ABSTRACT

Objective

The goal of this paper is to review the feedback-seeking behaviour literature using a self-motives framework and to provide practical recommendations for medical educators on how to encourage feedback-seeking behaviour.

Understanding feedback-seeking behaviour

In this paper, we aim to gain a better understanding of feedback-seeking behaviour through the application of a self-motives framework. Using this framework as a conceptual lens, we define feedback-seeking behaviour and review its antecedents and consequences. As such, we provide an overview of the key findings and answer to a number of unresolved issues in the literature.

Encouraging feedback-seeking behaviour

On the basis of the literature review, we present six evidence-based insights to encourage feedback-seeking behaviour in practice.

Conclusions

The reviewed literature shows that feedback-seeking behaviour is a valuable resource for individuals in work and educational settings, as it aids their adaptation, learning, and performance. Several individual and contextual factors that promote feedback seeking are presented. Although feedback-seeking behaviour has been a subject of research for over 25 years, some unresolved issues remain in the literature. We presented a self-motives framework to answer to those issues and to stimulate future research. We concluded this paper with six actionable insights for medical educators based on the reviewed evidence.
‘HOW AM I DOING?’

In medical settings, it is typically the patient who asks ‘How am I doing?’. The question of how one is doing, though, is in fact equally relevant for the medical staff and medical students. Giving feedback is one of the most widely used psychological interventions to stimulate learning and development (1). However, there is more to feedback than providing students their grades or discussing employees’ performance during an annual performance review. Research in organizational and social psychology suggests that people do not wait around passively until they get feedback; instead, they proactively seek it (2).

Feedback-seeking behaviour, the proactive search for feedback information in the environment (3), has been a subject of research for over 25 years. This literature has portrayed feedback seeking as a valuable resource for individuals because it facilitates their adaptation, learning, and performance. As many workers and students find themselves in a feedback vacuum (4), feedback-seeking behaviour probably has never been more important.

In this review paper, we unfold the literature on feedback-seeking behaviour in the following steps. We start with the definition of feedback-seeking behaviour and a review of the consequences of feedback seeking. Next, we present the various aspects and the antecedents of feedback-seeking behaviour. Gradually, we identify a number of unresolved issues in the current literature. In response to those issues, we present a more comprehensive framework for understanding feedback-seeking behaviour (i.e. the self-motives framework). We conclude the paper with evidence-based advice on how to encourage feedback-seeking behaviour in practice.

What is feedback-seeking behaviour?

Feedback-seeking behaviour can be defined as the conscious devotion of effort towards determining the correctness and adequacy of one’s behaviours for attaining valued
goals (2). From this definition, it follows that feedback seeking constitutes goal-oriented behaviour. Through feedback seeking, individuals want to improve their chances of attaining valued end states, such as skill development, good performance, or a promotion. Consider a medical student who aspires a high score on the final exam and consults a professor to get feedback on the adequacy of his/her study plan. Using the professor’s feedback, the student reconsiders the study plan and improves his/her chances of attaining a high score on the exam.

**Why does feedback-seeking behaviour matter?**

The key premise in this article is that feedback seeking benefits individuals. In this section, we review the evidence on three categories of outcomes: (a) performance, (b) learning and creativity, and (c) adaptation and socialization. Each category has received empirical support and is highly relevant for medical education.

**Performance**

Several studies have documented positive effects of feedback-seeking behaviour on job performance. Renn and Fedor (5), for example, found that sales employees who sought feedback more frequently realized higher sales’ revenues (i.e., average sales per hour) and obtained higher ratings for the quality of their work (i.e., service quality). Studies have also investigated the topic on which feedback is sought. Both for managers and subordinates, negative feedback-seeking behaviour tends to be associated with higher performance ratings (6, 7).

