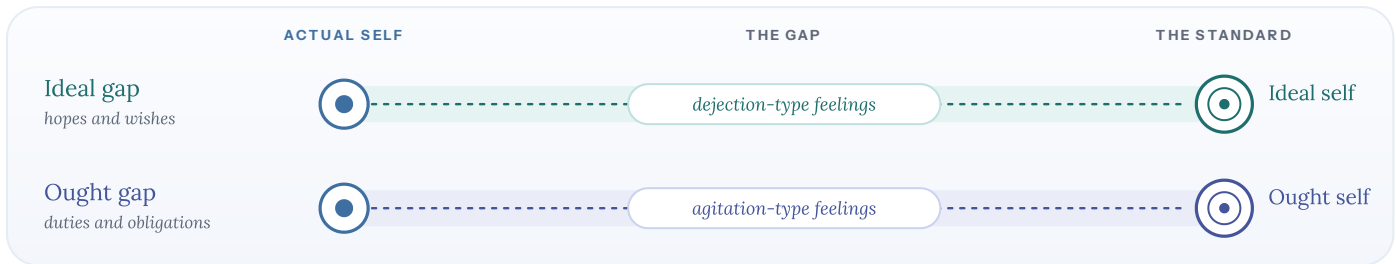


Self-Discrepancy Theory

E. Tory Higgins · *the gaps between who we are and who we think we should be*

Higgins proposed that we carry several pictures of ourselves: who we **actually** are, who we would **ideally** like to be, and who we feel we **ought** to be. When the actual self falls short of these standards, the kind of gap, and whose standard it is, shapes the emotions we feel.



Two gaps, two standpoints whose standard is it: mine, or someone important to me?

	IDEAL GAP · HOPES	OUGHT GAP · DUTIES
my own view	Disappointment dissatisfaction, sadness	Guilt self-criticism, uneasiness
another's view	Shame embarrassment, feeling let down	Fear feeling threatened, anxious

01 Two ways of pursuing goals

Higgins' later regulatory focus theory

IDEALS · PROMOTION FOCUS

Reaching for hopes

focus on growth, gains, aspirations
strategy eager: seize opportunities
when it falls short low, flat or disappointed

OUGHTS · PREVENTION FOCUS

Meeting duties

focus on safety, responsibility, avoiding loss
strategy vigilant: avoid mistakes
when it falls short tense, guilty or on edge

02 What makes a gap painful

Size

The larger the gap between actual and standard, the stronger the feeling tends to be.

Accessibility

How often the gap is on your mind, or easily triggered.

Importance

Gaps in areas that matter deeply hurt more than those that don't.

Rigidity

Standards held as all-or-nothing leave little room to fall short.

A research update

A large meta-analysis confirmed that both kinds of gap are linked to depression and anxiety, but found the neat one-gap, one-emotion pattern is **less specific** than first proposed (Mason et al., 2019). The gaps matter; the emotions often overlap.

03 Working with a gap

Either end can move

MOVE THE ACTUAL SELF

Small steps closer

Choose one realistic action that moves you toward a standard you truly value.

REVISE THE STANDARD

Whose voice is this?

Check whether the ideal or ought is yours, still fits, and is humanly possible.

CHANGE THE RELATIONSHIP

Hold the gap kindly

Falling short is human. Meeting it with self-compassion, not attack, reduces its sting.

04 Mapping my own gaps

Choose one area of life

The area I'm thinking about work, body, relationships, parenting, achievement...

HOW I ACTUALLY AM

HOW I'D IDEALLY BE

HOW I FEEL I OUGHT TO BE

Whose standard is this, originally?

What do I feel when I notice the gap?

One small step toward what I value...

A standard I could hold more gently...

SOURCES

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