

## Research Article

## Positive Self-Statements

## Power for Some, Peril for Others

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**ABSTRACT**—Positive self-statements are widely believed to boost mood and self-esteem, yet their effectiveness has not been demonstrated. We examined the contrary prediction that positive self-statements can be ineffective or even harmful. A survey study confirmed that people often use positive self-statements and believe them to be effective. Two experiments showed that among participants with low self-esteem, those who repeated a positive self-statement (“I’m a lovable person”) or who focused on how that statement was true felt worse than those who did not repeat the statement or who focused on how it was both true and not true. Among participants with high self-esteem, those who repeated the statement or focused on how it was true felt better than those who did not, but to a limited degree. Repeating positive self-statements may benefit certain people, but backfire for the very people who “need” them the most.

At this moment, thousands of people across North America are probably silently repeating positive statements to themselves. Students facing exams, cancer patients, speakers approaching lecterns, and individuals trying to lift their low self-esteem are repeating phrases such as, “I am a lovable person” (Johnson, 1991, p. 31). From at least as far back as Norman Vincent Peale’s (1952) *The Power of Positive Thinking*, the media have advocated saying favorable things to oneself. For example, *Self* magazine advises, “Try chanting, ‘I’m powerful, I’m strong, and nothing in this world can stop me’” (Gordon, 2001), and numerous self-help books encourage “affirmations,” such as “Every day I admit my errors, failures and weaknesses but feel no guilt, blame, or self-criticism” (McQuaig, 1986, p. 56).

Are positive self-statements effective? To our knowledge, they have been examined only (a) in the context of comprehensive treatments with experienced clinicians, along with techniques such as relaxation training (e.g., Treadwell & Kendall, 1996), or

(b) in studies in which confounds, such as therapist attention or demand characteristics, seem highly plausible but were not controlled. The true impact of positive self-statements, then, is unknown.

We propose that, contrary to popular belief, positive self-statements can be useless for some people, even though they may benefit others. They may even backfire, making some people feel worse rather than better. We base our predictions on research involving attitude change, self-comparison, and self-verification. According to the “latitudes of acceptance” idea (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), messages that espouse a position close to one’s own attitude are more persuasive than messages that espouse a position far from one’s own (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Messages that fall outside one’s latitude of acceptance are thought to meet resistance, and even to have the potential to backfire, leading one to hold one’s original position even more strongly (Zanna, 1993). Positive self-statements can be construed as messages that attempt to change attitudes—in this case, attitudes about the self. Thus, if positive self-statements carry messages that fall outside one’s latitude of acceptance, one may reject them. For example, if people who believe that they are unlovable repeat, “I’m a lovable person,” they may dismiss this statement and perhaps even reinforce their conviction that they are unlovable.

Self-comparison theory applies similar ideas to the context of receiving self-relevant feedback from other people. People are thought to automatically compare feedback that they receive with their preexisting self-conceptions, and to accept the feedback only when it fits reasonably well with those self-conceptions (e.g., Eisenstadt & Leippe, 1994). Positive self-statements may operate similarly. Although they are self-generated rather than provided by others, one may compare self-statements with one’s self-view, and reject them if they contradict it.

Like attitude researchers, self-comparison researchers propose that feedback highly discrepant with one’s self-view may even boomerang. Eisenstadt and Leippe (1994) asked participants to identify a trait they would like to possess but believed they lacked. When Eisenstadt and Leippe later told participants that they actually did possess that ideal trait, participants felt

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worse, rather than better. Evidence indicated that the “ideal” feedback led participants to think of examples of their behavior that contradicted that feedback.

Thinking of negative counterexamples may not be the main problem with self-discrepant feedback, however. Such feedback also may emphasize that one has violated important standards. Eisenstadt and Leippe (1994) proposed that when people believe that feedback is too positive to fit their self-conceptions, the discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves becomes salient, which makes them feel worse. This process seems to have occurred in a study in which participants were induced to write essays opposing funding services for disabled students (Blanton, Cooper, Skurnik, & Aronson, 1997). When these participants then received feedback that they were compassionate and caring, they felt worse, rather than better. As Blanton et al. explained, “reaffirming participants’ sense of compassion confronted them with the personal standard they had violated” (p. 690).