**Learning and creativity**

Feedback is an important determinant of learning (8). Indeed, through feedback seeking individuals can discover opportunities for skill improvement and obtain information about the dominant behavioural norms in a team or organization.
Despite feedback-seeking behaviour’s potential value for individual learning, few feedback seeking studies have looked directly into the relationship between feedback-seeking behaviour and actual learning. In a notable exception, Yanagizawa (9) found that individuals who more frequently sought feedback demonstrated higher goal attainment and learning compared to individuals who sought feedback less frequently. In contrast, Hwang and Francesco (10) found no relationship between face-to-face feedback seeking and learning. Clearly, additional research investigating the conditions that may influence the strength of the relationship between feedback-seeking behaviour and learning seems warranted, especially in educational settings.

Feedback is also important for creative behaviour (11). Through feedback seeking, individuals can develop creativity-relevant skills and gain fresh perspectives on their idea. For instance, De Stobbeleir, Ashford, and Buyens (12) found that employees who sought more direct feedback and who sought feedback from a variety of targets showed higher creativity at work.

**Adaptation and socialization**

Feedback-seeking behaviour has been regarded as a useful resource for individual adaptation (2). Studies have shown that newcomers in organizations who frequently seek feedback integrate better in their new social environment (13). Also, individuals who seek feedback in their first months in a new organization tend to have a more accurate and clearer view on their role in the organization (13, 14). Finally, feedback-seeking behaviour has been linked to higher job satisfaction, lower intentions to leave the organization and lower actual turnover (15, 16).

In sum, the reviewed literature shows that feedback-seeking behaviour has important consequences for individuals’ adaptation, learning, and performance. Thus, encouraging
student and employee feedback seeking is an important educational and managerial strategy.

In the next section, we delve into the various aspects of feedback-seeking behaviour.

**Aspects of feedback-seeking behaviour**

Research has been focused on five key aspects of feedback seeking (4): (a) the method used to seek feedback, (b) the frequency of feedback-seeking behaviour, (c) the timing of feedback seeking, (d) the characteristics of the target of feedback seeking, and (e) the topic on which feedback is sought. Although each of the five aspects of feedback-seeking behaviour is important, most of the literature has been devoted to understanding the antecedents and consequences of the frequency with which employees use two methods of feedback seeking (i.e., inquiry and monitoring). As a result, our understanding of the timing, the topic, and the target of the feedback seeking attempt is relatively underdeveloped.

First, feedback can be sought via two methods: inquiry and monitoring (3). Individuals seek feedback through the *inquiry* method when they directly ask others (e.g., the supervisor or co-workers) for feedback. Although inquiry is a useful method, individuals often report concerns relating to the risks associated with direct feedback seeking. For example, students may not want to burden their supervisor or appear needy by seeking feedback. Later in this review, we discuss individual and contextual factors that influence these risk perceptions. *Monitoring* entails an in-depth observation of the situation and other people’s behaviour (i.e., one’s environment) in order to collect information about one’s own performance. Consider a nurse who pays careful attention when a supervisor praises other nurses for experimenting with new work methods, and infers that such innovative behaviour will benefit her chances of getting a pay raise. The monitoring of feedback cues from the environment is not always straightforward because the individual runs the risk of misinterpreting the information collected. This inference problem is typical for an indirect method of feedback seeking.
Second, research has paid considerable attention to the frequency of feedback-seeking behaviour. More specifically, the dominant research approach has been to operationalize feedback-seeking behavior through a frequency measure. Consider a sample item from Ashford’s (2) original feedback-seeking behavior scale: “In order to find out how well you are performing in your job, how FREQUENTLY do you seek information from your co-workers about your work performance?” Although it is informative to know how individuals differ in the frequency of their feedback-seeking attempts, frequency measures paint only a rough picture of the feedback seeking process. Attention to the other aspects of feedback seeking is needed to complement our current understanding.

