Emotional Consequences of Positive Daydreaming:
The Moderating Role of Fear of Failure

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We argue that the emotional consequences of positive daydreaming (i.e., spontaneously imagining the successful attainment of personal goals) depend on an individual's fear of failure. Positive daydreaming may signal an absence of positive outcomes for individuals high in fear of failure. As a consequence, positive daydreaming may induce negative emotions and attempts at mood repair in individuals high in fear of failure. Three studies (one concurrent, one experimental, and one prospective) examined this hypothesis. Study 1 found that individuals high (relative to low) in fear of failure who had recurrent positive daydreams about attaining agentic personal goals reported increased levels of depression and confusion. In Study 2, fear of failure predicted reductions in goal commitment after participants imagined the successful attainment of an agentic personal goal. Study 3 found that participants high in fear of failure reported fewer daydreams about attaining a personal goal when they were strongly committed to attain this goal.
Emotional Consequences of Positive Daydreaming:

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There is ample agreement that motivational processes are guided by mental representations of desired end-states or goals (e.g., Pervin, 1989). Imagining the pursuit and the attainment of goals seems to play a vital role in human goal striving: While riding a train, while listening to music or while watching a boring TV show, a researcher may conjure up images of giving a thoughtful presentation, successfully employing a creative research paradigm, or publishing a well-received paper. In this article, we aim to explore the emotional consequences of such self-generated goal imagery that occurs spontaneously in daydreaming activity (Singer, 1981). We will argue that positive goal imagery can induce negative emotions and can lead to a reduction of goal commitment in individuals who tend to consider their goals to be unattainable, that is, for individuals who are high in fear of failure. Since spontaneous goal imagery most often occurs in daydreaming activity, we will start by considering the concept of daydreaming.

Daydreaming and Self-Generated Goal Imagery

According to Singer (1981), daydreaming can be characterized by a turning inward of attention in which thinking is no longer determined by a person’s immediate stimulus situation and the task he or she is currently working on. Klinger (1978) suggests that a central feature of daydreaming is that a train of thought starts and develops without conscious premeditation and with no obvious conscious goal or purpose, a mode of thinking which he calls respondent thought. Both authors agree that daydreaming is often accompanied by imagery, that is perception-like mental representations (Finke, 1989). Applying these criteria to the thought contents collected in a thought-sampling procedure, Klinger and Cox (1987-88) estimated that about one third to one half of all mental activity can be classified as daydreaming.

Daydreams often seem to revolve around the goals individuals are currently pursuing. In a study which also employed a thought-sampling procedure, Klinger, Bartha, and Maxeiner (1980) found that almost 50% of all the reported thoughts were related to the two most important current concerns which participants had listed at the beginning of the study. In a similar study, Gold and Reilly (1985-86) found that 65% of their participants’ daydreams were related to their current concerns. Descriptive analyses suggest that most daydreaming focuses on successfully achieving one’s goals rather than on
failing to do so (Oettingen, 1997). In sum, there is evidence that people spontaneously imagine the pursuit and the attainment of personal goals in their daydreaming activity and that this type of spontaneous goal imagery is a common phenomenon. In this paper, we will employ the term **positive daydreaming** to refer to self-generated imagery which enacts the successful attainment of personal goals. While daydreaming about the attainment of personal goals typically induces a mild positive affect and tends to motivate people to strive for their goals (Singer, 1981; Klinger, 1990), there is reason to believe that individuals high in fear of failure show a different response to positive daydreaming.

**Fear of Failure and Positive Daydreaming**

Individuals high in fear of failure typically have low expectations of being able to successfully attain goals which are related to achievement and competence and generally strive to avoid failure when facing a standard of excellence (Heckhausen, Schmalt & Schneider, 1985). In a recent study, Puca and Schmalt (2001) found that failure-motivated individuals showed a drop in success-related thoughts and an increase in failure-related thoughts just after they had decided on which of the two tasks to work on. The authors suggest that this tendency may be due to failure-motivated individuals’ expectations to fail, which set in right after they had committed themselves to working on one of the two tasks. More generally, individuals high in fear of failure often expect to fail at the pursuit of goals they desire to attain (cf. Heckhausen et al., 1985).

Because individuals high in fear of failure have low expectations of being able to achieve their goals, vividly imagining the attainment of a personal goal may highlight a possible absence of positive outcomes in the future. While the daydream itself may revolve around a positive future outcome (“It would be so nice to graduate with honors...”), individuals high in fear of failure have low expectations of attaining this outcome (“...but I think I won’t be able to do so”) and may thus experience negative emotions like dejection (Higgins, 1987) and depression (MacLeod, Pankhania, Lee, & Mitchell, 1997) as a consequence of this daydream. Thus, we expect individuals high (relative to low) in fear of failure who recurrently daydream about attaining personal goals to be vulnerable to dejected and depressed moods.

