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## **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Acting for the Right Reasons:**

**An Investigation of the Utility of Fear of Failure from a Positive Psychology Perspective**

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School of Psychology

Bangor University

**Acting for the Right Reasons: An Investigation of the Utility of  
Fear of Failure from a Positive Psychology Perspective**

Brianne Nichols

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

I hereby declare that this thesis is the results of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All other sources are acknowledged by bibliographic references. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree unless, as agreed by the University, for approved dual awards.

Yr wyf drwy hyn yn datgan mai canlyniad fy ymchwil fy hun yw'r thesis hwn, ac eithrio lle nodir yn wahanol. Caiff ffynonellau eraill eu cydnabod gan droednodiadau yn rhoi cyfeiriadau eglur. Nid yw sylwedd y gwaith hwn wedi cael ei dderbyn o'r blaen ar gyfer unrhyw radd, ac nid yw'n cael ei gyflwyno ar yr un pryd mewn ymgeisiaeth am unrhyw radd oni bai ei fod, fel y cytunwyd gan y Brifysgol, am gymwysterau deuol cymeradwy.

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

Positive Psychology has predominantly been concerned with the study of positive emotions and states in relation to flourishing until the rise of its second wave that inspired explorations of the ‘darker side’ of human nature for a more nuanced understanding of how people can flourish under a wide range of life circumstances. The research comprising this thesis was approached with the philosophy of the second wave of Positive Psychology as a framework and aimed through the use of various methodologies, to explore the adaptive role of negative emotions in goal-pursuit with specific focus on fear of failure. Chapter one consists of an exploratory study of a mixed-method nature that made use of a SenseMaker® software tool to explore the depth of the fear of failure experience in hopes of making a judgement regarding its value in goal-pursuit. Two-hundred participants provided a narrative of a fear of failure experience and attributed their own meaning to the story in a self-signification framework designed by the researcher to capture the cognitive, emotional and behavioural profiles of fear of failure. The existence of individual differences in behavioural responses to affective experiences of fear of failure was uncovered as a potential important factor to consider in the study of the utility of negative emotions and therefore inspired the second study to address this issue in a goal-achievement context. Accordingly, study two forms the experimental Chapter and is concerned with a sub-group of the population known as defensive pessimists who provide support for the positive value of negative emotions. These individuals are known to harness their negative emotions to successfully achieve goals and any attempts made to disrupt their habitual strategy negatively affects performance. With the supporting argument that emotion regulation strategies do not offer a ‘one-size-fits all’ solution, Chapter Two aimed to test the effect of an acceptance manipulation, which unlike other regulatory strategies do not seek to directly change thoughts and emotions. Forty-eight defensive pessimists took part and were randomly allocated to manipulation and control groups. The ability of acceptance to create a cognitive space to allow the habitual harnessing of emotion to cease for defensive pessimists provided an opportunity for further investigation in Chapter Three of how to best make use of this space to help defensive pessimists. The final Chapter therefore, consists of an intervention study that contrary to many previous intervening attempts aimed to build enduring resources to support long-term wellbeing and valued goal achievement among defensive pessimists. Twenty-one out of forty-five participants took part in individual coaching sessions consisting of material aimed at increasing self-worth and value-based action. The remaining twenty-four participants formed the control group. Taken as a whole, this research has made important contribution to the study of individual differences in motivation and Positive Psychology and holds wider implications in the context of Higher Education especially. The encompassing message of this thesis is that while negative emotions are both functional and adaptive, their utility for goal achievement can impair wellbeing in the process which poses a dilemma for those in favour of promoting one over the other. The solution proposed in the context of individuals who thrive off of negative emotions is to enable both through a readiness to accept all emotional stimuli and within this space choose to move in spite of fear, but in the direction of intrinsic values and from a place of knowing one’s worth.

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The overarching aim of this PhD was to explore the adaptive role of negative emotions in goal-pursuit with specific focus on fear of failure from a Positive Psychology viewpoint. More specifically, three research studies were conducted to draw attention to 1) the potential value of negative emotions in goal pursuit, 2) individual differences in preferences for negative emotional experiences and current practices used to eradicate negative emotions and 3) ways of encouraging lasting wellbeing without sacrificing the inherent value of negative emotional experiences. By exploring the positive in the seemingly negative, a larger vision of this research is to expand the breadth of Positive Psychology as a field of research to include a wider array of emotions in the understanding and promotion of human flourishing.

### **Positive Psychology**

**First wave.** The field of positive psychology emerged in response to mainstream psychology's disease framework with the overall mission to identify and nurture the good side of human nature rather than fixing the bad. As such, psychological wellbeing was recognised as the mere opposite of *ill*-being that centred around the presence of positive emotions and absence of negative, which became the formula for happiness that research pursuits strived to obtain and better understand. More specifically, the study of wellbeing in positive psychology came to rest upon the three pillars of positive emotions, positive states and traits and positive institutions that laid the foundation for the study of human flourishing, defined as an optimal state of living that is characterised by positive psychological functioning and overall wellbeing (Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005). Through this lens, positive psychology research has been devoted to understanding and encouraging positive emotions as a one-size fits all solution to positive psychological health, all while dismissing the negative and darker side of human nature. By all means, the endeavours of positive psychology have thus far been shown extremely worthwhile with theory development and research supporting the ability of positive emotions to not just generate high levels of wellbeing, but also to prevent disease and increase longevity (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels & Conway, 2009). One significant theoretical contribution to the field that enabled many of these findings is the Broaden-and-Build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), which holds that positive emotions are evolved adaptations that function to build lasting resources. Unlike negative emotions that are thought to narrow attention and cognitions to respond to immediate threats, positive emotions broaden existing ways of

thinking and acting which prompts the individual towards exploration of novel experiences. Over time, these approach tendencies motivated by a broadened mindset are thought to build social, emotional, psychological and coping resources that can be drawn on in future moments to create and maintain wellbeing in challenging times (Fredrickson, 2001). As this suggests, the cultivation of positive emotions such as joy, curiosity, gratitude, interest, amusement and compassion to name a few all play an important role in supporting positive psychology's mission to promote the good life in which a hedonic mode of functioning dominates. Furthermore, in recognising that happiness is not the absence of depression or ill-being, Seligman (2011) developed the PERMA model of wellbeing consisting of five components (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishments) argued to be the building blocks of flourishing beyond merely functioning. Through autonomously engaging with each one of these pathways, Seligman (2011) proposed that individuals can 'create' their own route to flourishing. This model acts as a key theory of wellbeing in positive psychology that has received an abundance of research support in its ability to predict flourishing outcomes such as for instance, vitality and life satisfaction (see e.g. Kern, Waters, Adler & White, 2015; Coffey, Wray-Lake, Mashek & Branand, 2014). Without disregarding these endeavours that have without a doubt brought value to the understanding of wellbeing, attempts of positive psychology to balance mainstream psychology's focus on treating disorders has spiralled too far in the other direction where the reality and benefits of negative emotions and experiences have been overlooked (Held, 2002). As a first example, resilience and other resources that are theorized to result from the availability of positive emotions in fact requires the individual to learn to tolerate negative emotions in order to effectively adapt and navigate through adversity (Joseph, 2011). What is more, emotions in themselves do not exist in a vacuum where the context can be ignored – negative emotions such as anger and frustration can in certain situations motivate the individual to make positive life changes (Netzer, Anan, Igra & Tamir, 2015) whereas optimism, which is highly regarded in positive psychology, has for example been linked to an under-appreciation of risk and risk-taking behaviour (Weinstein, Marcus & Moser, 2005), suggesting that the seemingly 'positive' can be negative in certain circumstances. In further support of the importance of considering contextual variables, Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014) argued that the prime focus of interventions should be helping individuals endorse a full range of psychological states, rather than promoting happiness as it is the reluctance to be in contact with these 'darker' sides of human nature coupled with a yearning for happiness



that are the root causes of suffering. By avoiding to put happiness on a pedestal and increasing the tolerance for hedonically uncomfortable states, the individual will have access to a wider range of emotions to draw upon depending on what best serves the situation (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014). The importance of recognising the value of other emotions besides happiness was further reinforced by Mauss *et al* (2012) who discovered that people who value the pursuit of happiness were lonelier than those who did not and had lower levels of the hormone progesterone that is boosted when a deep connection to others is experienced. These findings led to the conclusion that happiness should not be the ultimate criterion upon which life goals are measured. As these arguments suggest, the premise of the first wave positive psychology movement can and has been both critiqued and undermined as it is not all-encompassing of the true nature of the human condition in which negative states of mind are not dysfunctions, but rather reflective of what it means to be human in a troubling world.

**Second wave.** The recognition of these important limitations of the first wave instigated the development of a more balanced, dual-system model of positive psychology (Wong, 2011) that aims to synthesize the positive and negative aspects of living that are representative of the human being in its totality. This novel perspective aligns with what Lomas and Ivztan (2016) referred to as the ‘principle of complementarity’, which sees wellbeing as a dynamic interplay between the opposites of negative versus positive and light versus dark elements of the human condition that are co-dependent and should therefore not be studied in isolation. In contrast to the first wave therefore, the definition of wellbeing from a second wave perspective constitutes positive *and* negative elements of human nature. As this suggests, the new model of wellbeing took a large step away from Seligman *et al*’s (2005) three-pillar endeavour for positive psychology which considers the relief of suffering and cultivation of happiness as two separate processes. Instead, it views these processes as being inherently interconnected and argues that the study of what is good about people in times of prosperity is only half of the story of what incorporates wellbeing. For a more complete account, positive psychology needs to complement these pursuits with an understanding of how people can function well in bad times *in spite of* their internal and external limitations (Wong, 2011).

Accordingly, the model rests upon four pillars that are deemed adamant for flourishing: virtue, meaning, resilience and wellbeing - all reflective of the process of the good life rather than just happiness as an outcome, which allows research to study the

interactive effects of positives and negatives that have previously not been well incorporated into measures of wellbeing (Wong, 2011). This includes for example, the imperative role of context in the assessment of subjective wellbeing, defined as an affective and cognitive evaluation of one's life (Diener, 1987). As claimed by Wong (2011), a global score of an evaluation as such is meaningless without a consideration of situational variables and past histories, as these factors hold information about the circumstances under which a person was able to arrive at a certain level of wellbeing. Consequently, this type of analysis is bound to entail a vast array of negative experiences that not only will give important clues regarding the adaptive efforts involved in rising strong from a place of suffering, but also reveal the multiple pathways to happiness that in many cases do not begin with positive emotions although this may be the outcome from having achieved high levels of meaning or resilience by fully engaging with the process of life.

These pathways to happiness that stretch beyond the pursuit of positive emotions involve for instance, eudaimonic strivings which are characterised by the attainment of meaning/purpose, achievement, intrinsic motivation, virtue, self-transcendence and authenticity to name a few – all of which can involve a significant amount of struggle but that nonetheless contribute to a life of fulfilment and flourishing (Wong, 2011). This suggests that there is not just one road to happiness where positive emotions await at the destination, as currently reflected in measures of subjective wellbeing. In fact, a person can fail to reach a goal but still feel content with their actions (i.e. the process), which suggests that a meaning-orientation to life may be more adaptive than striving to feel good in terms of overcoming adversity and maintaining wellbeing in moments of suffering. With these arguments in place arising from a perspective that acknowledges the inherent value of negative experiences, positive psychology is challenged to expand its notion of what constitutes a good life and continue with the mission of helping individuals flourish, but *in spite of* the pains and hardships they may be enduring.

### **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Psychological Flexibility**

Expanding the breadth of positive psychology to include a wider array of emotions at the forefront of research inquiries aligns with the philosophy that governs ACT. With its roots in the contextual behavioural sciences, the ACT approach offers a unique and creative approach to behaviour change that is based upon teachings of mindfulness and values-oriented behavioural therapy. The aim of ACT, like that of positive psychology, is to promote

optimal functioning and maximize the potential of individuals to experience a rich and meaningful life. At a functional level, this is accomplished by encouraging psychological flexibility, in which the individual is taught through mindfulness and acceptance work to be in contact with the present moment fully regardless of what emotions are experienced, and to change or persist in behaviour in the service of chosen values based on what the situation requires (Hayes, 2004). Thus, ACT places a stronger emphasis on the relationship individuals have with their emotions and any resistance experienced is approached with an accepting attitude of what is outside of personal control coupled with a commitment to action in the service of values rather than troubling emotions. Like positive psychology, the components of ACT have received an abundance of research support in the last decade, with over sixty randomised controlled trials being carried out in clinical and non-clinical populations (Kashdan & Ciarrochi, 2013). With the rise of the second wave of positive psychology that similarly to ACT embraces both light and dark sides of the human psyche, it is time to unify these fields for a more comprehensive and all-encompassing understanding of optimal functioning. The research comprising this thesis will therefore draw upon the tenets of ACT to embrace the fear of failure experience.

### **Positive Psychology in goal-pursuit**

**Approach and Avoidance Motivation.** Motivation is a central concept in psychology referring to the ‘energy’ or ‘driving force’ of behaviour that has long been deemed essential for successful adaptation and survival of not just humans, but of all living organisms (Elliot, 2008). In the study of human behaviour in goal-pursuit, the approach-avoidance distinction of motivation is crucial as it reveals the direction in which behaviour is energised. From a hedonic viewpoint, seeking pleasure and avoiding pain are the ultimate and most fundamental motives that govern movement (Elliot, 2008). An approach goal is motivated by the prospect of pleasure or a positive experienced state and involves action that diminishes the discrepancy between a current and desired state (i.e. the goal). If the approach to attain is successful, excitement typically follows. If unsuccessful at reaching the desired state, it is a loss that give rise to sadness. On the opposite, avoidance motivation entails the anticipation of a negative experience that can inflict pain in one way or another and therefore initiates behaviour in favour of enlarging the discrepancy between a current and undesirable state (Tamir & Diener, 2008). Typically, the overt behaviour is withdrawal or inaction in order to maintain this space and if successful in doing so, the individual experiences

calmness. However, if the undesirable outcome becomes reality, anxiety is usually the feeling that accompanies (Tamir & Diener, 2008).

Clearly, at a functional level both approach and avoidance are critical for successfully adapting to the environment but beyond merely surviving, which one is best supportive of positive psychology's mission of encouraging a good life? Given the predominance of arguments in favour of positive affective experiences as critical determinants of wellbeing, research has supported approach goals as most conducive to wellbeing both in the outcome and process of the pursuit (Tamir & Diener, 2008). From a telic theoretical perspective in which wellbeing is viewed as a product of goal fulfilment (e.g. Diener & Ryan, 2009), the frequency of success should be the main determinant of a person's wellbeing assuming that all pleasant emotions contribute to this state. While both approach and avoidance goals have the potential of inducing pleasant and unpleasant affect as a function of the outcome as explained above, the frequency of success is according to telic theories greater when pursuing approach goals as the progression towards a desirable end-state is easier to monitor than the progress towards and undesirable end-point. Likewise, and in additional support of the desirability of pleasure, the process (i.e. activity) of pursuing approach goals is more likely to favour wellbeing than the process of avoidance goals as the former give rise to positive cognitions during the pursuit whereas the latter commonly elicit negative cognitions and unpleasant affect in the constant monitoring of unwanted and threatening outcomes (Tamir & Diener, 2008). Taken together, it seems approach motivation is a stronger contributor to wellbeing than avoidance both in the process and outcome of goal pursuit, due to its association with positive affective experiences and cognitions.

However, affect-based theories of functioning in motivation that assess the value of approach and avoidance motivation in this black-and-white manner are liable to the same critique as the premise of first wave positive psychology – putting pleasant emotion at the forefront of human experience and as the ultimate measure of successful goal-pursuit undermines the capacity of avoidance motives to facilitate behaviour in the direction of a more subjective perception of what constitutes wellbeing. After all, positive emotions are one aspect of wellbeing that, as argued above, are worthy of being pursued in some contexts and for *some* individuals, as the forthcoming sections will reveal. Another component of psychological wellbeing is meaning, whereby the individual is driven to pursue goals that carry some kind of personal significance that stretch beyond the pursuit of happiness (Ryff, 2014). In these instances, approach and avoidance matters equally (Elliot & Church, 2002).

As this suggests, the relationship between approach-avoidance motivation and wellbeing is complex and one that cannot be fully appreciated without considering individual differences in what people want to feel, when and why. As will be demonstrated in the following sections, emotions are not merely end-products that are facilitated by approach and avoidance goals, but are misrepresented as such in many theoretical underpinnings. Individuals differ in what they want to feel, not just when the desired state has been reached, but also *during* the pursuit in which emotions serve a purpose for behaviour (e.g. Tamir, 2005). Accordingly, it is the desirability of the emotional state that will determine the adaptiveness of approach versus avoidance motivation and further inquiry into the reasons for a particular preference will shed light on its potential benefit to wellbeing.

### **Instrumentality of negative emotions in goal-pursuit**

**Fear of failure.** In his Need Achievement theory, Atkinson (1957) argued that human goal achievement is the product of a conflict between the individual's motive to approach with expectancies for success and the need to avoid negative outcomes associated with failure. Therefore, the motive to enlarge the discrepancy between a current state and an undesirable outcome is deeply connected to fear of failure in the anticipatory stage of goal-pursuit that give rise to negative cognitions and emotions, which in turn are thought to impair wellbeing. Not only that, fear of failure is typically the fuel for the overt behaviour witnessed in the pursuit of avoidance goals that directs the individual away and sometimes even towards the goal to maximise chances of succeeding to not fail (Atkinson, 1957). As such, fear of failure acts as an alarm that arises when the individual perceives obstacles to goal achievement (e.g. challenges, lack of control) that in some way threatens the protection or fulfilment of innate psychological needs known as autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The inherent 'danger' perceived in these instances that give rise to the fear of failure experience is linked to five aversive consequences of failure identified by Conroy (2001) as: fears of experiencing shame and embarrassment, fears of devaluing one's estimate, fears of having an uncertain future, fears of important others losing interest and fears of upsetting important others. The aversiveness of these consequences is rooted in the shame experience which is thought to lie at the very core of fear of failure (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). When experiencing shame upon failure, the anticipated consequences listed above becomes real to the individual who not only feels inherently defective and exposed but also judged as unworthy of love and belonging. It is therefore no wonder that such deep

concerns about relational disruption orients individuals away from any anticipated situation (e.g. An achievement goal) that may elicit shame (McGregor & Elliot, 2005).

These behavioural tendencies in response to shame are supported by the Self-Worth Theory (Covington, 1984) which acknowledges individuals' need for self-acceptance as a stronger motivational pull than the need for competence. Therefore, individuals go to great lengths to protect their sense of worth as is, as failure would act as the ultimate proof of low ability which is the most tangible measure of one's worthiness (Covington, 1984). However, the behaviour initiated by the need to protect self and avoid shame is not purely directed away from the undesired state. The underpinnings of the self-worth theory can be used to understand how emotions in the context of motivation are more than end-products that individuals strive to attain, they are also used because of their instrumental value to move avoidance-oriented individuals *towards* the goal of avoiding failure.

**Defensive Pessimism.** Defensive pessimists represent a sub-group of individuals who fall into the category of failure avoidance because their strategy in goal-pursuit is geared towards protection of worth more so than attainment of success (Covington & Omlich, 1991). Typically, failure avoiders are characterised by their high anxiety and fear of failure, low belief in self, low perceptions of control, low self-esteem, declined mental health and express behaviour that aligns with their avoidant nature, such as withdrawal, procrastination, self-handicapping (Covington & Omelich, 1991). Defensive pessimists on the other hand, deviate from the typically observed behavioural norm as they despite their assumed low control and self-beliefs use their anxieties about failure to approach the goal with determined efforts to not fail (Norem & Cantor, 1986). In other words, they aim for success in order to avoid failure. Furthermore, defensive pessimists are high performers but are thought to set unrealistically low expectations prior to performance and engage in endless reflections of what could go wrong. Accordingly, these individuals brace themselves for the worst possible outcome and work proactively to avoid it becoming reality (Norem & Cantor, 1986). While there has been no evidence suggesting that defensive pessimists score higher on for example, grit or neuroticism, what these individuals do have in common besides their heightened state of anxiety is their future-oriented time perspective that drives them forward in a proactive fashion with determination to persist in the face of challenge (Norem & Cantor, 1986). It is thought that defensive pessimists make up approximately 25 percent of any given population drawn from an achievement context (Norem, 2001). As their profile suggests, negative emotions can be positive in certain contexts and for some individuals who prefer to

experience these affective states that help them achieve an end-state that is desirable and therefore of value. To illustrate the contrast between this instrumental perspective and the hedonic understanding of the role of motivation in wellbeing: defensive pessimists do not strive for happiness with their actions, but as far as the end-point is concerned, research to date has found no short-term differences between their levels of wellbeing in comparison to optimists (e.g. Norem & Illingsworth, 1993). The same may, however, not be true for sustained wellbeing on a longer-term basis. While there has been no longitudinal investigation of defensive pessimists' wellbeing, researchers have raised issues regarding the potential negative effects of being in a constant state of alarm on individuals' physical as well as mental health. For instance, Seery, West, Weisbuch and Blascovich (2008) raised concerns regarding the deleterious health effects of being in a prolonged state of threat with a constant activation of the body's fight-or-flight system. What is more, Ntoumanis, Taylor and Standage (2010) found a negative association between enjoyment and desire to participate in extracurricular activities, suggesting that the strategy of defensive pessimists may take a toll on their motivation to engage in purposeful activities. While Norem and Cantor's (1990) research on defensive pessimism points to no negative consequences of their strategy when used short-term, authors predicted that no such anxiety-ridden strategy could be maintained in the long term without an eventual drop in both performance and life satisfaction. As these arguments suggest, the adaptive 'label' attached to the defensive pessimist strategy may benefit from being reconsidered as far as wellbeing is concerned.

### **Fear of Failure and Defensive Pessimism from a Positive Psychology perspective**

Provided the current context, it is of utmost relevance to question where the multi-faceted nature of fear of failure and its central role in the strategy of defensive pessimists sit within the study and quest of positive psychology. Does it have a place in furthering the understanding of human flourishing? From the perspective and philosophy of first wave positive psychology, the answer to this question is twofold. First, it could be argued that it does not have a place due to its inherent negative nature. In fact, defensive pessimism and its accompanying emotions may mistakenly be dismissed in attempts to foster positive affective experiences as part of a one-size-fits-all solution. Failure to account for individual differences in emotional preferences will not benefit the individual or the outcome of such pursuits, as it is highly likely that interventions would be shown ineffective or even cause harm (e.g. Spencer & Norem, 1996). On the other hand, defensive pessimism sits partly well within

Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, as their strategy is focused on achievement which is the last component of the model deemed crucial for flourishing. However, Seligman also pinpointed that in order for achievement to encourage flourishing, it needs to be autonomously driven and self-fulfilling, which stand in stark contrast to the self-protective movement of defensive pessimists. Therefore, defensive pessimism may in fact not have a place in the teachings of positive psychology.

However, in the second wave of positive psychology defensive pessimism can be recognised as a co-valenced state of functioning, meaning that its presence is difficult to characterise as either good or bad (Lomas & Ivztan, 2016). On the one hand, the affective experience of defensive pessimists could potentially be harmful in the long run as mentioned above, in which case it is not conducive to wellbeing but functions merely as a strategy for anxiety relief. On the other hand, the willingness that emerged with the second wave to acknowledge the importance of the context in the judgement of good versus bad states allows for the value of defensive pessimism and fear of failure to be brought to the light. Accordingly, defensive pessimism is not an approach that needs 'fixing' or removing. Quite on the contrary, the manner in which these individuals use negative emotions to their advantage represents what Wong (2011) referred to as an optimal level of adaptation to a negative condition that coincides with his stated mission for the future of positive psychology to balance approach and avoidance-oriented emotions for optimal transcendence. From this perspective, it seems the approach of defensive pessimists could provide a good example for future research wishing to achieve this balance.

At a surface level of inquiry, the ways of defensive pessimists in goal-pursuit may well coincide with the mission of the second wave of positive psychology to embrace the negatives, but the question of whether it is an adaptive state that should be encouraged and supported cannot be answered without delving deeper into reasons behind this seemingly functional behaviour that facilitates successful goal achievement. That is, what is it about avoidance motives that bring individuals into action? Thus far, inquiries into the role of approach and avoidance motivation in wellbeing have judged the ability of these conflicting forces to get the individual *to* a desirable and feasible end-point. As such, both have been deemed appropriate and conducive to wellbeing as a function of individual differences in desires to attain versus not lose something.

While defensive pessimism can be viewed as adaptive in successfully avoiding an outcome, there has been no consideration of the meaning behind the desire to avoid failure



when judging its appropriateness and instrumental use. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), goal desirability in pursuits of meaning should be determined by the extent to which the goal is congruent with an individual's most authentic self and is as a result, only conducive to wellbeing if the strive reflects core values. The existing profile of defensive pessimists stand again in stark contrast to this view; while movement may be overtly successful, it is defensively driven by a deep desire to avoid the pain associated with a shame experience. Even so, its use in goal-pursuit can from a functional perspective be considered instrumental as the emotions, regardless of their source, successfully brings the individual from a current to a desired state. From a much broader perspective where wellbeing is also a cause for concern, clarity is needed on how and if the motivation to protect one's worth against perceived judgements of others works in favour of positive psychology's core mission of helping individuals to not just perform but also flourish and lead a good and healthy life. If it does, the breadth of positive psychology's focus is limited to the surface of observable events and has not in its research pursuits grasped the meaning of flourishing from a place where the individual also feels whole. If the motive to self-protect does not lie within positive psychology's agenda for flourishing, research within the realms of goal-pursuit and achievement will be challenged to find ways of supporting wellbeing without necessarily sacrificing the drive to achieve. This endeavour may involve focussing on building strengths from within before attending to the outer aspects of the individual's life and encourage action towards the achievement of goals that are congruent with valued end-states rather than fear.

### **The present research**

This thesis is made up of three chapters concordant with the philosophy of the second wave of positive psychology that views negative emotions as an integral component of human flourishing. Accordingly, this research was conducted without any agenda to change or eliminate negative emotional experiences, but rather with the overarching aim to explore the function of fear of failure in the context of goal-pursuit and the role of individual differences therein. The three chapters presented below were designed to support this aim and thus, contribute to the understanding of the role of negative emotions in flourishing.

Chapter one consisting of a two-part mixed measures design, set out to explore the depth of experience of fear of failure including its emotional, cognitive and behavioural profiles in order to shed light on its potential adaptive role in goal-pursuit. For this exploratory purpose, a SenseMaker® software tool was used that enables a combination of

quantitative and qualitative data for an in-depth analysis. The SenseMaker® framework is based on the assumption that stories and story-telling lie at the heart of human experience and daily discourse and therefore serves as an appropriate tool for making sense of any given subjective experience. Accordingly, the participant's story of a failure experience lays the foundation for this study, which was quantitatively explored in Part 1, using a self-signification framework (explained more in-depth within the chapter). Part 2 consists of the qualitative component in which the narratives were analysed using Thematic Analysis to delve deeper into some questions regarding the fear of failure experience that were not answered by the quantitative analysis. As such, this first study was largely exploratory.

Chapter two is made up of an experimental study that is concerned with individual differences in emotional preferences and the use of emotion regulation strategies to change unwanted emotions. More specifically, two groups of defensive pessimists were utilised in an experimental and control condition to investigate the effect on of an Acceptance manipulation on their task persistence in order to test the hypothesis that defensive pessimists' efforts will suffer from any attempts to alter their emotional experience.

Chapter three is an intervention study that was carried out with the main purpose of encouraging wellbeing and value-driven goal-pursuit among defensive pessimists through the building of personal resources. Over the span of two weeks, participants attended one-to-one coaching sessions with the investigator that were both interactive and reflective in nature and required participants to engage with exercises designed to facilitate the overall aim. A control group was used for comparison that did not take part in the intervention.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Making Sense of the Fear of Failure Experience: An In-Depth Exploration of its Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioural Profiles**

The aim of this chapter was to explore the essence of the fear of failure experience in hopes of gaining an understanding of its adaptive role in goal-pursuit. To achieve this aim, the SenseMaker® software was used as an exploratory tool in a mixed-measures design. Two-hundred participants provided a narrative of a time they feared failure of a valued goal and in part one, the SenseMaker® software enabled a quantitative investigation of the cognitive, emotional and behavioural profiles of the fear of failure experience. In part two, a thematic analysis of stories was carried out in response to quantitative findings to gain a more in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. Findings combining both analyses revealed that fear of failure relates to extrinsic pursuits and what permeates the experience is an intense vulnerability regarding others' opinions of self that urges the individual to take action towards the goal to avoid being unfavourably judged. As such, it was concluded that the emotional and cognitive representations of fear of failure can promote successful goal-pursuit and thus, be regarded as instrumental. The detailed exploration of fear of failure has theoretical implications that concerns its underrepresentation in the literature and from a practical viewpoint, the consequences of fear of failure on wellbeing are raised in response to its seemingly adaptive nature.

*Key words:* Fear of failure, motivation, goal-directed behaviour, failure consequences, instrumentality of emotion, extrinsic strivings, narrative research.

Negative emotions such as depressive mood states, anger, sadness to name a few have throughout the history of psychology had a bad reputation due to its role in psychopathology and psychological distress, which motivated research to study this ‘troubled’ side of human life (Sheldon & King, 2001). Up to this day, research within mainstream psychology focus on ‘fixing’ negative emotions that are viewed as troublesome due to their hedonic (i.e. felt) tone and positive psychology research strives to promote positive emotion while not paying much attention to the negative. As these trends suggest, psychology has based its study of emotions and their role in human functioning on their hedonic tone alone, which has led to a classification of emotions as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on how emotions are felt. Fear of failure, which is the emotion under scrutiny in the current study is of no exception. Due to its ability to provoke intense anxiety in the anticipation stage of a goal that is of perceived value to the individual, fear of failure is a commonly experienced so-called negative emotion in goal-pursuit that arise when obstacles to goal achievement are considered or experienced. It is largely unclear what type of goal elicits fear of failure – some argue it is a response to a thwarting of intrinsic need fulfilment of belonging, autonomy and achievement (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2000) whereas others have regarded fear of failure as an emotion resulting from a need to protect existing personal perceptions of for example, competence (Covington & Omelich, 1991). Regardless of when it is most commonly manifested, fears of failing to bring about a desired outcome has its root in the shame experience. Universally, shame is an aversive and painful human emotion grounded in a general evaluation of the self in relation to the ideal standards of a social context and thereby cognitively manifested as a belief of being flawed and unworthy of connection (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). A wish to protect self and avoid the relational insecurity associated with the aversive consequences of shame therefore acts as a strong motive to fear events that may elicit feelings of incompetence and threaten one’s need for social connection.

As this suggests, the emotional reaction that comes with the prospect of shame can reach intensities that although seemingly adaptive in avoiding pain, many times acts as an obstacle to goal achievement. Therefore, fear of failure has understandably received a negative standing in emotion research whereby its consequences and correlates have been thoroughly investigated. This research study on the other hand, sets out to explore fear of failure in a more positive light and aims to understand if this negative emotion can be of advantage to the individual.

### **The adaptive nature of negative emotions**

Fearing failure of life goals is not only an aversive experience in itself (Conroy, 2001); the threats associated with potential failure often initiate self-protective behaviours that steer the individual away from the goal. For instance, in life domains where individual achievement is highly valued by self and others (e.g. in sports and academia), fear of failure has been associated with avoidance and self-handicapping behaviours, such as distraction, physical escape, procrastination and reduction of effort, which in turn have strong links with learned helplessness and depression (Martin & Marsh, 2003). In his Need Achievement Theory, Atkinson (1957) equated these behaviours with avoidance motivation, in which the need to escape an anticipated negative outcome overtakes the potential rewards of goal achievement. While this is a commonly observed behavioural profile of individuals who fear failure, this multifaceted emotion has also been recognized for its potential to direct behaviour *towards* the goal despite the presence of negative emotions (Tamir, Chiu & Gross, 2007). These action tendencies have in particular been witnessed in the academic domain, whereby the anxiety associated with fear of failure motivates the individual to approach the goal using strategies aimed at avoiding failure at any cost. For example, Norem and Illingsworth (1993) noted that this was a common behavioural profile of a defensive pessimistic thinking style, in which individuals use their negative emotions to take control of the situation. This involves reflecting on all possible outcomes of a given situation and in so doing, planning the route and concrete steps towards the desired goal while at the same time avoiding disaster. In this manner, the anxiety and other negative emotions experienced act as a drive to effective preparation and are, contrary to common beliefs, not emotional states that need to be changed. In fact, when these individuals are asked to ‘think positive’, their anxiety increases and performance is significantly impaired as they are not allowed to harness their negative emotions (Norem & Illingsworth, 1993). This suggests that positivity may not always facilitate performance and also provides strong evidence for the potential positive function of certain negative emotions involved in goal-pursuit.

Similar to this view, Tamir, Mitchell and Gross (2008) looked beyond the hedonic quality of emotions and argued that any so-called ‘negative’ emotion can serve an important function depending on the context and the goal. That is, people sometimes prefer to experience unpleasant emotions when these states can promote the achievement of a valued goal. For example, the authors demonstrated that participants wanted to experience anger when preparing for a confrontational goal (Tamir et al., 2008) and further research has also

shown that fear can be a preferred emotion in instances when individuals prepare to avoid a threatening outcome (Tamir & Ford, 2009). While these emotional states may be unpleasant to experience and therefore coined as ‘negative’ as previously mentioned, the function they serve in goal-pursuit can indeed be positive and adaptive as demonstrated above, which suggests it is important for future research to also consider the instrumental value of emotions rather than just their hedonic tone.