A third aspect of feedback-seeking behaviour concerns the timing of the feedback-seeking attempt. Often individuals act strategically when asking for feedback. Following an administrative error, a nurse might decide not to ask the doctor for feedback because she thinks it might be better to keep silent about the error or wait until the doctor is in a better mood. Indeed, Morrison and Bies (17) proposed that individuals tend to wait until the target is in a good mood before approaching him or her for feedback. This leads to the fourth aspect of feedback seeking, which concerns the characteristics of the target. Research has shown that individuals carefully decide whom to ask for feedback. For example, the higher the target’s expertise and the more accessible the target is the more individuals are inclined to ask this target for feedback (18, 19). A fifth and final aspect of feedback-seeking behaviour deals with the topic on which feedback is sought. One might decide to seek feedback on successes or failures, or on certain aspects of one’s performance. Ashford and Tsui (7), for example, found that managers who primarily sought negative feedback from their subordinates were seen as more effective by their subordinates than managers who merely sought positive feedback.

In sum, the five aspects of feedback seeking represent the choices an individual has to make when deciding whether to seek feedback. In the next section, we discuss how
individuals make these choices, as we focus on the antecedents of feedback-seeking behaviour.

**Antecedents of feedback-seeking behaviour**

Several factors have been examined with respect to their influence on feedback-seeking behaviour. In Table 1, we provide an overview of the individual and contextual factors that have received most research attention. On the basis of a recent meta-analysis of feedback-seeking behaviour studies (20), we also include the overall sign of the effect of each factor on feedback-seeking behaviour. As an illustration, we will discuss three of the factors in more detail below.

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Insert Table 1 around here

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**Learning goal orientation.** Goal orientations influence how individuals experience, process, and respond to achievement situations (21). Although goal orientations represent individual differences, their strength is also dependent upon situational characteristics, such as birth order (22-24). Traditionally, two dimensions have been distinguished: learning goal orientation and performance goal orientation (25). A learning goal orientation is the desire to develop the self by acquiring new skills, mastering new situations, and improving one’s competence (23). In contrast, a performance goal orientation refers to the desire to demonstrate and validate the adequacy of one’s competence relative to others by seeking out favourable judgments and avoiding negative judgments about one’s competence (23). Typically, these goal orientations are measured using a 13-item self-report scale by Vandewalle (26).
It has been evidenced that goal orientations influence individuals’ cost and value perceptions of feedback-seeking behaviour (23, 27, 28). Because learning goal-oriented individuals see ability as something that can be improved over time (i.e. not fixed), they attribute a higher instrumental value to feedback as a means for improvement (27). In addition, learning goal-oriented individuals assign lower costs to feedback inquiry compared to individuals with a performance goal (23). Learning goal-oriented individuals conceive task failure as an invitation to increase effort and not as a threat to their image or ego. This makes them less afraid of negative feedback. In sum, a learning goal orientation leads individuals to seek feedback more frequently (23), and to have a preference for more diagnostic feedback (27).

**Public versus private context.** Ashford and Northcraft (29) found that individuals seek less feedback when being observed by others than when they are in a private setting. A feedback-seeking context that includes an evaluative audience makes individuals nervous about seeking feedback. Thus, it appears that public contexts highlight potential face loss costs, which discourage feedback-seeking behaviour.

**Leadership style.** Levy, Cober, and Miller (30) showed that subordinates who see their supervisor as a transformational leader (as opposed to a transactional leader) have higher intentions to seek feedback from their supervisor. Related to this, Chen, Lam, and Zhong (6) discovered that a high leader-member exchange (i.e., a high-quality relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate that fosters exchange and reciprocity) predicted a higher willingness of followers to seek negative feedback. In sum, the style of leadership and the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship tend to signal that the supervisor is considerate of the follower, which seems to decrease potential costs associated with feedback-seeking behaviour.
Unresolved issues in the literature

Inconsistent results regarding feedback seeking motives

Traditionally, three types of motives have been identified in the feedback seeking literature (3): (a) the instrumental motive to seek feedback in order to meet goals and regulate behaviour, (b) the ego-based motive to seek feedback that can bolster the ego and avoid feedback that might threaten the ego, and (c) the image-based motive to protect and enhance one’s public image. The literature, however, has produced two sets of inconsistent results that suggest the need for a reconceptualization of those three motives.