Since negative emotions often initiate attempts at mood repair (Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999), we also expect individuals high in fear of failure to manage negative emotions induced by positive
daydreaming. One way to protect oneself from the disappointment that would occur in the case of failure to achieve one’s goal is to discount the importance of one’s goals. For example, Pyszczynski (1982) found that participants tended to derogate a highly desirable outcome if they had low expectations of actually obtaining it. He argued that this response probably served to minimize the disappointment associated with the prospect of not receiving the desirable outcome. Similarly, individuals high in fear of failure may disengage from a desired goal as a means of minimizing the disappointment associated with the expectation to fail at goal pursuit (“Well, I guess graduating with honors is not really important”). Thus, we expect individuals high (relative to low) in fear of failure who imagine attaining a desired goal to reduce the commitment to pursue this goal.

Another strategy to reduce negative affect induced by positive daydreaming is, of course, to cease daydreaming about attaining one’s goals. Since the intensity of disappointment and dejection following failure of goal achievement is directly related to the commitment invested in goal pursuit (cf. Brunstein, 1993, 1995), we expect this strategy to be particularly prominent for goals an individual high in fear of failure is strongly committed to. Thus, individuals high in fear of failure may reduce daydreaming about goals they are strongly committed to (e.g., graduating with honors) as compared to goals they do not care about as much (e.g., winning a card game).

Because fear of failure relates to tasks and goals in which success or failure depend on a person’s ability and skills (Heckhausen et al., 1985), we expect these relationships to hold for a broad spectrum of goals which encompass concerns characterized by achievement of independence, self-assertion, and mastery experiences (Elliot, 1997). In contrast, we do not expect fear of failure to moderate the effects of daydreaming for goals which revolve exclusively around themes of affiliation and intimacy. Borrowing terms introduced by Bakan (1966), we expect fear of failure to moderate the effects of daydreaming for goals which are characterized by agency rather than communion.

To test the validity of these propositions, we carried out three studies which investigated the emotional consequences of positive daydreaming and affect management strategies involved in the process of daydreaming. In all studies, participants’ fear of failure was assessed using the Multi-Motive Grid (Sokolowksi, Schmalt, Langens, & Puca, 2000). Daydreaming was assessed using open-ended questionnaires.

Study 1: Positive Daydreaming and Mood
In the first study, we tested whether fear of failure moderates the relationship between recurrently daydreaming about successfully achieving agentic personal goals and mood assessments. We expected individuals high (relative to low) in fear of failure who daydream recurrently about the attainment of agentic personal goals to report high levels of depressed mood.

Method

Participants and Overview of Procedure

Forty-one women and 21 men participated voluntarily in this study. All of them were first-year students at the University of Wuppertal (Germany) and received course credit for participating. The average age of the sample was 27.53 (SD = 6.21) years. At the beginning of the semester, participants received a take-home questionnaire which contained the Multi-Motive-Grid (MMG), a daydreaming-questionnaire, and a mood-adjective checklist. Participants were first asked to fill in the MMG, then to monitor their daydreaming activity for one week and finally to fill in the mood-adjective checklist. Upon returning the booklet, the experimenter inquired whether the participants had complied with these instructions, which all of them had. Participants were then provided with information about the purpose of the research.

Measures

Motive assessment. The Multi-Motive Grid (Sokolowski et al., 2000) was administered to assess participants’ fear of failure. The MMG is a semiprojective measure designed to assess the hope- and fear-components of the achievement, power, and affiliation motives. It consists of 14 pictures which depict a variety of everyday situations which are presented along with a set of statements describing typical thoughts, feelings, and action-tendencies. Internal consistency and retest reliability for the different motive measures are sufficiently high (see Sokolowski et al., 2000, for details). The fear of failure index represents the inclination to have thoughts related to avoidance and the lack of abilities. The validity of the MMG’s fear of failure scale has been demonstrated in a variety of studies (e.g., Heckhausen et al., 1985; Puca & Schmalt, 1999, 2001; Schmalt, 1999; Sokolowski et al., 2000). In the present sample, fear of failure (M = 10.16, SD = 4.12) had sufficient internal consistency (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .81 \)).

Daydreaming questionnaire. Recurrent daydreams were assessed using an open-ended questionnaire in which participants were given a description of what daydreams are (‘thoughts and
images spontaneously popping up in your mind which usually revolve around needs, desires and
goals”) and were given examples of situations in which people typically have daydreams (“while
riding the train, during a lecture, when listening to music”). Participants were asked to monitor their
daydreaming activity for one week and to write down up to four recurring daydreams at the end of
that week. Most of the participants (54, or 74.4%) supplied three or four daydreams, eight (or 12.5%)
reported two daydreams and two participants (or 3.1%) provided one daydream.