We reason that positive self-statements may have effects similar to those of overly positive feedback. When people feel deficient in some quality, positive self-statements may highlight the discrepancy between their deficiency and the standard they would like to meet. Hence, when some individuals repeat the statement, “I am a lovable person,” they may say to themselves (consciously or not), “But I know I’m not as lovable as I could be, or as lovable as Chris . . . .”

Self-verification motives may fuel such processes. According to self-verification theory (e.g., Swann & Schroeder, 1995), people are motivated to preserve their self-concepts. Even an unfavorable self-view, however painful, affords clarity and predictability. Hence, people with unflattering self-views may resist information about themselves that is overly positive (Swann & Schroeder, 1995), and such information may include positive self-statements.

Thus, we propose that positive self-statements have the potential to make one feel worse if they lie outside one’s latitude of acceptance, are self-discrepant and thereby highlight one’s failures to meet one’s standards, and arouse self-verification motives. We further propose that positive self-statements are especially likely to backfire for the very people they are meant to benefit: people with low self-esteem. Such people, by definition, see themselves as failing to meet standards in more domains or in more important domains than do people with high self-esteem. Moreover, self-verification motives should bias people with low self-esteem to reject positive self-statements, but encourage people with high self-esteem to accept them.

Given the lack of research on positive self-statements and their potential negative effects, it is important to examine these effects empirically. Our first study involved a survey of people’s use of positive self-statements. In Studies 2 and 3, we experimentally manipulated positive self-statements and examined their effects on mood and state self-esteem (momentary feelings about the self).

## STUDY 1

In Study 1, undergraduates (47 men, 202 women)<sup>1</sup> completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and an on-line questionnaire about positive self-statements. Participants read examples of positive self-statements (e.g., “I will win!” and “I will beat this illness”) and responded to the following item: “I have used positive self-statements” (scale from 1, *never*, to 8, *almost daily*). Fifty-two percent gave a rating of 6 or higher; 8% said “almost daily,” and only 3% said “never” ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ). Men and women did not differ in their responses. People with higher self-esteem reported using positive self-statements more often than people with lower self-esteem,  $b = 0.42$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $\beta = .36$ ,  $t(246) = 5.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p_{rep} > .99$ . (Although self-esteem was measured continuously, for several dependent measures we provide means for participants in the top and bottom thirds of the self-esteem distribution. For the “I have used positive self-statements” question, those means are 5.71,  $SD = 1.74$ , and 4.34,  $SD = 1.78$ , respectively.)

Respondents reported using positive self-statements before exams (85%), before giving a presentation (78%), to cope with negative events (74%), and as part of their everyday routine (23%).

Participants judged positive self-statements to be helpful ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ; scale from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 8, *strongly agree*). The higher their self-esteem, the more helpful they said such statements were,  $b = 0.40$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $\beta = .35$ ,  $t(245) = 5.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p_{rep} > .99$  (high self-esteem:  $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ; low self-esteem:  $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ). The lower respondents’ self-esteem, the more they said positive self-statements “sometimes make me feel worse, rather than better,”  $b = -0.37$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $\beta = -.35$ ,  $t(246) = -5.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p_{rep} > .99$  (high self-esteem:  $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ; low self-esteem:  $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ). Overall, however, the results confirm that positive self-statements are used commonly (by Westerners) and are widely believed to be effective.

## STUDY 2

In Study 2, we experimentally examined the effects of repeating a positive self-statement on mood and state self-esteem. The statement we asked participants to repeat was, “I am a lovable person.” We chose this particular statement from self-help books because concerns about whether other people love oneself may lie at the heart of self-esteem (Leary, 2005). We predicted that people with high self-esteem would benefit from repeating the positive self-statement, but that repeating this statement would make people with low self-esteem feel worse. We focused on disguised measures more than self-report measures because we were concerned that participants might not be fully aware of

<sup>1</sup>In all three studies, we excluded participants of East Asian descent, because they are less likely than Westerners to endorse self-statements (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

their reactions, and that demand characteristics and beliefs about the benefits of self-statements might contaminate self-reports.

