Teacher, I may not do well on the test next week because I may have to babysit my sister.” I didn’t miss the opportunity to problem solve with the student and I responded with: “Do you have a calendar? How many days will you have to take care of her? We can get you help in student services. Do you have a study buddy to help you? What can I do to help?” You’ve heard the phrase, *deer-caught-in-the-headlights*, right? He stammered, sweat broke out on his forehead, then he mumbled that he had to go.

This young man was memorably the first student, but not the last to follow that similar pattern.

Most faculty are likely to work with students who provide ample evidence of explanatory and behavioral self-handicapping. Many researchers argue that self-handicapping is a clear academic detriment associated with low achievement scores and poorer grades (Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 1999, 2001; Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996; Midgley & Urdan, 1995, 2001; Urdan & Midgley, 2001). When psychology instructors recognize the maladaptive nature of self-handicapping, we have an excellent opportunity to create classroom modifications and interventions that can help students gain self-awareness and, potentially, encourage them to develop new strategies to maximize their potential for academic success.

When self-handicapping students prepare an excuse before an evaluation, they protect their self-concept and esteem by externalizing failure to events outside their control. Further, if they do well, the self-handicapping *a priori* strategy can bolster their self-concept or inflate their self-esteem because “they succeeded” despite a difficult situation (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Some students do not simply make excuses; they also behave in self-handicapping ways such as drug and alcohol consumption (Rhodewalt, 1994; Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005), lack of practice, reduced effort, choosing unfavorable performance settings, test anxiety (Midgley & Urdan, 1995; Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996), passive procrastination (Chu & Cho, 2005), and over-commitment of activities (Midgley et al., 1996; Wolters, 2003). Addressing the issue of self-handicapping gives us an opportunity to help our students and to show the practical side of psychology.

A Few Intervention Suggestions

Information and knowledge can be powerful. When students learn about self-handicapping, their ability to control it is strengthened. In order to give them feedback that helps them grow in self-awareness we must become attuned to “hearing” self-handicapping excuses and be willing to address them. Many of us who teach have heard students declare, “I’m just a procrastinator, that’s just who I am,” as if procrastination were an innate trait. Or, we have heard the seemingly outlandish excuses offered by my “first” student. These “before-hand” types of excuses may be diagnostic of self-

handicapping rather than simple requests for time management tips. Martin and colleagues (2003) reported that students strategically used test anxiety, procrastination, and excuse-making behaviors to provide the needed protection while believing they had no control of their self-handicapping behaviors; however, it was unclear if students understood why they needed "protection," or chose unhelpful behaviors. Even if our students are aware that they are deliberately self-protecting, they may not have been challenged to look at the "why" behind their choices. If we help them understand self-handicapping they may come to see that they have choice and control.

Not all teaching is done in the classroom. Changing a student's academic sense of self will take time. Students develop a sense of "possible selves" based on their perceptions about their abilities and potential for success across multiple academic settings (Seli, Dembo, & Corker, 2009). Inviting students to visit with us during office hours to address our concerns may initially create stress for us and the student, but can be helpful in the long run when helping them to understand their potential for self-handicapping. Shih (2009) reported that students whose teachers addressed motivational issues sought help and were willing to explore new learning strategies and solutions. By teaching students that self-handicapping thoughts and behaviors are not innate character flaws, but learned schemas and behaviors, we can help them rethink their perceptions, lower their fears, and balance their "possible selves," thus, decreasing self-handicapping.

Create protocols and structures that do not encourage self-handicapping. It is important to explain how your classroom rules have a purpose and are designed to encourage positive academic behavior. Classroom environment is important in the remediation of self-handicapping. Dorman, Adams, and Ferguson (2002) identified qualities that were inversely related to self-handicapping:

- *Supportive teachers* – helped by demonstrating genuine interest in their students' growth

- *Task orientation* – teachers explained the rationale for staying on task and how assignments purposefully contributed to their success

- *Perceived equity* – a sense that power was shared between teacher and students. Framing the need for deadlines and timelines and the costs for not meeting those markers is a way to share self-handicapping information.

Equally, we need to make every effort to give consistent, timely feedback. Origins of self-handicapping have been relatedto experiences of inconsistent evaluative feedback (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Richardson, 2001). When students receive inconsistent evaluative feedback, they may attribute success to external factors. If they are allowed to "slip" deadlines, not sure why they passed or why their paper was acceptable, they may tell themselves that the teacher "liked me" or "felt sorry for me" as a reason for the grade (Berglas & Jones, 1978). To encourage a sense of control, students need to know what they did well and what they need to improve and have experiences that affirm their ability to improve.

