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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbtep



Social anxiety and emotional suppression: The mediating role of beliefs

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 August 2008

Received in revised form 4 December 2008

Accepted 16 December 2008

Keywords:

Social anxiety

Emotion

Emotional suppression

Beliefs

ABSTRACT

There is mounting evidence to suggest that social anxiety is associated with the suppression of emotional expression. The current study examined self-reported emotional suppression and beliefs about expressing emotions among undergraduate students ($n = 95$). Socially anxious undergraduates reported greater use of emotional suppression compared to their non-socially anxious peers. They also reported greater ambivalence about emotional expression, more difficulties in emotional responding, more fears of emotional experiences, and more negative beliefs about emotional expression. Believing that emotional expression must be kept in control and is a sign of weakness partially mediated the association between social anxiety and emotional suppression.

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Social anxiety is the excessive fear of being embarrassed and/or rejected by others. Socially anxious individuals may suppress the expression of their emotional experiences as a way to avoid potential rejection. If less emotion is displayed, there is less observable material that might be rejected by others. As Kashdan and Steger (2006) suggest “by not genuinely expressing themselves, [socially anxious individuals] reduce the likelihood that they will make an egregious social error leading to outright rejection” (p. 125).

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There is mounting evidence to suggest that social anxiety is indeed associated with the suppression of emotional expression. For example, social anxiety is associated with an interpersonal style characterized by an avoidance of expressing emotion (Davila & Beck, 2002; Grant, Beck, Farrow, & Davila, 2007) and a general tendency to inhibit or control the expression of emotions (Kashdan & Breen, 2008; Kashdan & Steger, 2006). In addition, socially anxious individuals reported less expressivity of positive emotions than a non-clinical control group and individuals with generalized anxiety (Turk, Heimberg, Luterek, Mennin, & Fresco, 2005). And although individuals with social anxiety disorder reported higher levels of anger than community control participants, they also reported more suppression of their expression of anger (Erwin, Heimberg, Schneier, & Liebowitz, 2003). Finally, a treatment-seeking clinical sample, the majority of which had a diagnosis of social anxiety disorder, reported that they were more likely to hold back emotional reactions when viewing an anxiety-provoking film clip than a non-clinical control group (Campbell-Sills, Barlow, Brown, & Hofmann, 2006).

Other studies have demonstrated that socially anxious individuals tend to limit self-disclosure in conversations (Alden & Bieling, 1998; DePaulo, Epstein, & LeMay, 1990; Leary, Knight, & Johnson, 1987; Meleshko & Alden, 1993; Snell, 1989). Furthermore, this suppression becomes more pronounced when the person expects to be evaluated. For instance, DePaulo et al. (1990) found that socially anxious individuals who expected to be evaluated by an interviewer told shorter, less revealing stories about themselves and chose topics about more commonplace events than non-anxious individuals who expected to be evaluated or non-anxious and socially anxious individuals who did not expect to be evaluated by the interviewer. Alden and Bieling (1998) found that when socially anxious individuals were instructed to focus on the critical nature of a confederate in a structured interaction, they disclosed information about less intimate topics than did non-socially anxious individuals.

The majority of the studies investigating emotional functioning in social anxiety have focused on the tendency to suppress the expression of one's emotions. However, there is also mounting evidence to suggest that socially anxious individuals have additional difficulties regulating emotional responding. Previous self-report research suggests that compared to non-anxious controls, socially anxious individuals pay less attention to their emotions, have more difficulty identifying and describing their emotional experiences, and fear not only anxiety, but also feelings of depression, anger and positive emotions (Turk et al., 2005). Given efforts to dampen or suppress the expression of such emotions, socially anxious individuals may be particularly fearful and avoidant of a broad range of emotional experiences because of the feared social consequences of emotional expression. Thus, investigating beliefs socially anxious individuals hold about emotional expression may be beneficial in terms of delineating the nature of emotional suppression among socially anxious individuals. Strategic attempts to suppress emotional expression may be associated with beliefs that such expression increases the likelihood of negative evaluation.

The first aim of the current study was to investigate this possibility by examining beliefs about emotional expression across individuals with varying levels of social anxiety. It was expected that the current study would replicate previous findings (e.g., Turk et al., 2005) and socially anxious individuals would report more suppression of emotional expression, more problems identifying, discriminating, and describing their emotional experiences, as well as more fear of a range of discrete emotional experiences than individuals with mild to moderate levels of social anxiety. In addition, socially anxious individuals were expected to report more ambivalence about the expression of both positive and negative emotions, highlighting the notion that these individuals experience tension over emotional expression and as a result, suppress their emotional expression (King & Emmons, 1990). Furthermore, it was expected that negative beliefs about emotional expression would also increase as a function of social anxiety. Compared to those with lower levels of social anxiety, those with high levels of social anxiety were expected to more strongly endorse the belief that emotional expression leads to social rejection, consider emotional expression a sign of weakness, and endorse the importance of keeping emotions in control.

There has been little attention to factors that may mediate the association between social anxiety and emotional suppression in the existing literature. As mentioned earlier, the tendency to suppress one's emotions may be driven by an expectation that expressing one's emotions increases the likelihood of negative evaluation. Studies illustrate that socially anxious individuals inhibit their self-disclosure to a greater extent when they expect to be evaluated by others (Alden & Bieling, 1998;

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