

mental contrasting: a way to boost our commitment to the goals we care about



this handout with links to all research studies was posted to www.stressedtozest.com on 20.02.11

what is 'mental contrasting'?

Mental contrasting (MC) is a way of boosting our energy and commitment for goals that are important to us. It helps us turn our hopes and dreams into realities. Interestingly, and usefully, MC also helps us let go of dreams that are wasting our time. Mental contrasting is based on Professor Gabriele Oettingen's work (Oettingen 1999; Oettingen, Pak et al. 2001 - more details, including a free full text link, to all research articles mentioned are given at the end of this hand-out). MC has been shown to be effective in a whole series of research studies producing improvements in health behaviours, relationships, academic studying, and general goal attainment.

what does 'mental contrasting' involve?

Simply fantasizing about a desired future ("indulging") or just thinking about negative aspects of one's current reality ("dwelling") each only produce moderate commitment to achieve wished for goals. If however one both imagines the desired future and then also thinks about one's current more negative reality ("mental contrasting"), the present reality tends to be seen as "standing in the way" of the wished for future. If the obstacles to achieving one's goals are assessed as surmountable, then mental contrasting typically boosts energy, commitment and action. If the obstacles are seen as probably insurmountable, then MC helps one let go of goals that are actually likely to be a waste of time and effort.

how does one do 'mental contrasting'?

Mental contrasting is a delightfully effective and simple procedure. Specific MC instructions vary a bit from research study to research study, but all instructions follow the same general format. First one is asked to imagine, talk and/or write about personally valued aspects of the wished for future. Secondly one imagines, talks and/or writes about obstacles that currently get in the way of achieving the wished for future. Typically this ups one's energy & commitment to tackle the obstacles (Oettingen, Mayer et al. 2009).

combining 'mental contrasting' with 'implementation intentions':

Mental contrasting, on its own, has been shown to be helpful in boosting goal commitment (Oettingen 1999; Oettingen, Pak et al. 2001). In many ways though, MC becomes most effective when combined with implementation intentions (II). I've already written about "*Implementation intentions background*" and "*Implementation intentions instructions*" (note that both are available as handouts and as blog posts). Mental contrasting energises goal commitment while implementation intentions promote initiation and maintenance of goal-directed activity. Using them together (MCII) can help people make many valuable life changes, including eating more healthily (Adriaanse, Oettingen et al. 2010), increasing physical exercise (Stadler, Oettingen et al. 2009), improving academic study (Duckworth, Grant et al. 2010), and managing chronic pain (Christiansen, Oettingen et al. 2010).

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further developments in 'mental contrasting':

Professor Oettingen and her colleagues continue to explore mechanisms and applications of mental contrasting. Earlier work has already demonstrated that MC is relevant to a very wide variety of developmental life challenges (Oettingen 1999). More recently the application of mental contrasting has been extended successfully into the field of helping relationships (Oettingen, Stephens et al. 2010). Interestingly for understanding mechanisms, it has now been demonstrated (Oettingen, Mayer et al. 2010) that MC can help people reduce cigarette smoking both through standard contrasting of a positive future with a negative current reality, and also through adapted contrasting of a possible negative future with a positive current reality. Encouragingly too, potential gains from mental contrasting have been shown to still be measurable at two years' follow-up (Stadler, Oettingen et al. 2010). Making healthy life changes is often hard. Mental contrasting – often combined with the sister technique of implementation intentions – is a "change technology" it's very worthwhile to know about and to use.

For more information about mental contrasting and for the full text of all the research studies detailed below, see Professor Gabriele Oettingen's webpage at www.psych.nyu.edu/oettingen

- Adriaanse, M. A., G. Oettingen, et al. (2010). "When planning is not enough: Fighting unhealthy snacking habits by mental contrasting with implementation intentions (MCII)." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40(7): 1277-1293.
- Christiansen, S., G. Oettingen, et al. (2010). "A short goal-pursuit intervention to improve physical capacity: A randomized clinical trial in chronic back pain patients." *Pain* 149(3): 444-452.
- Duckworth, A. L., H. Grant, et al. (2010). "Self-regulation strategies improve self-discipline in adolescents: benefits of mental contrasting and implementation intentions." *Educational Psychology*: 1-10.
- Oettingen, G. (1999). Free fantasies about the future and the emergence of developmental goals. *Action and self-development: Theory and research through the life span*. R. M. L. J. Brandstädter. London, Thousand Oaks: Sage.: 315-342.
- Oettingen, G., D. Mayer, et al. (2009). "Mental Contrasting and Goal Commitment: The Mediating Role of Energization." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35(5): 608-622.
- Oettingen, G., D. Mayer, et al. (2010). "Self-regulation of commitment to reduce cigarette consumption: Mental contrasting of future with reality." *Psychology & Health* 25(8): 961 - 977.
- Oettingen, G., H. Pak, et al. (2001). "Self-regulation of goal setting: turning free fantasies about the future into binding goals." *J Pers Soc Psychol* 80(5): 736-753.
- Oettingen, G., E. J. Stephens, et al. (2010). "Mental contrasting and the self-regulation of helping relations." *Social Cognition* 28(4): 490-508.
- Stadler, G., G. Oettingen, et al. (2009). "Physical activity in women: effects of a self-regulation intervention." *Am J Prev Med* 36(1): 29-34.
- Stadler, G., G. Oettingen, et al. (2010). "Intervention effects of information and self-regulation on eating fruits and vegetables over two years." *Health Psychology* 29(3): 274-283.
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