### Method

Sixty-eight introductory psychology students (32 men, 36 women) were randomly assigned to the self-statement or no-statement condition, with the restrictions that almost equal numbers of men and women and almost equal numbers of people with high and low self-esteem participated in each condition. The high self-esteem (HSE) and low self-esteem (LSE) groups were defined, respectively, as people with scores within the top and bottom third of the distribution of scores on Fleming and Courtney's (1984) self-esteem scale.<sup>2</sup>

The experimenter was blind to participants' self-esteem. Participants in both conditions were asked to write down any thoughts and feelings they had during a 4-min period. Participants in the self-statement condition were told, in addition, that every time they heard a sound like a doorbell, they should repeat to themselves, "I am a lovable person." The cues occurred at 15-s intervals (i.e., 16 repetitions). After the writing task, participants completed three measures.

### Mood

We used two disguised measures of mood. The first was Mayer and Hanson's (1995) Association and Reasoning Scale (ARS), which includes questions such as, "What is the probability that a 30-year-old will be involved in a happy, loving romance?" Judgments tend to be congruent with mood, so optimistic answers suggest happy moods. Our second mood measure was a shortened version of Clark's (1983) "incentive ratings"; participants rated their desire to engage in pleasant activities (e.g., go to a party;  $\alpha = .84$ ). Sad people experience a loss of incentive (e.g., Wood, Saltzberg, & Goldsamt, 1990).

### State Self-Esteem

For our measure of state self-esteem, participants rated how they saw themselves "right now." Ratings were made for six pairs of opposite adjectives (*pleasant, unpleasant; valuable, useless; nice, awful; high, low; good, bad; and successful, unsuccessful*; McGuire & McGuire, 1996;  $\alpha = .93$ ).

### Results and Discussion

We predicted that the LSE and HSE groups would differ somewhat in the no-statement condition because, generally, people with high self-esteem are happier than people with low self-esteem (e.g., Leary & MacDonald, 2003). We also predicted that the difference between the groups would widen in the self-statement condition: The LSE group would feel worse after re-

peating the positive self-statement, whereas the HSE group would feel better. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) yielded a significant Self-Esteem  $\times$  Condition interaction for two of the three dependent measures—ARS:  $F(1, 60) = 8.86, p < .005$ ; incentive ratings:  $F(1, 60) = 6.84, p < .012$ ; state self-esteem:  $F(1, 60) = 2.73, p < .104$ . Because the predicted pattern of results would not be best captured by ANOVA, however, we also conducted focused contrasts (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000). First, we tested the predicted pattern by assigning contrast weights of +1 for the HSE group and -1 for the LSE group in the no-statement condition and contrast weights of +3 for the HSE group and -3 for the LSE group in the self-statement condition. Next, we examined the effect of self-statements within each self-esteem group separately, by assigning contrast weights of -1 for the no-statement condition and +1 for the self-statement condition. The error terms were drawn from the corresponding omnibus ANOVA (with the factors of self-esteem, gender, and condition).<sup>3</sup> We calculated effect size ( $r_{es}$ ) as recommended by Rosenthal et al.

Mean scores for the three dependent measures are presented in Table 1. The results for the ARS measure of disguised mood were consistent with the hypotheses. The overall pattern contrast was strongly significant,  $F(1, 60) = 56.87, p < .001, p_{rep} > .99, r_{es} = .67$ . As Figure 1 portrays, at baseline (represented by the no-statement condition), the HSE group had more favorable moods than the LSE group,  $F(1, 60) = 7.84, p < .007, p_{rep} > .97, r_{es} = .25$ . Repeating the positive self-statement did not bring mood in the LSE group up to the HSE level. Instead, it widened the difference between the groups,  $F(1, 60) = 49.22, p < .001, p_{rep} > .99, r_{es} = .62$ : Participants in the LSE group felt worse than in the no-statement condition,  $F(1, 60) = 4.63, p < .034, p_{rep} > .93, r_{es} = .19$ , whereas participants in the HSE group felt better,  $F(1, 60) = 4.26, p < .041, p_{rep} > .93, r_{es} = .18$ .

