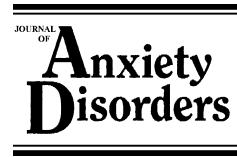




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Level of emotional awareness as a differentiating variable between individuals with and without generalized anxiety disorder[☆]

Paige Novick-Kline^a, Cynthia L. Turk^{a,*},
Douglas S. Mennin^b, Emily A. Hoyt^a,
Cristi L. Gallagher^a

^a*Department of Psychology, La Salle University, 1900 W. Olney Avenue,
Philadelphia, PA 19141, USA*

^b*Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA*

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Abstract

Using Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, and Fresco's [Emotion regulation deficits as a key feature of generalized anxiety disorder: Testing a theoretical model, submitted for publication] conceptualization of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) as a syndrome involving emotion dysregulation and an overuse of cognitive control strategies, this study sought to differentiate individuals with GAD from controls by offering differences in emotional awareness as one of the central distinctions between these groups. This study employs the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale (LEAS) [Lane et al., 1990 Lane, R. D., Quinlan, D. M., Schwartz, G. E., Walker, P. A., & Zeitlin, S. B. (1990). The Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale: a cognitive-developmental measure of emotion. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 55, 124–134] a rater-coded measure, to assess level of emotional awareness, a methodological improvement over previous tests of the model, which relied upon self-report. Individuals with GAD scored significantly higher than controls on

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 215 9515179; fax: +1 215 9515140.

E-mail address: turkc@lasalle.edu (C.L. Turk).

emotional awareness. These findings are discussed in light of the theoretical implications for GAD.

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Borkovec, Alcaine, and Behar (2004) assert that worry, the central feature of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), functions to allow the individual to avoid uncomfortable emotional experiences. By processing emotional stimuli cognitively through worry, the experience of intense emotions is avoided, thereby negatively reinforcing worry (Borkovec et al., 2004). However, in utilizing worry as an avoidance response, individuals prevent themselves from effectively processing all situationally relevant information, including emotions. Given that emotions provide information about how one should respond to situations (e.g., Gross, 1998a, 1998b) and are important in initiating, motivating, and organizing behavior (e.g., Cicchetti, Ackerman, & Izard, 1995), individuals with GAD may not be able to respond in the most adaptive way to their environment. Using this perspective as a foundation, Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, and Fresco (2002) and Mennin, Turk, Heimberg, and Carmin (2004) propose that understanding the role of emotions and emotion regulation processes in GAD is critical to adequately conceptualizing the disorder.

Emotion regulation refers to “the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998a, p. 275). This definition encompasses both positive and negative emotions as well as emotion reduction, enhancement, and maintenance (Cicchetti et al., 1995; Gross, 1998a). In this way, emotion regulation is different from coping, which typically is limited to reducing negative emotional states (Gross, 1998a). Emotion regulation processes range from ones that may be automatic (e.g., an infant averting his gaze from his mother’s frown) to ones that are conscious, controlled, and effortful (e.g., purposefully avoiding a disliked coworker; Gross, 1998a).

Some theorists do not attempt to make value judgments on emotion regulation processes as good or bad or adaptive or maladaptive (e.g., Gross, 1998a). However, other theorists have suggested that certain emotion skills and activities are important to adaptive emotion regulation (e.g., Mayer & Salovey, 1993; Saarni, 1990). For example, Mayer and Salovey (1997) have introduced the construct of emotional intelligence, which they define as “the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (p. 10). Recent studies have linked emotion skills such as these to good functioning. For example, one emotion skill that has been cited as conducive to positive emotion regulation is the ability to identify discrete

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