

## Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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*Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications, and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

### Can Brief Psychological Interventions Really Work?

by David G. Myers

**Walton, G. M. (2014). The new science of wise psychological interventions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23, 73–82.**

Have you, like us, felt skeptical of the seemingly too-good-to-be-true reports of brief psychological interventions? Consider:

*Nouns and verbs:* Voters asked survey questions framed with nouns (“How important is it to you to be a voter in tomorrow’s election?”) were 11 percentage points more likely to vote than those asked questions framed with verbs (“How important is it to you to vote?”) (Bryan, Walton, Rogers, & Dweck, 2011).

*Third-person perspective:* Couples asked (every 4 months for a year) “how a neutral third party” would view one of their marital conflicts, and how they might take that perspective, sustained their love, intimacy, and passion more than did couples that merely reported on their conflicts (Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013).

*Growth versus fixed mindset:* When taught that intelligence can grow like an exercised muscle, eighth-grade students tried harder and showed superior math achievement (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Yeager, Paunesku, Walton, & Dweck, 2013).

*Social belonging:* African-American collegians, after being reassured that new students of all races worry about fitting in at college, earned higher grades than comparable peers over the next 3 years, thus halving the racial achievement gap (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

*Values affirmation:* Compared with their peers, African-American seventh graders who wrote about their most important values (on three to five occasions for just 15 minutes) earned higher grades over the next 2 years than their peers (Cohen, 2006, 2009).

Really? Seriously? Is it plausible that minutes-long psychological interventions could increase voting, strengthen marriages, and boost school achievement? Is it believable that simple exercises could be more effective than expensive, intensive, extended interventions such as the 5-year-long Cambridge-Somerville youth intervention or the months-long Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program — both of which have been judged ineffective (McCord, 1978, 1979; Pan & Bai, 2009)?

As the APS Replication Initiative reminds us, these findings and more — all summarized in Gregory Walton’s (2014) fascinating paper — should be reproduced before we regard them as notable fruits of today’s applied psychological science. Happily, most of them have been replicated. The values-affirmation effect, for example, has been extended by Geoffrey Cohen and others to populations ranging from female college physics students to soup kitchen clients (Bowen, Wegmann, & Weber, 2012; Hall, Zhao, & Shafir, 2014; Miyake, Kost-Smith, Finkelstein, Pollock, Cohen, & Ito, 2010; Sherman, Hartson, Binning, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Taborsky-Barba, Tomassetti, Nussbaum, & Cohen et al., 2013).

Moreover, notes Walton, such magical-seeming interventions can work, given two conditions:

1) *Theory-guided precision*. In the spirit of Kurt Lewin (“There is nothing so practical as a good theory”), creators of “wise interventions” leverage specific psychological insights. Mindful of the need to belong, they help students make reassuring attributions for apparent social slights. Wary of overjustification effects, they do not overpraise. Making use of the “saying-is-believing” effect, they sometimes have students convey the intervention message to younger students. Rather than just getting people to visualize a goal, such as getting a good grade, they get them to form *implementation intentions* (action plans for specific situations) and rehearse *process simulations*, such as effective studying by reading chapters, going over notes, and declining an offer to go out (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006; Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998). Moreover, none of these are called “interventions” (which could be stigmatizing).

2) *Recursion*: triggering a virtuous circle. Wise interventions harness the power of self-fulfilling beliefs. If we expect someone to be nasty, we may behave in ways that elicit the nastiness we expect, which reinforces our hurt and anger, which compounds the other’s nastiness. Wise interventions aim to break or reverse such vicious circles by triggering constructive expectations and relationships, which further amplify positive outcomes. Believing that change is possible with effort — “*When you learn a new kind of math problem, you grow your math brain!*” — students may experience greater success, which discounts the sense they aren’t “gifted” at math and strengthens their self-efficacy.

To give your students an experience of these interventions — best offered *before* the class discussion (so as not to label them as “interventions”) — Gregory Walton has kindly made available to teachers of psychology some take-to-class materials.

A brief values-affirmation exercise that’s suited to college students is available [here](#).

A small-group discussion exercise that has been developed at Stanford as a variation on the belonging intervention is available [here](#).

The actual belonging intervention materials that improved minority student academic and health outcomes are available [here](#).

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