### **The present study**

In regards to fear of failure, past research has clearly established its negative impact on goal-pursuit and wellbeing as it is common for individuals to direct their behaviour away from the goal in a self-protective manner. Moreover, recent research uncovering the adaptive value of negative emotions as discussed above alludes to the potential positive effect of fear of failure on behaviour. Given that fear of failure can direct behaviour in two opposing directions (i.e. away from or towards the goal), it is worth further investigating the conditions that promote goal achievement without necessarily aiming to eliminate the emotion. After all, (as will be discussed below) it is the reluctance to be in contact with uncomfortable emotional states that cause more problem than the emotions themselves. The objective of this study directly aligns with the broader aim of this thesis, which is to uncover ways of creating positive change without eliminating emotions based on their hedonic tone alone.

Accordingly, the current study embarks upon the mission of unravelling the subtler factors that make up the essence of the fear of failure experience in order to understand the circumstances under which it promotes or hinders goal-pursuit. This aim carries important implications for those wishing to support for example, students on their academic journey. For this purpose, an exploration of the emotions-behaviour profile along with associated cognitive factors of the fear of failure experience (perceived control, self-esteem, role of past failures) is carried out using a mixed-measures research design. The quantitative investigation enables the relationship between variables to be assessed by group (high vs. low fear of failure) and the qualitative analysis is used as a complementary method for an in-depth understanding of the fear of failure experience.

### **Beyond the felt experience: Individuals’ relationship with their internal experiences**

One missing component of previous explorations of fear of failure is the inquiry into the relationship that individuals have with their uncomfortable emotions and thoughts relating

to the experience. Research literature within the field of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) argue that it is not necessarily the presence of these experiences that lead to problems, it is rather the way individuals process and appraise these internal experiences that play a critical role in behaviour and wellbeing (Hayes, 2004). That is, whether one is willing to allow uncomfortable states to exist without resisting or attempting to change these. As a matter of fact, most individuals are not willing to accept these emotions and instead retrieve to experiential avoidance techniques such as rejection, suppression and avoidance, all of which are common techniques used to manage emotional expression on a daily basis. When used on a short-term basis, these have been shown successful at controlling unwanted private events (Hayes, 2004), but when applied rigidly and inflexibly over longer periods of time they become problematic, as the energy and effort devoted to controlling and managing unwanted affect gets in the way of movement towards valued goals in life. As this struggle to avoid emotions and thoughts is common in response to daily life events, research has found experiential avoidance to be a significant contributor to reduced wellbeing and unsuccessful goal-pursuit (Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth & Steger, 2005). Given that fear of failure is at an emotional and experiential level extremely aversive, it is highly likely that experiential avoidance of this felt experience is a contributing factor to the avoidance behaviours witnessed, and therefore an important concept that requires scrutiny.

### **The role of past failures in current anticipations**

When considering the ways in which individuals respond to failure anticipation, the role of the past cannot be ignored, as earlier life experiences are thought to play a vital role in the learning of new behaviour, coping strategies and regulatory processes (Ajzen, 2002). While these events can entail a vast array of both success and failure, research has taken particular interest in experiences of failure, as these have been found to either ‘make’ or ‘break’ the individual. In regards to the former, a failure event can despite its emotional consequences offer opportunities for personal growth and strength of character if the individual is receptive to these. In fact, previous research on human response to adversity suggests that the struggle with less fortunate life events and even trauma can result in positive psychological change such as a greater appreciation of life, increased personal strength and a change in perspective (Linley & Joseph, 2004). However, responses to negative life events whether it may be failure or trauma vary greatly among individuals; while some may experience these positive changes, others will ‘break’ and feel a heightened sense of

vulnerability, hopelessness and depression (e.g. learned helplessness, Maier & Seligman, 1976.) Regardless of response, past experiences of negative life events do not seem to leave the individual unaffected and as previous failures are concerned, the current study seeks to understand how these have affected future anticipations as this could shed light on potential solutions to mitigate intense reactions.

### **Control of outcome and the nature of the fear**

Feeling in control of the outcome of one's life endeavours has been regarded as a necessary condition for purposeful action, bringing a sense of security and certainty (Bandura, 2001). However, the degree to which the individual feels able to influence the outcome by his/her actions may to a large extent depend on what type goal is being pursued. For example, in the sports domain in which much research on fear of failure has been conducted (e.g. Sagar, Lavalley & Spray, 2009), goals are often performance related, meaning that the outcome (i.e. one's success) will not only be influenced by one's own efforts but also by others that one is competing against. Therefore, the degree to which one can control the outcome is limited by external factors. On the contrary, mastery goals reflect aspirations that are largely concerned with long-term learning and interest for one's own sake (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Achievement of these goals is more measured by own standards and may therefore be perceived as more attainable and controllable than goals that depend on external indicators and validation.

Fear of failure has been positively associated with feelings of uncontrollability (Martin, 2002), suggesting that its presence may be most pertinent in pursuits of a performance-oriented nature where the individual is not fully in charge of the final outcome. However, given that high intensities of fear of failure have been witnessed amongst students prior to goal engagement (Martin, 2007), it is necessary to bring clarity to this association by investigating individuals' perception of control in relation to the nature of the fear and the type of goal being pursued. If control beliefs are shown to not be a matter of concern, it ought to be questioned why individuals fear the consequences of failure if they feel they can successfully achieve the goal. It may, for instance, be the case that these feared consequences extend beyond objective failure to a more subjective perception of not feeling that the outcome is 'good enough' in the eyes of self and significant others.



### **Fear of failure, self-esteem and perceived personal control**

Global self-esteem has been defined as a positive or negative evaluation toward the self as a totality (Rosenberg, Shoenbach, Schooler & Rosenberg, 1995) and has not only been found to be an important predictor of psychological wellbeing, but also an essential determinant of the way individuals responds to both positive and negative life events. While no significant group differences have been found between high versus low self-esteem in response to success and positive life events, levels of self-esteem matter greatly in events of failure. Brown and Dutton (1995) found that individuals with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to emotional distress following failure than those with high esteem, as the latter group is more likely to dismiss the negative consequences of failure. Moreover, self-esteem seems to also play a role in failure anticipation - an unstable self-esteem often acts as a motivator to defend against the loss of esteem in events of failure, as these instances are thought to bring about a diminished perception of self (Martin & Marsh, 2007). Given that self-esteem regardless of high or low levels seem very much contingent upon an individuals' accomplishments, the current study seeks to understand the role of higher levels of esteem in the process of failure anticipation. That is, can self-esteem that is high (and most likely contingent) protect against fears of failing? The answer to this question could simultaneously shed light on the potential implications of being protected from fears by an esteem that is rooted in a conditional regard for self. Moreover, taking into consideration that high esteem has previously been coupled with a perceived sense of personal control in life (Koivula, Hassmen & Fallby, 2002), the current study also examines the relation between these two factors and fear of failure in hopes of understanding their joint impact.

### **The methodology: SenseMaker®**

Fear of failure is a highly subjective emotion commonly experienced by people of all walks of life and therefore requires a careful methodological approach that can capture the depth and subtleties of this emotion. Therefore, the use of the SenseMaker® software tool which combines qualitative and quantitative approaches was deemed most appropriate for an in-depth exploration of fear of failure and the above-mentioned variables. While most cognitive psychological approaches to the study of emotions have employed narrative primes or mnemonic recall of narrative experiences to elicit and explore subjective emotions (Kensinger, 2007), SenseMaker®, on the other hand, focuses its research on the story itself, which is rich in the emotion in question.

Essentially, this framework is based on the assumption that stories are at the heart of daily discourse and a tool that humans of all levels of literacy use to make sense of the surrounding world (Snowden, 1999). Like other narrative research methods, SenseMaker® also challenges the assumption of objectivity in traditional research methods, arguing that the world is constructed by social agency and any attempt made to intervene will impact that reality. From this point of view, the use of surveys, questionnaires and other quantitative methods are limited on their own and not sufficient to capture the complexities and meaning behind human behaviour (Snowden, 1999). Therefore, the individual's story, i.e. their reality/experience, is the cornerstone of SenseMaker® frameworks, which also contains other unique methodological attributes that sets it apart from other narrative methods.

The richness of qualitative as opposed to quantitative data is a strong argument for its use, but most often this richness is 'lost in translation' as the researcher attempts to extract meaning from stories told. From a Sense-Making perspective, the reader is a story-teller him/herself, who interprets the text from his/her own context and belief system and then re-tells this story to an audience (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). Consequently, the end-product does not necessarily reflect the participant's experience as intended, and this is an unfortunate limitation of traditional qualitative approaches. In response to these shortcomings, the SenseMaker® approach to narrative research gives the power back to the participant by allowing them to decide and describe what their story means with hopes of creating a common context for translation to be more effective (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). This is accomplished through a tagging system, in which the participant tags their story in a self-signification framework designed by the researcher. In this manner, the participant gets to add a layer of meaning to the story within a shared context that does not require active interpretation by the researcher. This process of data collection produces the best of two worlds in a single intervention; quantitative data with reduced cognitive bias supported by the richness of self-interpreted narratives, which can be used to inform or generate research hypotheses (Snowden, 1999). That said, qualitative methods (e.g. Thematic analysis), are commonly utilised as a complementary tool for a more nuanced understanding of data trends.

The current study made use of the SenseMaker® software primarily as an exploratory tool to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature of fear of failure and its relation to goal-pursuit. The insights provided by participants' self-interpreted narratives inspired the use of quantitative techniques to explore relationships between variables that could potentially support the investigation of how and when fear of failure hinders or promotes goal-pursuit.

The analyses were guided by previous research and while the hypotheses were left non-directional due to the exploratory nature of the research, it was predicted that: 1) self-esteem and personal control would have significant associations with fear of failure, 2) individuals' locus of control would be significantly related to the nature of the feared goal, 3) individuals' struggle with their thoughts and emotions would significantly relate to goal withdrawal and 4) past failures would have a significant reinforcing effect on current fears of failing.

Additionally, a Thematic Analysis of narratives was carried out in response to quantitative findings to fill the gaps and seek greater depth of understanding. The approach taken to this qualitative analysis was largely deductive, as questions deriving from the quantitative analysis were used as a guide for exploration of stories.

## Methods

### Design

This study, consisting of two parts as a whole, utilised a mixed methods research design, in which the SenseMaker® software was used as a tool to combine the objectivity of numerical data in part one with the richness of narrative analysis in part two for an experiential understanding of the phenomena related to fear of failure. Although the study was exploratory in nature, the constructs under scrutiny that acted as dependent variables in the subsequent quantitative analyses were fear of failure, nature of the fear, goal withdrawal. The independent variables associated with these were self-esteem and personal control, locus of control, levels of experiential avoidance and the role of past failures, respectively. Participants interpreted their own narrative at the point of capture in a set of signifiers (explained in more detail below) that were designed by researchers. These signifiers related the variables stated above including the cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to failure anticipation, control of outcome, nature of the fear and the role of past failures. In turn, these were used in the quantitative analysis that explored associations between variables. In addition, to explore the relationship between personal control, self-esteem and fear of failure, three self-report questionnaires measuring these constructs were used to complement the SenseMaker® data. Demographic variables included gender, age, occupation, recent history of mental illness, religion, country of origin and social support; all of which were accounted for as potential extraneous variables in the analysis. However, when applied as filters to the overall pattern of responses in the SenseMaker® Explorer v2.5b analysis software no visual clusters of concern were revealed, so these were excluded from the overall analysis. In part two, a Thematic Analysis was carried out using the narratives provided as a complementary method.

### Participants

All in all, 200 participants took part in this study and provided one narrative each. These were 35 males (17.5%) and 165 females (82.5%) between the ages of 18-73. Participants consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students from Bangor University, Wales, as well as employed and retired members of the general public. The majority were undergraduate students (87%) and self-selected through Bangor University's research participation scheme, SONA. The remaining participants were recruited via email and social

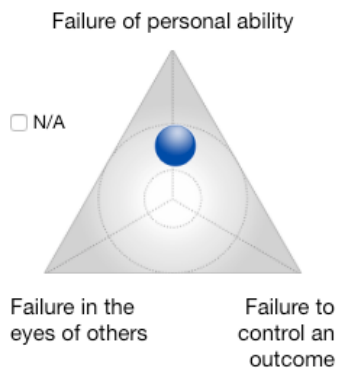
network sites. The study was approved by Bangor University's research ethics committee.

## Materials

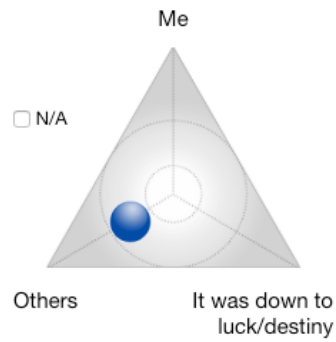
The current research made use of SenseMaker® v3.0 as a web-based tool for capturing and indexing narratives; in this case relating to a person's fear of failure. SenseMaker® is a statistical software developed by Cognitive Edge Pte Ltd that captures micro-narratives and allows participants to make sense of their own stories against a set of predefined indices of interest. The first page of the online SenseMaker® (after study information and consent) provided participants with the prompting statement: "Think about a time in the past when you have feared failure whilst pursuing a valued goal and write a story of this experience/event. Note that the story does not have to relate to your academic pursuits, it can be from your everyday life". Participants added further meaning to these stories in a self-signification framework that consisted of higher-order factors. These were created based on researcher's interest in the cognitive, emotional and behavioural profile of fear of failure as well as factors that could potentially influence or interact with this emotion, including; role of past failure, control of outcome and nature of the fear.

In order to capture these components, design features of the SenseMaker® consisted of five geometrically shaped triangles (also referred to as 'Triads') and one grid (referred to as 'Stones') in which participants self-signified (i.e. placed their story) in between three valued qualities represented on each triad, and onto a space on the grid with two dimensions. These self-signifiers were designed by researchers and based on theory within the fear of failure literature (see Figure 2.1 & 2.2 below). While narrowing down literature to three response options and two dimensions may seem restrictive, this process required the highest level of abstraction in order to encompass a wide range of possible outcomes as well as to avoid response bias. Take as an example the 'Past' triad, which is based on the idea of resilience in the face of difficulties, and the recognition that individuals may 'break', 'bend' or 'bounce back' from past failures (Linley & Joseph, 2005). Rather than using these three words to represent the 'Past' triad, the following semantically related phrases were applied: "Past failures have reinforced current fear of failure", "Past failures have had no impact on current fear of failure" and "Past failures have changed the way I now anticipate failures". Below are the remaining triads/grid that made up the SenseMaker®:

**In my story, my fear related to:**



**In my story, who was in control of the outcome?**



**In my story, past failures...**

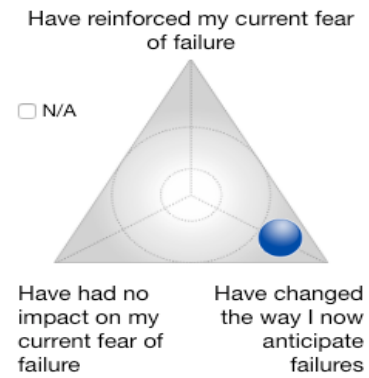


Figure 2.1. *Nature of fear*      Figure 2.2. *Control of outcome*      Figure 2.3. *Role of past*

**In my story, when I feel uneasy I tend to...**

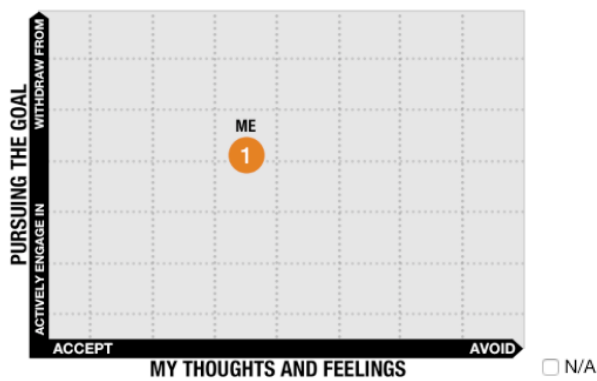


Figure 2.4 *Behavioural tendencies (SenseMaker® grid)*

**In my story, when I felt the fear...**



**In my story, when I thought about my fear of failure...**



Figure 2.5. *Emotions triad*

Figure 2.6 *Cognitions triad*

As well as the study signifiers, documents fulfilling the British Psychological Society's (BPS, 2009) ethical code of conduct for research consisted of participant study information, consent and debrief. Electronic versions of these were included in the SenseMaker®. The study also made use of three questionnaires that were part of the SenseMaker® (see Appendix A for full questionnaires used). The short form of the Performance Fear of Failure Inventory (PFAI, Conroy, 2001) was used to measure levels of fear of failure. This scale consists of five items assessing the individual's beliefs in five aversive outcomes of failure, including; shame, upsetting others, having other people lose interest, devaluing one's estimate and being uncertain about the future. Participants were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale ('very slightly or not at all' to 'extremely') the extent to which they agreed with a statement such as, 'When I fail it upsets my plan for the future.' The PFAI short form inventory has shown good internal reliability at  $\alpha = .81$  (Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick & Tracy, 2011).

Self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg's (1965) Self-esteem scale, consisting of ten items, such as, 'On the whole, I am satisfied with myself'. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement on a four-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .85$ ) has been reported for the scale (Bagley, Bolitho & Bertrand, 1997). Moreover, personal control was measured using the Spheres of Control Scale (Paulhus, 1983). While the original scale consists of three subscales (interpersonal, personal, socio-political) that are combined to represent an individual's overall sense of control in life, the current study made use of the 'personal' subscale only, as this aspect of an individual's control was of most relevance to individuals' fear of failure in an achievement context. This subscale has ten items, such as, 'I can learn almost anything if I set my mind to it', and was measured on a seven-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. High internal consistency has been shown for the Spheres of Control Scale as a whole ( $\alpha = .80$ ) and for the individual subscale (Personal,  $\alpha = .80$ ) (Paulhus, 1983). Lastly, the SenseMaker® also collected demographic data (see details in the Design section).

## Procedure

Participants who agreed to take part in the study were provided with an online link to the SenseMaker® database (courtesy of Cognitive Edge© Ltd). The initial page consisted of study information and consent. Participant gave their consent to partake by ticking the box labelled "I confirm that I have read and understood the information on this sheet and agree to

take part in this research, and that by clicking this I am giving my consent.” On the following page, participants were asked to share a story of a time in the recent past when they feared failure of a valued goal. No other prompts were provided and there was no minimum or maximum word limit. Before proceeding to the next section, participants gave their story a title in the space provided.

Self-signification of narratives followed, in which participants were asked to place a ‘bubble’ in a geometric shape of a triangle (‘triad’) (see e.g. Figure 2.1 above). The study consisted of five triads, though participants had the option to tick ‘not applicable’ if they felt that a particular triad had no relevance to their personal story. Therefore, the number of participants included in each analysis varies. Following the triads, this study also made use of ‘Stones’ as a type of self-signification (see Figure 2.4 above). In this instance, participants dragged the label ‘Me’ to a position on a grid that best fitted the context of their story. Again, participants were given the option ‘not applicable’. The remaining pages of the SenseMaker® consisted of the three self-report questionnaires and multiple-choice questions regarding demographics. Upon completion, participants were provided with debrief information and were thanked for their contribution to the research study.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

The first part of this study took advantage of the quantitative data produced by the SenseMaker® to investigate hypotheses. In the SenseMaker® Explorer v2.5b analysis software, the signification framework generates quantitative data that can be visually inspected for patterns/trends against the topics of interest in each triad/stone. The current SenseMaker® data did not produce any visible patterns; responses were scattered across triads. Each data point within the triad represents a story/participant/response and has a number that represents its relative distance to each apex of the triad and each axis of the stones respectively. Taken together, these data points produce non-parametric data that were exported from excel to SPSS together with the questionnaire data. Given the non-parametric nature of the triad data, Spearman correlations were used to assess relationship between variables and Mann-Whitney *U* tests were carried out to explore differences in high versus low groups of for instance, fear of failure, on participants’ cognitive and emotional profiles and the role of the past. The relationship between the questionnaire variables of personal control, self-esteem and fear of failure were analysed using multiple regression and



hierarchical multiple regression. Additionally, a step-wise mediation analysis was carried out in response to the findings of the hierarchical regression.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The second component of this research study consisted of a Thematic Analysis of 200 narratives and was carried out using the questions stated in the introduction as a guide. Furthermore, the analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps/phases of Thematic Analysis in order to produce a rich and detailed analysis of the dataset. These steps were as follows:

1. Familiarising oneself with the data is the first phase. This was achieved by reading and rereading the dataset multiple times to truly understand what each individual was saying by attempting to read between the lines. This was the stage to start looking for similarities or patterns in the data set.
2. Phase two is related to generating initial codes. Codes are used to indicate where, in the data, there seems to be content related to the research question or what seems interesting to explore further. The data was manually coded, this involved highlighting parts of the data that were deemed key to the question and marking the data with codes.
3. Phase three is searching for themes within the data set. This was also done manually. The codes from the previous phase were read, reviewed and narrowed down multiple times before being sorted into themes or sub-themes. If a particular code was not prevalent in more than one data set but was thought to be of significance, it was included in the themes as sub-themes. The justification of what was acceptable as a theme/sub-theme was subject to the researcher's interpretation of the data in relation to the research questions.
4. Phase four consists of reviewing the themes to ensure validity when cross-examined with the data. This phase also enabled the researcher to see if any codes were missed out on and needed to be added to existing themes/sub-themes. The dataset was reviewed again to confirm that the themes chosen were suitable.
5. Phase five entails generating clear definitions and names for each theme and sub-theme so that they represent the overall story the analysis tells. Sub-themes were named based on the codes first generated from the analysis. Themes were named at a higher level of abstraction in relation to the sub-themes.
6. The sixth and final phase was producing the results.

### Quantitative Results (Part 1)

The following section is divided into four subsections representing the main findings of an exploratory analysis: 1) Relationship between fear of failure, personal control and self-esteem, 2) Control of outcome and nature of the fear, 3) The cognitive, emotional and behavioural profile of individuals who fear failure of a valued goal and 4) Role of past failures on current fear of failure. The non-parametric data produced by the SenseMaker® triad and stones were quantitatively analysed using Spearman's Rho correlations to explore the relationship between triads. Additionally, Mann-Whitney *U* tests were carried out to compare group differences of triad responses. A hierarchical regression analysis was applied to the questionnaire data to explore the relationship between fear of failure, personal control and self-esteem.

#### 1. Relationship between fear of failure, personal control and self-esteem.

Prior to the analysis, the assumptions required for multiple regression were tested. Residual and scatter plots confirmed that the assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity and normality had all been met. Furthermore, Tolerance and VIF collinearity statistics did not indicate an issue with multicollinearity: correlations ranged between moderately negative ( $r = -.64, p < .001$ ) to moderately positive ( $r = .59, p < .001$ ). Both predictors had a statistically significant negative correlation with the dependent variable, fear of failure, with self-esteem recording the highest correlation ( $r = -.64, p < .001$ ) and control ( $r = -.39, p < .001$ ).

Table 3.1

*Pearson product-moment correlations, descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha for all continuous variables (N=200).*

Variables	Fear of failure	Control	Self-esteem
Fear of failure	1		
Control	-.39***	1	
Self-esteem	-.64***	.59***	1
Means	3.41	49.86	18.14
Standard deviations	.86	7.98	5.96
Range	1-5	23-69	3-30
Possible range	1-5	10-70	0-30
Cronbach's Alpha	.75	.80	.77

*Note:* Statistical significance: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

A hierarchical regression model was applied to further explore the relationship between fear of failure, self-esteem and control. Self-esteem was the first predictor entered into the model. It was found statistically significant ( $F(1, 199) = 134.53, p < .001$ ) and explained 41% of the variance in fear of failure. The addition of control in the second step of the model did not add any variance to the model ( $R^2$  change = .00;  $F(2, 199) = .03, p = .86$ ). Therefore, the model as a whole explained 41% of the variance in fear of failure ( $F(2, 199) = 66.95, p < .001$ ) and self-esteem was the only significant predictor in the final model ( $\beta = -.63, p < .001$ ).

Table 3.2

*Hierarchical Regression Model of fear of failure*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> change	B	Standard Error	$\beta$	t
Step 1	.64	.41					
Self-esteem				-.09	.01	-.64	-11.60***
Step 2	.64	.41	.00				
Self-esteem				-.09	.01	-.63	-9.20***
Control				-.00	.01	-.01	-.18

Note: Statistical significance: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The elimination of control as a significant predictor of fear of failure in the second step of the model suggests a potential mediating relationship between variables under investigation. To test the mediating role of self-esteem between control and fear of failure, Baron and Cohen's (1986) four-step approach to mediation analysis was followed, in which four regression analyses were conducted and examined for significance. The Beta values obtained (Table 3.3) indicate that the requirements for a full mediation have been met. The direct effect of control (predictor) on fear of failure (DV) was significant in the absence of the mediator,  $b = -.39, p < .001$ , and the relationship between control and self-esteem (mediator) was also significant,  $b = .60, p < .001$ . Self-esteem was significantly related to fear of failure,  $b = -.64, p < .001$ , and when the effect of this variable was controlled for in a combined model with the control variable, the significant effect of control on fear of failure was completely eliminated,  $b = -.01, p = .86$ , suggesting self-esteem fully mediates the relationship between control and fear of failure.

Table 3.3

*Self-esteem as a mediator between control and fear of failure*

	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	$\beta$
Analysis one: Control on fear of failure	.39	.15***		-.39
Analysis two: Control on self- esteem	.60	.35***		.60
Analysis three: self- esteem on fear of failure	.64	.41***		-.64
Analysis four: Step 1: Self-esteem on fear of failure	.64	.41***	.00	-.64
Step 2: Control on fear of failure	.64	.41		-.01

Note: Statistical significance: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## 2. Control of outcome and nature of fear

TRIAD (nature of the fear)



TRIAD (control of outcome)



Figure 3.1 Visual representation of the nature of the fear and control of outcome triads. Each narrative placed within a triad has a value relating to its proximity to an apex. This enables correlations across triads in order to explore relationships which in this case focus on the nature of the fear described in the narrative, and control over the desired outcome.

As the triad data did not meet the assumption of normality required for parametric testing, Spearman's correlation was performed to investigate the association between control of outcome and the nature of the fear. The two assumptions necessary for this analysis were met; the data was measured on a ratio scale and a monotonic relationship was observed between variables. Statistically significant correlations ranged between weak negative ( $r_s = -.38, p < .001$ ) to weak positive ( $r_s = .31, p < .001$ ). Based on these correlations (Table 3.4), it can be inferred that when an individual feels personally in control of the outcome of the goal, the fear likely relates to a doubt in one's own abilities ( $r_s = .31, p < .001$ ).

Table 3.4

*Spearman correlations between nature of the fear and control of outcome (N=198).*

	Control Me	Control Others	Control Luck
Failure of personal ability	.31***	-.21***	-.24*
Failure in the eyes of others	.00	.08	.04
Failure to control and outcome	-.38***	.28***	.26***

*Note:* Statistical significance: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

### 3. The cognitive, emotional and behavioural profile of individuals who fear failure of a valued goal.

Six Mann-Whitney  $U$  tests were carried out in total to investigate whether individuals who were high or low in fear of failure differed in their cognitive and emotional reactions. The assumptions required for this analysis were all met; the dependent variables are measured on a continuous level and the independent variable consists of two independent groups. These two groups (high and low fear of failure) were determined by a median split of the total fear of failure score generated for each participant. The first three Mann-Whitney tests (Table 3.5) of the 'Emotions' triad indicated that a preoccupation with feelings relating to the fear of failure was greater for the high fear of failure group ( $Mdn = 51.79$ ) than the low ( $Mdn = 28.08$ ),  $U = 3350.50, p < .010, r = .24$ , whereas the tendency to distance oneself from feelings was greater for the low fear of failure group ( $Mdn = 19.73$ ) than the high group ( $Mdn$

= 13.97),  $U = 3614.50$ ,  $p < .010$ ,  $r = .19$ . There was no significant difference in mean ranks for high and low groups on tendency to act upon feelings.

Table 3.5

*Mann-Whitney U comparisons of mean ranks between low and high fear of failure groups on the 'Emotions' triad (N= 193).*

'Emotions'	Fear of failure	N	Mean rank	Median
'I distanced myself from my feelings'	Low	96	107.85**	19.73
	High	97	86.26	13.97
	Total	193		
'I was preoccupied with my feelings'	Low	96	83.40	28.08
	High	97	110.46**	51.79
	Total	193		
'I acted upon my feelings'	Low	96	102.84	22.36
	High	97	91.22	18.61
	Total	193		

*Note:* Statistical significance: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Further Mann-Whitney tests were carried out on the 'Cognitions' triad (see Table 3.6) and revealed that focusing on thoughts relating to the fear was more common in the high fear of failure group ( $Mdn = 32.56$ ) than the low fear of failure group ( $Mdn = 19.55$ ),  $U = 3953.00$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .17$ , whereas the inclination to change the way one thinks about the fear was greater for the low fear of failure group ( $Mdn = 44.66$ ) than the high group ( $Mdn = 17.49$ ),  $U = 3184.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .30$ . No significant group differences were found for attempts made to remove one's thoughts.

Table 3.6

*Mann-Whitney U comparisons of mean ranks between low and high fear of failure groups on the 'Cognitions' triad (N= 198).*

'Cognitions'	Fear of failure	N	Mean rank	Median
'I tried to change the way I thought about it.'	Low	99	116.84***	44.66
	High	99	82.16	17.49
	Total	198		
'I tried to make my thoughts go away'	Low	99	95.31	18.67
	High	99	103.69	22.57
	Total	198		
'I focused on my thoughts'	Low	99	89.93	19.55
	High	99	109.07*	32.56
	Total	198		

*Note:* Statistical significance: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Spearman correlations were performed to explore the behavioural profile of individuals who fear failure. The assumptions were met for this data set also. Statistically significant positive correlations were observed between variables, ranging from  $r_s = .23, p < .001$  to  $r_s = .25, p < .001$  (see Table 3.7 below). The positive association between avoidance of inner experiences and withdrawal from goal pursuit suggests that the less individuals are willing to accept their thoughts and feelings, the more likely they are to disengage from pursuing a valued goal ( $r_s = .25, p < .001$ ). The  $R$ -square value was however, low ( $r^2 = .06$ ), suggesting that participant responses were scattered around the mean. Correlations further imply that both avoidance of inner experiences and withdrawal tendencies increase with higher levels of fear of failure ( $r_s = .23, p < .001, r_s = .24, p < .001$ ).

Table 3.7

*Spearman correlations between acceptance, goal-pursuit and fear of failure, all measured on a continuum (N=195).*

	Avoid thoughts & feelings	Withdraw from goal	Fear of failure
Avoid thoughts & feelings	1		
Withdraw from goal	.25***	1	
Fear of failure	.23***	.24***	1

*Note:* Statistical significance: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

#### 4. Role of past on current fear of failure

Spearman correlations were carried out to explore the association between current fear of failure and past failures. While the scale used to measure fear of failure meets the assumptions for parametric testing, the use of Spearman's correlation was deemed most appropriate for this analysis as it was combined with triad data that failed to meet these requirements. As indicated in Table 3.8, current fear of failure had a significant relationship with all apices of the 'Past' triad, with correlations ranging from weak negative ( $r_s = -.21, p < .001$ ) to moderately positive ( $r_s = .40, p < .001$ ). The positive relationship observed implies that the more one fears failure, the stronger the influence of past failures ( $r_s = .40, p < .001$ ). On the contrary, negative correlations seem to suggest that the past has had little impact ( $r_s = -.23, p < .001$ ) or changed current failure anticipations ( $r_s = -.21, p < .001$ ) for individuals at the lower end of the fear of failure continuum.

Table 3.8

*Spearman correlations between fear of failure and the 'Past' triad (N= 189).*

Fear of failure		'Past has reinforced current fear of failure'	'Past has changed current anticipation of failure'	'Past has had no impact on current fear of failure'
	1			
Fear of failure				
'Past has reinforced current fear of failure'	.40***	1		
'Past has changed current anticipation of failure'	-.21**	-.55***	1	
'Past has had no impact on current fear of failure'	-.23**	-.34	-.36***	1

Note: Statistical significance:  $p < .05$ \*  $p < .01$ \*\*  $p < .001$ \*\*\*

Furthermore, Mann-Whitney  $U$  tests were carried out on each apex of the 'Past' triad to verify potential differences between high versus low fear of failure groups. Similar to results retrieved in the correlation analysis, the group comparisons in Table 3.9 below suggest



that the past has reinforced current fear of failure more so for the high fear of failure group ( $Mdn = 47.88$ ) than the low ( $Mdn = 22.56$ ),  $U = 2846.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .31$ . Also in accordance with correlations, past failures were more likely to have changed current anticipations for the low fear of failure group ( $Mdn = 43.01$ ) than the high ( $Mdn = 29.91$ ),  $U = 3627.00$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .16$  and the likelihood of the past having no impact on current fear of failure was also greater for the low ( $Mdn = 16.47$ ) compared to high group ( $Mdn = 11.80$ ),  $U = 3467.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .19$ . All in all, these analyses suggest the past plays an important though differential role in both high and low fear anticipations of failure.

