Background

• How people adjust their goals is central to adaptation across the lifespan (Baltes, 1987; Brandstätter & Renner, 1990), yet little is known about individual difference characteristics that predict how and why people use different goal adjustment strategies.

• In older adulthood, people often adapt to changing life circumstances (e.g. loss of social partners or declines in physical and cognitive health) by disengaging from certain goals. Re-engagement with achievable goals is also an important component in adaptation. We propose that flexibility in goal adjustment (endorsement of both goal disengagement and re-engagement strategies) is an important dynamic process involving effectively adapting goal-related behaviour in response to contextual demands and available resources.

The Present Study

This study extended on recent work by Dutt et al. (2018), by focusing on associations of awareness of age-related gains and age-related losses, and their interaction as predictors of goal adjustment in older adulthood. Furthermore, we examined whether perceptions of time remaining in life mediated relationships between awareness of age-related change (AARC) and goal adjustment capacities.

Method

408 adults aged 60-88 (M = 67.07, SD = 4.57)

• Online survey (via Turkprime)

• measures included questionnaires assessing AARC, goal disengagement and re-engagement (a goal flexibility index was also calculated), and future time perspective.

Results

Regression analyses showed that AARC-gains moderated the relationship between AARC-losses and goal adjustment. While AARC-losses was associated with lower reported goal flexibility and goal re-engagement, this association was weaker for those who also reported high AARC-gains (see Figures 1 & 2).

Mediation analyses showed that future time perspective (FTP) mediated relationships between AARC and goal adjustment. Higher AARC-gains was associated with a more expansive FTP, which was associated with lower goal disengagement, and higher goal re-engagement. Conversely, higher AARC-losses was associated with a more restricted FTP, which was associated with higher goal disengagement, and lower goal re-engagement (see Figures 3 & 4).

Conclusions

Awareness of age-related losses may not inherently undermine self-regulatory behaviour, if this awareness is accompanied by an appreciation of developmental gains and enduring strengths.

Those with higher AARC-gains may be more aware of future opportunities due to a recognition of their resources (Hobfoll, 2002) and performance capacity (Ryan & Deci, 2000), therefore remaining committed to goals for longer and more readily engaging in new goals. For others, awareness of age-related losses may result in a reduced focus on future opportunities, and in turn more willingness to disengage when goals are blocked.