The same overall pattern emerged for incentive ratings,  $F(1, 60) = 32.74, p < .001, p_{rep} > .99, r_{es} = .57$ , and for state self-esteem,  $F(1, 60) = 44.62, p < .001, p_{rep} > .99, r_{es} = .63$ . In the no-statement condition, participants in the HSE group felt better about themselves than did those in the LSE group (state self-esteem:  $p < .002, p_{rep} > .99, r_{es} = .33$ ; incentive ratings:  $p < .083, p_{rep} > .89, r_{es} = .18$ ), and repeating the positive self-statement widened this difference (both  $ps < .001, p_{rep} > .99, r_{es} = .55$ ). Was this widening due to positive self-statements making the LSE group feel worse, making the HSE group feel better, or both (as was true for the ARS)? Comparison of the no-statement and self-statement conditions showed that in the LSE group, repeating the positive self-statement reduced incentive ratings,  $F(1, 60) = 5.84, p < .018, p_{rep} > .95, r_{es} = .24$ , and marginally reduced state self-esteem,  $F(1, 60) = 2.75, p < .099, p_{rep} > .88, r_{es} = .16$ . In the HSE group, analyses revealed no

<sup>2</sup>For a given sample size, employing extreme groups offers more statistical power than employing the entire distribution (Preacher, Rucker, MacCallum, & Nicewander, 2005). However, this approach can overestimate effect sizes (as can manipulating variables in experiments).

<sup>3</sup>The ANOVAs revealed gender effects that did not qualify the effects reported: Women scored higher than men on the ARS, and men's incentive ratings differed more between conditions than women's.

**TABLE 1**  
*Mean Mood and State Self-Esteem as a Function of Trait Self-Esteem and Condition in Study 2*

Measure	High self-esteem		Low self-esteem	
	No-statement condition	Self-statement condition	No-statement condition	Self-statement condition
ARS	24.59 (7.24)	30.47 (7.88)	16.94 (8.44)	11.18 (10.08)
Incentive ratings	44.24 (7.37)	47.88 (7.19)	39.47 (7.86)	33.24 (9.54)
State self-esteem	36.35 (5.78)	37.82 (2.94)	28.76 (6.42)	25.47 (8.19)

**Note.** For all measures, higher scores indicate more positive feelings. Standard deviations are given in parentheses. The Association and Reasoning Scale (ARS) included 12 items with varying response scales; scores could range from  $-16$  to  $49$ . The incentive-ratings scores were sums of ratings for 6 items; all rating scales were from 1 through 9. The state self-esteem scores were sums of ratings for 6 items; all rating scales were from 1 through 7. “High self-esteem” and “low self-esteem” refer to participants drawn from the top third and bottom third, respectively, of the distribution of self-esteem scores.

effect for either incentive ratings,  $F(1, 60) = 1.66$ , n.s., or state self-esteem,  $F < 1$ . In sum, the unfavorable effects of repeating “I am a lovable person” in the LSE group were more pronounced than the favorable effects of repeating this statement in the HSE group.

What thoughts do people have while they repeat positive self-statements? Two coders blind to self-esteem coded the thought listings of participants in the self-statement condition for thoughts affirming their lovability and for thoughts contradicting their lovability ( $\kappa = .86$ ). Participants in the HSE group were more likely than those in the LSE group to say that they were lovable ( $M = 0.94$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ , vs.  $M = 0.47$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ),  $F(1, 60) = 7.92$ ,  $p < .007$ ,  $p_{\text{rep}} > .97$ ,  $r_{\text{es}} = .21$ . In addition, participants in the HSE group were far more likely to affirm their lovability than to contradict it ( $M = 0.06$ ,  $SD = 0.24$ ),  $F(1, 15) = 7.60$ ,  $p < .016$ ,  $p_{\text{rep}} > .96$ ,  $r_{\text{es}} = .43$ , whereas those in the LSE group were as likely to say they were unlovable ( $M = 0.24$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ) as to say they were lovable,  $F < 1$ .