Table 3.9

*Mann-Whitney U comparisons of mean ranks between low and high fear of failure groups on the 'Past' triad (N= 189).*

'Past influence'	Fear of failure	N	Mean rank	Median
'Past has reinforced current FF.'	Low	94	77.78	22.56
	High	95	112.04***	47.88
	Total	189		
'Past has changed current anticipation of failure'	Low	94	103.91*	43.01
	High	95	86.18	29.91
	Total	189		
'Past has had no impact on current FF''	Low	94	105.62**	16.47
	High	95	84.49	11.80
	Total	189		

*Note:* Statistical significance: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The analyses of the SenseMaker® above has provided an overview of the emotional, cognitive and behavioural profile of fear of failure. From these quantitative findings alone it can be concluded that there are many factors that may influence a person's level of fear of failure and the resulting behaviour towards a desired goal.

### **Discussion of Quantitative findings (Part 1)**

Findings from the quantitative analysis of the SenseMaker® generated four main findings. Firstly, when individuals feel personally in control of the outcome of the goal, the fear relates to a doubt in own abilities rather than a concern for the potential judgement of others (p. 30-31). In terms of behavioural impact, results suggest that as the intensity of the fear increases, so does the tendency to withdraw from goal-pursuit (p. 33). In turn, this reluctance to move in the direction of valued goals is linked to an unwillingness to accept the internal experiences associated with the fear of failure, as indicated by a high preoccupation and absorption with thoughts and feelings (p. 31-33). Moreover, the inquiry into the role of past failures suggests that these have an impact on current anticipations, especially in the case of high levels of fear of failure (p. 34-35). Lastly, findings imply that having high self-esteem and a high sense of control may help lessen the negative impacts of fear of failure (p. 28-30). These results will be discussed in the light of previous research and links will be drawn between findings for a comprehensive understanding of fear of failure.

#### **Fear of failure: the role of self-esteem, perceived control and past failures**

The high proportion of variance in fear of failure explained by control and self-esteem indicate that these two factors may help protect against high levels of fear of failure. At first glance, it seems as if the higher the positive evaluation of oneself (self-esteem) together with an expectation that one's actions will lead to desired outcomes (perceived personal control), the lower the fear of failure of a valued goal. This finding is theoretically sound: although recognised as distinct constructs, both self-esteem and control are two major components of an individual's self-concept, which is an umbrella term for the belief one holds about oneself as a human being that is shaped throughout life by past experiences of success and failures, evaluations by others and reinforcement (Ross & Broh, 2000). As fear of failure is motivated by a need to protect the self from aversive experience of shame that could diminish perceptions of one's inherent worth, a logical conclusion would hold that the stronger the self-concept is, the less impact thoughts of fear of failure will have.

While this is a seemingly straightforward relation that could act as the foundation for interventions aimed at lowering the impact of failure anticipations, it is worth noting that both control and global self-esteem are commonly unstable (Kernis, 2003). Not only are both factors often shaped by past accomplishments and are thus, products of learning, but they are also commonly sustained and contingent upon these external events. For instance, past

experiences of success and a perception of oneself as a causal agent of these has previously been linked to the maintenance of a high sense of perceived personal control (Ross & Broh, 2000). However, the fact that life endeavours many times fall short of success despite personal effort suggests that control beliefs contingent upon succeeding are extremely vulnerable to failure and can therefore easily be damaged if continuously misattributed to the wrong cause. The reinforcing effect of past failures on high levels of fear in the current study seems to evidence this fragile nature of perceived control in response to failures and further suggests that its protective effect may only apply if past events had no effect or if one is able to make accurate attributions in the sense-making process that often follows an unexpected event.

On this note, the ability of self-esteem to mediate the relationship between control and fear of failure in this study implies that self-esteem may have a greater potential to remain intact through experiences of failure, as a commonly observed form of self-esteem do not, unlike control, depend on successful outcomes. This type of self-esteem that can remain despite continuous failures is referred to as *non-contingent*, as an individual's evaluation of self is in this case not controlled by the outcome of the pursuit and therefore acts as a buffer against the impact that failure anticipations may have (Kernis, 2003). This line of reasoning may support the group differences found between high versus low fear and past failures – individuals with low levels of fear of failure as opposed to high had higher levels of self-esteem and reported that previously experienced failures had no impact or had changed current anticipations.

That said, in an environment such as academia where performance outcomes are supposedly highly valued by the individual and the institution, a self-esteem not contingent upon external validation is rare and even unconstructive, some argue. Attempts made by previous research to encourage a more secure sense of esteem among highly contingent students through the endorsement of both mastery goals (Niiya & Crocker, 2008) and incremental intelligence beliefs (Niiya, Brook & Crocker, 2010) failed, as individuals chose to self-handicap to protect themselves from internal attributions of potential failure. Therefore, a high self-esteem and low fear of failure profile may also be reflective of a highly *contingent* self-esteem accompanied by skilful self-protection and tendencies to deflect blame away from self or an unconcern for the implications of the outcome. Alternatively, there is a possibility that this profile is simply part of a natural learning process in which fear of failure thoughts are less likely to disturb a well-established self-concept (Cohen & Ranganath,

2007). From correlations alone, it is impossible to know which type of self-esteem was most commonly endorsed in the current study.

Nonetheless, if higher levels of both contingent and non-contingent forms of self-esteem have the potential of remaining intact in events of failure and sustained through various self-protection techniques, it poses concerns regarding the practical research applications and promotion of a well-anchored self-esteem. That is, should self-esteem be maintained by shielding individuals from the experience of failure through the application of various self-protection techniques or similarly, should stability in the form of non-contingent self-esteem be encouraged whereby the individual neither bends nor breaks with failure?

While both approaches may maintain and/or encourage high levels of self-esteem and thus buffer against fear of failure, Vonk and Smit (2011) proposed several reasons as to why the answer to true self-esteem does not lie in protecting the ego from failure. To start with, by remaining in the safety of one's comfort zone untouched by humiliation and other aversive experiences, the individual will miss out on learning experiences that build character and offer opportunities for growth and self-improvement. Secondly, by relying on external rewards to feel good about self, the behaviour towards the goal becomes forced rather than autonomous and consequently, control is relinquished to the uncertainty of the future. True self-esteem therefore, is neither passive nor sought outside of the self, it is according to Ryan and Deci (2004) developed intrinsically by the sole motive to be true to oneself. In this sense, the individual's evaluation of him/herself as a measure of worth is not dependent upon the outcome of a pursuit, but on the pursuit in itself and the extent to which the behaviour towards the goal is congruent with one's deepest held values. Accordingly, a self-esteem that does not require defence or shelter from failure challenges future research to help individuals build a stronger sense of who they are independently of their accomplishments and embrace experiences of failure in ways that align with their intrinsic motives.

### **Experiential avoidance of fear of failure and goal-pursuit**

The pursuit of a valued goal is unlikely to be free of negative emotions, especially as the individual encounters challenges and experiences loss that may push the goal even further out of sight and reach. It has previously been suggested that it is not necessarily the presence of these uncomfortable emotions that hinders successful goal pursuit, but rather the unwillingness to accept these internal experiences (Hayes, 2004). The relationship observed between fear of failure, experiential avoidance and goal withdrawal in the current study

further supports this claim: the higher the fear of failure, the more likely individuals were to experientially avoid their thoughts and feelings relating to the anticipated outcome and disengage from goal-pursuit. As such, the preoccupation with these as previously indicated is likely a reflection of the individual's unwillingness to accept their presence.

The association of fear of failure as a motive for avoidance behaviour is not a novel finding, but coincides with many of the early theories of motivation that recognised the tendency of humans to avoid outcomes perceived as aversive at any cost. In fact, Atkinson (1957) reasoned that bad is a stronger behavioural pull than good, as individuals value avoiding the shame of failure over and above the rewards of goal achievement. This need also underpinned Elliot and Church's (1997) theory of goal orientations, in which the fear of competence judgements is thought to motivate individuals to steer away from the goal. Both theories of motivation and the support lent from current findings demonstrate the ability of a strong emotional state to elicit behaviour that may in the long run, impede the pursuit of valued goals.

While this link between aversive emotional experiences and maladaptive behavioural responses may appear causal and direct at first glance, this study's consideration of experiential avoidance as a factor in this relation provides evidence for a more complex relationship, suggesting that the overt behaviour is not necessarily elicited by the intensity of the fear in itself, but rather by the fear of feeling such strong emotions. This idea is well-rooted in the domain of ACT and contextual behavioural science, in which theorists argue that humans have, through their complex relational networks and language abilities, learnt to generalise fear from direct sources to mental events that are then treated as real threats to one's wellbeing (Hayes, 2004). In this manner, individuals act to avoid the experiential aspect of the feared event, rather than the event itself, which in turn interferes with valued goal-pursuit. For instance, the individual may intentionally choose to not pursue a valued goal to avoid the feelings associated with potential failure. While experiential avoidance in itself may work well as a short-term emotion-regulation strategy, its continuous use is thought to be the root cause of long-term psychological suffering, as attempts to escape unpleasant internal states only increase their psychological importance and persistence (Hayes, 2004).

Not only does the inquiry and significance of experiential avoidance in the current study provide further insight into the nature of fear of failure in relation to avoidance behaviours, but it may also hold the key to a fruitful solution that lies on the opposite end of

the continuum – namely in the ability to accept and embrace all internal experiences regardless of their unpleasantness. When taught as an alternative to avoidance, experiential acceptance targets the ‘fear of feeling’ that is thought to contribute to the maintenance of psychological distress. Thus, individuals are encouraged not to accept defeat, but to stop resisting pain and instead establish a willingness to experience all emotional states and accept them as part of the overall tapestry of life. From an attitude of acceptance, the individual can with awareness decide if the emotional signal serves a functional purpose that requires action (Hayes, 2004).

The effectiveness of experiential acceptance as an approach to negative emotional experiences has been well-documented in both clinical and non-clinical populations. Levitt, Brown, Orsillo and Barlow (2004) found that experiential acceptance had a positive effect on approach behaviour among individuals with panic disorders, as those who endorsed an accepting attitude towards their experience of panic were more likely than controls to engage in exposure exercises. Furthermore, Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth and Steger (2006) demonstrated the important role of experiential acceptance also in daily positive psychological functioning. More avoidance and less acceptance of day-to-day distress acted as a barrier to obtaining pleasure and meaning from life. Taken together, both pieces of research suggest experiential acceptance may play an important role in behavioural engagement towards value-based action in the presence of negative affect and in the building of positive psychological resources.

If it is the case that experiential avoidance and acceptance exist on a single bipolar continuum as operationalised in current and previous research, facilitating acceptance among people high in fear of failure may help encourage continued action towards the goal rather than away from it, as individuals would learn to surrender the internal struggle with emotions that is thought to lie at the core of fear of failure in itself (i.e. the fear of feeling the emotions of potential failure and its consequences). It is possible that those who were lower in fear of failure were more accepting of their internal states, as indicated by their tendencies to distance themselves from their emotional experiences, and could therefore lend further support for the use of acceptance in goal strivings. However, this speculation requires a more in-depth analysis that future research may wish to undertake, as acceptance and distancing may in fact serve two completely different functions.

### **Control of outcome and the nature of the fear relation**

The relation between control of outcome and the ‘why’ of fearing failure revealed that the more individuals feel personally in control of the outcome, the more they question their own abilities in the process of pursuing that goal. In other words, when individuals feel they can bring about a desired outcome, they are uncertain of their abilities to do so. A common finding within the fear of failure literature is that people fear failure the most when they perceive the outcome to be outside of their personal control (e.g. Conroy, 2004; Martin & Marsh, 2004). The current study does not contradict these consistent findings, but provides evidence that the opposite of lacking control (i.e. being in control) does not necessarily protect against fearing failure of a valued goal either, *unless* these control beliefs exist in conjunction with a belief that one is also capable of bringing about the desired outcome.

The importance of believing in oneself, of feeling efficacious and knowing one has the means to reach a desired end appears to be a strong theme in the current study that in a way, overshadows the importance of control. Recognizing that one has control of an outcome and simultaneously doubting in one’s abilities to exert that control is like owning a fully equipped car and not knowing how to drive it; taking ownership of the driver’s seat without moving the car forward will guarantee failure to reach the desired destination and thus, contribute to a heightened fear of not being able to influence a perceived controllable situation. Therefore, it may be possible that the uncontrollability often reported by those high in fear of failure is rooted in a strong doubt in one’s abilities rather than a lack of control over the outcome. Encouraging efficacy beliefs may therefore contribute to a greater sense of control and ownership that will help individuals keep moving forward despite the many inevitable roadblocks, such as fear, along the way.

Additionally, feelings of competence do not only stimulate action, it ignites it with volition and self-determination to achieve the goal. In this manner, the importance of competence beliefs extends beyond preventing fear of failure, it has also been recognised as an innate psychological need that drives the individual towards fulfilling goals that foster growth and optimal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although the journey towards goals that coincides with intrinsic human needs may be more autonomous and less fearful, failure is still a possible outcome. Therefore, it will be of equal importance for future research to not only help encourage continued action in the anticipation phase, but also recognize the determinants of persistence in events of failure. Perhaps part of the growth that humans seek

to self-actualize can only be found on the journeys that require individuals to find alternative routes to a desired end.

### **Summary of findings and limitations**

Thus far, the exploration of fear of failure has yielded insight into the relation between fear of failure, self-esteem, general perceived personal control and the role of the past therein, the more specific relationship between control of outcome and the nature of the fear itself, how individuals relate to their felt experience of fear of failure and the effect this has on behaviour. More specifically, self-esteem was found an important predictor of fear of failure beyond control suggesting that its encouragement may help buffer against high intensities of felt fear of failure and make up for uncertain control beliefs. However, given the seemingly contingent nature of self-esteem, its use as a long-term solution was questioned. Moreover, participants' reported control of the outcome was positively related to a doubt in their abilities, which similarly to the previous conclusion hints at the possibility that feeling *capable* of realising the goal is important beyond just owning the outcome. In regards to emotions, findings indicated a preoccupation with thoughts and emotions which suggested experiential avoidance of uncomfortable internal states. In turn, this was associated with a higher likelihood of goal withdrawal, suggesting that the behavioural effects of fear of failure may in part be due to a reluctance to feel the emotions associated with fear of failure.

That said, there is no escaping the truth that these findings are correlational in nature and are therefore prone to the inherent limits of such designs. For instance, no statement regarding causation can be made, there are many extraneous variables not accounted for that could provide exceptions to the witnessed 'rule' and the many cases that did not fall into the line of best fit will most likely be misrepresented. Not only that, correlations alone do not offer the depth of insight that the current study seeks. While it has provided an informative snapshot of the cognitive, emotional and behavioural profiles of fear of failure that can and will act as a foundation for further inquiry, it does not stretch much further and has therefore given rise to many questions regarding the "why" behind many of the associations and revealed inconsistencies and unclarity in understanding. In other words, it is the nuances of the experience sought that seem to have been lost in the stages of quantitative analysis. These include speculations regarding: what type of goal pursuit give rise to fear of failure (i.e. intrinsic or/and extrinsic?), the depth of fear of failure – what is it really about (control uncertainties or doubts in ability?), what the strongest and most aversive consequence(s) of



failure are amongst students that generate such aversive reactions, the reasons behind the seemingly strong impact of fear of failure, and behaviour – what is the link between emotions and behaviour? Are there deviations from the norm discussed thus far? A Thematic Analysis of participants' stories will be carried out in hopes of finding answers to these questions and reach a conclusion regarding the adaptiveness of fear of failure in goal-pursuit.

### Qualitative Results: Thematic Analysis of stories (Part 2)

A thematic analysis of narratives was carried out guided by questions resulting from the quantitative analysis. These questions are represented in the tables below along with the themes appearing in the order of most prominence and their sub-themes.

Table 3.1

***Question 1.A) What type of goal are individuals pursuing that they fear failure of?***

Theme	Sub-themes
Performance goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic</li> <li>• Competition</li> <li>• Driving test</li> </ul>

Table 3.2

***Question 1.B) What makes the goal valued that individuals fear not achieving?***

Theme	Sub-themes
The outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extrinsic rewards</li> </ul>
Pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived from others</li> <li>• Imposed by self</li> </ul>

When participants were asked to tell a story of a time when they feared failure of a valued goal, the majority of stories centred around **performance goals** of an academic nature, in which they recognised themselves as agents in the achievement of these goals. This theme was predominant across almost all stories, many of them beginning with a statement linking the fear of failure to the goal being pursued as in the following examples:

***Quote 1.1*** “My biggest fear of failure is almost always academic.”

***Quote 1.2*** “My biggest fear was failing A-levels...”

***Quote 1.3*** “I feared failure when I applied to University as a mature student.”

The second most common goals of a performance-oriented nature were those relating to driving tests and competitions, as evidenced in the following quotes:

**Quote 1.4** *“I was nervous in case I failed and wanted to do well for the team...”*

**Quote 1.5** *“I feared failure when I attended a dance competition I had been preparing for, for a year...”*

**Quote 1.6** *“...in the morning of my driving test I have never felt more fear and anxiety in my whole life...”*

**Quote 1.7** *“When attempting to pass my driving test about 3 years ago I felt fear of failure.”*

What makes the goal valuable is the importance individuals place on the **outcome** of the pursuit and the rewards attached to it. What reinforces the value of the goal and thus the fear of not actualising the desired outcome is the **pressure** imposed on self and perceived as coming from others. The following extracts demonstrates the value individuals place on the outcome that were present in all performance goals and the experienced pressure of not failing:

**Quote 1.10** *“The last time I felt a fear of failure was when I took my practical driving test for the first time. I had only been learning to drive for less than 2 months before taking my driving test so the pressure was already quite high but the addition of the internal drive to beat my sister made my fear of failure even greater...”*

**Quote 1.11** *“I fear failure every time I hand in an assignment. In my first year of study (I’m now a second year) I did really well and even got on the honoural list. I know if it was just me I’d be disappointed it wouldn’t be as bad, but because my parents and family and friends know that I did well I get way more fearful everytime I do and hand in an assignment or take an exam because I feel like they expect the same of me...”*

As can be judged from the quotes above, both individuals are fixated on the outcome that holds a reward (beating sister on driving test, doing well for recognition) and both experience pressure from self and others which reinforces the fear of not achieving the goal.

Table 3.3

*Question 2) What is the fear about?*

Theme	Sub-themes
Not being in control of the final outcome	• The unknown
Doubt in self	• Difficulty
	• Effort

The themes above are closely intertwined in the stories. While individuals recognised themselves as agents in the achievement of their valued goal, what came across in the majority of stories was a fear of **not being in control of the final outcome** due to the many unknown external factors that come into play. Thus, the power is perceived to be in the hands of someone or something else. This is highlighted by the following quotes:

***Quote 2.1** “... I was absolutely terrified, mainly because I wasn’t familiar with the questions before the exam, but also because the final exams were completely different to midterm exams. Perhaps what I feared most was the unknown – what were things going to be like once I entered PJ hall? Could the environment lead me to failing my exams? Or had I not done enough revision? I wasn’t sure who marked our exams... One of my main goals is to get the highest grades possible. I was afraid I would not be able to achieve this goal at university...”*

***Quote 2.2** “... I feared I wouldn’t be able to attain the standard I had set for myself because of the uncertainty I had about the questions that would come up in exams. The unknown made me doubt my abilities because I didn’t have control over what would come up in the exams. I had control over revision but what if that didn’t match up to the content needed to be expressed in the exam papers...”*

Evident in these quotes is a feeling of not being fully in control over the outcome after having exerted effort due to the many external unknown factors that are encountered during the pursuit. A concurrent and dominant theme linked to not feeling in control is a **doubt in self** and one’s abilities to successfully achieve the goal. This self-doubt appeared after exerted effort, commonly expressed as an uncertainty over having “done enough” to succeed, hence reinforcing the impression of uncontrollability that comes with being trapped between

one's effort and the final outcome that rests in the hands of another. The following examples clearly highlight this prominent theme:

**Quote 2.3** *"...I worry about things a lot so exam time and the wait afterwards was very scary. I had worked so hard that year, but I knew from past experiences that that isn't always enough for me to succeed. I desperately wanted to get into Uni and I was so scared that I hadn't done enough and I didn't want to consider what would happen if I didn't make it."*

**Quote 2.4** *"...I really valued getting into university and following in his (brother's) footsteps to get myself a degree and an amazing job. During my A-levels studies I was not in a particularly good place and feared that this would effect my future goal. I would work and work and work but still feel as if it wasn't good enough. I blanked in exams and feared I had messed up my chances of getting into my university of choice..."*

Moreover, the doubt in one's abilities was also present in stories accounting for the fear of failure experienced when goal pursuit had just commenced, most often in conjunction with perceived difficulty of the task. In these instances, individuals expressed doubt in their efficacy to perform the actions required for the task in the first place. This too, communicates a degree of uncontrollability - not over the outcome per se, but in one's efficacy to produce the desired effect. This is illustrated in the following extracts:

**Quote 2.5** *"A recent deadline for a piece of difficult university work has lead me to a fear of failure, fearing I would not meet the deadline, would fail the work, fail the module, fail the year and fail at Uni."*

**Quote 2.6** *"... Public speaking was not something I was comfortable with at the time; the thought terrified me and I resigned myself to the fact that I was probably going to fail this module because there was no way I would be able to take part in one presentation, never mind four... I was terrified; terrified that I would go blank, terrified that I would collapse, terrified that I would do something wrong or stupid and make a fool of myself and that the others would laugh at me. Most of all I was terrified of failing."*

**Quote 2.7** “... When I was taking my A levels, I was always worried that I wasn’t going to be able to pass them and go to university like I wanted to do. I used to get really stressed if I didn’t understand something immediately because I was worried that if I didn’t understand then and there I never would be able to and that would mean I would struggle in exams.”

Table 3.4

**Question 3) Which are the strongest feared consequences of failure?**

Theme	Sub-themes
Judgement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of others’ opinion of self</li> <li>• Fear of not being enough</li> </ul>
Uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of having an uncertain future</li> </ul>

**Other peoples’ opinion of self** lies at the core of individuals’ fear of failing any type of goal and is most commonly expressed as an inherent fear of disappointing others, letting others down, embarrassing self in front of others, being judged by others and being left out:

**Quote 3.1** “...I feared that I would fail and disappoint my parents who have paid for me to attend university.”

**Quote 3.2** “... I never told my family my fears as I believed they would make me face them and the thought of failing and them being disappointed was too much for me to bear so I kept quiet about it.”

**Quote 3.3** “... not that failing was a problem, but driving tests are so expensive and just the shame of telling everyone I had failed I couldn’t deal with.”

**Quote 3.4** “... The hardest part of this difficult decision (leaving university) was breaking the news to my family and friends. I felt as though they would be disappointed in me, or that if I left they would never take me seriously again.”

**Quote 3.5** “... I grew this intense fear that if I did fail, everyone around me would judge me as a result of it. After all, they had put so much faith in me to do well, so I couldn’t let them down.”

The fear of having to face the perceived judgement of others upon failure and not being able to *do* enough to avoid such consequences further translates to the ultimate fear of not **being enough**, suggesting another important consequence of failing relates to individuals' uncertainties of their worth as a human being. This is evident in the following quotes:

**Quote 3.6** "... The latest result for my psychology exam is not that good and I feel like no matter how hard I try I am still a failure."

**Quote 3.7** "... I was not confident on my performance in my A level exams last summer, which resulted in me thinking I would not achieve the grades to get into Bangor University. It would keep me awake at night, as I was worried people would think I was a failure."

**Quote 3.8** "... I couldn't relax, every day I was consumed with this stress and fear... I was going to fail, and I was going to be a disappointment to everyone I knew and loved."

**Quote 3.9** "... my actual A level grades were a large contrast to the effort I had been putting in all year round and therefore were very disappointing to me. I felt like a disappointment overall, even though I passed them all."

"I was so terrified that if I got anything below an A\* it would be rubbish and I would be a failure."

As the quotes above suggest, individuals describe that failure would not just be an event resulting from their actions, but also a direct reflection of their being (i.e. being a failure, being a disappointment). A third aversive consequence of failure commonly expressed by participants is the **fear of having an uncertain future**, of being 'doomed' if not successful at achieving this particular goal – thus giving the impression that the goal is an important stepping stone for a successful future. This is directly expressed in the quotes below:

**Quote 3.10** "... the thought of failing and not getting where I needed to be was too scary."

**Quote 3.11** "... On AS results day, I believed that any dream I ever had to going to university was over. It was an emotion I had never felt before, this fear of not knowing what my near future looked like was overwhelming... every day I was consumed with

*this stress and fear, counting down to that dreaded day where my fate would be decided.”*

**Quote 3.12** “...most of my worry would be because I hadn’t thought of any other options if I didn’t get into university. I feared failure because I feared what would happen to me. I can’t imagine doing a different subject or even getting a full time job at this age so I think that’s what I feared the most, the unknown.”

**Quote 3.13** “...I kept thinking to myself, ‘I have no future’. That’s what scared me the most – having no future. That for me was the biggest fear of failure. And letting my father down.”

As such, besides from fearing others’ opinion of self upon failure, the potential of having an unknown or uncertain future is a consequence that individuals greatly fear facing.

Table 3.5

**Question 4.A) What emotions encompass the ‘fear of failure’ experience and how are they portrayed?**

Theme	Sub-themes
Negative emotions intensity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (extremely) nervous</li> <li>• (extreme) worry</li> <li>• (deep) fear</li> <li>• (consumed with) stress</li> <li>• (intense) anxiety</li> <li>• (absolutely) terrified</li> <li>• Panic (attack)</li> </ul>
Negative emotions as physical symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heart palpitations</li> <li>• Sleep deprivation</li> <li>• Shaking and sweating</li> <li>• Nausea</li> </ul>

*Note:* Words within brackets are examples of adjectives that were used by participants to describe the intensity of the emotional experience.

The inquiry into what emotions encompass the fear of failure experience reveals a wide **spectrum of negative emotions** that are further characterized by their potency (illustrated within brackets in the table above). Taken together, emotions existed within a



range from nervousness to sheer panic and the adjectives used by individuals in their stories to describe the intensity of these emotions added a layer to the understanding of the fear of failure experience as a whole. Some examples of this felt experience include:

**Quote 4.1** *“... Although my grades are good I still have a deep fear that I will fail, if not now maybe next year or even after university.”*

**Quote 4.2** *“During my studies at Bangor, I have been extremely worried that I am going to fail.”*

**Quote 4.3** *“Even once my exams were over, I couldn’t relax, every day I was consumed with this stress and fear...”*

*“I was extremely nervous and run myself down because I let myself get too stressed out...”*

**Quote 4.4** *“... I had this intense anxiety and fear, that I would completely screw everything up, and that I wouldn’t be able to go to university.”*

**Quote 4.5** *“I was absolutely terrified, mainly because I wasn’t familiar with the questions before the exams...”*

**Quote 4.6** *“In the exam I was terrified that I would fail as I was so tired and emotional, despite the fact I had attempted to study. I had a panic attack during the first 5 minutes but persevered.”*

In addition, fear of failure was also experienced as **physical symptoms** that further exacerbated the emotion, as illustrated in the following quotes:

**Quote 4.7** *“In the exam period, I made myself ill out of stress; I wasn’t really eating and was hardly sleeping.”*

**Quote 4.8** *“... I had a constant feeling of sickness so much so that I couldn’t separate the feelings from nerves or truly being sick. When I got in the car I had the horrible cotton-mouth feeling as though I was rapidly dehydrating yet my body was soaked with sweat as I panicked.”*

**Quote 4.9** *“I had many sleepless nights and the sudden heart palpitations were not stopping either. I cried a few times in order to relieve the build-up of emotion.”*

**Quote 4.10** *“I often feared failure when taking part in netball trials. Although I knew I was skilfully capable and just as fit as the other girls trialing I feared not being*

*good enough to make the team. I would vomit before every trial with worry. I made it into the national team and would continue to vomit before matches.”*

**Quote 4.11** *“Before the test I was really nervous and scared of failing. I was physically shaking... My heart was pounding really fast as I sat in the waiting room. When the examiner called my name my mouth was really dry and my legs were shaking.”*

**Quote 4.12** *“This lead to a lack of sleep, because I worried so much, I also ate a lot, didn’t see my friends...”*

Table 3.6

**Question 4.B) The relation between emotion and behaviour in goal-pursuit.**

Theme	Sub-theme
Emotions as a drive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving to avoid failure</li> <li>• Moving for high achievement</li> </ul>
Emotion tolerance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving in spite of failure</li> </ul>
Emotions as an obstacle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoidance</li> </ul>

The emotions experienced give rise to behaviour that is directed either towards or away from the goal with various underlying motivations. For a vast majority of individuals, emotions acted as a **drive** to either: **approach the goal to avoid failure** or **approach the goal for high achievement** - both with fear as the underlying motive. These behaviours are illustrated in the following examples:

Approach to avoid:

**Quote 4.13** *“During my studies at Bangor, I have constantly been extremely worried that I am going to fail. Although this has motivated me to work to the best of my ability, the fear of failure has become so intense that I have overworked myself.”*

**Quote 4.14** *“In my most recent exams, I feared failing and felt that no matter how much I revised I still didn’t know enough to pass, therefore I stayed up, barely sleeping for around a week and then through the exam period trying to make sure that I had revised. If I wasn’t studying I felt guilty...”*

**Quote 4.15** *“I find mid-term and final exams a challenge that I must complete and achieve high marks in. During the previous final exam period, I worked profusely to*

*ensure I performed well and achieved high grades. With such determination to achieve greatness, I found myself worrying excessively about failing and not receiving a first class."*

Approach to achieve:

**Quote 4.16** *"I experience fear of failure everyday in university. I am very determined and driven and work hard because I want to do well. But every single assignment, exam, task... I fear failure. My experience as a student is really stressful, and I would hate not to do well. I always fear failure during my time in university. It's exhausting."*

**Quote 4.17** *"I often fear failure about university and assignments, but I work extremely hard to achieve my goal of around 65% for each assignment. I make sure I am fully aware of the criteria needed. I often get lower than my goal and get scared that this will affect my whole degree grade."*

**Quote 4.18** *"Fear of failure is very present in examinations, as in A level especially, it was the deciding factor as to whether I could get to study in university or not and caused me a lot of panic, which I suppose led to a further drive to revise."*

The second most common theme throughout the stories was **movement towards the goal in spite of** the presence of uncomfortable emotion, suggesting a tolerance towards felt experiences and an eagerness to move forward regardless:

**Quote 4.19** *"... It was not easy trying to fit in (in a new school) because everything was different and I was not sufficiently mentally prepared. I avoided socialising and would rather be on my own. But eventually I stop giving in to fear and faced the challenges head on. I told myself not to be afraid and did not think about and do it. Which I did and somehow managed to fit in before realising it."*

**Quote 4.20** *"... Once A level work became intense, I no longer had a way to escape my problems because college became a stressful issue too. Despite the day in-day out battle with anxiety, I worked solidly to do well in my A-levels, getting top marks on my mock exams."*

**Quote 4.21** *"... The day of the presentation arrived and I don't think I have ever felt so ill or terrified in all my life as I did on that day. To cut a long story short, I did carry out my presentation with my legs trembling, a dry mouth, a voice that sounded*

*nothing like mine and all the other terrifying feelings that accompanied my complete fear. At the end of the presentation I realised I had actually faced one of my biggest fears."*

**Quote 4.22** *"I am afraid of failure every day... but in reality I think it's a healthy fear to have. It keeps me from making that feared error. It prevents me from failing. The more afraid of failure I am, the less I am apt to fail. My fear drives me from me from procrastination before tests and kicks my studying into overdrive, and rather than getting an F I find that I have gotten an A."*

**Quote 4.23** *"I've recently started a company with two other partners and of course failure often comes to mind. If we let it rule us, however, we'd never get anything started. So we put that aside and went for."*

Less commonly than expected, individuals expressed their emotion as an **obstacle** to continued goal pursuit, leading to the endorsement of various avoidance strategies such as self-handicapping and procrastination.

**Quote 4.24** *"...I was constantly told my nerves always got the better of me, which made the situation worse. Eventually I stopped trailing so that I didn't have to face the possibility of not being selected. I've always made excuses saying it's because I was too busy to continue but I suppose that's the reason I stopped trialing."*

**Quote 4.25** *"It was a friends birthday and I promised her that I would bake a cake for her party. I was scared that the cake would not taste good or look pretty. I was scared that the people at the party would judge the cake for not being good and that I would disappoint my friend. I ended up getting a relative to bake the cake for me, and passed it off as my own to avoid bad judgement and failure."*

**Quote 4.26** *"During end of semester exams I feared failure as due to work and lack of motivation I had left revision too late... this is when I realised that I needed to work harder this semester to try and achieve good grades."*

**Quote 4.27** *"During the revision period in which I was revising before taking my January exams I feared failure. So I experienced stress during this time when revising which actually made it more difficult to revise and affected my sleeping and eating habits."*

Table 3.7

**Question 5) The influence of past failures on current fear of failure and the “why” of this association.**

Theme	Sub-themes
Past failures reinforce current fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unexpected</li> <li>• Aversive consequences</li> </ul>
Past failures as a learning experience	

The majority of stories that accounted for past failures in relation to a current goal expressed that fear of failure had been **reinforced** by the previous experience, as suggested by the following quotes:

**Quote 5.1** “I’d already failed the test once before and the thought of not passing the second time filled me with a lot of anxiety.”

**Quote 5.2** “In sixth form I choose subjects that were not suited to me and so doing my A-levels first time round I didn’t do very well. This increased my fear of failure when I had to retake my exams in a year. I was so nervous and was extremely worried that I was going to fail again.”

