SELF-EFFICACY THEORY

Self-Efficacy is defined as a person’s belief about their ability to organize and execute courses of action necessary to achieve a goal. In other words, persons with strong efficacy beliefs are more confident in their capacity to execute a behavior. Beliefs about self-efficacy have a significant impact on our goals and accomplishments by influencing personal choice, motivation, and our patterns and emotional reactions. For example, we tend to avoid threatening situations that we believe exceed our coping skills. Perceived self-efficacy also affects how successfully goals are accomplished by influencing the level of effort and persistence a person will demonstrate in the face of obstacles. That is, the stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active our efforts. Higher self-efficacy is also associated with more persistence, a trait that allows us to gain corrective experiences that reinforce our sense of self-efficacy.

Because of its effect on personal choice, motivation, effort, and persistence, self-efficacy has severe implications for health behaviors, such as condom use, non-smoking, among others. For example, high self-efficacy influences whether or not a person commits to condom use in the face of social obstacles. Using evidence-based interventions, we can influence self-efficacy through several channels:

1) **Performance accomplishments** are one’s personal mastery experiences, defined as past successes or failures. These experiences form expectations that are generalized to other situations that may be similar or substantially different from the original experience. For example, strong efficacy expectations are developed through repeated success of a behavior, and reduced efficacy expectations can result from failures. We can increase personal mastery for a behavior through participant modeling, performance exposure, self-instructed performances, and performance desensitization, the process through which aversive behavior is paired with a pleasant or relaxing experience.

2) **Vicarious experience**, which is observing others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences, can also enhance personal self-efficacy by demonstrating that the activity is “do-able” with a little effort and persistence. Vicarious experience can be enhanced through live modeling (observing others perform an activity), or symbolic modeling.

3) **Verbal persuasion**. People are led to believe they can successfully accomplish a task or behavior through the use of suggestion, exhortation, or self-instruction. However, because verbal persuasion is not grounded in personal experience, it is a weaker inducer of efficacy and may be extinguished by histories of past failures.

4) **Emotional arousal**. We can enhance perceived self-efficacy by diminishing emotional arousals such as fear, stress, and physical agitation since they are associated with decreased performance, reduced success, and other avoidance behaviors. Emotional arousal can be mitigated with repeated symbolic exposure that allows people to practice dealing with stress, relaxation techniques, and symbolic desensitization.