We suspected, however, that the mere presence of negative thoughts is not the only problem that arises from repeating positive self-statements. We examined this idea in Study 3.

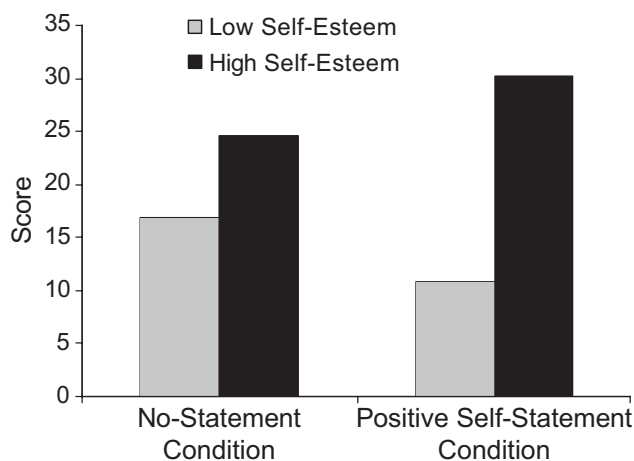
### STUDY 3

In Study 3, we examined whether removing the pressure to focus on only positive thoughts would mitigate the harmful effect of positive self-statements for people with low self-esteem. We argued earlier that positive self-statements may remind people that they are not measuring up to important standards. Perhaps positive self-statements invoke the standard that one should think only positive thoughts. If one then has difficulty keeping out negative thoughts, one may infer that one cannot meet the standard of thinking positive thoughts—and this inference may be more problematic than the negative thoughts themselves.

Indeed, previous evidence indicates that people do draw inferences from the ease or difficulty with which they think certain thoughts. In one study, participants were asked to recall either 12 or 6 examples of their assertiveness. Paradoxically, those in the 12-example condition rated themselves as *less* assertive than did those in the 6-example condition (Schwarz et al., 1991). Participants apparently inferred from their difficulty retrieving 12 examples that they must not be very assertive after all. In another study, when participants high in self-doubt provided examples of their self-confidence, their self-esteem dropped lower if they had to list 12 examples rather than 2 (Hermann, Leonardelli, & Arkin, 2002).

Similarly, if one is repeating a positive self-statement, trying to focus solely on favorable self-related thoughts, and if unfavorable thoughts intrude, one may infer that one cannot meet the standard implied by the positive self-statement. This problem should be especially acute for people with low self-esteem, who, by definition, have more plentiful and ingrained negative self-thoughts than people with high self-esteem. They may say to themselves (consciously or not), “If I’m supposed to think about how I’m lovable and I keep thinking about how I’m not lovable, the ways in which I’m not lovable must be important. I must not be very lovable . . . .”

Positive self-statements, then, may implicitly demand only favorable self-thoughts, so any unfavorable thoughts that arise may lead to unfavorable inferences. By this logic, if the demand



**Fig. 1.** Mean score on the Association and Reasoning Scale as a function of self-esteem and condition in Study 2. Higher scores suggest better mood.

to think only favorable thoughts can be removed, unfavorable thoughts should be less problematic. If people are granted “permission” to think of ways in which a positive self-statement they are repeating is not true, they should believe that such negative thoughts are to be expected and do not violate a standard. In Study 3, we attempted to grant such permission to half of the participants by telling them they should focus on ways that the statement “I am a lovable person” might be true and also might not be true. We told the other participants that they should focus only on how the statement was true. We predicted that, paradoxically, participants with low self-esteem would be better off when allowed to focus on how the statement was not true than when asked to focus solely on how it was true.

