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Dodging Monsters and Dancing with Dreams:  
Success and Failure at Different Levels of Approach and Avoidance

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### Abstract

Many models of motivation suggest that goals can be arranged in a hierarchy, ranging from higher level goals that represent desired end-states to lower level means that operate in the service of those goals. We present a hierarchical model that distinguishes between three levels—goals, strategies, and tactics—and between approach/avoidance and regulatory focus motivations at different levels. We focus our discussion on how this hierarchical framework sheds light on the different ways that *success* and *failure* are defined within the promotion and prevention systems outlined in regulatory focus theory. Specifically, we review research that demonstrates that differences in what “counts” as success versus failure in these systems have important implications for motivational strength, emotional responses, and risky behavior.

*Keywords:* regulatory focus, self-regulatory hierarchy, approach, avoidance

### Dodging Monsters and Dancing with Dreams:

#### Success and Failure at Different Levels of Approach and Avoidance

Life is full of dreams and monsters, duties and missed chances. We not only long for those desired end-states that populate our hearts and our daily task lists, but we also strive fervently to reach them. And although we sometimes find ourselves dwelling in the land we feared and hoped to avoid, its presence (the ugly sides of ourselves, the world) also motivates us. There is no doubt: in this world, we are motivated by *both* approach and avoidance (cf. Elliot & Thrash, 2002). What it means to be motivated by approach versus avoidance, however, is as rich and complex as these lands that drive us. There is a difference, we'll argue, between avoiding monsters versus missed chances, between approaching dreams versus duties. To understand the affective, motivational, and cognitive texture of approach and avoidance, it is useful to consider the ways in which these motivations are conceptualized at different levels in a self-regulatory hierarchy.

We'll explore this texture in a few different ways. First, we'll examine our framework for considering levels of self-regulation and how it provides insight into what it means to be motivated by approach versus avoidance (cf. Scholer & Higgins, 2008). Our perspective is grounded in research in regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) and highlights critical distinctions between approach and avoidance at the system, strategic, and tactical levels. We'll then discuss how key differences in what *counts* as success and failure within different regulatory systems have profound implications for the ways in which people experience their worlds. We'll conclude by examining how the levels of the hierarchy work together and what that suggests about pursuing success across the levels.

#### **Levels of Approach and Avoidance**

Many theories of motivation recognize that goals can be arranged in a hierarchy, ranging from abstract high-level goals (e.g. “be helpful”) to concrete low-level means (e.g. “carry the elderly woman’s groceries”). Theories that focus on this hierarchical aspect of goals (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Elliot & Church, 1997; Kruglanski, et al., 2002; Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960; Powers, 1973; Scholer & Higgins, 2008; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987) vary in the number of levels they highlight and the terms used to describe these levels, but they agree that the levels are independent and that higher levels capture the “why” (ends) whereas lower levels describe the “how” (means).

Although most models of motivation acknowledge the existence of multiple levels in a goal hierarchy, in practice, many models highlight distinctions between only two levels (often, goals vs. means; cf. Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Like other models, we limit the number of levels on which we focus (and acknowledge the existence of important levels both above and below), but, in contrast to many models that make a general goals versus means distinction, we make an additional distinction between two levels of means—strategies and tactics (cf. Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987). Our framework also highlights the different ways in which approach and avoidance are characterized at each level. Our framework complements models that have discussed how broad approach and avoidance motives and temperaments can be served by approach and avoidance goals (e.g., Elliot, 2006; Elliot & Church, 1997) by focusing on how approach and avoidance goals are reflected in lower levels in a hierarchy (e.g., strategies and tactics) and by exploring how the implications of approaching desired end-states may be quite different depending on whether approach is occurring within the promotion or prevention systems (cf. Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, in press).

