

Self-Efficacy Theory (Albert Bandura)

By Gabriel Lopez-Garrido, published Aug 09, 2020

Take-home Messages

- Psychologist Albert Bandura has defined self-efficacy as people's beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events that affect their lives. One's sense of self-efficacy can provide the foundation for motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment.
- People's beliefs in their efficacy are developed by four main sources of influence, including (i) mastery experiences, (ii) vicarious experiences, (iii) social persuasion, and (iv) emotional states.
- High self-efficacy has been linked with numerous benefits to daily life, such as resilience to adversity and stress, healthy lifestyle habits, improved employees' performance, and educational achievement.

What is Self-Efficacy?

The term 'self-efficacy' was first coined by psychologist Albert Bandura (1977) a Canadian-American psychologist and a professor at Stanford University.

He originally proposed the concept, in his own words, as a personal judgment of "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations" (1977).

Self-Efficacy is a person's particular set of beliefs that determine how well one can execute a plan of action in prospective situations (Bandura, 1977). To put it in more simple terms, self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation.

Bandura was responsible for bringing the term to light, but psychologists have studied self-efficacy from several perspectives.

To give an example of another perspective, Kathy Kolbe – educator and best-selling author – thinks that believing in one's own abilities can be vital in measuring cognitive strength (2009).

She believes that self-efficacy also involves determination and perseverance – seeing as how it helps one overcome obstacles that would interfere with utilizing those innate abilities to achieve goals.

How Does Self-Efficacy Develop?



Source: The Pennsylvania State University

Albert Bandura (1977) states individuals develop their self-efficacy beliefs by interpreting information from four main sources of influence.

1. Mastery Experiences (Performance Outcomes)

The most influential source is the interpreted result of one's previous performance, or mastery experience.

When talking about Mastery experiences, this refers to the experiences one gains when they take on a new challenge and are successful at doing so.

"Mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy information because they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one can muster whatever it takes to succeed. Success builds a robust belief in one's personal efficacy. Failures undermine it, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established" (Bandura, 1997). One of the best proven ways to learn a new skill or to improve one's performance in a given activity is by practicing.

How can one be sure that practicing and acquiring new skills will lead to mostly positive experiences? In most cases, part of the reason this works so well is that people –

unknowingly throughout this process - are teaching themselves that they are capable of acquiring new skills.

2. Vicarious Experiences (Social Role Models)

The second important source of self-efficacy is through the vicarious experiences provided by social models.

Bandura (1977) posits that "Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers' beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities to succeed."

Vicarious experiences involve observing other people successfully completing a task.

When one has positive role models in their life (especially those who display a healthy level of self-efficacy) - one is more likely to absorb at least a few of those positive beliefs about the self.

Social role models including older sibling, older friends, camp counsellors, parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, teachers, coaches, and employers.

3. Social Persuasion

Receiving positive verbal feedback while undertaking a complex task persuades a person to believe that they have the skills and capabilities to succeed.

Self-efficacy is influenced by encouragement and discouragement pertaining to an individual's performance or ability to perform (Redmond, 2010)

For example, if one were telling an elementary school child that they are capable of achieving greatness and that they should set out to achieve anything their heart desires - this would be how verbal persuasion looks in action.

Verbal persuasion works on any age, but the earlier it is administered the more it is likely to encourage building of self-efficacy.

4. Emotional and Physiological States

The emotional, physical, and psychological well-being of a person can influence how they feel about their personal abilities in a particular situation.

For example, if you are struggling with depression or anxiety, one might find it harder to have a healthy level of well-being. Is it impossible to build self-efficacy while suffering from some of these struggles? Of course not, but boosting your self-efficacy is a much easier task when one is feeling healthy and well (Bandura, 1982).

However, Bandura (1977) states, "it is not the sheer intensity of emotional and physical reactions that is important but rather how they are perceived and interpreted. People who have a high sense of efficacy are likely to view their state of affective arousal as an energizing facilitator of performance, whereas those who are beset by self-doubts regard their arousal as a debilitator."

Thus, by learning how to manage anxiety and enhance mood when experiencing challenging situations, individuals can improve their sense of self-efficacy.

Bandura wasn't the only psychologist to delve into researching self-efficacy. One example of another influential self-efficacy researcher is James Maddux, who is actually responsible for suggesting the existence of a fifth main source of self-efficacy: imaginal experiences, or visualization (Maddux and Meier, 1995).

Imaginal Experiences/Visualization

James Maddux (2013) has suggested a fifth route to self-efficacy through "imaginal experiences", the art of visualizing yourself behaving effectively or successfully in a given situation".

