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The effectiveness of different implementation intentions in the downregulation of disgust

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Background. Emotion regulation figures prominently in mental health and is a requirement in many jobs. Implementation intentions (IIs) are if-then plans that help people attain their self-regulatory goals. Perspective-taking and response-focused IIs were shown to reduce feelings of unpleasantness and arousal, respectively, in response to briefly presented disgusting pictures. We addressed the open research questions whether forming perspective-taking and response-focused IIs is effective in regulating affect during prolonged presentation of disgusting pictures, and whether it is associated with changes in physiological arousal.

Methods. Eighty-one participants viewed disgusting, neutral, and pleasant pictures of 6 s duration under four instructions: the goal intention to not get disgusted, this goal intention furnished with a perspective-taking or a response-focused II, and no emotion regulation instructions. The dependent variables were ratings of disgust, valence, arousal and skin conductance.

Results. Only perspective-taking II participants significantly reduced their disgust and unpleasantness as compared to goal-intention and control participants. Arousal and skin conductance did not significantly differ between conditions.

Conclusion. Forming a goal intention to not get disgusted together with a perspective-taking II should be very valuable for professionals who are often confronted with disgust-inducing situations and could complement long-term clinical interventions that aim at facilitating the control of disgust in patients with various psychopathologies.