

Self-Handicapping: Schrodingers cat in the climbing gym

When I first started competing on the national youth circuit, I noticed something quite odd. Again and again, I overheard athletes claiming that they were training only once or twice a week, among them some of the most successful ones in their respective categories. On one hand, that made me slightly envious. These people seemed to have an incredible amount of talent since they were able to get to that level with such little training. But I was also very much confused by the fact that they almost seemed to be proud of training so little. I have always been someone who values working hard and therefore I was proud of all the time and effort I put into my training. It took me a couple of years to understand what was going on and that behaviors I observed elsewhere essentially followed the same pattern. It took me even longer to learn that I wasn't the first person to notice this weird phenomenon but that there was a whole field of research in psychology on it, where these behaviors are called self-handicapping.

I previously mentioned self-handicapping in my article on self-fulfilling prophecies as a mechanism by which such prophecies can work. But self-handicapping is a lot more than that. In that previous article, I defined self-handicapping as behaviors that undermine one's capabilities in order to excuse a potential failure in advance. But that isn't quite the whole story. Self-handicapping refers to any behavior that impairs performance in order to make this performance seem better. Whether that means a failure doesn't hit quite as hard or a good performance appears even better is irrelevant. A lot of times both mechanisms are at work at the same time: If the performance is bad, it can be excused. If, however, despite the handicap, the performance is good, even more impressive. Nevertheless, I will primarily focus on the use of self-handicapping in anticipation of a failure, since there is more research on it and my experience indicates that fear of failure is the more common cause for using self-handicaps.

Self-handicapping can express itself in a variety of ways. Avoidance of training is a very common example in sports. A lessened version of this is not trying as hard as possible. Other popular variants are claiming / showing off physical handicaps such as injuries (preferably demonstrated by various tapes across the body) or psychological handicaps like competition anxiety.

Those behaviors can be classified along two dimensions. First, there is the difference between acquired and claimed handicaps. That means psychologists distinguish between whether the person objectively acquired the handicap through their behavior (e.g., one actually avoids training) or whether they simply claimed that this was the case (e.g., one downplays how much they training they did. I for one have my suspicions which of these was the case back at those youth cups).

The second dimension is the distinction between internal and external handicaps. If my climbing shoe is completely worn out but I do not get new ones in time for a competition, that is an external (and acquired) handicap. However, if I claim to have competition anxiety that is an internal (and claimed) handicap since it is "inside" of me.

These two dimensions can be combined in any way, although some combinations are more common (e.g. internal handicaps are usually claimed since they are hard to observe from the outside). The distinction between these different types is useful since, although they work in the same way, they have slightly different characteristics.

So, as mentioned, self-handicapping is essentially an excuse in advance. But that excuse isn't an end in itself. The ultimate goal is to maintain a positive image of oneself and one's capabilities – in front of others as well as in front of oneself.

To achieve that the cause of a (potentially) bad performance is shifted from a central part of one's self-concept to a more peripheral one, meaning one that isn't valued quite as highly by the person. This is done as there isn't usually a perfect handicap that explains a failure without having any implications for the self. Instead, one chooses the smaller of two evils. If I claim that my worn-out shoes, were the cause of my bad performance, I may be able to convince people that I am still a capable climber, but they will definitely not think of me as very well prepared anymore. The fact, that it is the persons subjective value of different characteristics, that determines which of two attributes is seen as more important explains why I was confused by people seemingly boasting about their lack of training. I have never seen myself as someone who is especially talented in climbing, but I have always been proud of being someone who works hard and trains a lot. Therefore, to me, a threat to my self-concept of being a hard worker is more severe than a threat to my self-concept of being talented and I tend to excuse a bad performance with a lack of the latter. On the contrary, a person who values being talented more than working hard will tend more towards the pattern described in the beginning and excuse a failure with a lack of training in order to preserve their self-image of being talented.