**Quote 5.3** “...having done poorly in my first year I was adamant not to repeat it. This previous experience definitely added to the fear, and this fear added a significant amount of stress...”

When delving deeper into the reasons behind this common experience, two subthemes emerged from the data. First, it appears the failure event was **unexpected** given it did not match the effort put in by individual. Secondly, the experience involved a **consequence** that was perceived as aversive by the individual – most often in direct relation to other people. Taken together, these past perceptions had a direct influence on individuals’ anticipation of the future outcome, thus reinforcing the fear of a similar event reoccurring.

Unexpected past failures:

**Quote 5.4** “...I had not done as well as I thought and failed the 3 subjects I had taken, so therefore I really did not know what to do with myself, and completely feared the next year when I decided to carry on at A levels.”

**Quote 5.5** “... I strolled into my AS levels with the same attitude, believing I could put in minimal effort and still walk out with good enough grades to get me into top universities, but I was very wrong... Not only had I walked out of AS results day with grades that were below average, but they were pretty awful. The next year of my life was hell... every day I was consumed with this stress and fear.”

Perceived consequence of past failures:

**Quote 5.6** “... my actual A level grades were a large contrast to the effort I had been putting in all year round and therefore were very disappointing to me. I felt like a disappointment overall, even though I passed them all... In fact, my college teacher told me I was a disappointment on receiving the grades.”

**Quote 5.7** “... Upon completing my GCSE's and college, I came to university and completed first year with a C. I told my family my grades and they were disappointed. Ever since then I have been afraid to get anything less than a B grade in anything.”

**Quote 5.8** “Recently I had some mid-term exams and they were fields of psychology I struggled in and basically because of the intense fear of failure I fainted and even thought I wouldn't be able to pass in the end... this has been in me since I was 17 and I was humiliated in front of my extended family for failing my first year of college.”

Another theme unfolding was **learning** as a result of past failures. In these instances, fear of failure was acknowledged as present due to these events, but did not appear to have been reinforced. Instead, participants expressed a greater openness to learn from these events in order to improve future performance.

**Quote 5.9** “...even though we lost our coach was very supportive telling us that our mistakes are going to help us be better players and he also advised us to learn from the winning team... the year after that we won the cup. Failure is not always bad after all.”

**Quote 5.10** “My fear was failing my driving practical test. This was because I previously failed on my first attempt. This made me feel extremely nervous... unfortunately on the second attempt I gained a major, which means a straight fail. This has altered my view for when I come to take the test again in summer as I no longer feel as much pressure as I have already failed this test twice so know what to focus more on when I take the test again.”

**Quote 5.11** *“The fear of failure was of course paramount after I had come so far and had achieved regional level of hockey. Unfortunately, I did not manage to progress, which was devastating, however I had to take away from the experience all that I had learned and channel that into future hockey.”*

### **Discussion of Qualitative findings (Part 2)**

The qualitative analysis added multiple layers to the understanding of the fear of failure experience that complement and in some cases also contradict findings of the quantitative analysis. The forthcoming discussion will shed light on qualitative findings (in relation to quantitative and previous literature) and is organised into subheadings that represent the main and most prominent themes of each qualitative inquiry.

#### **Fear of failure is extrinsic**

When asked to provide a story of fear of failure in relation to a valued goal, the majority of individuals retrieve events relating to extrinsic pursuits of a performance oriented nature, which leads to the seemingly logical conclusion that fear of failure is extrinsic. However, given that such pursuits were accounted for when prompted to consider a valued goal requires further insight into the meaning of the term ‘value’ in relation to the fear of failure experience. Typically, a valuable goal is one that is considered inherently intrinsic, meaning that its pursuit aligns with one’s deepest held principles often relating to personal growth, relationships with self and others, contribution and health – all of which stand in stark contrast to the attainment of external rewards that are found outside of self but were not once accounted for in the stories (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The action taken towards the fulfilment of intrinsic values are commonly motivated by the individual’s core needs for feeling autonomous, competent and connected to others whereas the latter, extrinsic sources of satisfaction that were reflected in the majority of stories are most often sought in response to the thwarting of intrinsic needs whereby feelings of threat motivates a defensive pursuit geared towards ascertaining an extrinsic reward of some sort (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The contrast between these two motivations and the perceived value attached to extrinsic pursuits in the current study suggests the fear of failure experience may encompass internalised extrinsic motivations that as implied, refers to extrinsic and often instrumental outcomes (e.g. admiration, grades, power) that has become internalised as important because they are endorsed or considered valuable by significant others or society (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 2001). What further characterises internalised motivation is a strong sense of autonomy, whereby the individual perceives the behaviour involved in the pursuit to be a choice of their own and therefore takes full responsibility for accomplishing the seemingly important goal. This coincides with the finding of the quantitative analysis of the SenseMaker® in which participants recognised themselves as in control of the outcome.



However, what becomes important to highlight in the analysis of individuals' motivation as reported in the current study are the words *perceived* and *seemingly* mentioned previously in relation to control and the value of the goal. While intrinsic and internalised motivation may seem like inseparable constructs given that they on the surface share similar characteristics, it is in this case especially necessary to re-emphasize the distinction, as this is where fear of failure enters the story. Willingly choosing (i.e. perceiving to choose) to engage in behaviour because it is important (*to others*) is vastly different from choosing a behaviour because it is intrinsically interesting to self as revealed in the qualitative analysis of the stories. While the latter reflects a true sense of autonomy in which the process is as important as the outcome, the behaviour involved in pursuits deemed as important for the sake of others is in contrast, relentlessly controlled by a need to secure a successful outcome. This outcome focused approach to goal-pursuit is what Vallerand *et al* (2003) referred to as obsessive passion, whereby the individual has internalised into their identity certain contingencies often relating to interpersonal pressures and self-esteem that comes to control their engagement in an activity, thus leaving the individual feeling compulsively, rather than autonomously, driven to pursue certain goals. This controlled movement was a dominant theme in the current analysis connected to a strong fear of failing - participants continuously communicated a sense of being compelled to actualise the goal to avoid the losses/shame associated with an unsuccessful outcome. What can thus be concluded is that regardless of what type of extrinsic goal is pursued in which fear of failure is present, any value attached to the pursuit is likely to be a combination of internalised values and contingencies of worth that are pursued when the person's core needs are threatened.

### **Fear of failure is about not being in control of the outcome and doubting in one's abilities**

Reliance on quantitative findings alone would not have completed the understanding of how and when fear of failure arises, as the in-depth analysis of stories generated findings that were not reflected in participants' self-signified responses. While this framework suggested that when individuals perceive they are in control of the outcome the fear relates to a doubt in their abilities, what was of most prominence in participants' stories was a feeling of not being in control followed by a strong doubt in one's abilities. As contradictory as these two findings may seem, they are in light of the theory discussed above in fact complementary

in a sense that qualitative findings clarify the understanding of control in relation to the fear of failure experience.

Having a sense that one is the primary agent in initiating, executing and controlling one's actions is a prerequisite, i.e. the first stage, in the process of pursuing and eventually realising any type of goal. If this sense of agency/autonomy persists throughout the various stages of the pursuit as it commonly will when individuals are intrinsically motivated, it has been found to aid persistence in the face of challenge and contribute to positive affect and future task engagement (Ntoumanis et al., 2014). Therefore, retrospectively acknowledging one's responsibility for the outcome of the goal, which many times were revealed by participants as successful in the end, is congruent with the general perception of oneself as in control of and responsible for producing the effect at the onset of goal-pursuit. This is, however, only the beginning of the fear of failure 'story' and had the investigation ended here conclusions would have been devoid of insight into how the loss of perceived control in the process is so closely connected to individuals' experience of fearing failure.

In participants' stories of their pursuits, fear of failure was accounted for often in connection to encountered difficulties and pressure from others and self, which coincides with the underlying theory that fear of failure typically arises when the individual experiences a thwarting of core needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000), especially when having turned to goals that are important for the maintenance of their self-worth. It is the question of *why* this occurs that was found in the qualitative analysis to most dominantly be linked to a loss of a sense of control during the process of the pursuit. This is an important detail that quantitative findings were not able to capture. While it is impossible to establish a causal direction of events from the stories alone, individuals portrayed fear of failure in instances when they felt trapped between having exerted full effort and waiting for a final, unknown outcome that at this stage was attributed to an external source, suggesting their locus of control had shifted from being in the hands of self to now being determined by another. Feeling not able to control the final outcome then give rise to anxieties about potential failure and doubt in one's abilities, which was reflected by individuals' uncertainties about having done 'enough' to achieve the goal. These doubts were not only present after effort had been expended, but also prior to taking action and often in conjunction with perceived difficulty of the task, which insinuates that while individuals may possess a general sense of agency over the goal-pursuit process, fear of failure may in part relate to not feeling efficacious if for instance, previous attempts had resulted in failure (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

This analysis of when and how fear of failure arises has offered insight into how control relates to the fear of failure experiences, suggesting the perceived loss of it may be a factor involved in the rise of fear of failure during the goal-pursuit and a reason for individuals' expressed doubts in their abilities. Previous research has consistently linked fear of failure with low perceived control in various contexts and often in relation to inactivity, avoidance, and self-handicapping behaviours, suggesting that the combination of feeling fearful and not in control may stall goal achievement (e.g. Martin, 2002; Martin & Marsh, 2003). On the other end of the spectrum and as indicated in the quantitative analysis, high perceived control has been associated with an absence of or low fear of failure and high success orientation, as it is believed that individuals are more motivated and work harder to achieve when they see a clear link between their efforts and a successful outcome (e.g. Covington & Roberts, 1994; Martin, Marsh & Debus, 2001). Current qualitative findings, however, do not fall into any of these two extremes.

Judging from the narratives, individuals experience a sense of ownership over the goal at the beginning of the pursuit that is lost as they experience 'threat', meaning that they question if they have done enough or can do enough to influence the outcome. While this presents a state of extreme vulnerability, as the more effort exerted the higher the chances of attributing potential failure to low ability, the majority of stories did not reflect goal retrieval or avoidance. In fact, a dominant theme (that will be discussed in more detail later) provides evidence for continued action forward regardless of the perceived inability to control the outcome, which indicates that some individuals may be motivated to put in equally as much effort when they are uncertain about the link between their efforts and the outcome. This inconsistency between research findings may be due to not accounting for fear of failure as a drive for some individuals to respond to the loss of control with determined efforts to regain a sense of control (e.g. proactively accounting for challenges that may appear along the way). An alternative reason aligning with the observed relevance of self-esteem above and beyond control in the quantitative analysis opens to the possibility that some individuals may be riskier with their efforts despite not feeling in control due to their high levels of self-esteem that can be used to deflect blame away from their abilities in an event of failure. This explanation is however, less likely in the current study as it is not congruent with individuals' expressed concern for the consequences of failure.

Clearly, the individual's perception of control has many layers and when it comes to fear of failure in the context of goal pursuit, future research will benefit from considering the

whole process of the pursuit, as knowledge of individuals' control beliefs prior to commencing the goal can help alter unhelpful attributions regarding the outcome and thereby contribute to a more stable sense of control throughout and perhaps eventually, a lowering in fear of failure.

### **“Am I enough for others”**

Others' opinion of self is what appears to lie at the very core of individuals' fear of failure and was expressed as a fear of disappointing others, letting others down, embarrassing self and being judged as a result of failing to reach the goal. Closely connected to these perceived aversive outcomes were repeated concerns about not having done enough to prevent these from occurring. The value attributed to others' opinion as a theme in the current study is concordant with several of the lower-order factors identified in Conroy's (2001) model of fear of failure that is thought to represent aversive consequences of failing and aligns well with previous qualitative research that has pinned 'negative social evaluation' and 'disappointing significant others' as concurrent themes of aversive outcomes (Sagar, Lavalley & Spray, 2007). Beyond the identification of these consequences, stories enabled a depth of analysis that generated further insight into the meaning behind the aversive nature of others' perceived opinion of self. At the heart of this fear and far past concerns regarding 'doing' enough to perform lies a disturbing uncertainty of not 'being' enough, as reflected in participants' expressions of 'being a failure' and 'being a disappointment', which also demonstrates an inability of individuals to separate their behaviour (i.e. failing because of my actions) from their inherent value as a human being (i.e. failing because I am a failure). All in all, what this suggests is that failure is immensely aversive due to the fact that individuals' worthiness rather than behaviour would be up for scrutiny by others.

Perceiving to have one's worth judged has been recognised through the self-worth theory as the ultimate source of shame that conflicts with the individual's need for self-acceptance, which so tightly hinges on others' judgement (Covington, 1992). The extremity of this experience has been evidenced by previous research demonstrating that students are often willing to sacrifice their grades and their learning in order to protect their existing sense of worth that is thought to be reflected by their overall competence and abilities (Covington, 1992). Therefore, when fear of failure is at its peak it is common for individuals with high threat appraisal to choose to turn to self-handicapping behaviours to preserve their perceived competence rather than to seek ways to enhance their need to feel competent, suggesting

there will be individual differences in the motives of the shame experience. Taken together, what becomes evident is the depth of individuals' uncertainties of not 'being' enough and regardless of what behaviour results from the anticipation of such a vulnerable outcome, what appears to be a common denominator is a yearning for acceptance from others when ultimately, all it narrows down to is a deep-rooted wish to accept self.

### **A wide spectrum of negative emotions encompasses the fear of failure experience**

The qualitative inquiry of participants' felt experience has added multiple layers of depth to the understanding of the emotional side of fear of failure that stretch way beyond the quantitative findings of the current study and past research. Without having been specifically instructed to describe their emotions, the substantial level of detail actually provided by participants enabled insight into the wide range of emotions that accompany fear of failure and *how* they are experienced. Taken together, the spectrum of negative emotions gathered from analysing the stories can by their semantics alone be plotted on a dimension of extremity ranging from nervousness to panic. In addition, participants used adjectives such as 'extremely' (worried), 'deep' (fear) and 'intense' (anxiety) that further added to the understanding of how these were felt.

What particularly emphasised the magnitude of the emotional experience were the physical symptoms reported in connection to extreme emotions. For instance, participants commonly expressed changes in appetite, feeling sick, having heart palpitations and lack of sleep due to being overwhelmed by emotions. Physical symptoms as an extension of an intense emotional experience represents the complex interdependence between mind and body that, although not acknowledged in the fear of failure literature, is a well-known occurrence that has previously been explained in relation to psychopathology (Thayer & Brosschot, 2005). Mental states such as depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress and even negative affective states have been shown to affect not just the mind but also the body, giving rise to numerous symptoms such as chest pains, insomnia, headaches and digestive issues to name a few (e.g. Trivedi, 2004), due to the association between these mental states and automatic nervous system imbalance which occurs when the individual is under a prolonged state of alarm (Thayer & Brosschot, 2005). In these instances of *perceived* threat from the environment, the body works in favour of survival by putting the individual in a state of hypervigilance and action readiness, shutting down any bodily function that is of secondary importance to survival – such as the ability to down regulate heartrate and body temperature,

hence explaining why participants reported these symptoms along with their threat anticipation of failure (Thayer & Brosschot, 2005).

Whilst it is evident that a link exists between negative emotions experienced in a state of alarm and physical symptomatology, it does not suffice to explain why other individuals who experience intense fear of failure do not express these symptoms. Apart from the obvious reason that some may have purposefully left it out of their stories, another explanation for this discrepancy is put forth by the Joint Impact Hypothesis (Gendolla, Abele, Andrei, Spurk & Richter, 2005) suggesting that affective state alone does not produce symptoms, it needs to be paired with a high degree of self-focus. That is, negative affectivity will only facilitate enhanced perception of somatic symptoms when attention is simultaneously focused on self, and vice versa. This hypothesis aligns with the quantitative findings of the current study which indicated that individuals high in fear of failure were particularly preoccupied with their emotional experience and caught up with their thoughts relating to their fears. While it is impossible to ascertain if this group experienced any physical symptoms, it is highly likely that this kind of self-focused attention combined with their fear of failure amplified the experience of physical symptoms. Nonetheless, given that individuals can fear failure to the point where the body resorts to a state of threat that eventually, can lead to serious health consequences highlights the urgency for research to delve into the ways in which these effects can be mitigated.

### **Fear of failure: Approach to avoid**

It is safe to say that the qualitative approach has yet again provided an immense depth of insight that in the case of behavioural impact, will require a reconsideration of previous conclusions drawn from quantitative findings alone. Without entirely disregarding the positive relationship found between high fear of failure, experiential avoidance and goal withdrawal, the thematic analysis of stories has provided more nuance to this relationship by identifying subtle differences in individuals' motivations and needs. Given that fear of failure was the cornerstone of this research, it is not surprising that the motive to avoid failure lies at the core of individuals' strivings and was thus, a commonality across stories, but what this analysis found separated individuals was the direction in which behaviour was fuelled by this salient motive.

In the majority of individual cases fear of failure was, contrary to quantitative conclusions, not an obstacle to goal pursuit that resulted in avoidance behaviours. In fact, the

emotions associated with fear of failure (and even the accompanying physical symptoms) acted as a drive for individuals to approach the goal in order to avoid failing altogether, or avoid failing personal standards. While these profiles have in the achievement motivation literature been recognised to exist in response to negative emotion in general, it is difficult to place participants' behaviours into existing theoretical frameworks based solely on the information provided in one narrative. To start, the former profile identified (approach to avoid) aligns with the achievement orientation of Covington and Omelich's (1991) 'failure avoiders' typology, but does not display the typical avoidant behaviour that characterises this typology, nor do they express low achievement. Quite on the contrary, their fears drive them to approach challenges and take risks – two behaviours that are more common amongst individuals with a success orientation that is thought to be “uncontaminated” by fear of failure. Until further research can be conducted with intentions to collect more descriptive data to enable analysis of their typology as theorized by Covington and Omelich (1991), individuals identified as driven by their fears to approach will remain uncategorised in light of previous research and stuck in limbo between what Elliot and Church (1997) referred to as a performance-avoidance genotype and a performance-approach phenotype. That is, a desire for avoidance at a functional level that leads to approach at the level of behavioural expression. As mentioned previously, the complexity encountered when attempting to analyse the link between emotion and behaviour may be due to the lack of detail in participants' stories, but it could on the other hand be possible that these typologies are dated and require an update that reflect the ways of students in the current academic climate.

The drive to approach as a result of fearing of failure to ensure personal standards (i.e. high achievement) are met, however, fits well into the 'Overstriver' category which is distinguished by individuals' high expectancy for success *and* high fear of failure (Covington & Omelich, 1991). As indicated in some of the narratives that fit this category, not succeeding to their usual high personal standard is viewed as a failure that the overstriver puts an enormous amount of effort into avoiding. As such, this typology adopts behaviour similar to a perfectionist that may on the surface appear as a performance-approach orientation to goal achievement. With high expectancies for success as a motivational backbone, performance-approach goals are typically directed towards the attainment of favourable judgements of competence and a wish to outperform others (Elliot & Church, 1997). This is, however, not the motivation that energizes the seemingly success oriented behaviour of an overstriver, nor was it expressed as a motive of individuals in the current

research. Underneath the surface of the overstriver that was represented in the qualitative analysis lies as previously mentioned a stronger concern for protecting their perceived competence as is, rather than striving to gain more of it. In fact, this appears to be a common issue across that connects all qualitative inquiries thus far and in so doing, contradicts White's (1957) claim that the strive for competence is self-rewarding and the primary source of human motivation. Instead, it aligns with the self-worth theory (Covington, 1992) that puts shame at the forefront of individuals' motivation that is grounded in self-devaluation and concerns of relational disruption.

There may, however, be exceptions to the rule as some individuals deviate from this typically observed motivation. Those who were recognised as moving towards *despite* their fears, which was the third theme in the analysis, did not appear to do so from a place of scarcity or desire to demonstrate competence, but rather from a place of choice. This choice was evidenced in the stories by participants' awareness of their fears and a willingness to put it aside in favour of progressing towards the goal, which in itself implies an attitude of acceptance towards uncomfortable emotion. This theme aligns with the idea of experiential acceptance discussed in relation to quantitative findings and supports its use in promoting continued movement despite fears of failing.

Making a conscious choice to move regardless of fears in the space of acceptance is, contrary to previously observed behaviours, suggestive of actions that are self-initiating and autonomously driven rather than controlled by threats and may therefore reflect motivation sourced from innate desires. While intrinsic strivings lay the foundation for a mastery orientation to goal pursuit (Elliot & Church, 1997), this typology is also characterised by an absence of fear of failure, which again do not fit with the profile represented in the current theme. Rather than this being due to a lack of sufficient detail for categorising into existing types, it reflects the strength of qualitative research to produce rich and meaningful data that the derivative of these motivational theories is lacking. To give an example, a mastery orientation may in fact not be exempt from fear of failure, but the underpinnings of the theory does not account for the ways in which individuals navigate past this experience, by for instance, learning to tolerate/accept emotions as the current theme conveys.



### **The past has reinforced fear of failure**

The qualitative inquiry into the role of the past not only offers direct support of quantitative findings suggesting a strong link between past failures and current fear of failure, but is also able to shed light on the potential reasons behind this association. Past failures had a reinforcing effect on future anticipations seemingly due to a perceived mismatch between effort put in and the outcome (i.e. unexpected failure), which to the individual may have served as proof of lacking ability and in turn contributed to a loss of control to influence future outcomes as evidenced in previous analyses. Therefore, in the process of making sense of this failure outcome, the individual is likely to have made attributions that were of an internal (my abilities are at fault), stable (it will happen again) and uncontrollable (I may not have what it takes) nature that when taken together – reinforced individuals' fears of failing again, as the causes individuals attribute to events are likely to influence how they respond (both affectively and behaviourally) to a future event (Weiner, 1994). The tendency to explain setbacks using this set of attributions has been linked to low resilience (Martin, 2002) and is thought to be a strong contributor of depression (Peterson & Seligman, 1984), learned helplessness (Abrahamson, Metalsky & Alloy, 1978) and overall poor mental health.

That said, despite the significant impact of the past individuals did not express a helpless pattern of responding towards their current goal. Quite on the opposite as discussed in detail above, the majority moved towards the goal with a determination to not fail, suggesting that past failures may not only reinforce negative emotions, but also the associated behaviours (i.e. approach tendencies), thus urging the individual to *take control* to prevent a similar event from reoccurring rather than accepting defeat. On a much larger scale, being alarmed into action despite having attributed a cause as *uncontrollable* brings attention to two possible explanations that could account for this effect. Firstly, as hinted at above, it can be due to the ability of intense emotion to surpass cognitions in signalling action, just as in instances of perceived threat to survival (Pessoa, 2005). What is more, there is also a possibility that individuals were in hindsight able to attribute the cause of their past failure to a *controllable* factor (e.g. not putting in enough effort) regardless of any reinforcing emotional effect, in which case they approach the future goal with a general belief that they are capable to influence the outcome with their actions. Having higher self-esteem may aid this process, as suggested in the quantitative analysis. Clearly, future research needs to look into these speculations.

Regardless of which explanation is true for the individuals whose story represented the first theme, the latter scenario is indicative of a resilient mindset in response to a setback with a strong emotional impact that is essential to cultivate, not only for successful adaptation but also for being able to transcend beyond the sense-making stage to what Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema and Larsen (1998) referred to as the benefit-finding phase that characterises learning and growing from the event and most often pertains to the inherent positive implications of the experience. Learning from failure was the second theme revealed by the current analysis, generated from an impression of there being a greater openness to learn from these events in order to improve future performance, which in contrast to pursuits governed by threat reflects strivings that are more self-focused in nature. Without entirely knowing the ‘journey’ individuals took to get to this point, the willingness to learn and desire to improve demonstrates arrival at the second stage of the meaning making process whereby a decision was made to zoom in on the positive of a negative event. What is of most importance to highlight in this particular instance of learning post failure is that the decision to focus on the positive was not made in the absence of negative emotion. In their accounts of past failures, participants still acknowledged not only the disappointment of failing but also the fear of failure they felt in anticipation of the new goal. The ultimate measure of resilience in response to failure therefore, lies not solely in adopting the ability to turn negative to positive, but in the bravery of *choosing* to do so in the uncomfortable presence of negative emotion.

### **Researcher reflexivity**

Reflexivity in qualitative research entails awareness of the many ways in which the researcher’s subjective assumptions and agendas can affect the research process and outcomes. This statement therefore serves to acknowledge that results from the thematic analysis may unintentionally be influenced by the researcher’s own perceptions, prior knowledge and experience of fear of failure. Total detachment is, however, unrealistic given that the researcher does not exist independently of his/her subjective filters and had the narratives been approached with another’s frame of mind, the final product would still be prone to the same limitations. To help reduce such bias and ensure no information is dismissed or overlooked, it will in the future be helpful to involve more people in the data analysis process.

## **General Discussion and Conclusion (Part 1 & 2)**

The aim of this study was to explore the depth of fear of failure in hopes of better understanding its nature and expression on an emotional, cognitive and behavioural level and as a result gain insight into its role in hindering or promoting goal-pursuit. A SenseMaker® combining the benefits of both quantitative and qualitative methods of analyses was used for this purpose, which resulted in a rich and detailed account of the fear of failure experience that will be summarised below. As it turned out, the qualitative inquiry in particular added layers of understanding beyond the quantitative analysis that has brought clarity specifically to the issues regarding control beliefs, the emotional experience, resulting behaviour, the feared consequences and the role of past failures.

To start, the thematic analysis of narratives revealed that fear of failure is most commonly experienced when individuals internalise the value of extrinsic rewards and strive to attain these goals with undivided focus on the outcome. Most likely due to the value attributed to the successful pursuit of these goals, individuals admitted to being personally in control of the outcome, which communicates they were in possession of a general sense of autonomy over the initiation and realization of the goal. Further inspection of stories into the nature of the fear, however, yielded contradictory evidence to participants' self-signified responses regarding their control beliefs suggesting what individuals in the current study fear most is not being able to control the outcome. Rather than it discounting the relevance of the initial finding, it contrary acts as complementary by furthering the understanding of control and its relation to fear of failure *during* the pursuit, which was not captured quantitatively. More specifically, when delving into the depth of the stories it was found that while participants held onto a sense of ownership of the goal, their perceived sense of being able to control the outcome was lost in the space between having exerted effort and waiting for the outcome, hence giving rise to fears of failing and a doubt in their capabilities to succeed. These findings yielded from a consolidation of both analyses suggests a distinction between the perception of agency and control in goal pursuit – the former refers to the responsibility that comes with recognising oneself as a volitional being and can for better or worse, exist independently of one's perceived ability to actually control the outcome. As implied and previously discussed, control appears more prone to fluctuations from the influence of external forces and may therefore require an awareness of attributions in order to be kept intact. In addition, what the quantitative analysis indicated may help in instances of perceived

uncontrollability is having a good sense of self-esteem, although caution should be taken when encouraging this asset as high levels are more often than not, unstable and contingent.

Moreover, and also relating to the supposed absence of steady control beliefs, the qualitative analysis identified large deviations from the behavioural norm that was quantitatively depicted as a positive association between struggling with emotions relating to the fear of failure experience and goal retrieval. In fact, this relationship turned out to be far more nuanced and open to a whole host of individual differences – while not strictly fitting into any theoretical typologies, it can be concluded that fear of failure above all, acts as an alarm that signals the majority of individuals in this study to move in a forward direction even in the presence of self-doubt and control uncertainties, in order to avoid an aversive outcome and perhaps also to regain a sense of control. However, this alarm-state of movement towards the goal is not reflective of an accepting stance towards felt experiences, quite the contrary. Experiential acceptance has a beneficial role to play within the fear of failure experience, but was in the current study not a commonly applied tool in response to uncomfortable emotional states. Future research is needed to further explore the application of acceptance whilst taking into account individual differences in fear of failure motives and resulting behaviour.

Whilst this study recognised several of Conroy's (2001) aversive outcomes in the qualitative data, the one theme that encapsulated these lower-order factors were participants' concerns about 'being' enough for other peoples' judgement that has become so closely tied to one's ability to achieve. The vulnerability that comes with anticipating an outcome that has the power to diminish one's worthiness was reflected in participants' inability to separate their fears of not 'doing' from 'being' enough, suggesting an extremely unstable sense of worth that has been put in the hands of another to stabilise through competence judgements. Given that this is a core concern that almost all lower-order consequences of failure can be traced back to, it is surprising that it is not represented as a higher-order factor in Conroy's (2001) model of fear of failure. At a lower level, "devaluing one's self-estimate" does not do justice to the profound vulnerability attached to fearing failure, and should at a minimum be reconsidered as a 'search' for acceptance of self through others.

The thematic analysis of the emotional profile accompanying fear of failure generated very specific insight into what emotions participants were preoccupied with when fearing failure and also to what degree they were felt. It turned out the 'fear' in 'fear of failure' is a noun that could be replaced by many others, such as 'anxiety', 'panic', 'nervous' to describe

how it feels to anticipate an outcome perceived as aversive. What was of particular interest and novelty to discover was that the felt experience of fear of failure was not only emotional, but also physical. More specifically, participants commonly reported bodily symptoms as a result of intense emotional experiences leading up to the performance. The fact that fear of failure can express itself at a physical level points to the severity of individuals' threat perception and despite it not appearing as an impediment to successful goal-pursuit, its effect on overall health and wellbeing should be a matter of utmost concern.

Lastly, what both analyses can agree on is that the individual's perception of past experiences of failure plays a role in shaping future anticipations. More specifically, the current study found that the past had a reinforcing effect on current anticipations, suggesting that the manner in which the past event was processed (or not) is likely to have influenced expectations and emotions regarding a similar upcoming event with a value attached to it. However, of particular promise holds the revelation that the past plays a role not just in creating anticipations, but also in changing them. That is, participants expressed the past as a teacher from which they had learnt what went wrong and how to improve, which demonstrates a growth-oriented mindset that will be necessary for the development of a resilient character in the face of future challenges. As previously indicated, self-esteem may play an important role in this process. What can conclude fear of failure and its many potential strings to the past based on these two different responses is the prospect of there being a choice in how to respond. A choice with only one pre-requisite – a willingness to let go of what no longer serves.

### **Implications and limitations**

**Methodological.** The use of qualitative analysis to seek further insight beyond the limits of quantitative methods resulted in a rich understanding of the fear of failure experience that can serve as a foundation for future inquiries. While this clearly highlights the inherent strengths of qualitative research it simultaneously draws attention to the potential drawbacks of relying on quantitative methods alone, which in itself bears important methodological implications for future research investigations. To start, knowledge generated by quantitative methods may be lacking details that are important for fully understanding the phenomenon under scrutiny. Take as an example from the current study; the stories told by participants of fear of failure captured layers of depth to the understanding of their emotional experience that enabled conclusions regarding *what* emotions encompass the experience and

*how* they were felt. Without this qualitative component, conclusions would not extend beyond the knowledge that participants were preoccupied with their emotions. Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods alongside quantitative can shed light on unexpected statistical trends or outliers that in many cases can be equally as informative as the norm. In fact, this was the case in the current research, whereby the thematic analysis revealed behavioural patterns that contradicted the quantitative association. As these two examples illustrate, conclusions drawn from quantitative analyses can be incomplete without the nuances of qualitative insight. Therefore, including a qualitative component as a complementary method would greatly benefit research of an exploratory nature and do justice to the subjective accounts that are more often than not, lost in numerical translation.

That said, while there are indeed numerous strengths to the use of qualitative methods, it is important to also acknowledge some of the limitations that may require findings of this study to be interpreted with caution. To begin with, as the themes identified were generalised across the whole sample it is impossible to know if these attributes and tendencies are more commonly expressed in the high or low group of for example, fear of failure, that made up the quantitative analysis. Had it been possible to link findings of the thematic analysis with high/low groups of not just fear of failure but also control and self-esteem, it would have enabled more specific conclusions to be drawn regarding the nature of the fear of failure experience.

The second limitation relates to the issue of generalisability that is always present when dealing with the complexity of qualitative research. Complexity in this instance refers to the depth, richness and detail resulting from subjective accounts that are neither confirmatory nor falsifiable in nature, but rather open to interpretation by the researcher – all of which can make findings difficult to extend to a wider population (Ochieng, 2009). While this limitation would apply to most qualitative endeavours that aim to generate knowledge, it is deemed to be less of a concern in this study as its use acted as a complementary method to a quantitative analysis that is viewed as more robust and scientifically sound (Ochieng, 2009). What is, however, more of a concern to this study in particular is the possibility of intra-individual variations in behaviours and emotions reported that are not stable and therefore not generalizable across situations. That is, each story depicts one instance of fearing failure that may or may not be representative of their typical responses. Longitudinal designs using storytelling could help clarify this issue.

However, narrative research in itself is prone to concerns regarding validity, as the ability to articulate the meaning of an experience is very much dependent on not just the skills of narrator, but also his/her memory as stories are by nature, recollections of the past (Polkinghorne, 2007). In many cases therefore, reality is such that the descriptions attained of participants' experienced meaning is not a mirrored reflection of the *actual* meaning. This disjunction between the individual's actual experienced meaning and his/her description can for example be due to the limits of language (and skills thereof) to capture and convey the inherent complexity and depth of the experienced meaning, a resistance to fully disclose because of social desirability and the limits of memory in the recalling of meaningful events, to name a few (Polkinghorne, 2007). The latter source of disjunction may in particular be relevant to the current study in the form of recall bias, as many of the stories shared had a positive outcome. Retrospective responses may therefore not be representative of the momentary experience, suggesting stories may not do justice to the actual meaning of the event. One suggestion for overcoming this potential issue is for participants to share a story of a present goal they fear failing.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications.** The challenge encountered when attempting to fit the motives for participants' fear of failure into existing motivational typologies revealed the limits of categories to accurately account for fear of failure as a process. The 'all or nothing' view of fear of failure that encompass these theories especially at the lower and higher end of the approach-avoidance motivational spectrum may be beneficial for capturing a snapshot of trends for research purposes, but does not do justice to the journey upon which fear of failure evolves or ceases to be of motivational influence. As mentioned in the discussion for instance, the 'absence of fear of failure' as a pre-requisite for a master orientation omits important components of the journey that could explain how individuals arrived at a place where they were no longer stuck in the grips of fear of failure. Viewing the nature of fear of failure in goal-pursuit as a process rather than a product that is either present or absent at the time of measurement is crucial for knowing how and when to intervene, if at all, to promote goal-pursuit.

