



Personality and emotional memory: How regulating emotion impairs memory for emotional events ☆

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Abstract

In everyday life, individuals actively regulate their emotions in a variety of ways. One common form of emotion regulation is *expressive suppression*, which entails inhibiting outward signs of emotion. Although expressive suppression is often undertaken with an eye to looking calm despite feeling emotional, an analysis of its self-regulatory demands suggests that this form of emotion regulation may come at a cognitive price. We tested this hypothesis in two studies. In Study 1, we measured spontaneously occurring expressive suppression during a film that depicted a surgical procedure, and then assessed memory for the film. Greater use of suppression predicted worse memory. In Study 2, we examined expressive suppression during a film that depicted a conflictual conversation, and we measured memory for what was said during the conversation. To gauge the magnitude of any cognitive costs, we compared expressive suppression with *self-distraction*, which entails intentionally trying not to think about something. Both spontaneously occurring and experimentally induced suppression were associated with worse memory. Strikingly, these effects were comparable to the effects of spontaneously occurring and experimentally induced distraction. These studies suggest that “simply” keeping a stiff upper lip during an emotional event exacts a cognitive toll that is as great as intentional

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cognitive avoidance. We argue that efforts to understand links between emotion and memory must consider emotion regulation.

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1. Introduction

James (1890) wrote that “An experience may be so exciting emotionally as almost to leave a scar on the cerebral tissues” (Vol. 1, p. 670). A large number of studies have now born out James’s suggestion that there is something particularly memorable about emotional events. For example, when participants are asked to view either emotional or neutral film clips or slide sequences, subsequent memory tests show that the emotional stimuli are often remembered better than the neutral stimuli, particularly where perceptually salient details are concerned (e.g., Christianson & Loftus, 1990; O’Carroll, Drysdale, Cahill, Shajahan, & Ebmeier, 1999).

Still, a memory is not a perfect record of a life experience (e.g., Loftus, 1993). Even when people are motivated to remember an emotionally evocative event—such as a crime, an accident, or an important social interaction—they cannot recall everything that transpired. This much is apparent in laboratory studies as well, which use objective tests to quantify the degree to which people remember the details of emotional events. Average memory performance scores are never 100% and estimates of variability show that people who are exposed to the same emotional event differ dramatically from each other when it comes to how well they remember it. Whereas some people appear to remember emotional experiences quite completely and accurately, other people are left with the Cliff Notes. What might different people be thinking or doing during an emotional event that could explain why their subsequent memories differ?

In this article, we consider the possibility that certain personality processes (a) tend to covary with emotion, and (b) influence a person’s ability to encode ongoing events into memory. Specifically, we draw on the emerging field of emotion regulation research, which highlights some candidates. In the following section, we first define what is meant by “emotion regulation.” Second, we consider how certain efforts to regulate emotion might influence memory for events that transpire during the period of regulation. Third, we present two studies which test whether memory for emotional events can be explained by willful efforts to regulate emotional responses.

1.1. *Emotion regulation*

Early emotion theories conceptualized emotion in nearly reflex-like terms (e.g., James, 1890). On this view, if an event is appraised as relevant to one’s well-being, then emotions inevitably arise, much as a tap on the patella generates an uncontrollable

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