**System Level: So Much to Approach, So Much to Avoid**

Our framework distinguishes between three hierarchical levels—the system, strategic, and tactical levels (see Figure 1). *System level goals* are the highest level in our hierarchy and describe the abstract, ultimate objectives an individual aims to realize (e.g. self-protection, self-advancement). At the system level, approach or avoidance motivation is captured by the idea of regulatory reference: whether individuals are approaching desired end-states (e.g., a fulfilling career) or avoiding undesired end-states (e.g., unemployment). To fully understand an individual's motivational profile, however, it is also important to know what *types* of desired or undesired end-states an individual is approaching or avoiding. Orthogonal to approach and avoidance at the system level, another important distinction to be made is between systems fundamentally concerned with nurturance (promotion) versus security (prevention) (Higgins, 1997). Thus, in contrast to models (e.g., Gray, 1982) that place primary emphasis on the distinction between approach (reward, nonpunishment) versus avoidance (punishment, absence of reward), regulatory focus theory emphasizes the *quality* of desired and undesired end-states to which individuals are sensitive. Promotion-focused individuals approach gains and avoid nongains, whereas prevention-focused individuals approach nonlosses and avoid losses. As we describe below, individuals can differ in the chronic strength of these systems, but these regulatory orientations can also be manipulated situationally.

The promotion system is strengthened through caretaker-child interactions that direct attention to nurturance needs and emphasize desired end-states as ideals and aspirations (Higgins, 1997; Keller, 2008; Manian, Papadakis, Strauman, & Essex, 2006). It is advancements or gains that matter most, those that result in positive deviations from the

status quo or neutral state—the difference between “0” and “+1” (e.g., the absence or presence of a loving gesture from a partner). Promotion-focused individuals are less sensitive to negative deviations from the neutral state, i.e., the difference between “0” and “-1” (Brendl & Higgins, 1996; Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992).

In contrast, the prevention system is strengthened through caretaker-child interactions that direct attention to security needs and emphasize desired end-states as responsibilities and safety (Higgins, 1997; Keller, 2008; Manian et al, 2006). What matters most is the necessity of maintaining nonlosses or the absence of negative outcomes. In contrast to promotion, it is the difference between “0” and “-1” (e.g., the absence or presence of a hurtful comment from a partner) that matters more than the difference between “0” and “+1” (Brendl & Higgins, 1996; Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992). Both prevention and promotion-focused individuals approach desired end-states and avoid undesired end-states, but the end-states that they care about are qualitatively different, and this difference matters, as we develop later.

### **Strategies and Tactics**

System level goals are supported by the strategies—the general means for pursuing those goals—that individuals adopt. Either approach (eager) or avoidance (vigilant) strategies can be used to approach or avoid at the system level (Higgins, 2000). At the strategic level of approach and avoidance, differences between promotion and prevention focus relate to differences in preferences for using eager approach strategies or vigilant avoidance strategies, respectively. Promotion focus concerns with growth, advancement, and accomplishment are best served by using eager approach strategies in goal pursuit—approaching matches to desired end-states and approaching mismatches to undesired end-

states (e.g., Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994). In contrast, prevention-focus concerns with safety and responsibility are best served by using vigilant avoidance strategies in goal pursuit—avoiding mismatches to desired end-states and avoiding matches to undesired end-states (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 1994).

Thus, while regulatory focus is orthogonal to approach and avoidance motivation at the system level, the strategic preferences of the promotion and prevention systems do align with strategic approach and strategic avoidance motivation, respectively. When people use strategies that fit their underlying regulatory focus orientation (e.g, vigilant strategies/prevention system), they experience regulatory fit, which strengthens engagement in goal pursuit (Higgins, 2000). Research testing regulatory fit theory provides evidence both that the system and strategic levels are independent (because both fit and nonfit are possible) and that what matters most is *not* alignment of approach/avoidance motivation across the system and strategic levels, but the relation between regulatory focus orientations and the strategies that serve to sustain them (Higgins, 2000).