To obtain an index which reflects the amount of goal-imagery in daydreaming, daydream
protocols were coded for themes of achievement, power and affiliation according to Winter’s (1991)
Manual for Scoring Motive Imagery in Running Text. Refining the manual in accord with the
objective of our study, we scored motive imagery only when there was an indication that a daydream
depicted the attainment of a personal goal. Daydream protocols were independently scored by two
trained scorers who had demonstrated agreement of at least 85% with the calibration material
provided by Winter (1991). Percentage agreement was 80% for achievement, 65% for power, and
90% for affiliation. Disagreements were resolved by discussion. Scores for themes of achievement (M
= .36, SD = .60) and power (M = 1.39, SD = 1.42) in daydream protocols were combined for a total
score of agentic striving in daydreams, referred to as agentic daydreaming hereafter (for a similar
procedure, see Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grässmann, 1998). Since raw scores significantly correlated
with the total length of the daydream protocols, scores were corrected by regression for protocol
length (M = 213.11 words, SD = 109.98) and converted to z scores (for similar procedures applied to
TAT-protocols, see Smith, Feld, & Franz, 1992).

**Mood assessment.** Participants’ mood was assessed using Shacham’s (1983) shortened version
of the Profile of Mood States (POMS, McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1971) which consists of 35
adjectives describing a variety of mood states. Participants were asked to read each adjective and to
indicate on a 5-point scale with endpoints labeled not at all (1) and extremely (5) “how much you
have had that particular feeling during the past week”. Like the original POMS, the short version
yields six scales, Tension-Anxiety (M = 2.75, SD = .68, α = .75), Depression-Dejection (M = 2.32,
SD = .93, α = .91), Anger-Hostility (M = 2.62, SD = .85, α = .83), Vigor-Activity (M = 3.36, SD =
.77, α = .83), Fatigue-Inertia (M = 2.85, SD = .91, α = .84), and Confusion-Bewilderment (M = 2.46,
SD = .90, α = .78). Scores for the six scales were converted to z scores for further analysis.
Results

Preliminary Analyses and Descriptive Statistics

Fear of failure was significantly related to reports of tension-anxiety (r = .36, p < .01), anger-hostility (r = .34, p < .01) and confusion-bewilderment (r = .38, p < .01). Neither gender nor age of participants had significant impact on the results reported below.

Mood

We carried out a series of hierarchical regression analyses with mood (tension-anxiety, depression-dejection, anger-hostility, vigor-activity, fatigue-inertia, and confusion-bewilderment) as the outcome variables. Fear of failure and agentic daydreaming were entered in the first step of these regression analyses, followed by their multiplicative interaction term in the second step. To account for the number of analyses, we adjusted the significance level to $\alpha = .01$. Fear of failure and agentic daydreaming did not predict scores on the tension-anxiety, anger-hostility, vigor-activity, and fatigue-inertia scales (all $F$’s < 1). However, the effect of the Fear of Failure $\times$ Agentic Daydreaming interaction significantly predicted participants’ responses on the depression-dejection scale ($\Delta R^2 = .12$, $\Delta F(1, 58) = 8.50$, $p < .01$) and the confusion-bewilderment scale ($\Delta R^2 = .12$, $\Delta F(1, 58) = 9.04$, $p < .01$). To explore the nature of the interactions, we calculated predicted values using the regression weights by employing a procedure proposed by Cohen & Cohen (1983; see also Aiken & West, 1991), in which values at one standard deviation above or below the mean of the predictors are entered in the regression equation. Participants high in fear of failure who also recurrently daydreamed about attaining agentic personal goals reported the highest amounts of both depression-dejection (predicted $z$-score = .39) and confusion-bewilderment (predicted $z$-score = .42). The other groups of subjects scored below zero in both depression and confusion. Notably, recurrently daydreaming about achieving agentic goals was associated with low levels of depression (predicted $z$-score = -.53) and confusion (predicted $z$-score = -.86) in participants low in fear of failure.

Discussion

Study 1 provided initial support for our hypothesis that individuals high in fear of failure who have many recurrent daydreams related to the attainment of agentic personal goals experience high levels of negative mood. As expected, this result was strongest for moods which can be considered as markers of an absence of positive outcome. Since this study employed a concurrent design, it did not
provide support for a causal interpretation of the results. We therefore employed an experimental
design in Study 2 which tested the immediate effects of goal imagery on goal commitment.

Study 2. Imagining Success or Failure and Changes in Goal Commitment

We reasoned that individuals high in fear of failure are likely to reduce goal commitment when
vividly imagining successful goal attainment as a strategy to reduce disappointment resulting from an
anticipation of an absence of positive outcomes. In Study 2, we tested this assumption by having
participants imagine either successfully attaining an agentic and a communal goal they were currently
pursuing or failing to attain their goals. We expected participants high (relative to low) in fear of
failure to reduce commitment to the agentic goal after having imagined successfully attaining their
agency goal. No moderating effects of fear of failure were expected for the communal goal.

Method

Participants and Overview of Procedure

Participants were 74 students (38 women and 36 men) of the University of Wuppertal. They
received DM 20,- (about $ 9) for their participation. The data of 3 participants were discarded as a
result of these individuals’ failure to follow instructions. The final sample consisted of 71 participants
(37 women and 34 men). The average age of the sample was 24.10 (SD = 3.13).