The first set of inconsistent results can be found for the instrumental motive. Researchers have concluded that “in a context filled with uncertainty, the instrumental motive for seeking dominates” (4, p. 783). It has been argued that some degree of uncertainty is often necessary for feedback to have informational value (3), which has led researchers to refer to this motive often as the uncertainty-reduction motive. Given the importance and dominance of the uncertainty-reduction motive, it is surprising that empirical studies have produced conflicting results. For example, Ashford (2) found a negative relationship between uncertainty and feedback-seeking behaviour. Thus, contrary to the uncertainty-reduction motive, it seems that the more uncertainty individuals experience, the less feedback they seek; vice versa. Research has also shown that feedback-seeking behaviour does not always reduce uncertainty. Ashford (31) even found that in the context of an organizational transition, individuals who seek more feedback tend to experience more uncertainty-related stress six months later. These results are unexpected based on the uncertainty-reduction motive and thus call for a more comprehensive understanding.

Inconsistencies in the literature are also found for the ego-based motive. The ego-based motive posits that feedback from others is typically not very neutral to the feedback
receiver because it can contain unfavourable information. Sometimes, feedback may hurt individuals’ self-esteem. Therefore, it is usually expected that individuals will refrain from feedback seeking when it is too threatening for the ego (32). However, as can be seen from Table 1, the relationship between self-esteem and feedback-seeking behaviour is not straightforward, with studies reporting positive, negative, as well as insignificant relationships. Again, these results cannot be expected based on the ego-based motive and thus call for a reconsideration of the traditional feedback seeking motives.

The ‘black box’ of feedback reactions

Feedback-seeking behaviour can aid performance in several ways. For example, the information gained through feedback can direct individuals’ efforts towards more effective performance behaviours and plans, and it can aid them to correct mistakes at an early stage. Although several mechanisms have been postulated, few studies have empirically explored the specific process underlying the relationship between feedback seeking and performance. In a notable exception, Renn and Fedor (5) showed that individuals who sought feedback frequently were able to improve their work performance through feedback-based goals. As individuals gained feedback information, they were better able to adapt their goals, which benefited their work. In most other studies, however, little empirical attention is given to the question of how feedback seeking leads to increased performance. We need a more in-depth understanding of the intermediate steps that explain how an initial intention to seek feedback may eventually lead to increased performance. To date, virtually no theory exists in the feedback-seeking behaviour literature to open this ‘black box’.

In sum, we presented several unresolved issues concerning the motives underlying feedback-seeking behaviour, as well as the mechanisms linking feedback-seeking behaviour
to performance. Together, these issues clearly call for additional theory. In the next section, we present a comprehensive framework to resolve these issues.

**A self-motives perspective on feedback-seeking behaviour**

In this review paper, we build on recent theoretical work by Anseel, Lievens, and Levy (32) as we present a comprehensive framework for understanding feedback-seeking behaviour (i.e., the self-motives framework). Bringing together evidence from diverse research streams, this framework depicts four self-motives for feedback seeking (33). An overview of these motives can be found in Table 2.

The first motive is self-assessment, which is the motive to obtain accurate information about the self. Following this motive, individuals want to obtain an accurate and true self-image and thus to see themselves as they really are. The second motive is the self-improvement motive, which is the motive to improve one’s traits, abilities, and skills. Following this motive, individuals strive for a true betterment of their self. The third motive is self-enhancement, which is the motive to enhance the favourability of self-views. Following this motive, individuals are driven to seek and recall information that puts themselves in a good light, irrespective of whether this is justified or not. The fourth and final motive is self-verification, which is the motivation to maintain consistency between one’s central self-views and new self-relevant information. Following this motive, individuals seek out self-confirming information from others to confirm their self-views and try to convey their own self-views to others.