Strategies are enacted by *tactics*, the third and most concrete level in our framework. Tactics specify the precise ways in which strategies are enacted in particular contexts and are the “means” most commonly described in hierarchical models (Scholer & Higgins, 2008). As we develop more fully below, we believe that making a distinction between strategies and tactics can help to more fully clarify the motivational dynamics that drive behavior. For example, in some contexts vigilance is served by cautious and measured behaviors to maintain safety while in other contexts vigilance may require taking risky actions to return to safety. In other words, an individual’s surface behavior can look quite different but serve the same higher-level strategy (equifinality; cf. Kruglanski et al.,

2002). The same tactic can also serve different strategies (i.e., a risky tactic can serve either eagerness or vigilance, depending on the context; the concept of multifinality; cf. Kruglanski et al., 2002). Additionally, approach or avoidance tactics are orthogonal to regulatory focus motivations (i.e., a risky approach tactic could operate in the service of *either* the promotion or prevention systems; Scholer et al., 2010).

### **Experiencing Success and Failure within the Hierarchy**

What does it mean to *succeed* or *fail*? Success and failure are typically discussed in relation to approach and avoidance at the system level. Success is landing in a desired end-state (or avoiding an undesired end-state). Failure is landing in an undesired end-state (or failing to get to a desired end-state). Success can be about ending with either gains or nonlosses, and failure can be about ending with either nongains or losses. Importantly, these different kinds of success and failure involve different psychological experiences that relate to strength of motivation, emotional experiences, and willingness to take risks. The different psychological experiences of approaching the world with eager versus vigilant strategies are revealed, in particular, by the tactical profiles that characterize these strategies in different contexts (cf. Kammrath & Scholer, in press).

Failure hurts, regardless of whether it is a nongain or loss (e.g., Idson, Liberman, & Higgins, 2000). And failure, or the threat of failure, can produce desperation. Desperation increases the likelihood that individuals will be willing or motivated to engage in risky tactics—to do “whatever it takes” to put distance between themselves and this non-desired condition. When things are going well (regardless of whether “well” is defined by gains or nonlosses), there is less need for risky action. The experience of success is a signal that things are going well (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998), that risky or desperate actions are



generally not required. Yet what counts as “going well” and “not going well” is different within the promotion and prevention systems; consequently, different situations will lead promotion and prevention-focused people to feel desperate and engage in risky behaviors.

Our thinking about these issues has changed over the years by considering the tactical shifts in conservative versus risky tactics that reveal underlying eager versus vigilant strategies. In contrast to earlier work that associated a risky bias with the promotion system and a conservative bias with the prevention system (e.g., Crowe & Higgins, 1997), we now recognize the ways in which both risky and conservative tactics can serve both eagerness and vigilance (Scholer, Stroessner & Higgins, 2008; Scholer et al, 2010; Zou et al., 2012). This recognition highlights the ways in which approach and avoidance can be occurring simultaneously at different levels of the hierarchy.

Success within the promotion system is fundamentally about making progress (advancing from 0 to +1), whereas failure is fundamentally about not making progress (remaining stuck at 0). In other words, within the promotion system, relatively little differentiation is made between -1 and 0 in defining success or failure. If you’re not advancing towards +1, you’re failing (i.e., maintenance of 0 is not enough). Consequently, promotion-focused individuals will likely feel desperate and be motivated to engage in risky action when they feel that they are not making progress (i.e., when they feel stuck at 0). When they have just made progress (reached +1), they should be less motivated to engage in risky action.

There is support for this proposal from a recent study using a stock investment paradigm in which participants believed they would lose or gain real money. Participants in a promotion focus chose a relatively risky option when their stock portfolio remained

unchanged (stuck at 0), but switched to a relatively conservative option when they had just experienced a large gain. Evidence that this tactical switch was indeed driven by perceptions of progress was found in studies that either measured or manipulated progress. When the same large gain was framed as reflecting little progress, individuals in a promotion focus once again became risky (Zou et al., 2012). This work provides support for the idea that either risky or conservative tactics, depending on the situation, can support the same eager strategy. Individuals in a prevention focus were unaffected by these manipulations (because either option represented maintenance of a sufficient status quo). In these studies, progress was operationalized as attaining +1, not as the velocity of goal attainment. Given work that demonstrates people's particular sensitivity to progress as *velocity* versus ultimate attainment, it will be interesting in future work to investigate if promotion-focused participants are especially attuned to this aspect of progress as well (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Chang, Johnson, & Lord, 2010).

