Exploring the Association Between Goal Difficulty and Well-Being

Hope Duppler & Danielle Geerling, PhD
Psychology | St. Norbert College

INTRODUCTION

- Difficult goals→ higher levels of both effort and performance (Locke & Latham, 2002)
  - Want the difficulty to be just right
- Positive relationship between goal-progress and emotional well-being (Wiese & Freund, 2005)
  - More difficult the goal – the stronger the relationship between goal progress and emotional well-being

Hypotheses

- Goal difficulty is beneficial for well-being
  - Especially when goal is specific & autonomously pursued

METHODS

Participants

- 150 St. Norbert College students
- 92.0% White, 87.3% female

Measures & Procedures

- Longitudinal study
  - 4 parts over a semester
  - N= 46 at Time 4

Time 1

- Goal Description
  - Specificity – coded by independent raters
  - Goal Difficulty - 2 questions,
    ex: "This goal is difficult to achieve"
  - Goal Autonomy - 2 questions,
    ex: "When working toward this goal, I feel like I'm doing what I want to be doing"
- Well-Being
  - *SPANE - (Diener, et al. 2009)*
- Personality
  - *TIPI* - (Gosling, et. al, 2003)

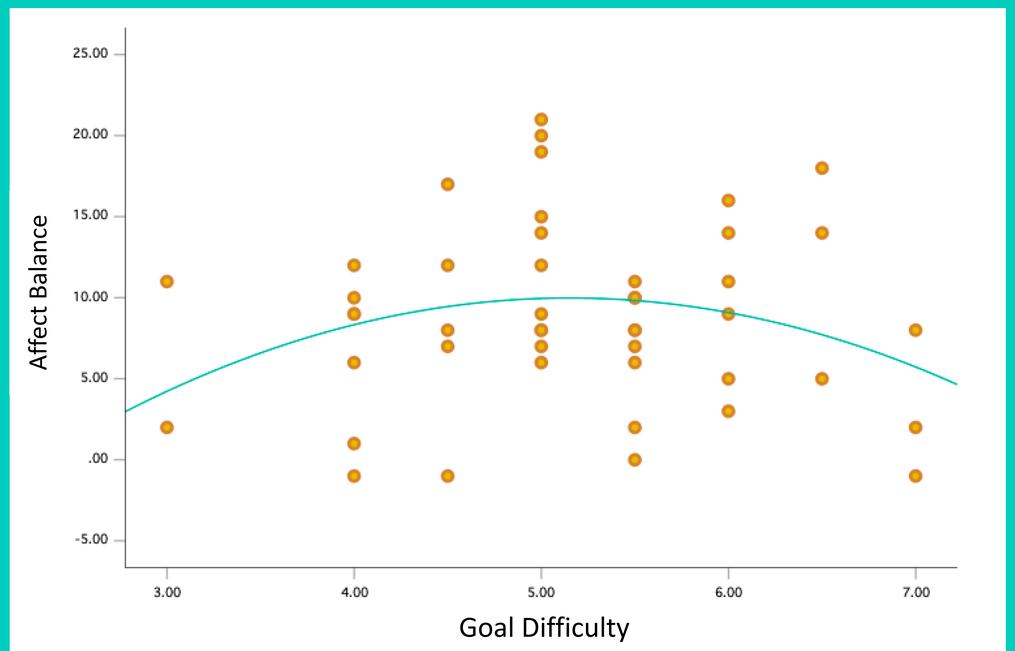
Times 2 & 3

- Progress
- Well-being

Time 4

- Goal achievement
- Well-being

Not all difficult goals are beneficial for one's well-being



Marginally significant effect of **conscientiousness & neuroticism** on **affect balance,** but no effects of **goal difficulty, specificity,** or **autonomy**

Goal Difficulty Squared

Effect	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI		*p*
			LL	*UL*	
Goal Difficulty	-.085	.821	-2.100	1.213	.592
Goal Difficulty Squared	-.085	.474	-1.226	.689	.574
T1 Affect Balance	.238	.138	-.080	.477	.158
Neuroticism	-.247	.624	-2.229	.290	.128
Conscientiousness	.281	.744	-.027	2.978	.054

Goal Difficulty and Autonomy

Effect	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI		*p*
			LL	*UL*	
Goal Difficulty	-.018	.708	-1.528	1.335	.892
Goal Autonomy	.114	.668	-.747	1.951	.373
DiffxAutonomy	.163	.490	-.362	1.619	.207
T1 Affect Balance	.278	.138	-.047	.511	.100
Neuroticism	-.260	.604	-2.240	.199	.099
Conscientiousness	.256	.707	-.086	2.770	.065

Goal Difficulty and Specificity

Effect	Estimate	*SE*	95% CI		*p*
			LL	*UL*	
Goal Difficulty	-.133	1.046	-2.808	1.416	.509
Goal Specificity	.084	1.610	-2.272	4.232	.546
DiffxSpecificity	.123	1.399	-1.918	3.732	.520
T1 Affect Balance	.192	.147	-.137	.458	.281
Neuroticism	-.274	.619	-2.326	.173	.089
Conscientiousness	.245	.761	-.249	2.823	.098

RESULTS

Analytic Plan

- Correlation- goal difficulty and affect balance
- Hierarchical regression- goal difficulty, goal difficulty^2, affect balance
- Regression- goal difficulty, goal autonomy, goal specificity, affect balance
  - Control variables- T1 affect balance, conscientiousness, & neuroticism

Results

- Marginally significant curvilinear relationship* between goal difficulty & affect balance
  (B= -1.254, β= -.273, SE= .682, p= .075)
  *when omitting outliers (below 2SD)
- Association between goal difficulty and affect balance was not moderated by specificity or autonomy (see tables)

DISCUSSION

- Few effects of goal difficulty on well-being, even when goal autonomy and goal specificity are considered
- Indicates that as a participant's goal difficulty increased, the effect of goal difficulty on their well-being decreased
- Suggests an optimal level of goal difficulty
- Nonsignificant results could be due to small sample size at time of the final survey
- C & N as moderators on relationship between goal difficulty & affect balance

References available upon request!