Emotion regulation in the context of daily stress: Impact on daily affect

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A B S T R A C T

A daily diary study was used to examine how person-level emotion regulation (i.e., reappraisal and suppression) impacts daily affect following stressful daily life events. Research has highlighted the positive and negative impacts of reappraisal and suppression on daily affect, respectively, but has yet to investigate emotion regulation in light of daily stress. After completing a measure of emotion regulation, participants completed measures of daily stress and daily affect at the end of each day for one week. As hypothesized, multilevel modeling results indicated that as daily stress increased, individuals were more likely to report lower positive and higher negative affect. Consistent with prior research, reappraisal was associated with better affect. Suppression was associated with lower positive affect. The main finding of this study was a significant cross-level interaction of daily stress and suppression on daily positive affect where individuals high in suppression experienced lower positive affect on days of high stress than days of low stress. This suggests that suppression may not be detrimental in low stress situations when emotion regulation is less important, but negatively impacts positive affect during high stress. These results point to the importance of considering emotion regulation in the context of stressful life events.

Regulating emotions is vital for maintaining healthy relationships (Murray, 2005), psychological well-being (Gross & Thompson, 2007), and even positive work performance (Diefendorff, Hall, Lord, & Stream, 2000). Despite the abundance of evidence pointing to the importance of emotion regulation, many of these studies have been cross-sectional and have had poor relevance to daily life. In order to better understand how individual differences in emotion regulation impact daily functioning, the present study used a daily diary design to investigate the impact of person-level emotion regulation on daily affect (positive and negative) in response to stressful daily life events.

When faced with stressful life events, individuals do not passively experience stress and the associated emotions but actually act upon them in an active manner in attempts to change the way they experience an emotional response. This process is called emotion regulation (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Emotion regulation can happen at various points in the process by which an emotion is generated (Gross, 2001). Antecedent-focused emotion regulation strategies are implemented prior to activation of the emotional response and its subsequent behavioral and physiological impacts. One well-studied and frequently employed example of an antecedent-focused emotion regulation strategy is reappraisal which involves altering the way a situation is appraised in order to change the emotional impact (Gross & John, 2003). Alternatively, response-focused emotion regulation strategies are employed after an emotional response is already underway. For example, one might seek to suppress or inhibit the way an emotion is being expressed behaviorally or physiologically.

Reappraisal is often associated with positive emotions and overall well-being (Loewenstein, 2007) and can even result in reduced physiological and behavioral responding to an aversive situation (Gross, 1998, 2002). For example, Gross (1998) found that individuals who were instructed to engage in reappraisal while watching a disgusting film reported less disgust and fewer behavioral signs of disgust in comparison to those who were asked to simply watch the film. Additionally, people reported reduced negative emotions following viewing of unpleasant photos when using reappraisal (Willroth & Hilimire, 2015). Research has even suggested that reappraisal is protective for well-being during times of failure (e.g., Hanley, Palejwala, Handley, Canto, & Garland, 2015). Although affective and behavioral control is important, individuals also wish to function well cognitively during stressful and emotional times. Richards and Gross (2000) found that individuals who engaged in reappraisal during a memory task that involved negative emotion eliciting images performed better than those who engaged in suppression.

Suppression takes a great deal of cognitive demand which decreases one’s ability to tend to details of a task, thus reducing memory performance. In addition to cognitive performance, research suggests that suppression also has negative effects on emotionality and overall well-being (Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009). In fact, Joormann and Gotlib (2010) found that the use of suppression in response to an emotionally laden experience was related with higher levels of depressive symptoms. Interestingly, though, individuals who engage in suppression end up exhibiting less behavioral expression of
negative emotion, but the negative emotionality that is experienced physiologically is heightened (Gross & Levenson, 1997). The goal is often to reduce negative emotions through suppression, but positive emotions are also often suppressed in this process. Gross and Levenson (1997) reported that those who engaged in suppression while watching an amusing film experienced less amusement than those who did not engage in suppression.

Clearly, reappraisal and suppression have differential positive and negative effects, respectively, on emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. In this study, we focus primarily on emotional well-being, specifically how trait-like emotion regulation strategies of reappraisal and suppression impact daily affect. Affect is characterized by short-lasting episodes of emotions in contrast to longer-lasting episodes that would be labeled as moods. Although affective experiences are temporary, they contribute to long-lasting moods. The more positive or negative affect that one experiences in a given moment predicts how much positive or negative affect s/he will experience in the future, respectively (Burns et al., 2008; Headley & Wearing, 1989; Pettersson, Boker, Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 2013). Despite the importance of examining the impact of emotion regulation on longer-term mood states (e.g., depression), only limited research has examined the role of emotion regulation in the daily experience of affect. Knowing that there are longer-term impacts of affect, it seems critical to improve our understanding of day-to-day emotional states in order to prevent subsequent negative emotional outcomes that result from poor daily affect.