Data were collected in two sessions. In an initial session, participants took part in groups of 4 to
8 and were first administered the MMG. Participants were then asked to list one agentic and one
communal goal they were currently pursuing and to rate goal commitment for these goals. In the
second session, which followed a few days (but not more than one week) later, participants were
tested individually in a laboratory session in which they had to imagine either successfully attaining
their two personal goals or failing to attain them. We took great care to foster conditions which would
be conducive to the occurrence of imaginative thought and daydreaming. The experiment took place
in a sound-proof, dimly-lit room in which participants were asked to sit in a comfortable reclining
chair. Items and part of the instructions were presented on a computer screen to which participants
responded by pressing keys on a keyboard placed next to them.

Participants were randomly assigned to the success condition or the failure condition. They were
then asked to listen via headphones to instructions spoken by a male speaker. The instructions started
with a short relaxation exercise which asked participants to close their eyes and to keep them shut
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until the end of the imagination period. The instructions then proceeded by asking participants to think about their personal goals. Half of the participants were asked to think about their agentic goal first, the other half were asked to think about their communal goal first. Participants were asked to think about their goal and then to imagine their current attempts to pursue this goal. In the success condition, they were asked to imagine as vividly as possible how they would be able to successfully attain this goal in the future. In the failure condition, they were asked to imagine failing in the pursuit of their goal. Participants were informed in both conditions that they had two minutes for the imagination task. To increase participants’ awareness of their emotional reaction to the imagination task, they were asked to focus on their emotional reaction (“How do you feel about this?”) at the end of the two minute period. After having imagined either achieving their goal or failing to do so, participants rated their experiences during the imagination task. Then, participants were asked to rate their commitment to the goal they had just imagined. The procedure of imagining goal pursuit and assessing goal imagery and goal commitment was then repeated for the second goal. Finally, participants were carefully debriefed and dismissed.

**Measures**

**Motive measure.** As in Study 1, the MMG was used to assess participants’ fear of failure.

**Listing and assessment of goals.** Participants were asked to list two personal goals which they were currently pursuing in their everyday life according to the instructions provided by Brunstein and his co-workers (Brunstein, 1993; Brunstein et al., 1998). They were told that “personal goals refer to the objectives, plans, and projects that you have pursued lately and that you intend to work on in the near future.” They were then asked to list two goals, one agentic goal which should be concerned with “striving for achievement, mastery, or taking responsibility” and one communal goal which should be concerned with “striving for intimacy, affiliation, or friendly social contact”.

After listing their goals and rating them for goal commitment, participants were asked to take notes describing possible scenarios of successfully achieving their goals and failing to do so. This was done for three reasons. First, we wanted the second session to be minimally imposing on participants. Having them write down their fantasies in the second session could have interfered with our attempts to create a situation conducive to the occurrence of daydreaming. Second, we wanted to exclude the possibility that participants had no idea what to imagine when asked in the second session to imagine
succeeding (or failing) in the pursuit of their personal goal. By providing them with notes they took in
the first session, we gave them some self-generated material on which to base what they subsequently
imagined. Finally, having participants take notes enabled us to check whether they followed
instructions.

For example, one participant listed the following agentic goal: “After successfully completing
my degree, I want to become a teacher at an elementary”. When asked to imagine successfully
achieving this goal, he wrote: “I will be able to give presentations in class, and will become more and
more confident in time. Reading books about how to give talks, I will realize that giving talks is just a
matter of practice. At some point in time, I will be a perfect teacher and will just laugh about my early
concerns.” When asked to imagine failing to achieve this goal, he wrote: “I am terribly nervous in
front of the kids, not able to think clearly. When I try to present the material for this class, I’m not
able to finish a single sentence. Eventually I realize that I have chosen the wrong profession, that
being a school teacher is not something which I have the ability to do.”

Participants were asked to rate goal commitment for both goals in the initial session (time 1, T1)
and a second time in the laboratory session (time 2, T2) after having imagined either successfully
attaining or failing to attain their goals. To assess goal commitment, participants were asked to rate
each goal on four items taken from Brunstein (1993). These items asked for their determination (e.g.,
“No matter what happens, I will not give up this goal”) and their willingness (e.g., “Even if it means a
lot of effort, I will do everything necessary to accomplish this goal”) to pursue their goals, and were
combined to give an index of goal commitment. Participants’ responses were measured on 7-point
scales with endpoints labeled completely disagree (1) and completely agree (7).

Manipulation check. After having imagined either achieving their goal or failing to do so,
participants rated their experiences during the imagination period on a variety of scales. One set of 6
questions (e.g., “I found it easy to concentrate on my images”, “I sometimes caught myself thinking
about something other than my goal”) assessed the ability to generate and concentrate on relevant goal
imagery during the imagination task. Participants’ responses were measured on 5-point scales with
endpoints labeled (1) not true and (5) true. A principal components analysis of the six items yielded
one factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1 for both the agentic goal (accounting for 56% of
variance) and for the communal goal (accounting for 61% of variance). After reversing negatively
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keyed items, the internal consistency of this scale was high for both the agentic goal ($\alpha = .84$) and the communal goal ($\alpha = .86$). Scores created by adding together responses over all items thus reflect how well participants were able to generate relevant goal imagery during the imagination task.