On a similar note, but more so in relation to the underlying needs of these motivations, the analysis of fear of failure also highlighted the potential role of individual differences in the strive for competence. Typically, fear of failure is understood to arise when there is a thwarting of one's intrinsic need to feel and demonstrate competence. However, for some individuals this need is not thwarted on an intrinsic level, but rather threatened on a

‘survival’ level that requires an armour to protect against the loss of competence as is. For the loss of competence comes with a higher price than the individual can afford: a feeling of being unworthy in the eyes of others. As this suggests, the strive/need for competence even at an approach-level of motivation (e.g. success-orientation, overstriver) has multiple layers that will differ depending on the need of the individual to seek or preserve competence. These very subtle needs that are masked underneath the strive for competence may not be apparent on a surface level as the tangible outcome of such pursuits are much the same across these approach strivings, but it is nonetheless important to be aware of these individual differences as their responses to challenges, failure and risk-taking will be different. From a higher, theoretical perspective, what these individual differences highlight is that the protection of competence is an equally relevant source of human motivation as is the desire for competence and in the case of the former, this striving is far from self-rewarding and self-initiating.

Consequently, the recognition of self-protection at the core of human motivation holds a number of practical implications that belong at the centre of research pursuits and interventions. To start, while it is difficult without evidence to ascertain which need is of highest priority, it seems logical to assume that the need to protect self against a perceived threat precedes any striving that is not relevant to ‘survival’. In other words, setting out to encourage intrinsic strivings without first tending to the foundation of establishing a healthy relationship to self may backfire as it is ultimately impossible to “pour from an empty cup”. Therefore, an appropriate focus of future research interventions is to begin at the core by helping individuals build a stronger sense of worthiness and then aim to encourage self-focused strivings governed by intrinsic needs and values.

Zooming out again and returning to the topic of fear of failure in the context of goal-pursuit that embrace this research, a question that initiated this exploration concerned its effect on successful goal achievement and its potential to act either as an obstacle or drive for behaviour. What evidence from the current study seem to suggest is that fear of failure predominantly drives behaviour forward with strong intentions to avoid failure and therefore does not inflict any harm on successful goal achievement. While this finding puts negative emotions in a positive light and lends support for its instrumental value in driving individuals forward, the investigation of its effect must continue from a more holistic perspective in which wellbeing (emotional, psychological, spiritual and physical) is put at the forefront of research inquiries. For what is yet unknown is what effect such threat appraisals that govern



avoidance motivation has on positive wellbeing. If it would turn out to do more harm than good, how can its impact be lessened without sacrificing goal achievement? These are all concerns that will be in the hands of future research to address.

To summarise, the in-depth exploration of the nature of fear of failure in goal-pursuit has yielded insight into its expression at an emotional, cognitive and behavioural level that can, along with an understanding of its past influences, serve as a foundation for future research to build upon in a variety of contexts. Despite there always being deviations from the norm, when taken together as a whole, what seems to permeate the fear of failure experience overall is an excruciating vulnerability regarding others' opinion of self that motivates a strive for self-acceptance through others' approval. In this process, the emotional sensation of fear of failure is essentially an alarm, urging the individual to protect and take action against any event that could threaten the sense of being worthy. On the surface, however, the emotions that represent this vulnerability seem beneficial to behaviour and successful goal achievement, thus lending to the conclusion that fear of failure can indeed be of value to the individual. The question that then remains is if fear of failure, as many other negatively valenced emotions, needs to be removed, changed, fixed or suppressed? The answer that will conclude this study is no; attempting to meddle with an unwanted emotion is like taking a pill to heal a broken leg – it may only offer short-term pain relief. What needs attention and maintenance is the root that gave rise to the problem in the first place. In the case of fear of failure, this will involve cultivating a stronger foundation of worthiness.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Individual Differences in the Regulation of Emotion: The Effect of Acceptance on Defensive Pessimists' Persistence in Challenging Goal-Pursuit**

This study was carried out primarily in response to the findings of the previous two-part study suggesting that individual differences may be an important factor to account for when assessing behavioural responses to fear of failure, which in turn implicates the application of many strategies used to regulate emotions. Defensive pessimists represent a group of individuals known for their tendencies to harness negative emotions in goal-pursuit to ensure a successful outcome. The aim of this study was to explore the effect of an acceptance manipulation on defensive pessimists' persistence on a challenging task to better understand the consequences of emotion regulation for individuals who prefer to experience negative emotion in goal-pursuit. Forty-eight defensive pessimists were randomly allocated to either an acceptance manipulation or control group prior to completing a difficult Remote Associates Task that included failure feedback after each trial answered incorrect. Participants reported their positive and negative emotions and state anxiety at baseline, after the practice trial and the manipulation as well as at the end of the task. Results showed that participants who received the acceptance manipulation were quicker to withdraw from the task than controls. However, there were no group differences in anxiety levels and positive emotions throughout the task. This suggested that acceptance had the ability among defensive pessimists to create a space at a cognitive level whereby negative thoughts were prevented from further exacerbating negative emotions to drive behaviour. That is, instructions to observe emotions and thoughts disrupted defensive pessimists habitual thinking-through process prior to goal-pursuit. Findings highlight the importance of considering individual differences in emotional preferences, both in the application of therapies (e.g. Acceptance based) and in the assessment of their effectiveness.

*Key words:* Defensive pessimism, persistence, goal-pursuit, negative emotions, acceptance

The need to avoid failure is a commonly manifested motive in goal-pursuit that has been behaviourally and cognitively distinguished from the need to attain success. While the latter energizes behaviour towards the goal with focus on positive outcomes, the need to avoid failure gives rise to negative emotions that typically steer the individual away from the goal in order to avoid the possibility of an unwanted outcome and the aversive emotions associated with it (Elliot & Church, 1997). The motivation to avoid failure has been associated with a wide range of avoidance behaviours, such as self-handicapping and effort withdrawal (Ommundsen, 2004), disorganisation and surface processing (Elliot, McGregor & Gable, 1999), decreased task persistence (Sideridis & Kaplan, 2011) and vulnerability to learned helplessness (Martin & Marsh, 2003); all of which are grounded in a self-protective and defensive mode of functioning.

Whilst negative emotions resulting from a wish to avoid failure may serve as an impediment to successful goal achievement for many people, the need to protect oneself against the negative consequences of failure, coupled with high levels of anxiety has also been shown to fuel approach behaviour. Defensive pessimists are individuals high in avoidance motivation who nonetheless use their negative emotions to approach the goal with determined efforts to prevent a worst-case scenario outcome (Norem & Cantor, 1986). These seemingly adaptive efforts resulting from negative emotions are both behavioural and cognitive in nature; when faced with a situation appraised as uncertain and often uncontrollable, defensive pessimists are thought to lower their expectations, reflect on all possible outcomes and plan their route accordingly in a proactive fashion. While action is taken towards the goal rather than away in the service of self-protection, some research has argued that the defensive pessimist strategy operates under a dual motive. That is, they not only wish to avoid failure, but also have an underlying desire to achieve and outperform others, which in turn may be a factor responsible for the action forward. For example, Martin and Marsh (2003) suggested an additional subgroup known as overstrivers who have high hopes for success and thereby set high expectations for their performance, but are also fearful of failure. It is, however, currently unclear whether overstrivers are a separate subgroup or a version of defensive pessimism. Nonetheless, the profile of defensive pessimists suggests that underlying motives may be working together rather than in isolation to direct and energize behaviour in a manner that is adaptive and far from inhibiting.

What has been shown to debilitate defensive pessimists' goal-directed behaviour are attempts to alter their emotional states. Norem and Spencer (1996) tested the effect of three

manipulations (positive imagery, distraction and coping) on defensive pessimists' performance on a dart-throwing task. As predicted, their performance was disrupted by relaxing prior to engaging with the task, and imagining positive outcomes lead to poorer performance than when allowed to use their habitual negative reflections. Similarly, Sanna (1998) explored the effect of positive and negative moods on anticipatory (i.e. prefactual) thoughts and performance. Being in a positive mood interfered with defensive pessimists' thoughts of alternative outcomes which in turn lead to a decrease in performance on anagrams, whereas a negatively induced mood facilitated the use of these prefactual thoughts and thus, resulted in performance equal to that of controls. These findings in particular illustrate how negative affect and reflectivity combined form defensive pessimists' unique profile.

As shown in these studies, attempts to regulate or intervene with affective states and cognitive processes in a goal achievement context are for defensive pessimists more problematic than the thoughts and emotions in themselves, and when taking a closer look at the purpose of emotion regulation strategies, it becomes apparent why they do more harm than good. To start, the purpose of many emotion regulation strategies is to reduce behavioural avoidance, which is thought to occur in response to aversive emotional stimuli via cognitive processing (Elliott & Church, 1997). In assuming this indirect causal chain between emotion and behaviour, a reduction in avoidance prior to goal performance is achieved by altering cognitions, suggesting that individuals can 'think' themselves out of reacting negatively to aversive emotional stimuli. Implicit in this logic is the notion that mastery and control of emotions are necessary to achieve positive outcomes (Hofmann & Asmundson, 2008). While these strategies have documented positive effects in reducing unwanted affect and promoting desired behaviours (e.g. Wolgast, Viborg & Lundh, 2011; Jamieson, Mendes & Nock, 2012), attempts to alter cognitions in defensive pessimists disrupts the goal-pursuit process as it on the contrary, reduces approach behaviour and decreases performance, thus having the opposite of intended effects. The fact that defensive pessimists need to feed their emotions with negative thoughts (and vice versa) about a future outcome in order to perform clashes with the intention of many emotion regulation strategies that as a result, calls for a more cautious application and consideration of when and for who these are appropriate.

While there is evidence that clearly speaks for the ineffective use of certain cognitive strategies in relation to defensive pessimists as reviewed above, little is known about the

effect of other strategies on defensive pessimists' goal achievement journey. The current study explores an acceptance-based strategy that makes no attempt to change, reduce or eliminate thoughts or emotions (Hayes, 2004), which aligns with the overarching aim of this thesis to not eliminate an emotional experience. The objective is rather to witness its effect on DPs' behaviour. Previous research has treated acceptance as an emotion regulation strategy in non-defensive pessimist populations and compared its effectiveness in relation to other strategies, such as reappraisal and suppression, that aim to target unwanted affect. For example, Hofmann et al. (2009) concluded that while acceptance was more effective at lowering physiological arousal than suppression, reappraisal was most effective out of the three at reducing anxiety.

Other research that has adopted the view of acceptance/avoidance as a function of habitual response patterns have on the contrary, generated results supporting acceptance over and above any other attempts to control or handle emotions in non-defensive pessimist populations. In these instances, the emotion regulation agenda *in itself* is targeted, with the assumption that problems arise from an unwillingness to experience unpleasant thoughts and emotions relating to the past, present or future. Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth and Steger (2006) found that acceptance mediated the relationship between both suppression and reappraisal, suggesting that attempts to regulate emotions resulted in diminished hedonic functioning due to an unwillingness to be in contact with difficult emotional states. Regardless of the perspective from which it is operationalised, the reasoning behind acceptance as a concept very much contrasts the logic of cognitive strategies as explained above. With acceptance, no default link between emotion and behaviour is assumed, meaning that emotions do not need to signal behaviour in any direction (Hayes, 2004). More specifically, acceptance strategies aim to weaken the link between unpleasant experienced emotions and behaviour, not via cognitions, but through teaching individuals to view their emotions as entities rather than signals that require action. This is achieved through engaging in a non-judgemental awareness and acceptance of ongoing internal states (Hayes, 2004).

At first glance, it may seem as if the defensive pessimist approach already aligns with the underpinnings of acceptance. After all, they experience ongoing anticipatory distress and they move forward. However, a closer look at underlying intentions suggests this approach behaviour is in itself a regulatory process, in which the unwillingness to tolerate the aversive emotions associated with failure instigate action geared towards ascertaining success and thereby prevent worst-case scenarios. As such, action is not taken in favour of positive

psychological functioning and so does not coincide with the mission of acceptance to undermine the need to regulate emotion. From a pure motivation and goal achievement perspective, defensive pessimism appears adaptive as they are moving forward and succeeding, but considering the strategy in light of acceptance uncovers a different side to the story in which long-term wellbeing may be sacrificed for the instrumentality provided by momentary, anxiety-ridden affect. This raises the important question of whether DPs' fear-based motives should be harnessed if it could potentially cause harm to their long-term wellbeing as previously discussed. Considering that both goal achievement and wellbeing are crucial components of overall psychological functioning, an important research endeavour is to find out how to best support defensive pessimists on their journey without doing too much damage to their forward moving strategy. Acceptance as a strategy may help with this endeavour, as it does not aim to diminish any emotional experience, but rather create a space where individuals can consider why they are acting on an emotional signal in the first place. On a much larger scale and regardless of what population is studied, further research will also be important for supporting the application of common therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in which acceptance and cognitive techniques are main components, respectively. Failure to consider individual differences in emotional preferences may otherwise result in unsuccessful strategy use depending on the desired outcome.

To carry on with this mission, the present research seeks to understand the effect of an acceptance manipulation on defensive pessimists' emotions and persistence on a challenging goal, which in contrary to previously explored strategies does not purposefully involve disrupting their habitual pattern with change techniques. Instead, the aim of this approach is to *add* a quality of acceptance and observation to their existing repertoire that is thought to provide a new perspective of relating to their thoughts and emotions. In order to measure persistence on a challenging goal, the study required a computerised task that could be made difficult. Accordingly, a Remote Associates Task (RAT) was chosen for this purpose, in which participants were required to think of a fourth word that is associated with a group of three seemingly unrelated and difficult words. Although historically used as a measure of creativity, it was in the current study purely used for its ability to record response time and withdrawals as measures of persistence with a challenging goal.

In practice, bringing momentary awareness to a future-oriented strategy governed by anticipatory fear is thought to result in one of the following outcomes: a stronger intensity of

already existing affect that will fuel behaviour towards the goal with determined efforts to persist in order to avoid failure, thus resulting in longer response times *or* a removal of defensive pessimists' urge to harness affect which will lead to less persistence, i.e. quicker withdrawals. In the current study, it is predicted that the latter will be true; participants in the acceptance condition will be more likely than controls to disengage from the challenging task and negative emotions, including state anxiety, will be reduced as a result of removing the impulse to harness these. With no previous research available to guide predictions regarding positive emotions, it is anticipated that these will remain the same throughout. To test these hypotheses, withdrawal responses on the RAT will be measured and emotions will be recorded throughout various stages of the experimental procedure.

## Methods

### Design

In this experimental study, an independent samples research design was adopted to explore group differences (IV) in persistence on a challenging Remote Associates Task measured in response time (DV) on item withdrawals. There was an experimental condition consisting of an acceptance manipulation and a control group with no manipulation. Furthermore, a mixed-measures design was employed to investigate group differences in positive and negative emotions as well as state anxiety at different time points of the experimental procedure, as it was predicted that levels of affect would change with the different elements of the experimental procedure. As such, there were three models with time (baseline, after practice, after manipulation, post experiment) as the within-participants factor and group (manipulation/no manipulation) as the between-group factor, resulting in a 2x3 (positive emotions), 2x3 (negative emotions) and a 2x4 (state anxiety) design. As these models imply, anxiety was measured at four time points rather than three due to the predicted effect of the manipulation on individuals' anxiety levels.

### Participants

The whole sample consisted of 265 undergraduate psychology students (59 males, 206 females) who were self-selected through Bangor University's research participation scheme and pre-screened for defensive pessimism. Participants who had a total score that fell within the most upper quartile of the defensive pessimism questionnaire were eligible to take part. The scores in the whole sample displayed a *Median* of 57 (*IQR* = 48-70, *Range* = 72). This research sampled as many defensive pessimists that were available from the upper quartile (Q3). Accordingly, 48 was the final number of participants classified as defensive pessimists who were contacted through email and agreed to take part in individual experimental sessions. These were six males (12%) and 42 females (88%) aged between 18-25.

### Materials

**Questionnaires.** The Revised Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire (Norem & Cantor, 1986) was used to identify individuals who endorse the defensive pessimism strategy. Participants whose total score fell into the upper quartile range were classified as defensive pessimists. The scale has 17 items measured on a seven-point Likert Scale ranging from



‘Very true of me’ to ‘Not at all true of me.’ An example item includes: “I carefully consider all possible outcomes before these situations”. The scale has demonstrated good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

State anxiety was measured using the short-form version of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) for adults (Spielberger, 1989). The questionnaire includes six items such as “In this moment I feel worried”, measured on a four-point Likert Scale ranging from ‘Not at all’ to ‘Very much’. The STAI has repeatedly shown good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .86-.95$ ). The scale of Positive and Negative Experiences (SPANE) was used to measure positive and negative affect throughout the experiment (Diener et al., 2009). The scale includes twelve negative and positive emotions such as, ‘Afraid’ and ‘Pleasant.’ Participants were asked to report to what extent they are currently experiencing each of the twelve emotions on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from ‘Very rarely or never’ to ‘Very often or always.’ Similarly, SPANE has shown good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .81-.87$ ). See Appendix B for full questionnaires.

**Manipulation.** The experimental manipulation adapted from Hoffman, Heering, Sawyer & Asnaani (2009) consisted of instructions recorded by the experimenter asking participants to take an accepting stance towards their thoughts and emotions. More specifically, the instructions were as follows:

*“It is quite normal that a situation in which you have to perform and compete against others creates some level of discomfort or even fears of failing. In this very moment and throughout the task that you are about to do, please try to experience your feelings fully as they are, and do not try to control, change or get rid of them in any way. Let your thoughts and feelings run their natural course and allow yourself to stay with these as fully as possible, without letting them dictate your behaviour or your next action. You will in a few minutes be sat in front of a computer to complete the task, but for now please sit quietly with your eyes closed for a couple of minutes. During this time please handle your thoughts and feelings in the manner I suggested. I will let you know when the time has passed.”*

Participants in the control group listened to the following voice instructions also recorded by the experimenter:

*“It is quite normal that a situation in which you have to perform and compete against others creates some level of discomfort or even fears of failing. If you experience any thoughts and/or feelings as such about the upcoming task, take a few minutes now prior to the task and*

*think about how you would normally respond in performance situations as such. I will let you know when it is time to do the task.”*

Both instructions were delivered through headphones using Windows media player and participants were free to adjust the volume to their preference.

**Remote Associates Task (RAT).** The RAT requires participants to think of a word that is associated with a given set of three words (e.g. the associated word for loser, throat, spot is *sore*). The task was designed and run in E-prime on a laptop computer. Given that the aim of the experimental procedure was to induce fear of failure among participants, ten items identified as ‘hard’ on the remote-associates.com website were purposively chosen to measure how long participants would persist on a challenging goal. There was also a practice trial consisting of one RAT item that was completed before the manipulation to increase perceived difficulty and furthermore induce fear of failure. All RAT items were presented in the following order:

*dust/cereal/fish (practice trial) (=bowl)*

*elephant/lapse/vivid (=memory)*

*cross/rain/tie (=bow)*

*back/step/screen (=door)*

*cast/side/jump (=broad)*

*over/plant/horse (=power)*

*shadow/chart/drop (=eye)*

*child/scan/wash (=brain)*

*foul/ground/mate (=play)*

*catcher/food/hot (=dog)*

*house/thumb/pepper (=green)*

There was no time limit on each item and participants pressed the SPACE bar to continue to the next page/item when they considered themselves ready. Upon pressing SPACE, failure feedback (“Wrong answer, you have failed this trial”) was presented in red text with incorrect and blank responses and successful trials were followed by “Correct” in green font. The task finished after 15 minutes, regardless of whether it was completed. Response time for task withdrawals for each participant were collected.

## **Procedure**

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental or control group before arriving to the lab. Once greeted and seated, the participant received instructions regarding the experimental procedure and were told the task was a measure of their reasoning ability. The importance of scoring high on the task was highlighted and to induce a fear of failing and performance anxiety, participants were led to believe their performance would be analysed in relation to their personal attributes and compared to their peers' scores. After obtaining signed consent and baseline measures, the participant completed a practice run of the task that was meant to increase perceived difficulty. Measures of affect and anxiety were taken straight after.

Subsequently, the participant was sat in front of a stationary computer in an adjacent room and was told to relax and make themselves feel comfortable. The experimenter emphasised the importance of following the voice instructions throughout the duration of the recording as well as after and during the task. The manipulation/control phase lasted for three minutes, as the experimenter left the participant in silence for 1.5 minutes after the recording to fully contemplate instructions. Measures of state anxiety was completed straight after and participants indicated how able they were to follow instructions.

In the next phase, the laptop on which the RAT was to be completed was brought to the participant who was advised to try his/her best. The experimenter left the room and the participant pressed SPACE to start the task. Upon completion, participants were asked how many items they scored correctly and completed the final measures of affect and anxiety. Participants were debriefed of the true nature of the experiment and thanked for taking part.

## **Data Analysis**

Response time and emotions data were analysed separately. To start, response time data was approached using an independent samples design whereby a *t* test was utilised to compare differences in time between groups on withdrawal items of the RAT at the end of the experiment. This enabled the researcher to assess whether the experimental group was quicker to withdraw from the task than controls. Furthermore, the emotions data (anxiety and positive and negative affect) was analysed using a mixed-measures ANOVA as emotions were measured at different time points throughout the experimental procedure (within-factor)

and compared across the two groups (between-factor). These analyses provided insight into how participants' emotions changed during the course of the experiment.

## Results

### Preliminary analysis

**RT data.** Response time data for withdrawal trials was analysed using  $t$  test. Data was log-transformed due to the skewness of the normal distribution and zero scores were removed. Furthermore, Levene's test of equality of variances was not assumed ( $p = .005$ ). In addition, response time for correct and incorrect trials were included in the analyses to account for the influence of success and failure feedback on task persistence. In both these instances, Levene's test was also not assumed ( $p < .05$ ).

**Emotion data.** Two independent samples  $t$ -tests were carried out to assess baseline differences in positive affect and anxiety prior to the main analyses of variance. There were no baseline differences in anxiety between groups ( $t(46) = -1.51, p = .14$ ), however levels of positive affect differed significantly between groups ( $t(46) = 2.84, p = .007$ ) at baseline. Emotions data (positive affect, negative affect and anxiety) measured at different time points throughout the experiment was analysed using mixed-measures ANOVAs. An ANCOVA was carried out on positive affect to control for baseline differences. Negative affect was omitted from further analysis as it failed to reach significance ( $F(2, 92) = .06, p = .94$ ). Assumptions required for analysis of variance were tested for both positive affect and anxiety prior to analysis. Data was normally distributed as assessed by the skewness and kurtosis of the normality curve. Mauchly's Sphericity test was violated for both analyses, therefore the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was used. As Levene's test for equality of variance was not violated, homogeneity of variance for the between-group factor was assumed.

Immediately after the manipulation participants were asked how able they were to follow instructions guiding them on how to handle their emotional states on a scale from 0-8. There was no difference between the experimental ( $M = 7.00$ ) and control group ( $M = 6.63$ ) in their self-reported ability to engage with instructions ( $p = .29$ ), indicating that participants were confident they could follow the instructions. As such, this acted as a quick 'Instructions check', rather than a manipulation check to avoid too much disruption of the experimental procedure. This decision was guided by Ellsworth and Gonzalez (2003) who suggested that manipulation checks should be avoided, primarily due to the disruption, but also because it is another event to the participant that in a way could act as an additional and unwanted manipulation.

## Main analysis

**Will defensive pessimists who accept be quicker to withdraw from the goal than controls? What will happen to defensive pessimists' positive emotions and anxiety levels as they accept their thoughts and emotions prior to task performance?**

There was no difference between the experimental ( $M = 3.32, SD = 2.29$ ) and control ( $M = 3.93, SD = 2.37$ ) group in number of trials withdrawn from ( $t(32) = -.77, p = .448$ ). However, an independent-samples  $t$  test was carried out to compare log-transformed response time (RT) for withdrawals between the experimental and control conditions. This analysis showed a significant difference in RT; defensive pessimists in the Acceptance group ( $M = 4.62, SD = .36$ ) were quicker to withdraw than controls ( $M = 4.84, SD = .18$ ),  $t(28) = -2.22, p = .035, d = .74$ , suggesting that acceptance had an effect on defensive pessimists' persistence on a difficult task. Furthermore, two separate  $t$  tests were used to observe group differences for correct and incorrect trials. No differences were found for time spent on incorrect ( $t(35) = -1.62, p = .12$ ) and correct ( $t(26) = -.12, p = .91$ ) item trials, which suggests the manipulation likely did not influence participants' performance.

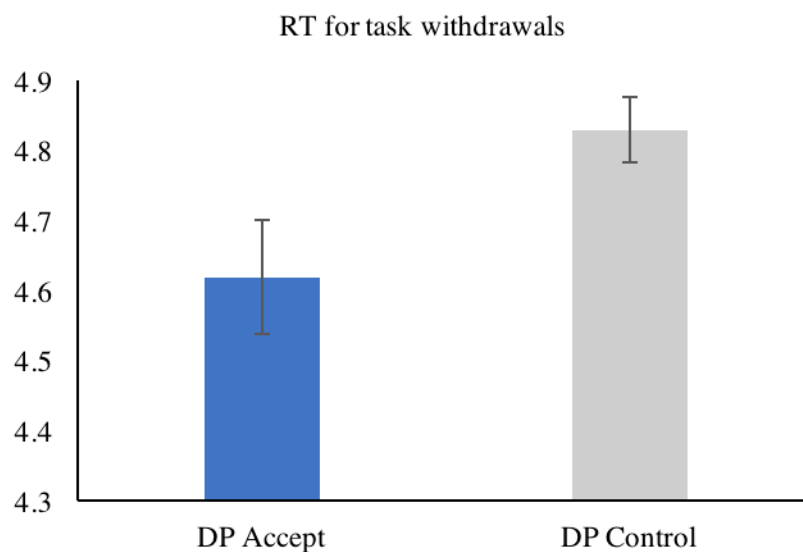


Figure 3.1. Differences log (RT/ms) withdrawal means between groups.

Two mixed-measures ANOVA were conducted to investigate changes in affect (anxiety, positive emotions) between and within groups throughout the course of the experimental procedure. Anxiety was measured at four time points; baseline, after practice, after manipulation and at the end of the task to track changes as a result of the elements of the experimental procedure. Positive emotions were measured at three time points only (baseline,

after practice and at the end) as there was no reason based on previous literature to expect changes after manipulation.

### Anxiety

There was a significant main effect of time on levels of anxiety,  $F(3, 138) = 11.82, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$ , which implies the different phases of the experimental procedure had an effect on participants' anxiety levels. To further explore the direction of this effect, a post-hoc test was carried out using Bonferroni correction. Baseline ( $M = 37.92$ ) significantly differed from both practice ( $M = 42.22, p = .007$ ) and post measures ( $M = 47.71, p < .001$ ), but interestingly not from the manipulation phase of the procedure ( $M = 39.51, p > .05$ ), which in comparison showed a decrease in anxiety levels. The manipulation phase differed significantly only from post measures ( $M = 47.71, p = .001$ ). Taken together, pairwise comparisons suggest that while anxiety levels increased after the practice trial and at the end of the actual task, participants showed a decrease in anxiety after the manipulation. It is, however, not possible to conclude if this was the effect of the acceptance manipulation, as there was no significant main effect of group ( $F(1, 46) = 1.09, p = .30$ ) and no interaction ( $F(3, 138) = .32, p = .77$ ).

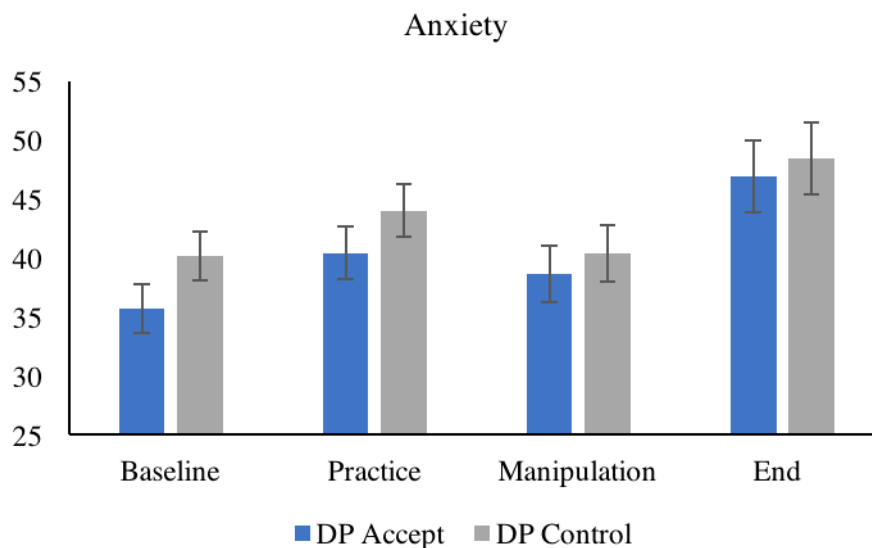


Figure 3.2. Mean differences in anxiety between experimental ( $N = 24$ ) and control ( $N = 24$ ) groups at baseline, after practice trial, after manipulation and at the end of the experimental task.

## Positive emotions

When controlling for baseline differences in positive emotions in an analysis of covariance, there was a significant main effect of group  $F(1, 45) = 6.82, p = .012, \eta^2 = .13$  and a significant effect produced by baseline affect  $F(2, 45) = 174.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = .80$ , implying that any differences in time observed are likely due to baseline differences between groups in positive affect. Nonetheless, the graphical representation of data below suggests both groups experienced a decline in positive affect as they progressed through the different stages of the experiment.

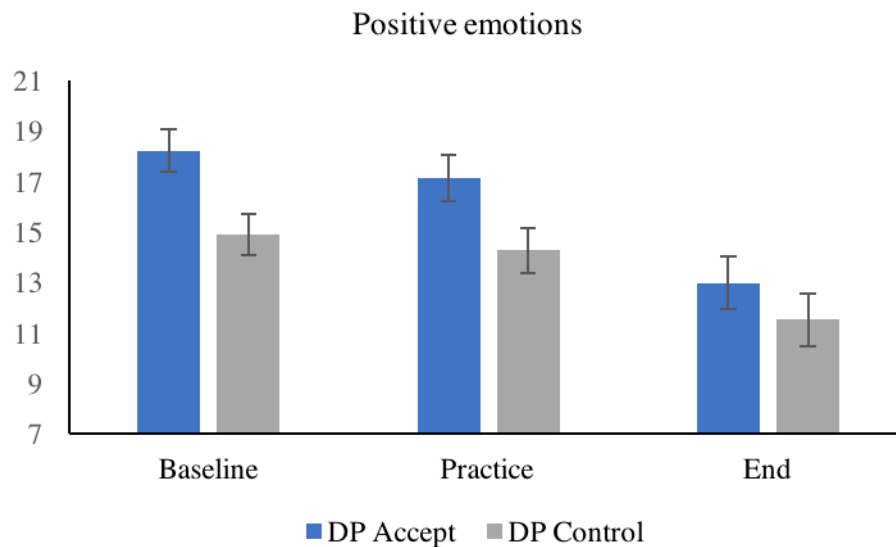


Figure 3.3. Mean differences in Positive emotions between the experimental ( $N = 24$ ) and control ( $N = 24$ ) group at baseline, after practice and at the end of the task.

In summary, results indicate that defensive pessimists who were instructed to accept their thoughts and emotions relating to their task engagement were quicker to withdraw than defensive pessimists who used their habitual strategy (i.e. controls). What is more, fluctuations in both positive emotions and state anxiety were witnessed throughout the stages of the experiment. Trends in data suggests participants' positive emotions decreased throughout, but observed group differences were due to significant baseline differences. Simultaneously, both groups experienced an increase in anxiety at all time points except after the manipulation when levels seemed to drop.



## Discussion

The current study sought to examine the effect of acceptance (as conceptualised within the ACT framework) on defensive pessimists' (DP) behaviour and emotions in challenging goal-pursuit. Accordingly, an experiment was conducted using a difficult Remote Associates Task to explore group differences in persistence as a result of applying an acceptance manipulation prior to task performance. Although the current study did not purposefully aim to disrupt DPs' strategy use, predictions were based on findings of previous research in which DPs' performance has suffered due to a removal of their tendencies to harness negative affect. Therefore, it was hypothesized that those who were instructed to adopt an accepting stance towards their thoughts and emotions would withdraw more quickly from the difficult task compared to controls.

As predicted, defensive pessimists who were instructed to accept their thoughts and emotions prior to the task were quicker to withdraw than controls. Unexpectedly however, there was no difference in anxiety levels between groups at any time point throughout the experiment – both groups experienced an increase in anxiety from beginning to end, except a slight decrease after the manipulation phase for both groups. Results also indicated a steady decline in positive emotions with time, again with no significant group differences. Taken together, findings indicate that although DPs in the acceptance condition were quicker to withdraw from the task, there was no observed change in negative emotions as a result of the manipulation.

