Stepping back while staying engaged: On the cognitive effects of obstacles
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Summary
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What happens on a cognitive level when we realize that we did not buy an important ingredient for the romantic dinner we are about to prepare, when the main sponsor for the festival we are organizing has cancelled in the last minute, or when we think about how to overcome the biggest possible obstacle to an important personal goal? Are the changes in our perception and our thinking useful for dealing with obstacles? The goal of this dissertation was to examine whether and when people respond to obstacles by mentally "stepping back and looking at the bigger picture" (Chapters 2 and 3) as well as how this cognitive response might help to deal with obstacles (Chapter 4).

In this research, obstacles were defined as interfering forces (Higgins, 2006) that prevent people from reaching a goal along the most direct, or initially intended path and that require people to figure out what to do and how to deal with the obstacle (Marguc, Förster, & Van Kleef, 2011). Based on Lewin's (1935) field theory and research on global versus local processing styles (for a review, see Förster & Dannenberg, 2010), psychological distance (for reviews, see Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), and novelty (Förster, Marguc, & Gillebaart, 2010; see also Förster, Liberman, & Shapira, 2009), I predicted and found that obstacles can lead people to both perceptually and conceptually focus more on the overall Gestalt rather than the details of objects and thereby perform better on tasks that require active integration of seemingly unrelated concepts (Chapter 2) and to increase the psychological distance between themselves and other objects (Chapter 3). Furthermore, the cognitive processes elicited by obstacles were shown to help people to find creative means towards their goals (Chapter 4). Because a more distanced perspective on the overall situation would seem of little use when people are not motivated to follow through with tasks or activities, these effects were expected, and found, to occur primarily when people are very engaged in activities and when the obstacle appears on their own path to their goal rather than on other people's paths to their goals.

This research thus suggests that engaged individuals respond to obstacles by mentally "stepping back" and "looking at the bigger picture" and that this cognitive response is indeed functional: It helps people to find more creative means to their goals. These results are relevant for research on self-regulation, for organizations, and for people who have difficulties dealing with obstacles.