On average, participants succeeded in generating and concentrating on imagery pertaining to their personal goals. On the 5-point scale, the average rating of goal imagery was significantly greater than the midpoint (= 3) of the scales for both the agentic goal ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .76$, single sample $t(70) = 6.88$, $p < .001$) and the communal goal ($M = 3.55$, $SD = .94$, single sample $t(70) = 5.06$, $p < .001$). There were no differences between the two conditions ($t(69) = .13$ for the agentic goal, $t(69) = .15$ for the communal goal, $ps > .20$). We see this result as evidence that most of the participants were indeed concentrating on imagining the pursuit of their goal (versus thinking about something else) during the imagination task in both conditions.

In addition, participants were asked to rate the time they spent on imagining success and failure of goal pursuit by responding to the items “I mainly imagined succeeding at pursuing this goal” and “I mainly thought about failing to achieve this goal”, which were interspersed in the concentration items. Since the items correlated highly for both the agentic goal ($r = -.65$, $p < .001$) and the communal goal ($r = -.73$, $p < .001$), the failure item was reversed and the two items were combined to form an overall index of imagining success rather than failure in goal pursuit ($\alpha = .79$ for the agentic goal and $\alpha = .85$ for the communion goal). As expected, participants in the success condition imagined succeeding at goal pursuit to a greater extent than participants in the failure condition ($M = 8.32$, $SD = 1.56$ in the success condition vs. $M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.95$ in the failure condition, $t(69) = 9.07$, $p < .001$ for the agentic goal, and $M = 8.40$, $SD = 1.35$ in the success condition vs. $M = 4.74$, $SD = 2.00$ in the failure condition, $t(69) = 9.28$, $p < .001$ for the communion goal). We see this as evidence that our experimental manipulation worked well.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses and Descriptive Statistics**

The means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and intercorrelations of the variables are presented in Table 1. At T1, fear of failure was unrelated to goal commitment ($r = .07$ for the agentic goal and $r = .01$ for the communal goal, $ps > .20$). Thus, any changes in goal commitment after the imagination task do not simply reflect a preexisting relationship between fear of failure and goal commitment.
Mean scores for goal commitment did not differ for the two measurements ($t(71) = .69, p > .20$ for the agentic goal; $t(71) = .24, p > .20$ for the communal goal). Neither age nor gender of participants nor order of goal imagination (agentic goal first vs. communal goal first) had significant impact on the results reported below.

**Goal Commitment**

Participants’ goal commitment at T2 was analyzed by employing the following hierarchical regression approach (see Table 2): After controlling for initial goal commitment, we entered the experimental condition and fear of failure into the regression equation followed by the multiplicative interaction of experimental condition and fear of failure. With initial goal commitment covaried out, the set of first order predictors did not account for a significant portion of the variance of agentic goal commitment. However, agentic goal commitment at T2 could be predicted by the interaction of fear of failure and experimental condition. Fear of failure was negatively related to change in goal commitment in the success-condition ($r = -.43, p < .05$). In contrast, fear of failure was unrelated to change in goal commitment in the failure condition ($r = .08, p > .20$). The nature of this interaction is depicted in Figure 1, which was prepared according to the guidelines outlined in Study 1. Participants high in fear of failure showed a decrease in agentic goal commitment after having imagined the attainment of their agentic personal goal. In contrast, individuals low in fear of failure evidenced an increase in agentic goal commitment in the success condition. For communal goal commitment at T2, none of the predictors reached significance.

**Discussion**

The results of Study 2 support our hypothesis that daydreaming about the successful attainment of an agentic personal goal leads to a reduction in goal commitment in individuals high in fear of failure, whereas it is followed by an increase in goal commitment in individuals low in fear of failure. In accord with our assumption that motivational effects of fear of failure pertain to goals characterized by an agentic orientation, this result was limited to the agentic goal and did not show up for the communal goal. In Study 3, we focused on the relationship between fear of failure, goal commitment, and positive daydreaming outside the laboratory by looking at the goals participants pursued in their everyday life.

**Study 3: Goal Commitment and Positive Daydreaming**
We expected individuals high in fear of failure who are strongly committed to their goals to have comparably few daydreams about attaining their goals. In Study 3, we tested this hypothesis by investigating positive daydreaming among first year university students. First year students typically pursue the goal of acquiring basic skills to master their studies, which includes (among other things) preparing for lectures, learning how to give presentations, and getting good grades in exams. We expected individuals high in fear of failure who were strongly committed to this goal to have fewer daydreams about attaining it than a) individuals high in fear of failure who were not committed to the study goal and b) individuals low in fear of failure who had high goal commitment.