This was somewhat unexpected and suggests a unique pattern of responding that does not fully coincide with previous research, neither in the DP literature nor ACT domain. First, when considering findings in relation to previous research on defensive pessimism in the achievement domain, a similar pattern of responding behaviourally to strategy-use interference can be detected. In the current study the acceptance manipulation contributed to less persistence on a challenging task. Other research has similarly shown that changing or interfering with DPs emotions and thinking processes have negative effects on their performance, arguably because it removes their need to harness negative states in achievement contexts (e.g. Norem & Illingsworth, 1993; Seery, West, Weisbuch & Blascovich, 2008). Given these similar behavioural patterns in response to strategy-use disruption, an equivalent emotional profile was expected in the current study, but surprisingly not found. While actively intervening as shown in previous research produces a change in emotions that inhibits the harnessing that is thought to be responsible for observed behaviour,

the act of observing thoughts and emotions unfold with an accepting attitude towards these momentary experiences has no such effect on emotion. On the contrary, it seems to create a disconnection between negative experienced affect and behaviour.

Being unable to hold emotions accountable for the effect of acceptance requires scrutiny of the *ACT* literature to gain further insight into what other mechanisms could be involved in DPs' response to the manipulation. Acceptance applied to non-DP populations has shown similar effects on emotions as in the current study, but different behavioural responses. For instance, Feldner, Eifert, Zvolensky and Spira (2003) compared the effect of acceptance and suppression in a non-clinical sample who were induced into a state of high emotional and physical stress. Participants in the acceptance condition were less avoidant behaviourally, but did not experience any more or less physiological arousal, which coincides with the findings of the present research.

These behavioural differences are not surprising given that acceptance is typically applied in non-DP populations to dissociate aversive emotional stimuli and avoidance behaviour. In defensive pessimists however, findings suggest an opposite effect whereby a dissociation occurs between aversive emotions and *approach* behaviour, because of DPs need to actively engage with thoughts and emotions to drive behaviour. Acceptance thereby works not by preventing the harnessing of emotions, as these remained unchanged, but by creating a space at a cognitive level whereby negative thoughts were prevented from further exacerbating negative emotions to drive behaviour. Although acceptance is not involved in changing cognitions per se, it is possible that instructions to observe and accept unfolding thoughts and emotions disrupted DPs' habitual thinking-through process. As such, it is at this cognitive level that some interventions may be able to appeal to DPs' behaviour in the goal-pursuit process.

Given the discussion thus far, one might conclude that the current study is simply one of many to lend further support to previous findings demonstrating the debilitating effects of preventing defensive pessimists from making instrumental use of their negativity. After all, they were left with the same amount of anxiety as when they started and despite of this, did not use it to their advantage. It can be argued that quite the opposite is true: when faced with a difficult challenge individuals did not persist as long as DPs who did not receive acceptance instructions. As such, viewing one's thoughts and emotions as momentary experiences rather than threat signals requiring action may not be beneficial for DPs' persistence in challenging goal-pursuit. Or could it be? The answer to this question depends largely on the outcome in

mind. Viewing these findings solely from a perspective that favours and supports DPs' instrumental use of negative emotions as explained above does not require any further discussion. However, viewing findings from an ACT framework shows how acceptance worked as would be expected and what may at first seem limiting is actually a blessing in disguise that holds a whole host of opportunities for DPs' progress in goal-pursuit that has previously not been recognised. These opportunities lie in the space created by acceptance between stimulus and response in which individuals can consider the reasons behind their movement towards or away from the goal. That is, there is space to consider if the behaviour is governed and supported by one's inherent values or if the behaviour is forced due to fear of losing something. This space is of utmost relevance to DPs whose motivation is largely driven by a fear of failure, which to date has been widely supported by previous research and viewed as an asset in the pursuit of goals. Very much to the contrary, DPs' quicker withdrawal as a function of acceptance can therefore be viewed as a benefit rather than obstacle long-term, as it provides a chance for these individuals to reflect upon *if* and *why* they want to persist in the first place. As such, the outcome sought by Acceptance in ACT extends way beyond the instrumental benefits that is highly regarded in the DP literature, and therefore opens a new door for research to explore how to support meaningful goal-pursuit *and* wellbeing in DPs.

Continuing down this suggested path of inquiry that would involve DPs to consider the 'why' of their movement within this space may also help provide a stronger buffer post-failure. Failure or not living up to expectations is the worst possible imagined outcome that DPs work to avoid, as it acts as the ultimate 'proof' of not being worthy in the eyes of others and self. This aversion was indicated on post-performance measures of anxiety that were even higher than the anticipation phase for both groups in the current study, suggesting also that acceptance only had a momentary effect that was overridden by post-performance anxiety. Therefore, shifting research focus from feeding or starving DPs' emotional state to instead helping them develop a greater awareness of the values behind their behavioural choices may result in a stronger sense of worth that do not require protection from failure. These are speculations born out of past research findings suggesting for instance that individuals who engage in goal strivings for intrinsic reasons are more likely to experience higher wellbeing, flow and persistence than those who for some reason feel forced to pursue a particular goal (see for example Carpentier, Mageau & Vallerand, 2012; Vansteenkiste,

Simons, Lens, Sheldon & Deci, 2004). Both experimental research and intervention studies are needed to confirm effects on DPs and add credibility to findings discussed.

Notwithstanding the novel insights offered by the current study on defensive pessimists' persistence in goal-pursuit, it has a few limitations worth noting. First, previous studies showing no change in participants' emotional state as a result of acceptance used physiological measure to record the physical experience of anxious arousal, and so were able to argue that acceptance relates to how these states are experienced and evaluated rather than how they actually occur (e.g. Feldner et al., 2003). However, the claims made in this study regarding emotions are based solely on self-report measures and should therefore be interpreted with caution as it is possible that participants' physiological arousal in the Acceptance group were higher or lower than subjectively reported. Therefore, future research interested in replicating the present study should include indicators of physiological arousal at all stages of the procedure. Secondly, it would be interesting to see how a group of individuals driven by positive as opposed to negative emotions (e.g. strategic optimists) would respond to acceptance in comparison. This could potentially also be an important stepping stone for research wishing to explore experiential acceptance/avoidance in relation to positive emotional experiences. Moreover, response time data may need to be interpreted with caution, given there was no baseline assessment of participants' response time to the task. However, should there have been a baseline task, the element of surprise would have been sacrificed and consequently, the aim of inducing fear would have been unsuccessful. Nonetheless, future research may wish to replicate this study with a baseline measure of response time to compare differences in results.

On the whole, this research holds significance that stretches beyond its findings. Its incentive for being conducted was born out of defensive pessimists' unique behavioural profile in response to negative emotions, which are dominantly viewed as 'bad' and are therefore the target of many interventions and therapeutic approaches. Defensive pessimism coupled with acceptance in the current study therefore give rise to some important real-world implications. For instance, it suggests that failure to consider individual differences in emotional preferences both within therapeutic and research interventions can have opposite of intended effects and consequently, lead to wrong conclusions regarding the effectiveness. For these reasons, it is of vital importance to consider what people want to feel. At research/therapy onset, it would be of equal value to also contemplate the reasons for intervening in the first place. Besides from its more obvious implications, the use of

acceptance in the current study as opposed to some change strategy opens up to a new perspective of emotions and their role in the regulatory process. With acceptance allowing a wider spectrum of emotions at the forefront of experience, a greater depth of understanding and insight regarding the *why* of their presence can be acquired (as previously discussed) before actively pursuing to change experiences without knowing their value to the individual. With this knowledge in mind, a more informed decision can be made of whether regulation of emotion is at all necessary.

To conclude, the present research supports acceptance as a function in the emotion regulation process that was found to decrease DPs' persistence on a challenging task, whilst having no effect on their emotions. These findings add novel insight to previous research within the DP literature, suggesting that acceptance did not prevent harnessing of emotions, but instead appealed to DPs at a cognitive level by adding a new perspective of relating to their internal experiences that in turn, did not further exacerbate negative emotions to drive behaviour. Whilst seemingly debilitating to DPs' forward-moving strategy at first glance, this pattern of responding is by all means promising from an ACT perspective, as it paves the path for future research to work with this space between emotional stimulus and response to help DPs create a meaningful rather than anxiety driven pursuit towards valued goals that can also support long-term wellbeing.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **Walking Your ‘Why’: An Intervention Aimed at Encouraging Goal-Pursuit and Wellbeing Among Defensive Pessimists**

This chapter aimed to test the effectiveness of an intervention specifically designed for defensive pessimists to build enduring resources in hopes of helping with their fear of failure and facilitating a stronger sense of worthiness to operate from in the pursuit of life goals. As such, this study follows on from the findings of Chapter Two where acceptance was used to create a space between the emotional stimuli and the behavioural response. With regards to this finding, the current study seeks to work with that space to promote meaningful, rather than fear-based action among defensive pessimists through the building of personal resources. The intervention, which was carried out in individual sessions with the researcher and the participant, consisted of educational components and exercises both in session and at home designed to target self-worth, value-based action and self-compassion. The effectiveness of this intervention programme was assessed using pre and post measures of defensive pessimism, fear of failure, unconditional self-acceptance and intrinsic self-esteem. Out of the 45 undergraduate and postgraduate female students who participated, 21 took part in the intervention and the remaining 24 made up the control group. Results indicated that participants’ levels of defensive pessimism and fear of failure decreased as expected in the intervention group. There was no increase in participants’ unconditional self-acceptance. However, a decline in global self-esteem which was included as a covariate in the analysis was observed in the control group, suggesting the intervention may have had a buffering effect against fluctuations in self-esteem. Findings hold important implications for both research and practice on how to support both wellbeing and achievement without sacrificing one over the other, all whilst considering individual differences in emotion and motivation. To achieve this goal, a careful deliberation of why an emotion is deemed instrumental will be crucial.

*Key words:* Defensive pessimism, instrumentality of emotion, self-worth, value-based action, goal-pursuit, wellbeing, Positive Psychology

While Higher Education holds a whole host of opportunities enabling students to pursue their career dreams and develop an autonomous personal life, it cannot go unnoticed that the many demands relating to these activities can make students vulnerable to mental health issues (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). In particular, the pressure imposed upon students to succeed is an important, yet anxiety provoking aspect of Higher Education that can drive performance but also contribute to debilitating fears of failing. In the absence of appropriate coping strategies, these intense emotional experiences often act as an obstacle to achievement, as the perceived threat of failure often steer the individual away from the goal (Martin & Marsh, 2003).

Dealing with these issues through the application of various coping strategies aimed at reducing and/or altering the emotional reaction to the inevitable demands of Higher Education may seem like an appropriate solution. However, if these strategies to help students are applied as a one-size-fits-all solution, these efforts are likely to be ineffective. For a subgroup of the population known as defensive pessimists that are targeted in the current study, the negative emotions experienced in response to the inherent pressures of educational pursuits is not the problem and coping not the solution. What characterises these individuals are their tendencies to use their high fear of failure and anxiety in an instrumental fashion; rather than withdrawing from the goal in the face of high threat appraisal, defensive pessimists approach the goal with determined efforts to not fail (Norem & Cantor, 1986). This is accomplished through endless reflections of worst-case scenarios and careful planning of the best route to the goal that will guarantee success. From an instrumental perspective, defensive pessimists' approach behaviour in response to negative emotions appears highly adaptive, as despite their fears and anxieties, they continue towards the goal. In fact, research has previously shown that these individuals prefer to experience negative emotions as opposed to positive in performance situations and they accomplish any task just as well as their optimistic counterparts (Norem & Spencer, 1996). Hence, the profile of defensive pessimists most definitely lends support for the value of negativity in goal-pursuit that may often be overlooked, even mistaken for an obstacle, and thereby targeted inappropriately in efforts to promote mental health and continued goal-pursuit.

That said, however, there seems to be a huge gap in the understanding and judgement of what is truly an adaptive response. Thus far, previous research has judged the adaptiveness of the defensive pessimist strategy solely on observed behaviour without considering the motives behind this seemingly adaptive behaviour. What is revealed when looking behind the

DP exterior is an unstable sense of worth that requires protection from any incident that could serve as proof of their perceived unworthiness. With the shame of failure serving as evidence of these inherent beliefs, goal achievement has for DPs become a contingency of worth that they strive to uphold. Accordingly, every action taken that overtly appears as adaptive is done in the service of self-protection – by ensuring success through proactive efforts and negativity, defensive pessimists shelter themselves from the shame of appearing unworthy in the eyes of others and self. As such, uncovering the underlying motives of DPs' approach behaviour has important implications. First, it immediately calls for a reconsideration of the adaptiveness of the strategy and whether the motivation to self-protect against these perceived consequences should and can be harnessed without long-term consequences on individuals' physical and mental wellbeing. What is more, it questions if and to what degree research should continue to applaud behaviour fuelled by the need to protect self and refrain from helping these individuals reconsider their motives in favour of not just performance but also long-term wellbeing. As will be addressed below, the answer to both concerns will depend largely on the outcome in mind.

### **The present research**

Scratching below the surface of DPs' strategy to unveil the reasons behind their seemingly adaptive response to the pressures of educational pursuits opens up to a previously unexplored yet important avenue of further inquiry: the long-term effects of their strategy use and the quest for a solution that supports optimal functioning beyond performance. The potential negative effects on DPs' health as a result of their strategy have previously been brought to researchers' attention. For instance, through the use of cardiovascular markers of threat/challenge Seery, West, Weisbuch and Blascovich (2008) found that DPs had an increase activation of the HPA axis during task performance which is the body's signal of being in a heightened state of threat. Given that this is a prolonged state that characterises the essence of DPs, authors warned that their constant activation of the body's 'fight-or-flight' system due to the perceived stressor (i.e. anticipated threat upon failure) can cause an unhealthy exposure to high levels of cortisol that when sustained, can lead to chronic illness. Others have predicted that it can furthermore, lead to a decrease in life satisfaction and an eventual drop in performance (Norem & Cantor, 1990). Further investigation into these direct physical effects are beyond the scope of the current study, but appreciating how the



connection between mind (perception of environment) and body (physical effects) enables disease is crucial for understanding how the same pathway can mitigate such effects.

Accepting that a preventative solution to potential health and wellbeing implications involves targeting DPs' perception of the environment poses a dilemma, as it is the perception of an imagined threat to their worthiness that drives the strategy forward. After all, previous studies have demonstrated how DPs' performance suffers as a result of intervening with their strategy and altering their preferred emotional state (e.g. Norem & Illingsworth, 2003) and it is not the intention of the current research to do so. However, through the lens of positive psychology, this study adopts the view that sacrificing wellbeing for an imagined threat is not a justifiable reason for DPs to miss out on intervening efforts aimed at not only preventing damaging long-term effects of their stress response, but also promoting optimal functioning and performance. In the service of wellbeing, therefore, the current study applies a light-touch positive psychology intervention specifically designed for DPs that unlike previous studies and interventions, does not set out to change any quality of the DP strategy or undermine their performance. The purpose is rather to *add* resources at the core from which they operate in the hopes of building a stronger sense of worthiness from which they can make use of their forward-moving strategy to act in accordance with values rather than a perceived threat.

### **The Intervention**

Positive Psychology Interventions (PPI) are commonly applied to generate or increase positive emotions and have shown lasting short and long-term benefits on individuals' mental health (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), close relationships (Harker & Keltner, 2001) and longevity (Ong & Allaire, 2005) to name a few, arguably due to the ability of positive emotions to build personal resources (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek & Finkel, 2008). While these are worthwhile pursuits, a valid criticism that can be supported by the profile of DPs is the application of PPIs as a one-size-fits all solution that does not take into consideration the role of individual differences (Tamir, 2011). Given that positive emotions are not a size that fits DPs, the PPI of the current study largely deviates from previous research pursuits in its content and target, whilst still aligning with the mission of positive psychology to build lasting personal resources. As such, the intervention specifically aims to build DPs' self-worth in the hopes of helping with their fears of failing and in doing so, encourage action (i.e.

approach behaviour) that is driven by intrinsic values and protected by a compassionate attitude towards self.

**Self-worth.** Self-worth is often synonymous and used interchangeable with self-esteem. However, recognising the distinction between these two concepts is essential, not only for grasping how they have become so closely intertwined in practice, but also for understanding why self-esteem has been the target of many interventions thus far. A person's self-worth refers to an unconditional self-acceptance of who one is as a human being, and it lies in the knowledge that one's worth is independent from one's actions and accomplishments (Covington, 1992). Self-esteem on the other hand, is the evaluative component of self-knowledge that can fluctuate depending on how one think and feels about oneself – both of which are judgements that often coincide with major successes and failures in life (Kernis, 2003). In a society that measures human value in terms of ability to achieve competitively, the search for self-acceptance has taken the backseat while individuals strive to protect their sense of competency to feel good about themselves and be positively regarded by others. When students' abilities are rewarded by grades, such strivings are further reinforced and acceptance of self often comes to depend on the evaluation of one's ability (Covington, 1992). Hence, a strong correlation between the two is formed in which the individual learns to associate their worth with ability. In educational settings therefore, failure is an outcome that students use various strategies to avoid, as it would serve as evidence of inability and provide reasons to despair their worth. Given that self-esteem is so highly contingent upon performance, there is no wonder that perceived ability has been shown to cause fluctuations in self-esteem (Covington, 1992). This instability has been of rising concern in educational settings due to its association with mental health issues among students, which in turn has spurred research to intervene in the hopes of raising self-esteem (Crocker, Luhtanen, Bouvrette & Cooper, 2003). Such pursuits can however, seem redundant given the interdependency of self-esteem, especially if applied to a population with high vulnerability to threats relating to their worth. The current study, therefore, shifts focus to source in the hopes of helping individuals internalize the distinction between their worth and behaviours.

**Value work.** Prompting action that is in accordance with the individual's values is a central component of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which similarly to positive psychology aims to maximise human potential for a rich and meaningful life, but through different means (Hayes, 2004). While positive psychology interventions revolve

around the amplification of positive emotions and experiences as stated above, the ACT approach makes no attempt to change an individual's experience and therefore places focus on values and behaviour (i.e. committed action) rather than feelings to help individuals reach fulfilment. As such, values in ACT are highly personalised guiding principles for ongoing action and are designed to facilitate behaviour regulation rather than avoidance based on fear. Accordingly, two central facets of ACT work involve addressing the congruency between the individual's current actions and values and encouraging action forward irrespective of pain or fear whilst using values as a guide (Hayes, 2004). The application of such strategies in the student population has been supported by various randomized control trials that have for example demonstrated increases in value-based living and quality of life amongst individuals with high anxiety (Eustis, Hayes-Skelton, Orsillo & Roemer, 2018) and increases in academic performance and psychological flexibility in a non-clinical student population (Palilunas, Belisle & Dixon, 2018).

This philosophy and focus that constitutes ACT is deemed highly appropriate for defensive pessimists whose forward movement is not only instigated by fear, but also driven by it. Preserving action in a forward direction *regardless of* these distressing emotions (rather than *because of* these) would involve working with the value-action gap in the hopes of facilitating behaviour that is less energised by threat and avoidance and more in alignment with their intrinsic purpose. Engagement in this process may eventually also contribute to a strong sense of eudaimonic well-being. As far as the author is aware, this study is the first to integrate ACT and Positive Psychology in a tailor-made intervention for defensive pessimists.

**Self-compassion.** Pursuits that fall short of success are commonly met with a barrage of self-criticism that has become an ingrained and almost automatic response serving as a means of shaming oneself into action or deflecting blame, both of which are self-protective strategies that stem from an inability to confront, acknowledge and accept personal weaknesses (Neff, 2003). For defensive pessimists who take full responsibility for successes and failures, learning how to approach oneself with compassion rather than self-criticism in events of failure is essential for building resilience and therefore a crucial aspect of optimal functioning in goal-pursuit. Defined and practiced as a sensitivity directed inward to the experience of suffering and a deep desire to relieve that suffering, self-compassion has been shown to reduce anxiety and stress and enhance wellbeing when applied in clinical and non-clinical populations (e.g. Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012).

These effects are thought to occur primarily through the self-soothing nature of compassion that deactivates the threat system and in so doing, protects against the maladaptive emotional states associated with poor mental health (Gilbert & Irons, 2005). What is more, self-compassion has in comparison to self-esteem, been associated with less fear of failure and greater resilience upon failure through its effect on individuals' experienced sense of worthiness (Neff, Hsieh & Dejjitterat, 2005). That is, while esteem is largely based on competence evaluations that tends to decrease with failure, self-compassion is always at hand for the individual to simply acknowledge with kindness and accept their human limitation with no bearing on their worthiness. Hence, self-compassion serves as a cushion to always fall back on in times of need while self-esteem is a prize achieved if one is judged as worthy of it. Given that self-compassion is so closely associated with the cultivation of unconditional self-acceptance, its practice supports the aims of the current study and is therefore considered an essential component of the intervention.

The intervention consisted of educational components and exercises to target the concepts mentioned above in a series of one-to-one coaching sessions with the researcher. In addition, participants completed daily at-home exercises in a diary format that were meant to encourage a deeper reflection and application of these teachings in the context of their daily lives. All in all, each participant met with the researcher at two separate occasions to engage with the material surrounding these concepts and spent two weeks reflecting on their applied significance.

### **Objectives and Hypothesis**

The objective of this study was to test the effectiveness of an intervention designed specifically for defensive pessimists and assess its impact on individuals' fear of failure, unconditional self-acceptance, intrinsic self-esteem and defensive pessimism as measured on a continuum. Based on the literature and rationale presented above, this study makes the following predictions: after the intervention, there will be an *increase* in esteem that is contingent only upon intrinsic factors and unconditional self-acceptance. There will be a *decrease* in fear of failure and defensive pessimism.

## Methods

### Participants

Defensive pessimists were chosen for this study based on their tendencies to approach goals from a self-protective motive. Accordingly, individuals were pre-screened for defensive pessimism via Bristol Online Survey and all those who fell within the upper quartile of the Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire were contacted through email and asked to participate in the research. Forty-six individuals agreed to take part, however one participant dropped out after the first week resulting in a final number of 45. These were all undergraduate and postgraduate students at Bangor University Wales, female and between the ages of 18-26. The study was approved by Bangor University's research ethics committee.

### Procedure and Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental group design consisting of a pre and post-test intervention and control. To start, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants in both groups completed baseline and post measures (two weeks from baseline) of fear of failure (FoF), defensive pessimism (DP), self-esteem (SE), Unconditional self-acceptance (UA) and intrinsic and extrinsic contingent self-esteem. As summarised in the flow diagram below (see Figure 2.1), participants who were first contacted to take part formed the intervention group ( $N = 22$ ). Each participant in this group met individually with the researcher at three time points over the span of two weeks to engage with the intervention material. Attrition was minimal, twenty-one individuals provided complete data at post-test. After one week had passed since the start of the intervention, the second lot of participants were contacted to form the control group ( $N = 24$ ). These individuals completed the baseline measures online and after two weeks they were contacted again with another online link consisting of the same questionnaires. The online questionnaires were created using the Bristol Online Survey tool.

### Material

**The Intervention.** As demonstrated in the figure below, the intervention consisted of three individual sessions with the researcher. In the first session, participants completed baseline questionnaires and engaged with the week one content of the intervention. At the end, participants were provided with material to work with in their own time that related to the topic of the session. After one week had passed, participants were invited to the second

session which introduced a new topic. Similarly, participants engaged with the second week's material and were provided with exercises for another week of at-home reflections. Both sessions lasted for approximately an hour each. At the end of two weeks, participants came back a final time to complete post measures (see Appendix C & D for details on questionnaires and intervention material).

**Session one.** The three main objectives of this session were to 1) help defensive pessimists consider the “why” of their actions 2) increase value-based action and as a result, reduce action based on fear and 3) help these individuals align more with themselves rather than others. To start, the researcher introduced the concept of values and the importance of considering these in the context of one's everyday life. After this short introduction and conversation about values, participants were provided with a worksheet prompting them to consider their own inner-most values and how these relate to important goals currently being pursued. At the end of the session, participants received a booklet containing daily reflections relating to values and how these guide everyday behaviours and decisions. All material in this session are based on the philosophy and research within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (see e.g. Wilson & Murrell, 2004) and has been adapted from Harris' (2010) *The Confidence Gap*.

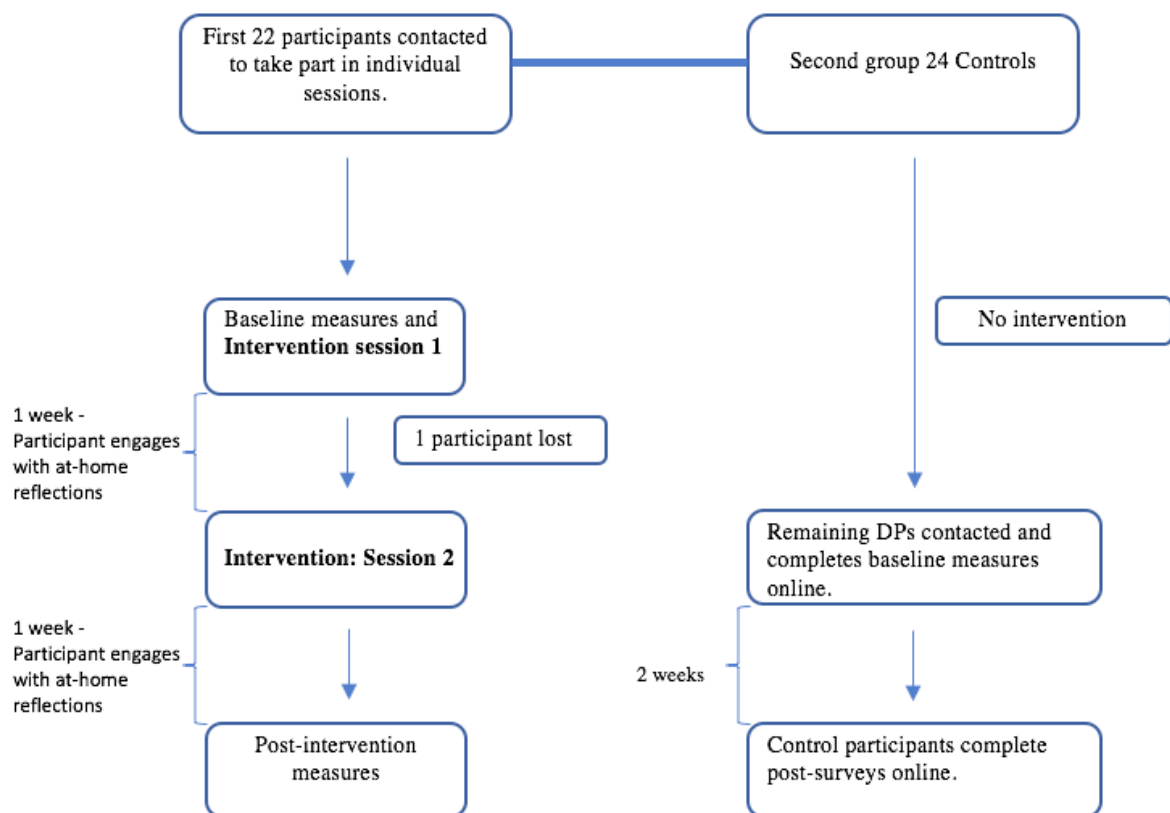
**Session two.** This session aimed to 1) increase awareness of one's worth by separating the individual from her behaviour 2) create awareness of self-criticism and unhelpful self-talk 3) provide insight into the why of self-critical tendencies and normalise these experiences and 4) practice affect tolerance and empathy for self.

Accordingly, the session comprised of two exercises. In the ‘A different perspective of self’- exercise, participants were encouraged to write down 8-10 adjectives that best describe who they are as a person. It was stressed that these should not include roles or behaviours, but rather reflect positive personal qualities. When completed, participants were asked to reflect upon how their characteristics relate to their values considered in the first session. This exercise was adapted from Hooley and Germain (2014).

The second component of this session consisted of information and exercises relating to failure and self-compassion adapted from Gilbert and Procter's (2006) *Compassionate Mind Training* and Neff and Germer's (2012) *Mindful Self-Compassion Program*. To start, participants were made aware of typical reactions to failure events in which it is common to engage in critical self-talk. Attention was specifically drawn to the contrast between how one would speak to a friend in need of support versus self. In the exercises, participants explored

their own unhelpful self-talk and practiced alternative ways of responding to self in difficult situations based on the three steps within Neff's (2003) self-compassion model (normalising, common humanity, self-kindness). Again, at the end of the session participants received material to reflect upon in their own time relating to the content of the second session.

**Session three.** This session took place two weeks after the start of the intervention for each participant and the purpose of it was to collect post-measures and provide study debrief. This final session lasted for approximately 20 minutes and participants were thanked for their participation and engagement. The researcher did not collect any personal material produced by the participant throughout the course of the intervention. All instructions and material were standardised to ensure all participants received the same value, but were designed to facilitate subjective reflections.



*Figure 2.1.* Flow diagram showing the study timeline for the intervention and control group, stretching over 8 weeks.

**Measures.** The following measures were completed at baseline and again after two weeks (post-intervention) by both groups: Fear of failure was measured using the short form version of The Performance Fear of Failure Inventory (Conroy, 2001). This scale consists of

five items assessing individuals' beliefs in five consequences of failure including: shame, upsetting others, having other people lose interest, uncertainty about the future and devaluing self-esteem. For instance, 'When I'm failing, important others are disappointed'. All items are measured on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from 'very slightly or not at all' to 'extremely'. The questionnaire has shown good internal reliability ( $\alpha$  .81, Mosewich, Kowalshi, Sabiston, Sedgwick & Tracy, 2011). To capture individuals who endorse the defensive pessimism strategy, The Revised Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire (Norem & Cantor, 1986). Participants whose total score fell into the upper quartile range were classified as defensive pessimists. The questionnaire has 17 items measured on a seven-point Likert Scale ranging from 'very true of me' to 'not at all true of me'. A sample item includes: "I go into situations expecting the worst, even though I know I will probably be okay". The scale has demonstrated good internal reliability ( $\alpha$  = .78, Norem 2001).

Global self-esteem was assessed using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants rated themselves on 10 items such as, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", all measured on a four-point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The scale has shown good internal reliability ranging from  $\alpha$  = .77 to  $\alpha$  = .88 in previous research (e.g. Blascovich & Tomaka, 1993). The Intrinsic Contingency Scale (Vonk & Smit, 2012) was used to measure individuals' intrinsically contingent self-esteem. The questionnaire consists of two subscales in which participants are asked to rate the positive and negative impact of three external factors (capabilities, social, physical) and one internal (self-congruency/personal growth) on their self-esteem. On the positive impact subscale, participants rate items such as 'being skilled at what I do' and 'giving attention to my feelings' on a seven-point Likert Scale ranging from 'has no influence on my self-esteem' to 'has a strong positive effect on my self-esteem'. On the negative impact scale, participants are asked to rate the extent to which items such as 'looking bad' and 'not being true to myself' lowers their self-esteem, also on a seven-point scale ranging from 'has no influence on my self-esteem' to 'has a strong negative impact on my self-esteem'. The current study was particularly interested in the intrinsic factor of positive and negative influence.

The Unconditional Self-Acceptance Questionnaire (Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001) was used to measure participants' levels of self-acceptance. The scale consists of twenty items such as "Being praised makes me feel more valuable as a person", measured on a seven-point Likert Scale ranging from 'almost always untrue' to 'almost always true.' The scale has shown strong internal reliability ( $\alpha$  = .72).



## **Data Analysis**

To assess the effectiveness of the intervention, four separate mixed-measures ANOVAs were used to examine group differences in pre and post measures on defensive pessimism, fear of failure, unconditional self-acceptance and intrinsic contingent self-esteem. Self-esteem was initially included as a covariate to control for its effect on unconditional self-acceptance as recommended by previous research (Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001). As this analysis revealed strong significant effects of the covariate, it was later included in an analysis of variance on its own. As for extrinsic and intrinsic contingent self-esteem, the means of extrinsic items (capabilities, physical, social) were computed for both positive and negative subscales separately. Of particular interest to the current study was the influence of intrinsic items on individuals' self-esteem. Pre and post intervention scores were therefore analysed using a mixed-ANOVA.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

The assumptions required for mixed-measures ANOVA were tested prior to analysis for all variables. Defensive pessimism post-intervention scores required removal of one outlier to normalize the slightly skewed distribution. All other variables revealed no significant departures from normality as assessed by Q-Q plots and skewness and kurtosis values. Self-esteem was the only variable that did not meet the assumptions of homogeneity as indicated by Levene's test of equality of error variances. However, closer inspection of the variances using Hartley's  $F_{\max}$  test revealed an F-ratio small enough to assume homogeneity of variances. Thus, overall, the data was deemed appropriate for analysis of variance.

Independent samples  $t$  tests were carried out on all variables to check for baseline differences between intervention and control group. These confirmed there were no group differences in participants' levels of defensive pessimism ( $t(41) = 1.29, p = .204$ ), fear of failure ( $t(43) = .07, p = .949$ ) unconditional self-acceptance ( $t(43) = .75, p = .458$ ), self-esteem ( $t(43) = 1.07, p = .294$ ), intrinsic and extrinsic contingent self-esteem ( $t(43) = -.12, p = .907$ ) at baseline.