A few important studies have begun to shed light on how emotion regulation impacts daily affect (e.g., Burns, Koval, Verduyn, Lim, & Kuppens, 2013; Kuppens, Oravecz, & Tuerlinckx, 2010; Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008; Pavani, Vigouroux, Kop, Congard, & Dauvier, 2015). Some studies have measured emotion regulation on a daily basis, in reaction to specific events whereas others have focused on habitual, trait-like, emotion regulation. Despite this difference, results converge on the findings that reappraisal is more likely to result in a positive affective state and suppression is associated with negative affect. Although important additions to our understanding of emotion regulation and daily affect, a major limitation in all of these studies is that they do not examine how emotion regulation impacts daily affect during stressful times.

Emotion regulation is not necessary without an event, either internal or external, that warrants an emotional response. An individual’s typical emotion regulation style may not make an overall difference in her/his well-being unless s/he is faced with stressful life events. According to the diathesis–stress model, individuals with a vulnerability to psychological distress are more likely to experience symptoms when faced with stressful life experiences. An abundance of research has examined the role of stress in development of depression (e.g., see Hammen, 2005, for a review). Other research has focused on individual difference factors such as perfectionism that act as a diathesis for psychological symptoms under stress (e.g., Chang & Rand, 2000; Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003). Yet, only limited research has examined the individual difference factor of emotion regulation as a vulnerability factor for developing distress during stressful events. One study has examined how emotion regulation as a person-level variable impacts performance during a stressful situation (Raftery & Bizer, 2009). They found that individuals who are habitual “reappraisers” exhibited better test performance than habitual “suppressors” following negative feedback. However, only one study has examined the impact of emotion regulation during stressful daily life events. Schraub, Turgut, Clavairoly, and Sonntag (2013) found that engaging in reappraisal allowed individuals to experience more recovery experiences (i.e., psychological detachment from work and relaxation) following stressful daily life events whereas suppression had a negative impact on recovery experiences.

Building upon work by Schraub et al. (2013), the present study seeks to examine the impact of one’s emotion regulation style on daily well-being following stressful daily life events. We chose to focus on daily stress rather than laboratory-induced or overall life stress in order to enhance the translational ability of our findings. Additionally, research by Pillow, Zautra, and Sandler (1996) found that stressful daily life events play a larger role in overall well-being than more major life events. We used a daily diary study to assess daily stress and affect over a week-long period which allows for examination of dispositional (i.e., emotion regulation style) influences on affect on days of both high and low stress. Daily diary studies also reduce retrospection (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003) and allow for examination of time-invariant (i.e., emotion regulation) and time-variant (i.e., daily stress) factors that impact one’s overall and day-to-day changes in positive and negative affect.

We anticipated significant intraindividual coupling of daily stress and daily positive and negative affect where higher daily stress would be associated with lower positive affect and higher negative affect. We also expected that individuals who are more likely to engage in suppression as well as those low in reappraisal will generally report higher levels of negative affect and lower levels of positive affect throughout their week. Additionally, given that suppression is a vulnerability factor for psychological distress (e.g., Ehring, Tuschen-Caffier, Schnülle, Fischer, & Gross, 2010) and low reappraisal often results in higher distress (e.g., Gross, 1998), we anticipated that high suppression and low reappraisal would be vulnerability factors for poor affect during days of high stress. Suppression and reappraisal were tested independently. We hypothesized that on days of high stress, those who typically engage in suppression as well as low reappraisers will experience heightened negative affect and lower positive affect in comparison to days of low stress when emotion regulation style is less likely to make a difference in well-being.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Data for the present study are from a larger data set on daily well-being of 396 undergraduate students. Another study (Richardson & Rice, 2015) was published using this same data set. It tested the associations between self-critical perfectionism and daily disclosure of daily stress and included one of the three variables used in the present study (daily stress). The sample for this study included 396 participants, 79% women, with a mean age of 19.77 (SD = 1.40), who were recruited from general psychology subject pool and other psychology courses for research or extra credit, respectively. The sample was racial/ethnically diverse: 54.5% White, 21.0% Hispanic/Latino, 10.9% African-American, 8.6% Asian, 3.8% Multicultural, and 0.5% Pacific Islander. A total of 1.3% identified as “Other” or did not report their race/ethnicity.

1.2. Measures

1.2.1. Emotion regulation

Emotion regulation was measured using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003). This measure consists of two subscales: Reappraisal (6 items) and Suppression (4 items) that are responded to a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree through 7 = strongly agree). An example Reappraisal item is “When I want to feel less negative emotion, I change the way I am thinking about the situation.” An example Suppression item is “When I am feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them.” Gross and John (2003) reported internal consistency estimates ranging from 0.75 to 0.82 for Reappraisal and 0.68 to 0.76 for Suppression. Internal consistency estimates for the present study were 0.87 for Reappraisal and 0.78 for Suppression.

1.2.2. Daily stress

To measure daily stress, a three-item scale used in research by Dunkley et al. (2003) was used. Participants were initially asked to report the most unpleasant event of that day. Then, they were asked to
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