Success within the prevention system is fundamentally about maintaining a safe and sufficient status quo (maintaining 0) whereas failure is fundamentally about losing 0 (falling into -1). In other words, within the prevention system, relatively little differentiation is made between 0 and +1 in defining success or failure. As long as you maintain 0, you're fine. However, any descent into loss (-1) is cause for alarm; this is when prevention-focused individuals will be motivated to take risky action. Once prevention-focused individuals reach 0, they should be less motivated to take risky action. Using the stock investment paradigm described above, we have shown that after experiencing a loss, individuals in a prevention focus will opt for a risky option if it is their only way to get back to 0. However, if provided with a conservative option that can also get them back to 0,

prevention-focused individuals will choose that instead, even when that option gets them *exactly* back to 0 rather than offering the possibility of some gain beyond 0 like the risky option does (Scholer et al., 2010). Individuals in a promotion focus were unaffected by these manipulations (because neither option was clearly superior for ensuring clear progress).

The different definitions of success and failure within the promotion and prevention systems also impact affective experiences. Success in promotion reflects the presence of a positive outcome (a gain or advancement) and results in cheerfulness-related feelings like joy. In contrast, success in prevention reflects the absence of a negative outcome (maintaining a satisfactory state) and results in quiescence-related feelings like peace. Failure in promotion reflects the absence of a positive outcome (non-advancement) and results in dejection-related feelings like sadness. Failure in prevention reflects the presence of a negative outcome (danger) and results in agitation-related feelings like anxiety (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Higgins, 1997).

Consistent with these distinct affective sensitivities, individuals in a promotion focus are faster at appraising how cheerful or dejected a given object makes them feel, whereas individuals in a prevention focus are faster at appraising how quiescent or agitated an object makes them feel (Shah & Higgins, 2001). Several studies have also found that priming ideal (promotion) discrepancies leads to increases in dejection whereas priming ought (prevention) discrepancies leads to increases in agitation (Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986; Reznik & Andersen, 2007; Strauman & Higgins, 1987). In addition to these distinct affective profiles, the asymmetry in the way that success is defined within the promotion versus prevention systems creates distinct vulnerabilities. Fundamentally,

promotion “success” requires positive *change* (gain), whereas prevention “success” just requires a state or condition that is satisfactory. Promotion-focused individuals are vulnerable to never being satisfied for long with the successes they obtain, turning eventually to new (often more challenging) goal pursuits; whereas prevention-focused individuals are vulnerable to remaining in a state that is only minimally satisfactory rather than daring to venture into new lands.

These differences extend to the strategic level in ways that affect motivational strength. Recent work by Scholer, Ozaki, & Higgins (2012), for example, shows that task motivation is strengthened (as measured by persistence) for promotion-focused individuals when they are given an opportunity to reflect on their strengths (increasing eagerness). In contrast, it is strengthened for prevention-focused individuals when they are given an opportunity to reflect on their weaknesses (increasing vigilance).

### **To Approach or Avoid?: An Organization of Motives**

At the system level, there is strong empirical support that it is generally better in terms of well-being to approach versus avoid (e.g., Elliot, 2006). Research in regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 2000), however, suggests that the same cannot be said of approach and avoidance at the strategic level. At lower levels of the hierarchy, what matters more is the extent to which strategies are aligned with promotion and prevention orientations at the system level (i.e., regulatory fit). Indeed, when individuals use strategies that fit their system (promotion-eager; prevention-vigilant), they *feel right* about what they are doing and are more engaged (Higgins, 2000). Regulatory fit often leads to better performance and well-being (e.g., Freitas & Higgins, 2002; Scholer et al., 2012; for a review, see Higgins, 2012).

Thus, the dynamics of what facilitates success are integrally linked to how the levels of approach and avoidance motivation *work together*. As we've reviewed, the goal of reaching +1 within promotion (at the system level, an approach goal) is supported by strategic eagerness (at the strategic level, an approach orientation) that can be served by either risky (tactical approach) or conservative (tactical avoidance) behaviors (Zou et al., 2012). Similarly, the goal of maintaining 0 within prevention (again, at the system level, an approach goal), is supported by strategic vigilance (at the strategic level, an avoidance orientation) that can be served by either risky (approach) or conservative (avoidance) tactics (Scholer et al., 2008; Scholer et al., 2010). To understand the effects of approach versus avoidance, including the effects on affective experience, it is important not only to identify at what level individuals are approaching versus avoiding, but also whether individuals are approaching versus avoiding within the promotion versus prevention systems, and how the levels are working together (e.g., supporting regulatory fit vs. nonfit).