Self-motives are determined by individual differences as well as situational influences (32, 33). Consider an employee who is generally driven by self-assessment motives. In the weeks preceding a promotion decision, this individual might become more self-enhancing, trying to cover up a poor performance. Not seeking feedback on a poor performance but on a
good performance episode might impede an accurate self-view, but heighten chances of obtaining a promotion.

Note how individuals motivated through self-enhancement or self-verification also actively strive to convey a certain image to others. For individuals driven by a self-enhancement motive, their goal is to present a favorable image of oneself to others (33). For the self-verification motive, the objective is to make others see the feedback seeker in the same way as the seeker sees him/herself. For instance, individuals can elicit feedback that confirms their negative self-view about their ability to speak in public (“I’m not very good at public speaking, am I?”).

Resolving current issues in the feedback seeking literature

The first issue was related to the inconsistent relationships found for the traditional uncertainty-reduction motive (i.e., instrumental motive) for feedback seeking. The review showed that uncertainty can lead individuals to seek less feedback and that feedback-seeking behaviour can increase uncertainty-related stress over time. Although these findings seem to contradict the traditional perspective on feedback seeking motives, they make more sense from a self-motives perspective.

When a self-verification motive is activated in the feedback-seeking process, individuals who are more certain about a particular self-view often take more action to confirm this self-view (34). Thus, it is possible that people experiencing high levels of certainty seek more feedback to obtain self-verifying feedback (35), and that individuals who
are uncertain about a particular self-view will seek less feedback. Future research should illuminate when uncertainty leads to feedback-seeking behaviour and when feedback seeking reduces uncertainty by explicitly taking into account the role of different self-motives.

Second, inconsistent relationships have been found for the ego-based motive. More specifically, studies have reported positive, negative, and insignificant relationships between self-esteem and feedback-seeking behaviour. In line with the self-motives perspective, a study by Bernichon, Cook, and Brown (36) showed that high self-esteem individuals sought self-verifying feedback, even if it was negative, but low self-esteem individuals sought positive feedback, even if it was non-self-verifying. As such, a self-motives perspective might help explaining the feedback-seeking tendencies of individuals high versus low in self-esteem.

Third, we argued that theory and research are lacking concerning the mechanisms guiding the effect of feedback-seeking behaviour on performance. When we look at this issue from a self-motives perspective, the literature indicates that the same self-motives that influence feedback seeking are crucial in determining feedback reactions. Two factors are deemed especially important when considering feedback reactions (37): feedback processing and feedback acceptance.

First, feedback processing represents how deeply and accurately the recipient cognitively processes the feedback from a given target (37). Research has found that self-motives influence the recall and processing of self-relevant information (33). In comparison to self-enhancement and self-verification, especially the self-assessment and self-improvement motives lead to deep processing of feedback information (38). For example, individuals with a self-enhancement motive tend to remember success feedback better than failure feedback (39) and spend more time reading favourable than unfavourable information about themselves (40).
Second, feedback has to be accepted in order to have an effect on behaviour (37). For example, individuals with a self-verification motive are more likely to dismiss self-refuting feedback as inaccurate and devalue the credibility of the source of self-refuting feedback (33).

Together, these aspects of the feedback process illustrate that feedback needs to be processed deeply and to be accepted in order to have an effect on performance. The self-motives perspective can provide an integrative framework for future research investigating different phases of the feedback process, such as how and when individuals seek feedback and how they react to the received feedback. This should result in a better understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the feedback seeking-performance relationship.

**Summary and suggestions for future research**

The self-motives framework provides a more comprehensive perspective for the study of feedback-seeking behaviour. More specifically, we have shown how this framework can aid to unravel some of the inconsistent results concerning the traditional instrumental and ego-based motives, as well as improve our understanding of how and when feedback seeking leads to performance improvement.