Imaginal experiences (or visualization) is basically someone attempting to portray their goals as achievable.

It's like the old saying that goes "it's so close you can almost taste it" – visualization is about putting yourself (in your head) in a pole position to being capable of achieving anything one sets their mind to.

With this method, in order to enhance one's own self-efficacy or that of a child, the focus needs to be on painting a picture – making success seem as the most likely outcome (Maddux and Meier, 1995).

By painting oneself or others in a favourable position, Maddux (1995) hypothesized that the levels of self-efficacy in said individual would rise given that they are now more susceptible – after portraying themselves at the finish line – to believe in themselves.

Building Self-Efficacy

"People's beliefs about their abilities have a profound effect on those abilities. Ability is not a fixed property; there is a huge variability in how you perform. People who have a sense of self-efficacy bounce back from failure; they approach things in terms of how to handle them rather than worrying about what can go wrong" (Bandura, 1977b).

Emphasize Peer Modelling:

Learning from examples set by those around you happens at any age (think of how a teacher is a role model for a student but in a similar manner an employer is a model for an employee).

This concept of peer modelling, while it can be applied to any age, is of course especially true for children on the early side of the spectrum, and is most effective when a child's direct peers (brothers, sisters, parents, teachers, friends) set the example (Bandura, 1988).

To put peer modelling into simple terms – it is when a child or an adult shows good social behaviours, and is interested in passing on those same values to a new person.

Take for example a work setting – one employee takes centre stage for the week and shows both business savvy and good social behaviours.

This employee will be a peer model to the rest of the employees of the company – they will want to learn how to act and behave in that manner, especially if this good behaviour helped them achieve more success or drew more praise from the boss.

This positive way of thinking – believing that one is capable of achieving tasks they set out for themselves – is a boon because part of the struggle of getting better at anything or learning something new is making sure the person believes they are capable of carrying out said task successfully.

Seek Feedback:

The problem with understanding feedback is that some people tend to believe that getting no feedback is the same as being told that one is doing their job well (hence the common phrase: “no feedback is great feedback”).

When done with both the right intentions in mind and also in the right manner, feedback can be one of the most important sources of building levels of self-efficacy.

Employees and students alike tend to want to know how they are doing. In order for the feedback to work positively, feedback must be delivered both concisely and frequently.

Without frequent feedback, one can be confused as to whether they should remain doing what they are doing and without concise feedback, the individual will not understand what in particular they should fix about themselves.

Self-efficacy and subsequent task performance improves after receiving higher, more detailed levels of performance feedback (Beattie, Woodman, Fakehy, Dempsey, 2015).

Encourage Participation:

Participation tends to be essential in any work environment – it encourages the person to be active and engaged, great qualities in someone that are usually influential in a person’s levels of self-efficacy.

Participation is especially important at an early age – those students who engage with the class are not only being more active in their learning, they are probably absorbing more information in regards to the material. Active class participation is also correlated to having high critical and higher level thinking skills.

Participation is also an essential quality of a peer model – this is a person who has previously engaged in active learning and can teach others in a similar manner.

The level of thinking associated in an activity that requires participation goes beyond simple comprehension of text – it engages both the instigator and the audience. More importantly participation helps fellow students learn from each other – and people tend to build their levels of self-efficacy depending on how those who are most close to them behave.

Allow People to Make Their Own Choices:

When talking about the importance of letting people make their own choices the term self-accountability usually tends to come to mind.

Whether the outcome is positive or negative – making one's own decisions allows for one to feel responsible (due to your cunning or due to your negligence, the person themselves is the one held accountable for if the outcome turned out in your favour or against you).

Another important reason to emphasize self-accountability - making one's own choices and decisions allows them to make their own mistakes and – most importantly – gives them the opportunity to learn from them.

Advice is not the same as a command – an individual can advise one on something, but it is a person's own responsibility to do whatever they feel like with said information. This is why a peer - although very helpful – is not enough; the person needs to understand that at the end of the day – if they want to model anyone – the only person capable of taking action is themselves.

Applications of Self-Efficacy

High self-efficacy has been linked with numerous benefits to daily life, such as resilience to adversity and stress, healthy lifestyle habits, improved employees performance, and educational achievement.

Healthy Habits

According to health psychologists (Bandura, 1988), people are more likely to engage in healthy behaviours when they feel confident in their capabilities to successfully carry out those behaviours.

To give one example, having higher levels of self-efficacy could help one stick to an exercise routine. This tends to be a positive on multiple ends – the goal of finishing the workout is complete due to the higher levels of self-efficacy and the finished exercise routine helps with your bodily and mental wellness.