**Method**

**Participants and Overview of Procedure**

Data were collected in two phases. At the beginning of the semester, participants received a take-home booklet which contained the MMG and a questionnaire which asked them to rate two goals—gaining competence in their studies and keeping in touch with close friends—on a number of scales. After participants returned the booklet about two weeks later, they met with the experimenter in groups of 3 to 4 in which the experimenter explained the concept of daydreaming in order to make participants more sensitive to their daydreams. He then handed each participant a small booklet which he introduced as the daydream diary. Participants were asked to pay attention to their daydreams during the next 14 days and to write down their daydreams in the booklet.

Fifty-nine first-year students enrolled in different faculties at the University of Wuppertal participated in the study. Seven participants failed to complete all questionnaires and were excluded from data analyses. This resulted in a sample of 52 participants (33 women and 19 men), the average age being 22.96 years ($SD = 5.03$).

**Measures**

**Motive assessment.** As in Studies 1 and 2, the MMG was used to assess participants’ fear of failure ($M = 10.96$, $SD = 5.25$, $\alpha = .82$).

**Goal commitment.** The MMG was followed by a questionnaire in which participants read that “first year students typically try to reconcile two goals. First, they want to gain competence in their studies, which means, for example, keeping track of lectures, learning how to give presentations, passing tests, and so on. At the same time, most students try to keep in touch with close friends by
writing letters, making phone calls, or seeing them once in a while. First of all, we want to know how important these goals are to you.” From hereon, we will refer to the first goal as the study goal and to the second goal as the friendship goal. Goal commitment was assessed using the scale of Brunstein (1993) which was also employed in Study 2 and yielded measures of study goal commitment ($M = 21.98, SD = 4.27, \alpha = .71$) and friendship goal commitment ($M = 23.67, SD = 4.08, \alpha = .75$).

Daydream diary. The daydream diary provided a summary of the concept of daydreaming and contained space for writing down up to 12 daydreams. Participants reported a mean of 6.23 daydreams ($SD = 3.29$), which is comparable to studies in which a similar technique was employed (e.g., Gold & Reilly, 1985-86). Daydream protocols were content-analyzed for daydreams which dealt with advancing toward or successfully attaining the study goal or the friendship goal. Percentage agreement of two scorers was 90% for these measures. On average, .63 ($SD = .89$) daydreams depicted advancing toward or attaining the study goal (referred to as study goal daydreaming) and .70 ($SD = 1.01$) daydreams revolved around advancing toward or attaining the friendship goal (referred to as friendship goal daydreaming).

An inspection of daydreams not classified as positive goal daydreaming revealed that the majority were either memories ($M = 1.37, SD = 1.86$) or positive fantasies elaborating unrealistic scenarios (e.g., being able to fly or being a famous rock star, $M = 1.98, SD = 2.01$).

Results

Participant Attrition, Descriptive Statistics, and Preliminary Analyses

Seven of the initial 59 participants did not complete the study, resulting in an attrition rate of 11.8%. Attrition analyses revealed no significant differences between participants who dropped out and participants completing the study. Fear of failure was unrelated to study goal commitment ($r = .07, p > .60$) and study goal daydreaming ($r = -.14, p > .20$). In addition, study goal commitment was unrelated to study goal daydreaming ($r = -.05, p > .40$). Neither age nor gender of participants had significant impact on the results reported below.

Goal Daydreaming

The amount of study goal daydreaming was analyzed by employing the following hierarchical regression approach: Fear of failure and study goal commitment were entered first in the regression equation (Step 1), followed by the multiplicative interaction of fear of failure and goal commitment
(Step 2). Neither fear of failure nor study goal commitment predicted study goal daydreaming ($F$’s < 1). However, the interaction of fear of failure and study goal commitment significantly predicted study goal daydreaming ($\Delta R^2 = .11$, $\Delta F(1, 48) = 5.76$, $p < .05$). Figure 2, which was created according to the procedure described in Study 1, depicts the interaction for study goal daydreaming. As the regression lines indicate, individuals high in fear of failure had few daydreams about attaining the study goal if they were strongly committed to the study goal (predicted $z$-score = -.45). In contrast, individuals high in fear of failure had many positive daydreams if their commitment to the study goal was low (predicted $z$-score = .33). This pattern was reversed for individuals low in fear of failure: They daydreamed most about attaining the study goal if they were strongly committed to the study goal (predicted $z$-score = .35) and least if study goal commitment was low (predicted $z$-score = -.15).

For friendship goal daydreaming, neither fear of failure, nor friendship goal commitment, nor their interaction was significantly related to friendship goal daydreaming (all $p$s > .30).

**Discussion**

Study 3 demonstrated that fear of failure and commitment to the study goal were related to the amount of daydreaming about attaining a goal typically pursued by first year university students. As expected, individuals high in fear of failure reported only few daydreams about gaining competence in their studies if they were strongly committed to this goal. Study 3 thus supports our general hypothesis that individuals high in fear of failure who are strongly committed to their goals reduce daydreaming about attaining these goals. Individuals high in fear of failure who were not strongly committed to the study goal reported a much higher amount of study goal daydreaming. This result is in keeping with our reasoning: Expecting to fail at goal pursuit induces strong negative emotions only if a person is committed to attain this goal (Brunstein, 1995). Individuals high in fear of failure who were not committed to the study goal had little to lose and could thus safely daydream about goal attainment. We would expect this inclination to have positive daydreams to cease, however, once they do commit to the goal of advancing in their studies.