Although the framework is developed on the basis of a large stream empirical evidence, it is still best thought of as a set of working hypotheses awaiting further empirical testing (33). As such, several avenues for future research exist. Building on the self-motives framework, researchers can look for individual and situational antecedents of feedback-seeking behaviour that have been previously overlooked in the feedback seeking literature. Also, researchers have mostly adopted experimental approaches to study self-motives (for an overview, see 33). More recently, researchers have begun to adopt survey approaches (41). Following this, future research should take the self-motives framework from the lab to the field for empirical testing and refinement.
Encouraging feedback-seeking behaviour in medical settings and medical education

On the basis of the reviewed literature, we present six recommendations aimed at encouraging feedback-seeking behaviour in work and educational settings.

1. Encourage individuals with low performance expectations to seek feedback, so that they can correct errors and learn from them (42, 43). Emphasize that errors and mistakes are accepted as a normal part of the learning process and create an environment that is psychologically safe (44).

2. Encourage feedback seeking during newcomers’ socialization period by means of special orientation programs, social events and mentoring (45).

3. Make sure to provide sufficient feedback to individuals that have extensive tenure and/or job experience, even when they do not seek feedback themselves (2, 46).

4. Design training programs in order to develop the learning goal orientations of individuals (e.g., by changing the attributions individuals make about success and failure). Use developmental performance appraisal systems in which feedback is provided regarding one’s own performance instead of feedback relative to the performance of others (23, 28). Map goal orientations of individuals and customize feedback systems (47).

5. Use information technology and communication media in order to encourage feedback seeking for example by registering, tracking, and displaying performance statistics. Provide alternative sources for privately seeking feedback (e.g., helpdesk, intranet) so that the cost of seeking feedback publicly can be diminished (29, 43).

6. Train leaders in different strategies for encouraging feedback-seeking, for example by showing consideration and supportiveness (14, 48), by concealing a bad mood (17, 49), and using a transformational leadership style (30).
Conclusions

The reviewed literature shows that feedback-seeking behaviour has important consequences for individual adaptation and socialization, learning and creativity, and performance. In this review, we present several individual and contextual factors that influence feedback-seeking behaviour. On the basis of the self-motives framework, we aim to stimulate future research on the relationship of feedback-seeking behaviour with uncertainty and self-esteem and on feedback reactions following feedback-seeking behaviour.

Encouraging the application of the reviewed literature, we provide six evidence-based insights to stimulate feedback-seeking behaviour in work and educational settings.

References


Appendix

Table 1. Individual and contextual factors influencing feedback-seeking behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual factors</th>
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<th>Mixed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External feedback propensity</td>
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<td>(5, 50, 51)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feedback orientation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>(52, 53)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning goal orientation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>(23, 28, 54, 55)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Performance, performance expectations</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>(42, 43, 56)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance for ambiguity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(50, 54, 57, 58)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure, age, experience</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(2, 14, 28, 46, 57, 59)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
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<table>
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<th>Contextual factors</th>
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<td>Uncertainty</td>
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<td>Publicness of seeking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(45)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational socialization</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
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<td>(62, 63)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sign</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>(42)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diagnosticity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Target</td>
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<td>Transformational leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship quality</td>
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<td>(18, 63)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Availability, accessibility</td>
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<td>(14, 28, 48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support, consideration</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>(18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>(17, 49)</td>
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Table 2. Overview of self-motives

<table>
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<th>Motive</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Behavioural example</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self-assessment</strong></td>
<td>Motive to obtain accurate information about the self</td>
<td>Choosing diagnostic tasks that provide accurate feedback</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-improvement</strong></td>
<td>Motive to improve one’s traits, abilities, and skills</td>
<td>Working on challenging projects that can stimulate learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-enhancement</strong></td>
<td>Motive to enhance the favourability of self-views</td>
<td>Seeking positive feedback after a good performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-verification</strong></td>
<td>Motive to maintaining consistency between one’s central self-views and new self-relevant information</td>
<td>Seeking confirming, negative feedback after a bad performance</td>
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