### Effect of the intervention

**Defensive Pessimism.** The analysis of variance revealed a significant effect of time,  $F(1, 41) = 5.65, p = .022, \eta^2 = .12$ , but no main effect of group was found ( $F(1, 43) = .54, p = .465$ ). There was however, a significant interaction effect,  $F(1, 41) = 4.32, p = .044, \eta^2 = .10$ , suggesting that the two groups differed significantly in defensive pessimism with time. To gain further insight into the direction of this interaction effect, paired-samples  $t$  tests were carried out. As shown in Figure 3.1, there was a significant decrease in defensive pessimism for individuals in the intervention group  $t(20) = 2.92, p = .008, d = .63$ , whereas there was no significant change in defensive pessimism for the control group ( $p = .821$ ). Taken together, results seem to suggest that the intervention had an effect on participants' levels of defensive pessimism.

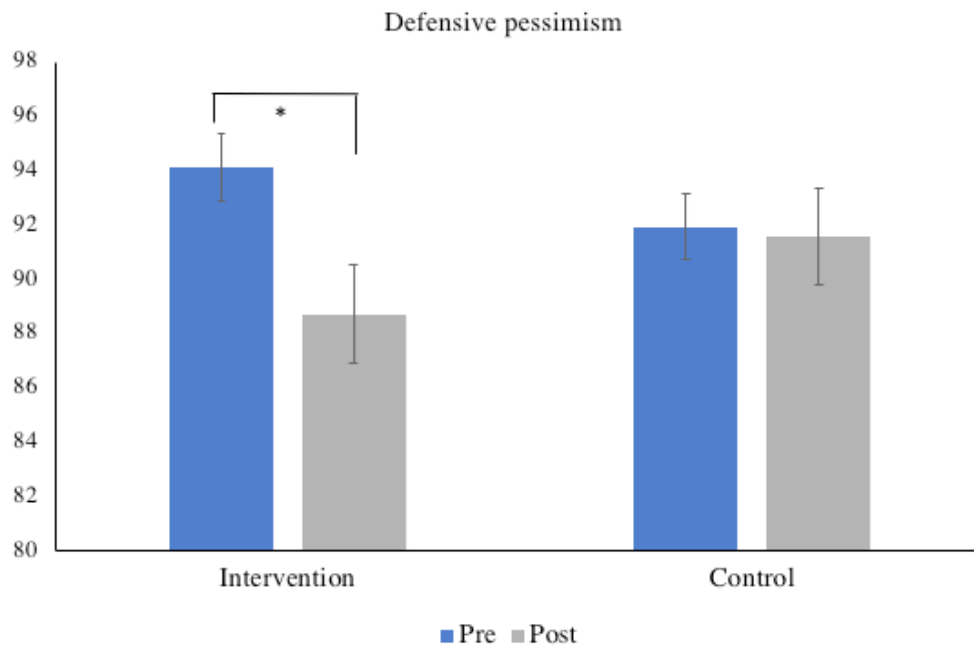


Figure 3.1. Pre and post scores of defensive pessimism for intervention ( $N = 21$ ) and control ( $N = 24$ ) group. The intervention group shows a significant reduction in defensive pessimism  $t(20) = 2.92, p = .008, d = .63$ . Note: \* $p < .005$  \*\* $p < .001$ .

**Fear of Failure.** The main effect of time showed a significant difference in pre and post measures of fear of failure,  $F(1, 43) = 18.57, p = .000, \eta^2 = .30$ , suggesting a small but significant drop. There was no main effect of group ( $F(1, 43) = .98, p = .329$ ) and only a trend towards an interaction ( $F(1, 43) = 2.78, p = .103$ ). Based on the hypothesis regarding fear of failure, targeted t-tests were carried out (Cardinal & Aitken, 2005) and showed a significant fall in fear of failure following the intervention ( $t(20) = 5.15, p < .001, d = .65$ ), whilst no difference was found in the control group ( $t(23) = 1.68, p = .11, d = .65$ ), suggesting the intervention may have worked to reduce individuals' fear of failure.

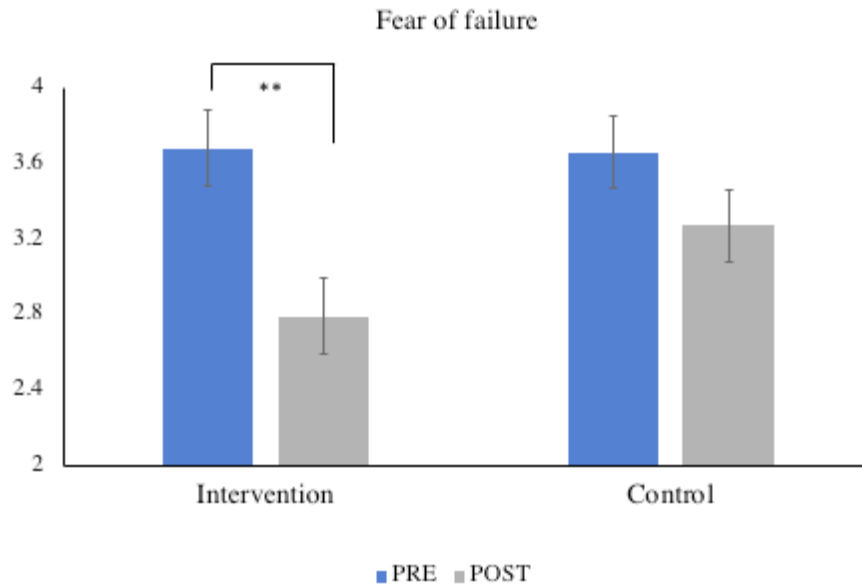


Figure 3.2. Pre and post scores of fear of failure for intervention ( $N = 21$ ) and control ( $N = 24$ ) group. The intervention group shows a significant decline in fear of failure post intervention,  $t(20) = 5.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .65$ . Note: \* $p < .005$  \*\* $p < .001$ .

**Unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem.** To evaluate the unique effect of the intervention on individuals' unconditional self-acceptance, self-esteem was included as a covariate in the model. Surprisingly, there were no significant differences in self-acceptance over time ( $F(1, 43) = .37$ ,  $p = .547$ ) or between groups ( $F(1, 43) = 2.11$ ,  $p = .153$ ) with or without the inclusion of the covariate. Self-esteem, on the other hand, was the only variable in the model that produced a significant effect,  $F(1, 42) = 4.11$ ,  $p = .049$ , suggesting first and foremost that a lot of the unexplained variance in the model can be accounted for by individuals' self-esteem. These findings call for a closer examination of group differences in self-esteem across time points.

Accordingly, an analysis of variance was conducted on the self-esteem variable and revealed a significant interaction effect between group and time:  $F(1, 43) = 4.76$ ,  $p = .034$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . Further scrutiny of this interaction using  $t$  tests indicated a significant difference in post-measures between groups ( $t(36.38) = 2.81$ ,  $p = .008$ ). However, this difference may be explained by the reduction in self-esteem witnessed in the control group ( $t(23) = 2.20$ ,  $p = .038$ ,  $d = .65$ ). The intervention group showed a minor increase in self-esteem as graphically depicted below, but this change was not significant ( $t(20) = -.89$ ,  $p = .379$ ).

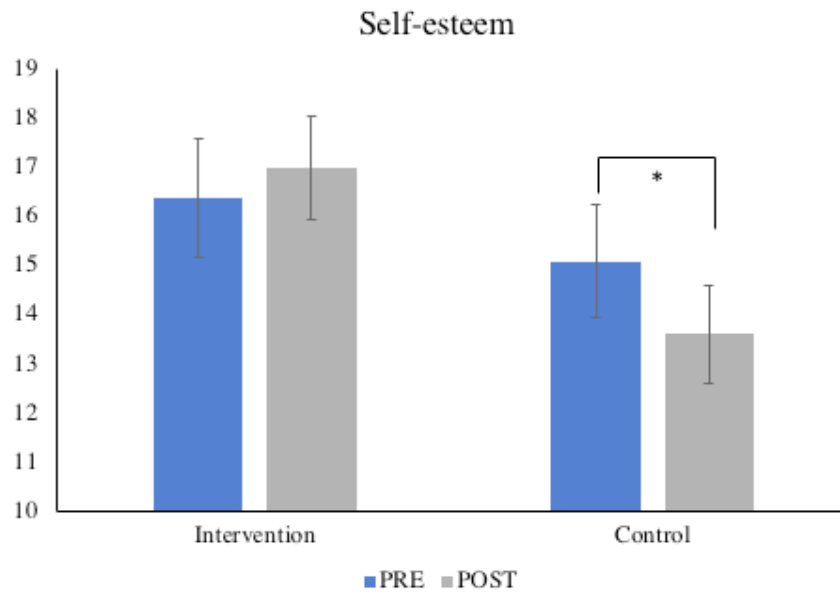


Figure 3.3. Pre and post scores of self-esteem for intervention ( $N = 21$ ) and control ( $N = 24$ ) group. Control group shows a decline in levels of self-esteem at post-measures,  $t(23) = 2.20$ ,  $p = .038$ ,  $d = .65$ . Note: \* $p < .005$  \*\* $p < .001$ .

**Intrinsic and extrinsic contingent self-esteem.** The means of extrinsic items (capabilities, physical, social) were combined and averaged for both positive and negative subscales respectively in order to flag potential trends in data. A summary of these are presented in Table 3.1. Judging from the means alone, there does not seem to be any large differences to note between pre and post measures for either of the two groups. To verify this interpretation, paired samples  $t$  tests were conducted for both subscales. For the negative influence of extrinsic factors, there was no difference pre and post for the intervention ( $t(20) = 1.07$ ,  $p = .29$ ) or control group ( $t(23) = .21$ ,  $p = .84$ ). Similarly, for the positive influence of extrinsic factors, there was no significant difference pre and post for the intervention group ( $t(20) = -1.33$ ,  $p = .19$ ) or controls ( $t(23) = 2.11$ ,  $p = .093$ ).

**Table 3.1**

Intervention ( $N = 21$ ) and Control ( $N = 24$ ) group means and standard deviations for pre and post measures of positive/negative influence of extrinsic factors on individuals' self-esteem.

	Positive Influence		Negative influence	
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST
Intervention	5.84 (.57)	5.96 (.62)	5.77 (.62)	5.63 (.69)
Control	5.98 (.54)	5.73 (.72)	5.95 (.86)	5.92 (.77)

Of particular interest to the current study were the intrinsic items of the scale, which measured the effect of self-congruency on individual's self-esteem. Two separate mixed-measures ANOVAs were carried out to compare group differences pre and post intervention. For the positive subscale, there was no main effect of time ( $F(1, 43) = 3.18, p = .08$ ), no main effect of group ( $F(1, 43) = .05, p = .82$ ) and no interaction ( $F(1, 43) = 1.24, p = .27$ ). Similarly, the negative subscale also turned out insignificant for the main effect of time ( $F(1, 43) = 1.25, p = .27$ ) and group ( $F(1, 43) = .62, p = .44$ ) and there was no interaction effect ( $F(1, 43) = .09, p = .75$ ). However, there seems to be a subtle trend in the Figure 3.3 below suggesting that individuals in the intervention group were more positively influenced by personal growth factors than controls given the similar baseline scores. Even so, without statistical evidence this cannot be confirmed.

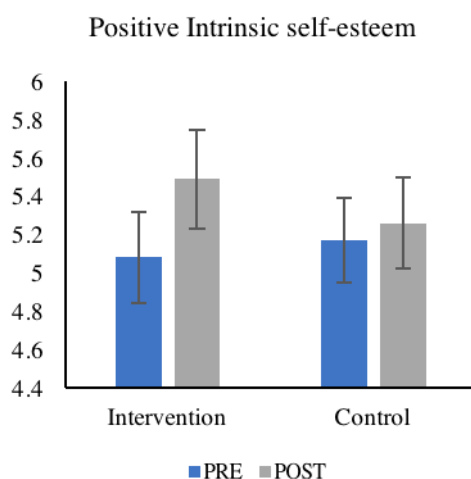


Figure 3.3. Pre and post measures of the positive influence of intrinsic factors on self-esteem for intervention ( $N = 21$ ) and controls ( $N = 24$ ). All comparisons were non-significant.

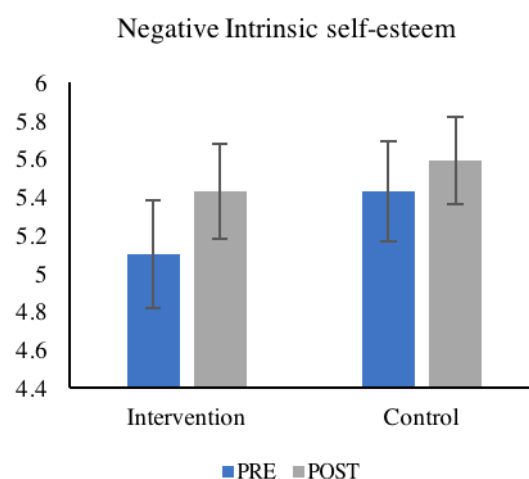


Figure 3.4. Pre and post measures of the negative influence of intrinsic factors on self-esteem for intervention ( $N = 21$ ) and controls ( $N = 24$ ). All comparisons were non-significant.

## **Discussion**

The objective of this study was to build a stronger sense of worthiness among defensive pessimists (DP) in the hopes of helping with their fear of failure in goal-pursuit and thus, support long-term wellbeing and value-based goal strivings. To achieve this aim, an intervention combining the teachings of Positive Psychology (PP) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) was applied and the effect on participants' defensive pessimism, fear of failure, intrinsic contingent self-esteem and unconditional self-acceptance was observed. It was predicated that the intervention programme would contribute to a decrease in defensive pessimism and fear of failure, and an increase in intrinsic self-esteem and unconditional self-acceptance.

Findings generated novel insight into the effect of the intervention that has not previously been shown. In support of the first two hypotheses, participants' level of defensive pessimism was reduced as a result of the intervention and trends in data suggested a greater decrease in fear of failure for the intervention group compared to controls. Moreover, there was no increase in participants' unconditional self-acceptance as a result of the intervention, but surprisingly, global self-esteem turned out to be a significant factor although initially treated as a control variable. While participants' self-esteem remained steady throughout the weeks of the intervention, a decline in levels of self-esteem was observed in the control group, suggesting that the intervention may have provided a buffer against fluctuations in self-esteem. Lastly, results did not lend full support of predictions regarding intrinsic contingent self-esteem; no significant difference between groups was observed although trends observed in data suggests the intervention group was more positively influenced by intrinsic factors than controls. These findings will be discussed separately and concurrently below in light of previous research.

### **Defensive Pessimism and Fear of Failure**

The current study is to the author's knowledge, the first to show a decrease in the use of defensive pessimism as a result of an intervention that aimed to strengthen personal resources and therefore stands out from previous literature in the DP domain that has continuously supported the adaptiveness of the strategy in response to external demands. This novelty can be largely explained by the emphasis of the current study on the underlying motives of the DP approach as opposed to solely observing its effects on behaviour in goal pursuit. By refraining from actively intervening with or challenging their strategy, there was

no resistance that reinforced the use of their defensive pessimism as seen in previous studies of strategy interference where DPs were prevented from utilising their negativity (e.g. Spencer & Norem, 1996). Instead, the adding of resources is thought to have created a space in which the effect of the intervention on individuals' *need* to use defensive pessimism in the first place could be observed.

While the use of defensive pessimism has previously been regarded in a positive light, the objective of the current study was not to refute this idea but rather to question the 'adaptive' label attached to a strategy born out of a strong need to self-protect. The decrease in levels of self-reported defensive pessimism in the intervention group suggests that turning DPs' attention to their intrinsic values as a guide for behavioural action as well as teaching them how to adopt a more compassionate stance towards self are powerful strategies that can reduce the need to protect self-worth. Hence, it is likely that these intervention components actually helped strengthen DPs' sense of worthiness. These insights resulting from a deeper quest into the *why* of DPs' movement calls for a more careful consideration of what a particular response is adaptive for prior to encouraging such action. If long-term wellbeing of DPs is the primary cause for concern in goal-oriented pursuits, action taken in the service of values rather than fear is likely the most adaptive response.

However, an important question that stems from a typical challenge encountered in ACT work is how a clarification of values results in committed action (McCracken, 2013). In the context of the current study, values may guide behavioural intentions aligned with intrinsic goals, but what is yet unknown is if and how these intentions will result in actual behaviour that is typical of a defensive pessimist in times when fear is the motivator of action. After all, results leaned towards a reduction of fear of failure in the intervention group and strong evidence has been put forth by previous research suggesting that the harnessing of negative emotions is crucial for DPs' forward movement and successful goal achievement, thus giving the impression that the DP strategy and fear and avoidance are inseparable and purely useful in situations of perceived threat. That said, the difference between current research objectives and past efforts to frustrate DPs' strategy use requires further insight into the role of a wider array of emotions in instigating and sustaining action geared towards pursuits that do not involve threat appraisal, which is a territory largely unknown in the DP literature.

Observing a change in DP motives and emotions as a result of *adding* to their existing repertoire and refraining from taking away suggests first and foremost a widened scope of the



strategy itself, in which the emphasis of the intervention on intrinsic factors may have encouraged a shift in their typically narrowed focus on threat to the opportunities inherent within the fulfilment of intrinsically rewarding goals. The act of widening attention and selectively attending to these is bound to lessen fear and may in turn, not replace negativity but create space for emotional experiences of a more positive valence that over time, can induce purposeful action and thereby bridge the aforementioned gap between intention and value-based action. As such, positive emotions may be the by-product of DPs' engagement with their *why* and other resources built as a result of the intervention. Defensive pessimism and positive emotion may be two constructs that do not go hand in hand, but through the lens of the Broaden and Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2004), the inclusion of positive emotions in the analysis of DPs' behaviour is crucial to fully understand the effect of the intervention.

According to this theory, positive emotions and personal resources exist in a feedback cycle in which the experience of positive emotions builds important cognitive and psychological resources due to its widened effect on the individual's attention. In turn, as these resources are put into practice, further positive emotions are generated in what has been likened to an upward spiral that increases emotional wellbeing over time (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Evidence from the application of this theory suggests the reverse is also true – durable resources can become sources of positive emotions, which suggests positive emotions are not an essential building block of resources, although a highly likely product of engagement with these resources. It is this latter understanding of the theory that supports findings and particularly agrees with the nature of DPs. As is evident from the analysis thus far, DPs start with the 'doing' and may ultimately end up with the 'feeling' as far as positive emotions are concerned. That is, positivity is not an emotion that DPs initially thrive off, but as they intentionally engage with the building of personal resources, these may become part of DPs' repertoire that with time can be used to facilitate action towards goals that are pursued in favour of intrinsically valued outcomes. Through these mechanisms, DPs' journey may become more positively experienced and less anxiety driven.

That said, it is important to acknowledge that while these speculations do rest upon strong evidence of the broadening and build effect of positive emotions, they are not conclusive as neither positive emotions nor the resulting behaviour of the changes produced by the intervention were measured and are therefore in need of confirming evidence. Nonetheless, the fact that positive emotions were not recorded in the current study is not viewed as a limitation of major significance given that firstly, positive emotions are for DPs

likely to be a by-product of time and would therefore not have been accurately represented at post-measures. Second, and most importantly in defence of current objectives, lasting wellbeing is not the outcome of transient emotional states, it is experienced through the resources developed for living well and navigating through life's various circumstances (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels & Conway, 2009). In this process, any positive emotion experienced as a result of bringing DPs' 'why' to the surface is viewed as a mechanism that can help build further resources and energize intrinsic pursuits towards a more meaningful, and less anxious, existence.

While the intervention may have promising effects in practice as discussed above, what also needs to be addressed are the potential theoretical implications of undoing DPs of their self-protective armour. That is, if the qualities (i.e. motives) that characterise the essence of a defensive pessimist are reduced or diminished altogether, does it change the DP status overall or does the person end up endorsing more or less of defensive pessimism? Although there are claims that defensive pessimism is not a trait, but merely a strategy used adaptively in response to perceived threatening outcomes (Elliot & Church, 2003), evidence is lacking to support a conclusion that defensive pessimism is non-existent without or with reduced motives to self-protect. Given that defensive pessimism is, at its conceptual level, comprised of not just emotions in response to perceived threat, but also enduring qualities of a future-oriented nature such as proactivity, planning and organisational skills that helps sustain action (Gasper, Lozinski & LeBeau, 2009), there is accordingly more evidence to support DP as a disposition that is malleable to external input, but that does not cease to exist in the absence of fear and avoidance. More specifically in the context of current findings, the armour can be put aside with appropriate training while still being kept within reach. Just as happiness is considered to not be the absence of depression (Wood, Taylor & Joseph, 2010), but rather a state that needs to be proactively cultivated through a higher ratio of positive to negative emotional experiences – DPs do not need to relinquish their negativity to experience a positive 'journey'. What will be of greatest concern for future research is finding ways to appropriately intervene so that the inherent skills of defensive pessimism can be used to cultivate a higher ratio of positive to negative affect and thus, greater emotional wellbeing.

### **Unconditional Self-Acceptance (UA) and Self-Esteem (SE)**

The non-significance of unconditional self-acceptance and the unanticipated relevance of self-esteem as a result of the intervention was at first surprising given the

objective of the current study to appeal to individuals' inherent worthiness rather than the evaluative aspect of their self-concept. However, when considering the nature of defensive pessimism alongside an apprehension of the interconnectedness of UA and SE in its purest form it is understandable why this endeavour may not be a straight forward task within the given time frame. Evaluating one's sense of self from a place of worthiness is what Ryan and Deci (2004) referred to as true self-esteem that is pursued from a place of fulfilment rather than need deprivation and that does not fluctuate in response to failure, thus suggesting a positive association between unconditional regard for self and the cultivation of true esteem.

For a defensive pessimist, these constructs are similarly intertwined but in the opposite, downward direction. It is the motive to protect the low feelings of worthiness that gives rise to an unstable and far from true self-esteem that is, on the contrary, contingent upon external proof of ability and thereby pursued defensively due to fear of loss. For as long as the defensive pessimist's worth is tied to an evaluation of self that fluctuates with events (e.g. failure), any rise or fall witnessed in self-esteem is merely a representation of its fragility. Attempts of the current study to free DPs' worth from the grips of this evaluation turned out to be an ambitious pursuit judging from participants' unchanging levels of UA post-intervention, but it was not completely unsuccessful. While SE was as expected not raised in the absence of UA, it seems the intervention acted as a cushion against fluctuations in SE that was witnessed in the control group. In light of previous findings, this may be partly due to a reduced need to protect against external perceived threats, but primarily a result of cultivating a deeper care and concern for one's own struggles which in turn could have contributed to a more compassionate evaluation of self. This outcome can be supported by an abundance of research that has demonstrated strong links between self-compassion and, for example, reduced anxiety when faced with unpleasant self-relevant events (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen & Hancock, 2007) and more secure and less contingent feelings of self-worth in the non-DP population (Neff & Vonk, 2009).

Whether time is an important factor for the development of UA is a matter of concern for future research to address through longitudinal designs, but given the seemingly intricate relationship between DPs' deep-rooted conditional regard and the defensive shield typically upheld to protect against the loss of this fragile sense of worth perhaps UA is not an appropriate direct target or starting point for DPs. In fact, Vonk and Smit (2011) argue that it is a worthless strive for anyone as one's self-regard can never be completely non-contingent. It can however, depend on intrinsic contingencies whereby one's opinion of self is affected

only by the degree to which one's actions are self-congruent and facilitative of personal growth (Vonk & Smit, 2011). Therefore, the way forward for any research with the ultimate aim to affect change at the core of DPs is seemingly through the practice of self-compassion and a continuous engagement with values that reflect intrinsic strivings. While it may leave UA unaffected, current findings suggest self-compassion may mitigate fluctuations in DPs' evaluation of themselves that often occur in response to external events perceived as threatening to their sense of self. Moreover, the conditions of worth upon which the self is measured against may come to rest less upon external approval and more on the fulfilment of intrinsically valued pursuits, hence reflecting a truer and more growth-oriented sense of self.

## Conclusions

What may limit many of the broader conclusions drawn in the current study is the inability to pinpoint exactly how the intervention worked, as it was purposefully delivered as a bundle with the characteristics of DPs in mind and thereby not intended to directly target a specific causal mechanism. As an example, the researcher did not specifically set out to lower fear of failure, but this was nonetheless a subtle trend witnessed as a result of building other qualities. While it is indeed important to acknowledge that this may complicate future research aiming to replicate a particular effect produced by the current study, it is precisely this feature that makes this study unique and best supportive of its rationale. Another limitation that needs addressing is the fact that participants were not randomly assigned to the conditions, due to the time constraints of the research study. Therefore, the current research provides a foundation for better controlled studies of future research endeavours. That said, any research carried out in a real-world setting is bound to contain elements of scientific concern that would be difficult to counter despite carefully controlled research designs.

What is more, it also carries important implications that are both of a practical and theoretical nature. To start, the solution to the dilemma encountered when trying to figure out how to best support DPs in various contexts lies not in the choosing of one outcome over the other, but in trying to encourage both movement and lasting wellbeing. While performance brings a sense of competence that is a basic human need and therefore an important part of overall wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2001), it is neither fulfilling nor supportive of optimal functioning in the absence of other integral aspects of wellbeing. Therefore, when finding that the various coping strategies typically applied to deal with negative emotions has the opposite effect on DPs' performance, the solution is not to refrain from intervening. Negative

emotions may not be the problem for DPs in goal-pursuit but as continuously stressed in this study, they are not necessarily adaptive for any other purpose than escaping the anxiety of potential failure. To preserve movement towards goal achievement *and* encourage wellbeing, the solution suggested by current findings is to always explore the motives behind DPs' behaviour before deciding on the adaptiveness of a certain emotion in order to ensure DPs are moving for the right reasons: autonomously and perhaps with fear, but in the direction of their *why*.

The positive effects witnessed in the current study has promising implications for both fields to widen their horizons and flourish either separately or in combination. While the marrying of Positive Psychology and ACT in the current study was justified by the fact that the two fields share the goal of helping individuals flourish, it was the combining of their constituent parts that worked in a complementary fashion to produce change. For instance, the tolerance and acceptance of negativity in ACT coupled with Positive Psychology's focus on the building of positive and enduring personal resources. As for the process of research, it appears there can be many different pathways to the same goal and that these paths may benefit from converging for a more nuanced and coherent whole.

By incorporating the philosophy of ACT into the teachings of Positive Psychology, the current study has shown that it is possible to affect positive change by focusing on building enduring qualities while refraining from taking away 'less desirable' states of being. As for the defensive pessimist, lasting optimal functioning lies not in external contingencies of worth that control behaviour in a given direction, nor in the chasing of happiness. Findings showing a decrease in defensive pessimism and fear of failure and a buffering effect on self-esteem as a result of the intervention has laid a foundation for research to continue exploring the possibilities for DPs to create a stronger sense of belonging to *self* by consulting their motives before responding and actively choosing to walk in the direction of their *why*. In doing so, they will likely tap into the potential of developing a higher regard for self that rises and falls solely with their ability to be true to self. It is ultimately through the building of these resources that DPs' journey may become more positively experienced and less anxiety driven.

To conclude, this study has shown that by helping DPs tolerate their negative emotions and consider their underlying motives for a particular goal, these individuals have the potential to experience greater wellbeing on their journey to goal achievement. This novel finding demonstrates that negative emotions can be both adaptive and instrumental in

supporting individuals' life goals but do not necessarily need to impair their wellbeing in the process. As such, DPs can find ways to align with self and in doing so, sustain action only if it serves a meaningful end. While this 'journey' inwards to cultivate a deeper sense of worthiness is of utmost relevance specifically for DPs in order to engage more fully with life, it also carries a lesson that ought to be internalised by *any* individual or research in pursuit of happiness, which is to avoid attaching oneself to a particular outcome. Ultimately, it is the resources built as a result of the many ups and downs along the way that will enable a good life.

## THESIS DISCUSSION

With the second wave of positive psychology as a foundation, the research that make up this thesis has explored the depth of the fear of failure experience in the context of goal-pursuit with particular emphasis on the core of its presence. And furthermore, intervened with the aim to encourage rather than manage long-term wellbeing and value-based goal-pursuit. There are several core messages to take away from the totality of this thesis. Firstly, negative emotions can, regardless of their felt experience, serve a valuable purpose in goal-pursuit and hence, play an adaptive and positive role in helping the individual achieve desired goals, which is why individual differences in emotional expression are essential to consider. Secondly, the process of goal-pursuit is just as important as the outcome. That is, the instrumentality of negative emotion needs to be considered in conjunction with its effect on long-term wellbeing for a more comprehensive understanding of what is truly adaptive beyond achievement, especially when dealing with populations who are driven by self-protection. Finally, a promising solution is to start from within: to focus attention on building internal strengths before attempting to remove unwanted affective experiences. This can be accomplished by creating an accepting space between the emotional stimulus and the behavioural response so the individual can make a mindful choice to move in the direction of intrinsic values and from a place of feeling worthy. These conclusions will be of utmost importance in the marrying of eudaimonic and hedonic approaches in Positive Psychology, along with a recognition of the functionality of emotions, in the pursuit of flourishing.

Zooming in on a more detailed account of findings, fear of failure was understood as an intricate emotion with its origin in past experiences, self-beliefs and deep-rooted needs that in goal-pursuit acts as an alarm that predominantly spurs the individual into action despite wavering control beliefs to avoid the ‘harm’ associated with failure. The potential benefits of this affective experience are in bringing attention to the role of individual differences in preferences for emotions that challenged common practices of regulating negative states in favour of more hedonically pleasant emotions. Developing an accepting stance towards unpleasant thoughts and emotions without an agenda to change these was for defensive pessimists found to create a space between stimulus and response which holds the potential for these individuals to contemplate the reasons behind their fear-based movement. This space was shown beneficial when utilised as a platform for building personal resources among defensive pessimists in hopes of pointing them in a value-based and less threatening direction.

As such, the research comprising this thesis has above all, brought attention to the importance of investigating the reasons behind the effects of an emotional experience before making assumptions regarding its role in wellbeing and goal-pursuit and shown it is possible to produce positive change without having to neglect negative emotions. As will be discussed below, it was the function of individual differences in the study of emotional preferences and motivation that not only influenced the direction of this research but also informed the wider conclusions drawn and thereby opened the door to a whole host of theoretical as well as practical implications that will serve future research.

### **Fear of failure**

The aversive nature of failure that acts as a threat in goal-pursuit was in the current study traced back to a deep-rooted concern of not *being* enough for others, which first and foremost highlights an inability to separate one's being from one's doing, and secondly, suggests that a lot of striving towards a valued end may be other-focused at its very core. In other words, extrinsically motivated by judgements of others. As will be discussed below, this need to be accepted by others can have important consequences not just for behaviour, but also for wellbeing. While this finding coincides with Conroy's (2001) model of fear of failure which acknowledges 'fear of upsetting important others' as a lower-order factor among others, it bears too much significant to merely lend support for this model. Instead, findings implicate an update of Conroy's (2001) model and/or the development of a new one that treats this search for acceptance as a main higher-order factor of fear of failure. Expanding the theoretical underpinnings of fear of failure is important for the sake of future pursuits that use these as frameworks to not only approach research but also in making sense of findings. Failure to acknowledge the essence of fear of failure in these models could lead to a disregard of data deemed not relevant for the support of theory and hypothesis and thus, result in incomplete conclusions of the phenomena under scrutiny.

### **Individual differences**

That individuals differ in terms of their behavioural response to fear of failure is a known fact that is acknowledged in many existing theories of achievement motivation. At a deeper level of analysis, however, individual differences in explanations of how fear of failure arise in response to the environment have not been fully endorsed. Through the lens of the Self-Determination Theory which view the desire for competence, autonomy and



belonging as primary sources of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) fear of failure is linked to an introjected form of extrinsic motivation which motivates the individual to engage in controlled behaviour to avoid experiencing shame upon the thwarting of these needs. This may for instance occur when challenges to successful goal-pursuit are encountered as this threatens the individual's need for competence, which in turn leads to lowered intrinsic motivation. Hence, the rise of fear of failure is from this perspective tied to the impediments encountered when striving to fulfil self-rewarding, intrinsic needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

While this accounts for a general understanding of fear of failure in relation to the fundamental needs that govern volitional behaviour, the theory does not fully acknowledge that individuals habitually differ in their primary motives. That is, some individuals act purely with self-protective motives to preserve their existing feelings of competence as the need to avoid judgements of their worth is greater than the need to reach higher states of self-actualisation. The core of these protective motives is thought to stem from a deep-rooted need for self-acceptance which is sought through favourable judgements of significant others (Covington, 1984). As this implies, the motives to protect versus gain more competence may exist on a hierarchy of needs with certain conditions as pre-requisites for evolving to a higher level. Self-acceptance may be one of these conditions that separates those who engage in self-rewarding strives from those who habitually move to preserve existing competence judgements. Thus far, this very core element relating to the shame experience has not been appropriately addressed as a factor that may be involved in differences existing between individuals in primary motives and reactions to the thwarting of these different needs. For advancing explanations of the fundamental drives behind human behaviour, further investigation of the core factors that give rise to individual differences are warranted.