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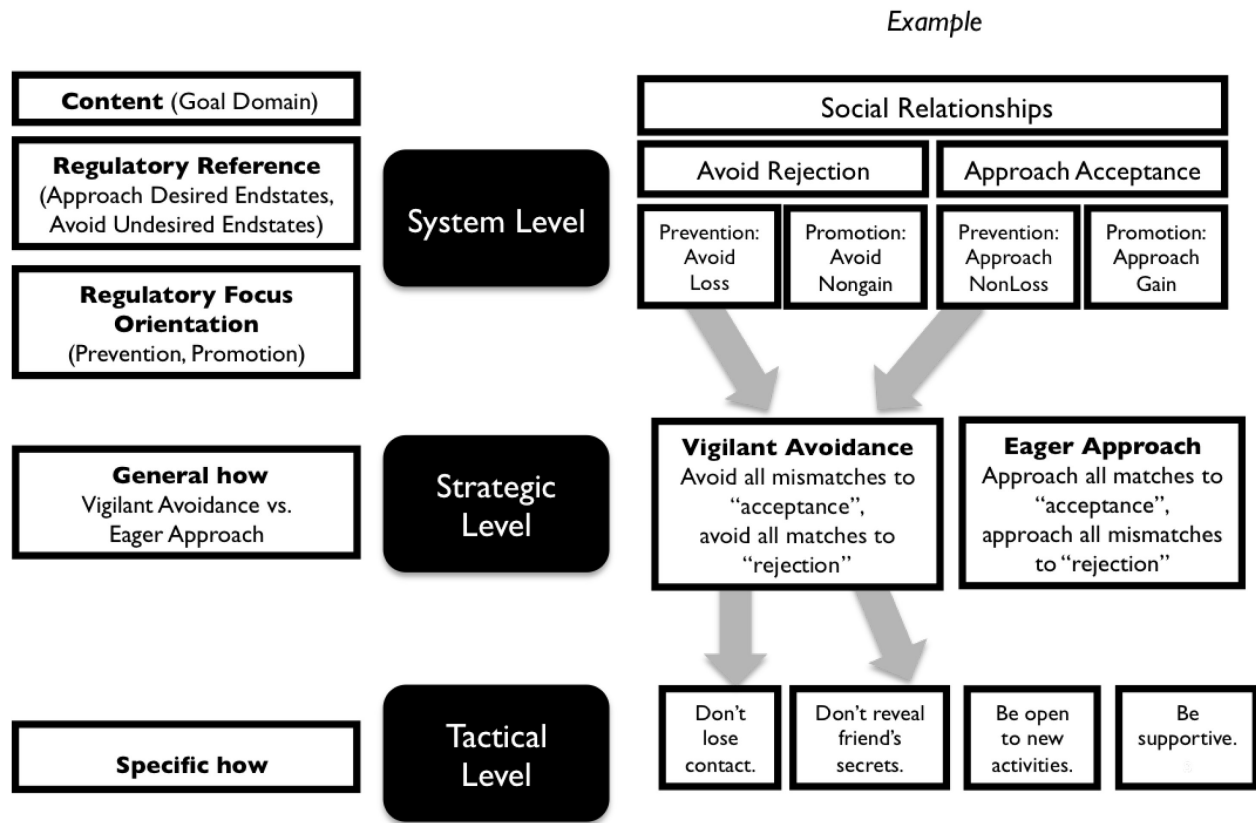
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*Figure 1.* Illustration of proposal hierarchical model. Arrows provide a prevention focus example of how avoidance at the strategic level can be in the service of either approach or avoidance at the system level. Arrows also illustrate that a vigilant avoidance strategy may be reflected in multiple tactics.