**General Discussion**

In three studies we investigated the role of fear of failure in moderating the relationship between daydreaming about attaining personal goals and emotional and motivational variables accompanying goal pursuit. The results provide support for our hypothesis that individuals high in fear of failure
respond differently to positive daydreaming as compared to individuals low in fear of failure. Although each study employed a different methodology (concurrent vs. experimental vs. longitudinal designs) and different outcome variables (mood, goal commitment, positive daydreaming), the moderating effect of fear of failure was demonstrated in all three studies. We suggest that our results can best be explained by assuming that a positive daydream signals an absence rather than the presence of positive future outcomes for individuals high in fear of failure. While imagining the attainment of a highly desirable personal goal, individuals high in fear of failure become simultaneously aware of the possibility that this goal might be out of reach for them. Such a perceived absence of positive outcomes may then give rise to negative emotions (Study 1) and may initiate attempts of mood repair. For instance, when asked to imagine the attainment of a goal, individuals high in fear of failure may tend to disengage from this goal (Study 2) in order to minimize the disappointed associated with the prospect of failing at goal pursuit. In the long run, individuals high in fear of failure seem to regulate negative emotions by daydreaming less about attaining their goals, particularly if they are strongly committed to them (Study 3).

Positive daydreaming may not only be detrimental to mood and goal commitment in individuals high in fear of failure, it may ultimately interfere with goal attainment as well. Overall, individuals high in fear of failure perform worse in performance situations than those low in fear of failure, and this relationship is probably mediated by performance expectations (Heckhausen et al., 1985; Puca & Schmalt, 1999, 2001). Positive daydreaming may paradoxically intensify negative expectations harbored by individuals high in fear of failure because it so drastically reminds them of a possible failure of goal pursuit. Positive daydreaming may thus discourage individuals high in fear of failure and may eventually even lead them to disengage from their goals (cf. Brunstein, 1995).

While positive daydreaming seems to be detrimental for individuals high in fear of failure, they may benefit from strategies of defensive pessimism. Defensive pessimism is a strategy in which individuals manage feelings of anxiety and loss of control in performance situations by setting low performance expectations and by thinking through various outcomes, including a possible failure (e.g., Norem & Cantor, 1986; Norem & Illingworth, 1993). Although defensive pessimism appears to be a suitable strategy for individuals high in fear of failure, there is little evidence that individuals high in fear of failure typically resort to defensive pessimism in performance situations. The low
expectations reported by individuals high in fear of failure do not seem to be part of a strategy which eventually leads to better performance, but are genuine in that they expect a low performance and then indeed perform badly (Heckhausen et al., 1985). In contrast, low expectations do not seem to impair the performance of defensive pessimists (individuals who habitually employ defensive pessimism) who typically perform as well as strategic optimists (individuals who set high expectations and avoid reflecting on possible outcomes) in performance situations (e.g., Norem & Illingworth, 1993).

Thus, teaching individuals high in fear of failure strategies of defensive pessimism may help them to manage anxiety and worry in performance situations and to counter low expectations of success that typically go with fear of failure. Defensive pessimism may also help individuals high in fear of failure to maintain motivation in their pursuit of long-term goals. For example, when pursuing a highly desirable goal like a college degree, setting low expectations (“I may take longer to receive this degree”) and pondering a possible failure of goal pursuit (“I might fail an exam”) may actually help individuals high in fear of failure to sustain commitment to their goals. In accord with this assumption, Study 2 found that individuals high in fear of failure did not reduce commitment after imagining failure of goal pursuit. We suspect that most helpful to individuals high in fear of failure may turn out to be coping imagery (cf. Spencer & Norem, 1996), in which individuals imagine correcting mistakes or overcoming setbacks (“I might fail, but I will achieve a better result when I try again”).

More generally, the present research adds to recently accumulated evidence that positive imagery may be detrimental to motivation and performance (e.g., Pham & Taylor, 1999; Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001; Spencer & Norem, 1996). Although several studies have shown that sometimes people perform worse after imagining successful goal attainment, there is reason to doubt that a single process is responsible for each instance of this effect. For example, Oettingen (1996; Oettingen et al., 2001) argues that positive fantasies which are not contrasted by negative reality can lead to an anticipatory consummation of success and may therefore decrease the likelihood of action. In this view, positive imagery induces positive affect which then leads people to erroneously expect smooth and effortless goal-attainment. In accord with this assumption, Pham and Taylor (1999) found that students who engaged in process-related imagery (studying for an exam) spent most time on preparing for a midterm and achieved the best grades, whereas participants who exclusively engaged
in outcome-related imagery (receiving a good grade) prepared least for the exam and performed worst.