And the thing is: It works. At least in the sense that self-handicaps reduce the implications of a bad performance for relevant abilities and characteristics. But it has a price. It only works if the handicap is believable. That means whatever the handicap is, it has to be perceived as actually impairing one's performance. Going back to the distinction between the different kinds of handicaps: Claimed handicaps (e.g., exaggerating how little one has trained) are usually less risky, meaning that they are less likely to hurt one's performance, but they are also less believable and more easily perceived as "just an excuse". So, unfortunately, a self-handicap that is convincing will probably actually hurt one's performance. You don't get to have your cake and eat it too. That is also where the problem for competitive athletes becomes apparent: Competitive sports are by their nature about performance and self-handicapping endangers it.

Therefore, if performance is the goal, self-handicapping has to be stopped. But as self-handicapping is usually at least partly unconscious that is not always easy.

An important strategy derives from the fact that self-handicapping usually only occurs if the person has a positive but fragile self-image. That means she is hoping to be good in whatever the characteristic or ability under consideration is but isn't quite sure. The self-handicap, as previously mentioned, shifts the perceived cause of a (bad) performance to a factor deemed less relevant. It follows that there remains a certain uncertainty about the actual subject and the confrontation with a possibly uncomfortable reality is avoided. If I had tried harder, I might have done that boulder. But if I had tried harder and didn't do it, I would have had to live with the fact that I wasn't good enough. The whole thing is quite similar to Schrodinger's cat: As long as the box remains closed the cat might still be alive. And if you work hard enough on your rationalizations you might even be able to convince yourself and everybody else, that it definitely still is. But if you open the box, and the cat is dead you're going to have to deal with it. Therefore, if the uncertainty can be prevented from developing in the first place, the likelihood of self-handicapping can be decreased dramatically. This can be done by consequently seeking accurate feedback about one's performance.

On the other hand, if nothing is done, a downward spiral of uncertainty, self-handicapping, and failure can develop. That is most easily seen when the handicap of choice is not training or giving your full effort. That strategy serves as a short-term guard against having to face the potentially uncomfortable truth of not being as good as one has hoped. But not training will have a negative impact on one's actual abilities. Therefore, the next time around, facing this reality is even more

uncomfortable, and avoiding it by the use of self-handicaps becomes even more tempting. And so the vicious circle takes its course.

Another possible point of intervention comes from the fact that self-handicapping only works properly if the motivation behind it remains hidden. Should it become clear that the person shows a certain behavior to excuse a possible failure it loses its effect. It's not unlike a soldier shooting himself in the foot to be released from service. If anyone finds out what he did, the whole thing will probably backfire. Therefore, uncovering potential self-handicapping behaviors and the underlying motivation is an effective strategy to stop it from happening. In most cases, it is enough to spell out what options there are, what the likely consequences of those will be, and explicitly giving the person a choice. Going back to the example of worn-out climbing shoes: If anyone would ask me why I didn't get new shoes since climbing with the old ones was likely to impair my climbing, I would either have to come up with another good reason or get a new pair and accept that the handicap was no longer usable.

And finally, in situations in which the social component is central (that is, the behavior is mainly about "Impression management"), it helps to ask oneself whether one would behave in the same way if no one else was present or if one has behaved differently in similar situations in the past when no one else was there. If, in doing that one notices discrepancies between the two this might also be an indicator that there is some self-handicapping going on.

However, in the end, nothing will replace taking a hard look at one's behaviors and doing a whole lot of critical self-reflection because, as is so often the case, the truth might be a little uncomfortable.

Additionally, I have included some of the questions from the self-handicapping scale, as it is often used in studies, down below. Not all items apply to sporting situations as the scale was originally developed for academic settings. Therefore, I chose the eight I found to be most fitting. If you should find yourself agreeing with a lot of these statements that might be an indicator, that you are prone to self-handicapping.

1. I would do a lot better if I tried harder.
2. Someday I might get it all together.
3. I would do much better if I did not let my emotions get in the way.
4. I sometimes enjoy being mildly ill for a day or two because it takes off the pressure.
5. I tend to get very anxious before an exam or "performance".

Reverse Scored Items (High agreement indicates low Self Handicapping)

6. I tend to overprepare when I have any kind of exam or "performance".
7. I always try to do my best, no matter what.
8. I would rather be respected for doing my best than admired for my potential.