Self-efficacy is also a factor that helps people adopt other health lifestyle choices – like trying to keep a healthy diet or trying to stop smoking. For whatever one would want to use it for, health psychologists believe that self-efficacy can be applied in ways that promote a healthy lifestyle.

Academic Success

Mart van Dinter (2011) and a number of his colleagues conducted research on the link between education and self-efficacy. Their conclusions state that self-efficacy is linked to factors such as the strategies that students utilize, the goals that students set out for themselves, and their academic achievements.

In other words, higher levels of self-efficacy are related to – what people everywhere largely consider to be – healthy student life habits. This means that those individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy could be subject to doing better in school and being more organized.

Treating Phobias

Bandura (1982) proposed that self-efficacy could be used in an effective manner to treat phobias. He wanted to test this by conducting an experiment.

He started with two groups – one group would directly interact with their phobia (in this case, snakes) and the members of the second group would watch someone partake in activities with their phobia.

The point was to assesses which group – after different ways of approaching a phobia – would still be more fearful of snakes. According to the results of the experiment, the participants who had directly interacted with the snake showed higher self-efficacy and less avoidance.

This suggests that personal experience is more effective than observation when it comes to developing self-efficacy and facing our fears.

How is Self-Efficacy Measured?

The General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE) was developed by Matthias Jerusalem and Ralf Schwarzer – the scale is composed of only 8 items, rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

1. "I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself"
2. "When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them"
3. "In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me"
4. "I believe I can succeed at most any endeavor to which I set my mind"
5. "I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges"
6. "I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks"
7. "Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well"
8. "Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well."

The scores are then calculated by taking the average of all 8 responses, (these will respectively range from 1 to 5).

The way the test is supposed to work is so that the higher one's score is, the greater the level of self-efficacy in said individual.

Self-Efficacy and Related Ideas

Self-esteem vs. Self-efficacy

Self-esteem one's own sense of self-worth while self-efficacy is the perception of one's own ability to reach a goal.

To give an example, let's say we have an individual who is a terrible horse rider. In regards to horse riding, this person would probably exhibit low levels of self-efficacy given that they themselves believe they are terrible at horse riding.

This person's self-esteem – however - will probably not be affected if the person doesn't rely on horseback riding to determine self-worth (and with how out of scope this activity is, it is very unlikely that this is the case).

Conversely, let's say the individual is actually very skilled at horseback riding, yet this individual has set such a high standard, and has based enough of their self-worth on this particular skill, that their self-esteem is actually quite low. In any case, both examples illustrate how self-esteem and self-efficacy are indeed related, but they are not the same term.

Confidence vs. Self-Efficacy

When Bandura first began researching self-efficacy (1977), he wanted to demonstrate that the construct of self-efficacy needed a separate definition from a more colloquial term like "confidence."

Why was this the case? The issue with a term like "confidence" and why it can't mean the same thing as self-efficacy is because confidence is a nonspecific term that refers to strength of belief but does not necessarily specify what the certainty is about.

For example, an individual can be confident in their innate ability to screw up anything. The perception of self-efficacy is distinct - it refers to believing in one's own capabilities, that one can produce given levels of attainment.

Therefore, the reason one can't use confidence in the same vein as the term self-efficacy is because confidence (unlike self-efficacy) fails to include both an affirmation of a capability level and the strength of that belief.

Motivation vs. Self-Efficacy

Motivation is based on an individual's desire to achieve a certain goal while self-efficacy is based on an individual's belief in their own capacity to achieve said goal.

While in most cases those same individuals with high self-efficacy often have high motivation and vice versa, it is essential to understand that this is not just a foregone conclusion. Think of motivation as what makes one get out of bed, and think of self-efficacy as one's own perception on believing that they have the necessary strength to get out of bed – the two terms go hand but are certainly not exchangeable.

Ofcourse logically speaking, it still remains true that when an individual maintains or increases their levels of self-efficacy, that usually tends to make these individuals get a boost in motivation to continue learning and making progress.

This relationship can go both ways; take for example an individual who is motivated to learn and succeed. When an individual is highly motivated to be successful, most of the time it means that they are likelier to achieve whatever goals they set out for themselves, which contributes to increases in their levels of self-efficacy.

Learning Activity

Develop a measure of self-efficacy for any health-related behaviour that avoids the confounding of self-efficacy with related constructs such as confidence or motivation.

Health related behaviours include:

- Smoking cessation
- Alcohol use
- Eating
- Pain control
- Exercise

Design an intervention program that will enhance self-efficacy for a health-related behaviour, and a research design to measure changes in self-efficacy.

About the Author

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