A secondary purpose of Study 3 was to examine self-statements in a context that afforded more privacy and choice than did Study 2.

### Method

Undergraduates who had completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale ( $M = 6.59$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) were provided access to an on-line study so they could participate where and when they wanted. Participants were randomly assigned to the neutral-focus (17 men, 48 women) and positive-focus (12 men, 39 women) conditions. On the Web site, participants were asked to choose between two self-statements: “I am a lovable person” and “I am an unlovable person.” They were told, “Although the choice of which statement to think about is up to you, we encourage you to think of the positive statement.” (Three participants who chose the “unlovable” statement were excluded.) In the positive-focus condition, participants were asked to “focus only on ways and times in which the statement is true,” whereas neutral-focus participants were asked to focus on ways the statement “may be true of you and/or ways in which [it] may not be true of you.”

In this study, we administered a self-report mood measure (drawn from Mayer & Gaschke, 1988;  $\alpha = .83$ ), to see whether it would yield the same results as disguised measures. (Note that any contamination by demand characteristics would have worked against our predictions for participants with low self-esteem.) Participants also completed McGuire and McGuire’s

(1996) measure of state self-esteem ( $\alpha = .91$ ); responded to the single item, “happy with myself/unhappy with myself” (7-point response scale); and completed the same incentive ratings as in Study 2 ( $\alpha = .72$ ).

### Results

We conducted multiple regression analyses with condition, mean-centered self-esteem, and their interaction as predictors. Results are presented in Table 2. No main effects of condition emerged (all  $ps > .093$ , all  $p_{rep} < .88$ ). The analyses did reveal main effects for self-esteem; the higher participants’ Rosenberg scores, the better their reported mood, state self-esteem, happiness with themselves, and incentive, all  $ps < .03$ ,  $p_{rep} > .94$ .

More important, the Self-Esteem  $\times$  Condition interaction was significant for three measures—mood:  $b = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $\beta = .30$ ,  $t(112) = 2.60$ ,  $p < .012$ ,  $p_{rep} > .96$ ; state self-esteem:  $b = 0.26$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $\beta = .23$ ,  $t(112) = 2.15$ ,  $p < .035$ ,  $p_{rep} > .93$ ; happiness with self:  $b = 0.41$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $t(112) = 2.45$ ,  $p < .017$ ,  $p_{rep} > .95$ . For respondents lower in self-esteem (1 standard deviation below the mean), positive focus was associated with worse mood, lower state self-esteem, and less happiness with oneself than was neutral focus— $b = -0.28$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $t(112) = -2.34$ ,  $p < .022$ ,  $p_{rep} > .95$ ;  $b = -0.48$ ,  $SE = 0.25$ ,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t(112) = -1.94$ ,  $p < .057$ ,  $p_{rep} > .91$ ;  $b = -0.82$ ,  $SE = 0.34$ ,  $\beta = -.26$ ,  $t(112) = -2.45$ ,  $p < .017$ ,  $p_{rep} > .95$ , respectively. For respondents higher in self-esteem (1 standard deviation above the mean), these dependent measures did not differ between conditions,  $bs < 0.35$ ,  $\beta s < .16$ ,  $t(112)s < 1.40$ ,  $ps = .183-.307$ ,  $p_{rep} s = .76-.83$ .

The Self-Esteem  $\times$  Condition interaction was not significant for incentive ratings,  $b = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ,  $\beta = .16$ ,  $t(112) = 1.26$ ,  $p < .210$ ,  $p_{rep} > .81$ . However, among participants with higher self-esteem (1 standard deviation above the mean), those in the positive-focus condition reported higher incentive than those in the neutral-focus condition,  $b = 0.86$ ,  $SE = 0.41$ ,  $\beta = .27$ ,  $t(112) = 2.08$ ,  $p < .041$ ,  $p_{rep} > .93$ . Among participants with lower self-esteem (1 standard deviation below the mean), incentive did not differ between conditions,  $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.41$ ,  $\beta = .04$ ,  $t(112) = 0.31$ ,  $p < .760$ ,  $p_{rep} > .59$ .