However, anticipatory consummation does not explain Spencer and Norem’s (1996) finding that defensive pessimists performed badly after imagining a flawless performance. The authors argue that the performance of defensive pessimists is debilitated by positive thinking not because they get carried away by expectations of an easy performance, but because positive thinking interferes with defensive pessimists’ preferred strategy of managing anxiety by setting low expectations and pondering a possible failure.

The present research suggests that yet another process may lead from positive imagery to emotional and motivational deficits. Our results do not indicate that individuals high in fear of failure experience an anticipatory consummation of success when they imagine successful goal-pursuit or that positive imagery conflicts with strategies habitually employed by high-anxious individuals. Rather, the present studies indicate that positive imagery may decrease motivation in individuals high in fear of failure because positive imagery signals an absence of positive outcomes and, as a consequence, induces negative mood and attempts of mood-repair.

Our results also suggest that daydreaming about attaining personal goals can act as an incentive to strive for personal goals in individuals low in fear of failure. Because individuals low in fear of failure tend to consider their goals to be attainable (cf. Heckhausen et al., 1985; Puca & Schmalt, 2001), they consider a goal envisioned in a daydream as an objective that can be achieved in the future. Consequently, positive daydreaming reminds people low in fear of failure of their goals, makes them feel more committed to their goals, and so presumably facilitates the attainment of personal goals. This interpretation owes much to Klinger’s (1990) conception of the positive effects of daydreaming on motivation and goal pursuit. In accord with this view, individuals low in fear of failure tend to increase goal commitment after imagining goal attainment (Study 2) and they daydream most about a goal if they are committed to attain it (Study 3).

From a broader perspective, our research illustrates the importance of looking at individual differences in analyzing the effects of daydreaming and imagination on behavior. Although there are exceptions (e.g., Schultheiss & Brunstein, 1999; Spencer & Norem, 1996), most approaches to the study of the motivational and emotional effects of daydreaming and goal imagery are implicitly based on the assumption that the effects of goal imagery are the same for all individuals. Quite in contrast to
this supposition, the present research has shown that exploring the moderating role of personality variables can help us understand the processes by which imagery may affect a person’s mood and motivation.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although we were able to begin to explore the emotional and motivational consequences of positive daydreaming for individuals high versus low in fear of failure, we are far from having answers to all issues which were raised in this paper. Most importantly, we mainly concentrated on the more molar aspects of the moderating role of fear of failure. It would be interesting, of course, to also investigate the more molecular cognitive and affective processes initiated by positive daydreaming. For example, we would expect positive daydreaming to enhance the accessibility of thoughts and concepts related to an absence of positive outcomes in individuals high (but not in those low) in fear of failure. In addition, the generality of the effects reported here should be examined in future analyses using different outcome variables. For example, the effects of daydreaming on mood and emotional well-being should be examined by collecting behavioral data and by assessing different components of well-being, such as physical symptoms or somatization (e.g., Karoly & Lecci, 1993).

Concluding Remarks

In closing, our research has demonstrated the importance of fear of failure as a variable moderating the emotional and motivational consequences of daydreaming about attaining personal goals. Three studies yielded encouraging results suggesting that individuals high in fear of failure experience negative mood and reduce goal commitment when daydreaming about attaining their goals. Imagining the attainment of a personal goal may thus induce a discrepancy between what a person high in fear of failure hopes for and what she or he actually expects to attain. By extending the scope and using different methodologies in future research, we may further enhance our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of what goes on in people’s private inner lives.
References


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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Two-Tailed Correlations Among Variables (Study 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fear of failure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.55</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Agentic goal commitment (T1)</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21.27</td>
<td>4.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Communal goal commitment (T1)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>(.68)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19.51</td>
<td>5.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Agentic goal commitment (T2)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>(.73)</td>
<td></td>
<td>20.94</td>
<td>4.85</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Communal goal commitment (T2)</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td>19.35</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note. N = 71. Figures in parentheses are reliabilities estimated by coefficient alpha. T1 = initial session, T2 = laboratory session.

* p < .05. ** p < .01.
Table 2
Hierarchical Regression of Agentic Goal Commitment at T2 on Experimental Condition and Fear of Failure With Goal Commitment at T1 Held Constant (Study 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Block</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$\Delta F$</th>
<th>$b^a$</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>T1 Goal Commitment</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>2, 68</td>
<td>20.23**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agentic Goal Commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.53**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communal Goal Commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>First-order predictors</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>2, 66</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experimental Condition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear of Failure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fear of Failure × Experimental</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>1, 65</td>
<td>5.86*</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Condition</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cumulative $R^2$</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>5, 65</td>
<td>10.44*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $^a$ $b$ is the regression coefficient in the final regression equation.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. 
Figure Captions

**Figure 1.** Agentic goal commitment at T2 as a function of experimental condition and fear of failure, computed for values one SD below (low) and above (high) the mean of fear of failure with goal commitment at T1 held constant (Study 2).

**Figure 2.** Daydreaming about attaining study goals as a function of fear of failure and study goal commitment computed for values one SD below (low) and above (high) the means of variables (Study 3).
Figure 1
Figure 2