Understand the motivational messages we send to our students and change our language and perspectives about classroom performance, if need be. Teachers influence the atmosphere in the classroom by the value they place on grades and expectations (Urdan, 2004). One way to lessen self-handicapping tendencies is to discourage performance goal orientations and competition for grades and

to promote a mastery-approach goal-oriented climate in the classroom (Pintrich, 2000). When faculty report the central tendency scores following an exam or encourage performance competition between students, they send the message that grades rather than knowledge mastery are important. Competitive environments may raise self-consciousness and promote self-handicapping behaviors for the most at-risk students (Beck, Koons, & Milgram, 2000; Hirt, Deppe, & Gordon, 1991). Simple steps, such as refusing to post grade ranges, not "pitting" students or groups against one another, or not disclosing central tendency information helps students to set individual markers of success and to focus on improvement.

Often students ask, "Am I doing okay?" which may mean, "Am I doing okay compared to others in the class?" The authors have heard the question posed somewhat differently, "Is my A a good A?," which is a request for the instructor to reassure a fragile student by using relative performance information. Comparison to others is a hallmark of performance or ego goals and research has noted the vulnerable combination of performance goal adoptions and competitive classrooms for students with fragile self-esteem (Ames, 1992; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001; Pintrich, 2000). Whether in the K-12 or the college classroom, holding the high performing students' work as the standard without clear feedback may "mystify" the skills needed for success and is not helpful for most students, particularly for the more at-risk students. Assessments based on clearly defined criteria presented before the beginning of assignments, projects, or tests help students focus on processes over which they have control and is the preferred form of assessment (Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Richards, 2001). Normative assessment (i.e., norming performance on the "top achievers" in class or forcing students' grades into a normal curve for grading purposes) is counterproductive and encourages competition.

Teach them to attain self-control by de-mystifying learning strategies. Two simple interventions can be made. First, modify the "big term paper." When high values are given to a single project or task, self-handicapping may be encouraged (Hirt et al., 1991). By breaking the large project into smaller pieces, the perceived value of the project and anxiety can be distributed over the project. In doing so, we also teach them to set reasonable goals and encourage self-evaluation. Self-evaluation, a hallmark of self-regulation, can prompt development of self-efficacy and academic self-concept as a preventative measure (Kimble, Kimble, & Croy, 1998; Ommundsen, Haugen, & Lund, 2005; Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Richardson, 2001). Further, incremental feedback provides checkpoints that can help students evaluate their skill and strategy needs.

Next, promote new test-taking and management strategies. It seems to be a truism that the more at-risk students are, the less they feel comfortable about seeking help. Instructors can't assume that students have all the tools they need or will actively seek the resources. Bring the help to them. Student Services Departments "live" to provide support. Set the tone for the semester; emphasize the importance of deeper learning strategies. Schedule a speaker to come to class to teach test-taking and course-management strategies as part of the course orientation. Increasing control through more skills lessens students' helplessness, helps them interpret tasks as challenging rather than threatening (Martin et al. 2003), and increases performance (Bandura, 1997).

Before we try to implement interventions it is helpful to understand students' epistemologies. In an effort to understand what motivational factors influence students to face challenges, to develop and use mature strategies, and to persist in the face of academic adversity, APS Fellow Carol S. Dweck and colleagues (e.g., Dweck, 2007; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) have explored students' concepts of intelligence. Before we hit brick walls and become discouraged in our efforts to make modifications, it

would be important to know if our students hold a fixed belief (i.e., intelligence is something you just have) or if they believe that intelligence is changeable. Some (or all) or our interventions will be less effective unless students believe that change is truly possible. Remedial efforts have indicated students can be taught to view intelligence as a dynamic, malleable construct with positive results, such as improved academic performance (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007).

Similarly, it is important to understand students' beliefs on what constitutes learning. If students believe that learning simply requires memorization of material, then our efforts to change their behaviors will not be productive without epistemological change on their end. Helping students recognize the potential to change epistemologies and learning beliefs in the classroom empowers not only students, but instructors as well (Leroy, Bressoux, Sarrazin, & Touilloud, 2007).

Conclusion

Students can be encouraged to take more responsibility for their learning experiences. These research-influenced suggestions may help college instructors gain awareness about self-handicapping students. If it is possible to encourage students to make some modifications we increase students' potential to succeed in academic settings. At a minimum, we hope these suggestions encourage teachers and students to engage in a dialogue that sets the stage for modifications and successful growth.