**TABLE 2**  
*Predicted Mood, Incentive, State Self-Esteem, and Happiness With Self as a Function of Trait Self-Esteem and Condition in Study 3*

Measure	High self-esteem		Low self-esteem	
	Neutral focus	Positive focus	Neutral focus	Positive focus
Self-reported mood	3.13	3.29	2.85	2.58
Incentive ratings	6.42	7.28	6.14	6.27
State self-esteem	6.03	6.30	5.11	4.64
Happiness with self	6.15	6.50	4.98	4.16

**Note.** For all measures, higher scores indicate more positive feelings. High and low self-esteem are defined as scores 1 standard deviation above and below the mean, respectively.

### Benefits for People With High Self-Esteem?

Studies 2 and 3 suggest that positive self-statements have more impact on people with low self-esteem than on people with high self-esteem, and that the impact on people with low self-esteem is negative. To examine in the strongest possible way whether positive self-statements have any benefit, we created a composite of the various measures within each study. Both studies indicated that positive self-statements (or focusing on how they were true) were detrimental to people with low self-esteem—Study 2:  $F(1, 60) = 6.77, p < .012, p_{\text{rep}} = .96, r_{\text{cs}} = .22$ ; Study 3:  $b = -1.39, SE = 0.68, \beta = -.22, t(112) = -2.05, p < .044, p_{\text{rep}} > .92$ . The benefit to people with high self-esteem approached but did not reach significance in either study—Study 2:  $F(1, 60) = 2.76, p < .098, p_{\text{rep}} = .88, r_{\text{cs}} = .14$ ; Study 3:  $b = 1.31, SE = 0.69, \beta = .21, t(112) = 1.91, p < .060, p_{\text{rep}} > .91$ . However, a meta-analysis combining the studies suggested that participants with high self-esteem did receive some benefit,  $Z = 2.51, p < .013, d = 0.66$  (for participants with low self-esteem,  $Z = -3.21, p < .002, d = 0.72$ ).

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

Injunctions to “think positively” are pervasive in North America. Self-help books, television shows, and loved ones advise thinking positively when one faces a challenge or is unhappy. Yet the present results suggest that for certain people, positive self-statements may be not only ineffective, but actually detrimental. When people with low self-esteem repeated the statement, “I’m a lovable person” (Study 2), or focused on ways in which this statement was true of them (Study 3), neither their feelings about themselves nor their moods improved—they got worse. Positive self-statements seemed to provide a boost only to people with high self-esteem—those who ordinarily feel good about themselves already—and that boost was small.

Further research is needed to uncover precisely why positive self-statements can backfire. One possibility is that, like overly positive praise, they can elicit contradictory thoughts (Eisenstadt & Leippe, 1994). Study 3, however, indicated that contradictory thoughts alone may not be as important as what those thoughts imply. When participants were allowed to focus on contradictory thoughts along with affirmative thoughts, they were better off than when they were asked to focus only on affirmative thoughts. The instruction to focus on contradictory thoughts may have conveyed that such thoughts are to be expected. In contrast, for participants who struggled unsuccessfully to avoid negative thoughts, such thoughts may have signified that the positive self-statement was not true of them.

It is possible that positive self-statements may benefit people with low self-esteem under some circumstances, such as when the self-views at stake are not major (e.g., Swann & Schroeder, 1995), when careful consideration of the self-statement is impossible (e.g., Eisenstadt & Leippe, 1994), and when the statement lies within one’s latitude of acceptance (Eagly &

Chaiken, 1993). Moderately positive self-statements involving specific attributes (e.g., “I select good gifts for people”) may be less likely than global (e.g., “I am a generous person”) or extremely positive self-statements to arouse disconfirming thoughts or self-verification motives among people with low self-esteem. However, outlandish, unreasonably positive self-statements, such as “I accept myself completely,” are often encouraged by self-help books. Our results suggest that such self-statements may harm the very people they are designed for: people low in self-esteem.

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