Defensive pessimists are a group of individuals who are known to thrive off the need to defensively protect against failure and was the population of interest in this research due to their propensity to harness negative emotions to achieve this aim, which is one quality that has been recognised to set them apart from typical failure avoiders. Nonetheless, it is their common motive that has united defensive pessimists, self-handicappers, overstrivers and failure acceptors under the failure avoiders umbrella (Covington & Omelich, 1991) and although they portray different behaviours in response to fear of failure, all are characterised by low expectations, low control, low self-esteem and low efficacy beliefs in goal-pursuit (Covington & Omelich, 1991; Martin & Marsh, 2003). However, the comprehensive analysis of defensive pessimists in the current research does not agree with their existing

representation in the literature. To start, the labels attached to defensive pessimists is suggestive of a severe misrepresentation of their actual qualities that are expressed through their proactive actions. While it has been speculated that proactivity may act as a means of regaining a sense of control, such actions would not be instigated without a certain degree of existing control, nor would it be carried through in the absence of efficacy beliefs. While not represented in the typologies mentioned above, both defensive pessimism and overstriving have been associated with perfectionism (e.g. Norem, 2001) which sets these individuals apart from other failure avoiders who are not actively defensive. Clearly, more research is needed to enable a new profile of defensive pessimists that do justice to their forward behaviour and accompanying qualities.

What is more, the drive of defensive pessimists in goal-pursuit that has been linked to achievement of an equal level to for example, optimists, questions not only the current belief that defensive pessimists prepare for failure by setting low expectations, but also their avoidance orientation as a single motive in goal-pursuit. That is, why would defensive pessimists engage proactively with the pursuit with such determination to meet the goal if their sole motive was to enlarge the discrepancy between a current and an undesired state? Rationally, enlarging this space would require minimal, if any, approach efforts. Therefore, there are two possible alternatives that could account for their history of high achievement *and* their need to harness negative emotions to protect their unstable sense of worth. Defensive pessimists either approach with high expectancies for success in order to distance themselves as far as possible from failure, given these end-states are objective opposites. Or, they are in their pursuits inherently torn between the need to avoid failure and the desire to succeed beyond the prevention of failure. It is likely these alternatives represent two types of defensive pessimists, considering the wide range of individual differences already present within the study of motivation. In whichever case, accounting for the possibility of a joint motive where the setting of high expectations prior to goal-pursuit is part of defensive pessimists' repertoire will provide opportunities to work with the 'why' of their movement as in the current research, to ensure the strive towards such high expectancies is intrinsically worthwhile.

### **Instrumentality of negative emotions**

The ways in which defensive pessimists act in goal-pursuit fits with the typical understanding of what constitutes an adaptive response to negative emotions and thus, lends support for the instrumental benefit of negative affect in helping the individual achieve the goal. In other words, a functional analysis of emotions in goal-pursuit. However, what has been neglected in the evaluation of the utility of negative emotions is a careful consideration of what the emotion truly serves. That is, beyond merely getting the individual to a desired end-state, what is the emotion instrumental for? The current research challenged the adaptive nature of defensive pessimism by raising the question of whether the motivation to self-protect should be harnessed and if so, how it aligns with positive psychology's mission to support and encourage long-term wellbeing. By merely bringing attention to this surprisingly disregarded concern, the research comprising this thesis has initiated a quest for understanding the depth of a person's motive that exists beyond overt behaviour prior to judging its utility for not just achievement, but also wellbeing. Even more so, by demonstrating that defensive pessimists' need to self-protect can be reduced by building positive personal resources, this research has taken the first step to actualise true instrumental action congruent with values and provided conditions for lasting wellbeing that does not falter with threats to one's sense of worth. These pursuits and findings that address defensive pessimists' successful goal outcome *and* raise concerns regarding their wellbeing during the process (i.e. goal journey) have important implications for positive psychology.

### **Implications for Positive Psychology**

Zooming out on the big picture to start, this research has claimed a space for negative emotions in positive psychology's study of what makes life worth living and in so doing, shown that these affective states do not need to be handled with the intention of ridding the individual of the experience. What can as a result of this research be proposed as an alternative approach to wellbeing and goal achievement that does not favour one affective experience over another is the establishment of an accepting attitude of *all* internal experiences relating to troubling thoughts and emotions. With an openness to these, acceptance has the potential to create a space between an emotional stimulus and the behavioural response for defensive pessimists and the typical population alike, that can be used as a platform to build resources and encourage behaviour in any desired direction.

Using this space to focus on building from within takes the discussion to the next layer of this research that holds enormous potential for practical as well as theoretical developments within positive psychology. Aiming for a positive change by cultivating states and resources (e.g. positivity & self-esteem) that are not genuinely endorsed or felt is similar to building a house without a solid foundation – *eventually* it will fall apart. Defensive pessimists represent one population with an obvious rocky foundation that needs tending to in order to stand tall long term, and there are others who do not fall into the defensive pessimist category but who disguise their wavering sense of worth in what may appear as ‘high self-esteem’. As demonstrated throughout, it takes some digging to unveil these various strategies. The building of self-worth seems to be of utmost relevance to achievement contexts, not just because it is so deeply connected to the individual’s sense of competence, but also because it is a building block for other relevant personal resources such as resilience and the ability to offer compassion towards self in times of despair. Once these resources have been cultivated, attention can be brought to improving any external conditions that may be beneficial to the individual.

Coming to terms with the idea that enduring wellbeing may start from a place where the individual feels whole challenges positive psychology to return to its humanistic psychology roots and place a stronger emphasis on building resources from within where there lie enormous strengths that can be used to carry other positive psychology agendas forward (see e.g. Rogers, 1951; Bohart & Greening, 2001). From a theoretical standpoint, the Broaden and Build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) has the potential to support this mission if it reversed its proposed causal chain. That is, rather than using it as a framework to study how positive emotions facilitate the building of resources, what the current research suggests should be the focus is the direct opposite; how the building of resources such as self-worth may facilitate the experience of positive emotion and with time, flourishing. Two major advantages stand out from supporting this endeavour. Firstly, it takes into consideration individual differences in emotional preferences – positive emotions are not a starting point that suits all. For instance, as discussed in Study 3, defensive pessimists’ initial preference is to experience negative emotions to enable action, but with time positive emotions may be an end-product of having built enduring resources. As such, this approach is more focused on the process rather than the outcome. Moreover, and what may seem counterintuitive, this way forward will provide better opportunities for experiencing positive emotions, as it allows exploration of what the conditions are that best prepare individuals to truly embrace positive

emotions before mistakenly forcing a smile onto an inside that may not be apt to genuinely carry it. As this suggests, positive emotions may ultimately, be a ‘size’ that fits all if tailored to the individual’s unique ‘journey’.

Holistically, an important message for the future of positive psychology is that individual differences matter (see also Carter et al., 2016), even to a point where scientific inquiry can be enhanced when differences are taken into account at both conceptual and practical levels. The current research brought specific attention to between-person differences in affective experiences that had important implications primarily for motivation, expectancies, behaviour and reactions to intervening regulatory attempts. The recognition of these differences can be used to further assess which positive psychology strategy will be most effective for particular people in particular circumstances. Moving forward, the next step that will add further depth to the understanding of positive human functioning is the exploration of within-person differences. That is, besides from assessing individual differences in behaviour across people future endeavours will also evaluate fluctuations in behaviour within the person across different situations. One important reason for taking on this challenge is evidence suggesting a greater variability in how a typical person behaves across situations compared to how they differ from others (Fleeson, 2001). Therefore, efforts spent pinpointing both beneficial and unfavourable differences in behaviour across situations will provide opportunities to uncover even more psychological as well as social and biological mechanisms that could account for this variability. With these benefits for research and knowledge generation in mind, an interesting extension of this research could involve examining within-person differences of defensive pessimism. That is, while defensive pessimism is regarded a fairly stable trait, are there performance situations in which their habitual approach differs? If so, what are the external and internal factors that can explain this effect? As has been highlighted, the study of individual differences both at between and within-person levels of inquiry has the potential to advance and deepen positive psychology’s study of human potential.

## **Conclusions**

Returning to the overarching question that instigated the research comprising this thesis: fear of failure as representative of a so-called negative emotion, is it adaptive? What has become clear from the arguments in this thesis is that the answer to this question will depend on the context in which it is explored. When addressing its role in goal-pursuit and

achievement from the perspective of positive psychology, it can be concluded that fear of failure is only adaptive if strivings are self-focused and pursued without a defensive shield. The reason for this being that these conditions reflect movement that is fuelled not by the fear, but *in spite* of it. This distinction is vital to emphasize in the evaluation of fear of failure's adaptive capabilities, as it is the latter movement that is most conducive to growth regardless of the outcome. That said, daring to step into the unknown without the protection of a shield or the certainty brought by a defensive strategy is also the most vulnerable move to make that requires a strong foundation to fall back on. It is here that the building of internal resources, such as resilience, worthiness and compassion will serve its most righteous purpose. Should success be the outcome, it is a win. Should failure be the outcome, it is an even greater win, as the individual who set out *in spite* of the fear did so with a readiness to experience the pain of the fall and to utilise their strengths to get back up.

The question of whether fear of failure serves wellbeing requires an answer that considers wellbeing as a holistic construct with many dimensions that are inherently intertwined. This is due to the various implications of fear of failure that extend beyond its hedonic impact including effects on mental, physical and even spiritual health. By its very nature, fear of failure is not an emotion that is sought to encourage these aspects of wellbeing. Quite on the contrary, its presence is known to be problematic. Therefore, the only way it will serve is if the individual learns to recognise the emotion for what it is; an uncomfortable affective experience that may be inevitable given the circumstances, but that will not cause trouble unless it is part of an experiential avoidance practice. In this space between the event that gave rise to the emotion and the response that typically does not serve wellbeing, lies an abundance of opportunities to consciously decide on the most appropriate action to take, or not to take. For instance, fear of failure may become more tolerable when it is decided that its presence is not a signal of a threat looming, but rather a sign that a positive change is in order. This type of approach that incorporates tenets of mindfulness and acceptance have previously been successful at helping individuals suffering from anxiety (e.g. Vøllestad, Nielsen & Nielsen, 2011). As such, the space provides a chance for fear of failure to be evaluated in terms of its use for all aspects of wellbeing, before any action is taken either away from or towards it. All in all, this suggests that the adaptive role of fear of failure in wellbeing depends not on the emotion in itself, but more so on what the individual makes of it. The opportunities for fear of failure to serve wellbeing will only arise once the struggle stops.

To summarise, with second wave positive psychology as a framework and fear of failure at the centre of research inquiries, it has been shown that negative emotions despite their uncomfortable nature do not need to be eradicated from the individual's experience as they can serve a purpose beyond pleasure and pain. In fact, applying strategies to regulate emotions as a one-size fits all solution can have negative consequences for individuals like defensive pessimists who are reluctant to harness negative emotions to achieve goals. Therefore, being mindful of individual differences in future pursuits is imperative for evaluating research outcomes. Nevertheless, caution should be taken when assessing the beneficial nature of negative emotions as it is easy to be fooled by a seemingly adaptive response. What this research concludes is the only way to approach emotions without doing harm is with curiosity of the reasons behind its presence and resulting behaviour. It is only then that accurate judgements regarding its instrumentality can be made from a positive psychology perspective where long-term wellbeing is the primary cause of concern. What stands out as the all-encompassing ingredient for moving with purpose, cultivating resilience and daring to step out of the comfort zone *in spite* of fear of failure is returning to self to reclaim a sense of being worthy regardless of outer circumstances. Therefore, focusing interventions on building a strong foundation rather than removing the unwanted is a necessary endeavour for cultivating an unconditional acceptance of both the light and dark aspects of self. Adopting this approach will have important implications for Higher Education especially, where students' sense of worth has become so closely tied to their feelings of competence in relation to others. In this current academic climate, the ability to flourish will be impossible without strong roots to fall and rise from. Accordingly, tending to the process and the foundation from where the strive commenced will be just as important as assuring the outcome.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Chapter one questionnaires

#### A.1) The Performance Fear of Failure Inventory (Conroy, 2001)

Using the scale below, please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

- 1= Very Slightly or Not at All
- 2= A little
- 3= Moderately
- 4= Quite a Bit
- 5= Extremely

- ☐ When I am failing, I am afraid that I might not have enough talent.
- ☐ When I fail, it upsets my "plan" for the future.
- ☐ When I am not succeeding, people are less interested in me.
- ☐ When I am failing, important others are disappointed.
- ☐ When I am failing, I worry about what others think about me.

#### A.2) Spheres of Control Scale (the personal control subscale) (Paulhus, 1983)

- 7= Strongly Agree
- 6= Agree
- 5= Agree Somewhat
- 4= Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 3= Disagree Somewhat
- 2= Disagree
- 1= Strongly Disagree

- ☐ I can usually achieve what I want if I work hard for it.
- ☐ Once I make plans, I am almost certain to make them work.
- ☐ I prefer games involving some luck over games requiring pure skill.
- ☐ I can learn almost anything if I set my mind to it.
- ☐ My major accomplishments are entirely due to my hard work and ability.
- ☐ I usually do not set goals because I have a hard time following through on them
- ☐ Bad luck has sometimes prevented me from achieving things.
- ☐ Almost anything is possible for me if I really want it.
- ☐ Most of what happens in my career is beyond my control.
- ☐ I find it pointless to keep working on something that's too difficult for me.

### A.3) Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please answer as truthfully as you can using the scale:

0= Strongly Disagree

1= Disagree

2= Agree

3= Strongly Agree

\_\_\_ On the whole, I am satisfied with myself

\_\_\_ At times, I think I am no good at all.

\_\_\_ I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

\_\_\_ I am able to do things as well as most other people.

\_\_\_ I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

\_\_\_ I certainly feel useless at times.

\_\_\_ I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

\_\_\_ I wish I could have more respect for myself.

\_\_\_ All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

\_\_\_ I take a positive attitude toward myself.

## Appendix B

### Chapter two questionnaires

#### B.1) The Revised Defensive Pessimism Questionnaire (Norem & Cantor, 1986)

When you answer the following questions, please think about how you prepare for and think about (academic/social) situations. Each of the statements below describes how people sometimes think or feel about these kinds of situations. Please use the continuous response scale below and indicate how true it is of you, in (academic/social) situations.

- 1= Strongly disagree
- 2= Disagree
- 3= Disagree somewhat
- 4= Undecided
- 5= Agree somewhat
- 6= Agree
- 7= Strongly agree

- \_\_\_ I go into these situations expecting the worst, even though I know I will probably do OK.
- \_\_\_ I generally go into these situations with positive expectations about how I will do.
- \_\_\_ I've generally done pretty well in these situations in the past.
- \_\_\_ I carefully consider all possible outcomes before these situations.
- \_\_\_ When I do well in these situations, I often feel really happy.
- \_\_\_ I often worry, in these situations, that I won't be able to carry through my intentions.
- \_\_\_ I often think about how I will feel if I do very poorly in these situations.
- \_\_\_ I often think about how I will feel if I do very well in these situations.
- \_\_\_ When I do well in these situations, it is usually because I didn't get too worried about it beforehand.
- \_\_\_ I often try to figure out how likely it is that I will do very poorly in these situations.
- \_\_\_ I'm careful not to become overconfident in these situations.
- \_\_\_ I spend a lot of time planning when one of these situations is coming up.
- \_\_\_ When working with others in these situations, I often worry that they will control things or interfere with my plans.
- \_\_\_ I often try to figure out how likely it is that I will do very well in these situations.
- \_\_\_ In these situations, sometimes I worry more about looking like a fool than doing really well.
- \_\_\_ Prior to these situations, I avoid thinking about possible bad outcomes.
- \_\_\_ Considering what can go wrong in academic situations helps me to prepare.

## B.2) State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Adults (short form) (Spielberger, 1989)

A number of statements which people have used to describe themselves are given below. Please read each statement and indicate how you feel *right now*, using the scale below. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any one statement but give the answer which seems to describe your present feelings best.

- 1= Not at all
- 2= Somewhat
- 3= Moderately
- 4= Very much

- ☐ I feel calm
- ☐ I am tense
- ☐ I feel upset
- ☐ I am relaxed
- ☐ I feel content
- ☐ I am worried

## B.3) Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences (Diener et al., 2009)

Please think about what you are doing and experiencing *right now*. Then report how much you experience each of the following feelings, using the scale below.

- 1 = Very rarely or never
- 2 = Rarely
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Often
- 5 = Very often or always

- |                                     |                                    |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Positive   | <input type="checkbox"/> Happy     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Negative   | <input type="checkbox"/> Sad       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Good       | <input type="checkbox"/> Afraid    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bad        | <input type="checkbox"/> Joyful    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pleasant   | <input type="checkbox"/> Angry     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unpleasant | <input type="checkbox"/> Contented |



## Appendix C

### Chapter three questionnaires

#### C.1) Unconditional Self-Acceptance Scale (Chamerlain & Haaga, 2001)

Please indicate how often you feel each statement below is true or untrue *of you*.

- 1= Almost Always Untrue
- 2= Usually Untrue
- 3= More often Untrue than True
- 4= Equally often True and Untrue
- 5= More often True than Untrue
- 6= Usually True
- 7= Almost Always True

- ☐ Being praised makes me feel more valuable as a person.
- ☐ I feel worthwhile even if I am not successful in meeting certain goals that are important to me.
- ☐ When I receive negative feedback I take it as an opportunity to improve my behaviour or performance.
- ☐ I feel that some people have more value than others.
- ☐ Making a big mistake may be disappointing, but it doesn't change how I feel about myself overall.
- ☐ Sometimes I find myself thinking about whether I am a good or bad person.
- ☐ To feel like a worthwhile person, I must be loved by the people who are important to me.
- ☐ I set goals for myself with the hope that they will make me happy (or happier).
- ☐ I think that being good at many things makes someone a good person overall.
- ☐ My sense of self-worth depends a lot on how I compare with other people.
- ☐ I believe that I am worthwhile simply because I am a human being.
- ☐ When I receive negative feedback, I often find it hard to be open to what the person is saying about me.
- ☐ I set goals for myself that I hope will prove my worth.
- ☐ Being bad at certain things makes me value myself less.
- ☐ I think that people who are successful in what they do are especially worthwhile people.
- ☐ I feel that the best part about being praised is that it helps me to know what my strengths are.
- ☐ I feel I am a valuable person even when other people disapprove of me.
- ☐ I avoid comparing myself to others to decide if I am a worthwhile person.
- ☐ When I am criticized or when I fail at something, I feel worse about myself as a person.
- ☐ I don't think it's a good idea to judge my worth as a person.

## C.2) Intrinsic Contingency Scale (Vonk &amp; Smit, 2012)

Below are several factors that can have a positive impact on your self-esteem, your sense of self-worth. Would you indicate for each of these to what extent it **increases** your self-esteem?

Has no influence on my self-esteem	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Has a strong <b>positive effect</b> on my self-esteem
<input type="checkbox"/> being skilled at what I do		<input type="checkbox"/> giving attention to my feelings
<input type="checkbox"/> discover a new side of myself		<input type="checkbox"/> feeling attractive
<input type="checkbox"/> accomplish a task successfully		<input type="checkbox"/> getting to know myself better
<input type="checkbox"/> looking good		<input type="checkbox"/> having the right weight
<input type="checkbox"/> getting attention from others		<input type="checkbox"/> seeing results of my work
<input type="checkbox"/> looking well-groomed		<input type="checkbox"/> getting support from others
<input type="checkbox"/> delivering good performance		<input type="checkbox"/> taking time for myself
<input type="checkbox"/> feeling loved		<input type="checkbox"/> getting appreciation from others

Please indicate how much your self-esteem is **reduced** by each of the below items. *Note:* the higher the number you choose, the more you indicate that your self-esteem becomes **lower** by this factor.

Has no influence on my self-esteem	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Has a strong <b>negative impact</b> on my self-esteem
<input type="checkbox"/> failing at a task		
<input type="checkbox"/> looking bad		
<input type="checkbox"/> being ignored by others		
<input type="checkbox"/> looking sloppy		
<input type="checkbox"/> giving poor performance		
<input type="checkbox"/> feeling that others don't like me		
<input type="checkbox"/> being criticized		
<input type="checkbox"/> going against my conscience		
<input type="checkbox"/> feeling unattractive		
<input type="checkbox"/> not being true to myself		
<input type="checkbox"/> being too fat		
<input type="checkbox"/> feeling that my knowledge or insight is insufficient.		
<input type="checkbox"/> not taking my own feelings seriously.		
<input type="checkbox"/> feeling stupid or incompetent		
<input type="checkbox"/> pretending to be different than I am.		
<input type="checkbox"/> feeling that others disapprove of me		

## Appendix D

### Chapter three Intervention Material

The following pages contains an outline of both sessions as well as the material used in-session with the participant and the at-home exercises appearing in the following order.

D.1) Outline of Session 1

D.2) Material used in Session 1 with participant

D.3) Outline of Session 2

D.4) Material used in Session 2 with participant (excluding the ‘A different perspective of self’ – exercise as this was carried out using pen and paper)

D.5) Session 1 diary (at-home exercise)

D.6) Session 2 first diary (at-home exercise)

D.7) Session 2 second diary (at-home exercise)

## D.1) Outline of Session 1: Values component of Intervention – Walking Your ‘Why’

### Purpose

- \*To get defensive pessimists to consider the “Why” of their actions
- \*To increase value-based action and as a result, reduce action based on fear.
- \*Aligning with “me” rather than others

### Components

- 1) Identifying a goal currently being pursued and aligning these with value system. (in session)
- 2) Working with Values in everyday life (at home exercise)

### In session

- \*The purpose of this session is to get participants to consider why they are acting towards a specific goal in the first place.
- \*Participants will identify a goal they are currently pursuing, or want to start pursuing.
- \*Experimenter will introduce Values and provide some general information on what it incorporates.
- \*Participant will identify how the goal they are aiming towards relate to their values within the domain of their goal. They will be prompted to think of why those particular chosen values are important to them.

### Exercise at home

- \*The purpose of this home exercise is to get participants to continuously ask themselves *Why* they are something. This is because movement towards goals are often driven by avoidance of an undesirable outcome, rather than intrinsic motives.
- \*Participant will select values that are congruent with their overall selves and the domain in which they state their goal.
- \*The following prompts will be given to participants in a worksheet/diary format:

Goal you are pursuing:

What activities have you engaged in today that relates to the goal:

Remind yourself, how does it map on to what I value in life?:

If you haven’t engaged in any activities that were in favour of the goal, try to think of ways that your values can guide your behaviour towards the goal:

The more you consider your values, you may find that the goal you stated is in fact incongruent with your values. If so, reformulate/set a new goal that match what you do value:

\*Alternative diary entry (it is noted that participants may engage in other activities that are not related to a specific goal they have. Still, we want them to consider why they are doing what they are doing). Accordingly:

You may do other things throughout the week that is not related to the goal in the domain you set in the session. Think about what you have done today/this week. This may be activities, decisions you've made, choice, conversations you've chosen to have, discussion, etc. Write these down:

Now ask yourself: Why did I do 'X' / Why did I make choice 'X' over 'Y'?

Does it relate to your Values? If so, which ones?

If not, would you have made different choices/engaged in different activities if your values had guided these behaviours? How so?

D.2) Material used in Session 1 with participant – working with values

➤ **Ten values** that are important to me:

➤ From the 10 values chosen above, think about the **three** that are most important to you?  
Write them in the space below (*does not have to be listed in order of importance*).

1.

2.

3.

➤ Why do you believe that these particular values are important? (e.g. do they in some way relate to your beliefs, behaviours, personality?)

- **My goal (Personal, social, spiritual, academic...)** (can be one you are currently pursuing or one that you wish to pursue in the near future):

➤ **Does your goal map on to the values you stated before?**

~ **If yes**, write down which ones *and* reframe the goal to include your *Why* (i.e. your value):

~ **If no**, consider **a)** if you would like to add a value to your previous list that maps on to the goal?

~ **Or b)** think about if there are any other goals you would rather pursue if you were to be guided by your most inherent values?



### D.3) Outline of Session 2 – Self-compassion component

#### Purpose

- \*To increase awareness of who they are as a person (worthiness) which is separate from what they do (behaviour).
- \*Awareness of self-criticism and unhelpful self-talk
- \*Educate - knowledge of why we do this as humans + normalise these tendencies (i.e. compassionate insight)
- \*Tolerance for own affect and empathy for self

#### Components

- 1) A different perspective of self (Exercise in Session and at home)
- 2) Curiosity/Functional Analysis – Why we are self-critical (Psych-education)
- 3) Compassionate de-centering, awaken soothing system. We are not trying to get participant to reason with their thoughts and emotions, but to have a greater acceptance and tolerance for their affect (Exercise in Session and at home)

#### Exercise - A different perspective of self

- \*In this exercise, participants will be encouraged to think of adjectives that describe who they are (separate from their roles, their behaviours, etc).
- \*Participants will then be asked to think of how their characteristics relate to their deepest held values.

#### Information

- \*When failure happens – there are two main processes going on:
  - How do I feel (The one who is hurting)
  - What do I say to myself (The one who is criticising)
- \*Bring awareness to the contrast between how you speak to self versus how you would speak to a friend – normalize this as an instant self-protection technique evolved.
- \*Introduce concept of self-compassion, give examples, demonstrate.

#### Exercise – Helpful Self-talk

- \*Exercise in session: Explore with participant – what do they say to themselves when having a hard time (does not necessarily have to be a failure instance) and help them think of alternative ways of speaking to self, based on Neff's model of self-compassion.

- 1) Take a step back “de-centre”. Acknowledge that you are criticising yourself, but don’t criticise yourself for criticising yourself!  
Know that this is a natural response.  
What am I saying to myself? (addressing self-talk that we are often not aware of)

- 2) Explore alternative ways of speaking to self in order to awaken empathy:

(Normalising-mindfulness): “I feel x because y. So it’s understandable that I feel this way.”

(Common humanity): “I’m not alone in this experience. Everyone fails at some point and everyone experiences disappointment, it’s all part of being human”

(Self-kindness: what would you say to someone else in your position): “It’s okay, it’s not the end of the world. I will do better next time, it’s okay to make mistakes.”

At home exercises (Questions and prompts will be printed in a diary format):

Practising affect tolerance (1)

This exercise can be carried out whenever you experience something that cause you emotional pain or discomfort. The purpose of it is to practice having compassion for yourself and when you experience difficult times, just as you would for a friend or a loved one.

(some examples of events that may trigger emotional reactions: not living up to someone’s expectations so we feel disappointment, loss, fear, uncertainty. Someone has hurt us, the day didn’t go as planned, worry about the future, thinking about past events, etc.)

Step 1: Acknowledge feelings. What am I feeling and why?

Have I felt this way before? If so, did the feeling last forever or did it pass eventually? (to bring awareness to the fleeting nature of emotions). Often when we are stuck in a state or thought we think it will be there forever.

Step 2: Notice current self-talk. Am I in any way being critical towards the way I am feeling or thinking? What could have triggered this self-criticism? Note that it is a normal response; but not very kind and supportive. Be sensitive to the feelings that brought on the criticism (e.g. disappointment).

Step 3: Usually we don’t care for ourselves in ways that can actually make us feel better. Take a moment to think about yourself as a compassionate person. Tune in to the warmth, tone of voice, facial expression of someone who is compassionate. If it helps, put your hands over your heart.

Step 4: What might a very compassionate friend say to you in this situation?

End of day self-appreciation exercise (2) (Diary format)

At the end of each day, write down 3 things that you appreciate about yourself today. This can refer to something you did, or a quality of yours that you were extra grateful for today.

D.4) Material used in Session 2 with participant

- **Bring to mind a person that you hold very dear and imagine that he or she is going through something really difficult that causes a lot of emotional pain and suffering.**

~ In response to this, what feelings and thoughts does this person's suffering/pain awake in you?

~ If you were to help this person, what would you say/do in response?

- **Bring to mind an incident or common occurrence in which you have noticed that you are talking down to yourself and/or being overly critical.**

~ What was the event that awakened these critical thoughts?

~ What did you feel in response to that event?

~ What were your reasons for feeling this way? (*For example, you may feel this way because you deeply care about something*).

~ What is a typical dialogue you would have with yourself about what happened? That is, what do you say to yourself and with what attitude? (*Note: The point is not to criticise yourself for criticising yourself!*)

~ Was that helpful? Did it make you feel better, or worse?

- **Can you think of an alternative self-dialogue of a more understanding nature that normalises the feeling you are having in response to the event?**

~ You may wish to follow this format:

I feel/felt \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_

*(this gives you an understanding of why you may feel a certain way and in a sense, normalises your experience)*

When I criticise myself on top of that, I feel \_\_\_\_\_

~ What could you say to yourself that acknowledges that the suffering/pain we all experience from time to time is part of the human experience, something that we all share? *(this will help you realise when you feel down that you are not alone in your suffering/pain):*

Again, you may wish to follow this format:

Everyone, even those who appear to be happy and problem-free all the time, experiences \_\_\_\_\_, it's all part of being human and there is no such thing as an existence free of negative emotions.

- **Now, bring the same friend/loved one to mind that you did in the beginning. Imagine that he or she experienced the exact same event that you just described, and experienced the exact same thoughts/feelings.**

~ What would you say to this person in your position to demonstrate your care and concern?

~ Now bring your attention back to yourself. Is it possible for you to imagine directing those same words and feelings of warmth/empathy towards yourself? What would you say? Would the words you choose to soothe yourself be any different?

### D.5) Session 1 diary (at-home exercise) – Reflecting upon your Why

**The purpose of this diary** is for you to take a moment each day to reflect upon the behaviours and activities you engage in on a daily basis and how these relate to the goals that you set for yourself and what you truly value in life. It is hoped that by having a greater awareness of the reasons behind your daily actions and activities, you will find even greater fulfilment and meaning in your life.

#### **Some pointers and reminders from our session ~**

- ❖ There are no right or wrong answers here. This reflection is meant to benefit you and it is yours only. It is your space to be as honest and open as you possibly can with yourself.
- ❖ Values and goals are not set in stone, they can change with your experience and with the different life stages you go through. You may even find that as you become aware of what you truly value in life, the goals you have set for yourself don't match what you believe is important for you. If this happens, don't worry, work with where you are at this point of your life and simply follow the pointers within this diary.
- ❖ You will benefit most from completing this diary at the end of your day.

#### **To help guide your reflection, write down the following before you begin ~**

The goal I considered/set in the session (it is okay if you want to think of another goal):

---

My top three values that relate to this goal: \_\_\_\_\_

---



---



**Day 1** (same format every day for 7 days)

- **What activities have you engaged in today that relate to your goal?**
  
- **If you find as you reflect on this that you haven't really engaged in any activities that are in favour of your goal, remind yourself of your values** (i.e. What is important to you in life):
  
- **Can you think of ways in which these values could guide your daily activities/behaviours towards the goal?** (For example, I highly value my wellbeing, which is why an important goal of mine is to care for my wellbeing on a daily basis. By reminding myself that this is something that is really important to me, I can better think of actions to take each day in order to be truer to myself. Accordingly, I may wake up 30 minutes earlier to have time to do some yoga or meditate).
  
- **The more you consider your values, you may find that the goal you previously listed as important is in fact incompatible with what is truly important to you. If so, reformulate your current goal *or* set a new goal that is more consistent with what you value:**  
(For example, my goal is to become more mindful and present in my everyday life because this is important for my psychological wellbeing)

## D.6) Session 2 diary (at-home exercise) – Compassionate Reflection

**It is very common that we don't treat ourselves with the same love and respect that we treat others.** In fact, most of us are very good at being empathic towards our friends and family, whilst being overly harsh and critical towards ourselves. The aim of this week is to practice having your own back in times of need! It is truly amazing that we have the ability to care so deeply for others and to offer our love and support - why not direct this towards ourselves when we most need it?

**This exercise is meant to be carried out whenever you experience something that causes emotional pain or discomfort.** The purpose of this whole week is to practice having compassion for yourself throughout difficult or uncomfortable experiences, just as you would for someone you care deeply about.

**Some examples of events that may trigger emotional reactions (of course there are many others that you may experience not listed here):**

- Not living up to someone else's expectations, leaving us feeling disappointed in ourselves.
- Loss of something or someone we hold dear
- Fear of the future and of failure
- Uncertainty and worry about future
- Feeling unsettled over past events
- Being hurt by someone
- Hurting someone else intentionally or unintentionally
- When the day didn't turn out as expected
- When life just feels unbearable
- When we are stressed
- Having an argument with someone

**It is okay to do more than one entry per day!**

**Entry 1 (there were seven entries with the same format)**

**Step 1.** Acknowledge your feelings. What exactly am I feeling right now (or when the event happened) and what are my reasons for feeling this way?

- **Have I felt this way before? If so, did the feeling last what seemed like forever, or did it pass eventually?** (The purpose of this question is to bring your awareness to the fleeting nature of emotions. Often when we are stuck in an emotional state or a nagging thought we think that it will last forever, when in fact it doesn't).

**Step 2.** Pay attention to your current self-talk about the situation.

- **Am I being critical towards the way I am feeling or thinking about this?**
- **What could have triggered this self-criticism?** (Note that this is a normal response; but not very kind and supportive. Be kind to whatever feelings that brought on the self-criticism).

**Step 3.** Usually we don't care for ourselves in ways that can actually make us feel better. Take a moment to think about yourself as a compassionate person. Tune in to the warmth, tone of voice and facial expression of someone who is compassionate. If it helps, put your hand over your heart while you do this.

- **What might a very compassionate friend say to you in this situation? Direct these words to yourself either out loud or silently in your mind.**

D.7) End of day self-appreciation diary (at-home exercise)

**We are all very good at criticising ourselves for the things we believe we could have done better. The point of this reflection is to do the exact opposite!**

**At the end of each day for one week, write down three things that you appreciate about yourself that day. This can refer to something you did or a quality of yours that you are extra appreciative of that day.**

**If you struggle to think of something to write on any given day, consider what someone else (perhaps someone who loves you) might write about you in a positive light.**

**Day 1 – Today I appreciate these things about myself:** (same format for 7 days)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.