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## Neuroticism, daily hassles, and depressive symptoms: An examination of moderating and mediating effects

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### Abstract

This study examined the relationship between the personality trait neuroticism (N) and daily hassles in the development of depressive symptoms. Seventy-seven college freshmen completed self-report measures of N, daily hassles, and depression at 3 time points during the academic year. Models of moderation and mediation among N, hassles, and depressive symptoms were examined using regression analysis. High-N individuals were more likely than low-N individuals to develop depressive symptoms under exposure to hassles. Additionally, daily hassles partially mediated the relationship between N and depressive symptoms. Taken together the results of this study indicate that (a) high levels of N exacerbate the effect of daily hassles on the development of depressive symptoms, and (b) a portion of the effect of N on depressive symptoms may be attributed to differential exposure to daily hassles.

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## 1. Introduction

It has long been postulated that personality traits may serve as vulnerability factors in the development of depressive symptoms by affecting the manner in which individuals perceive, react to, or cope with stressors. This view holds that individual differences in cognitive, affective, or physiological response to environmental events can predispose some individuals to experience psychological distress, which over time may lead to the development of psychopathology (see Clark, 2005).

### 1.1. Neuroticism as a vulnerability to depressive symptoms

Neuroticism (N) is a higher-order personality dimension related to poor stress coping, irrational thinking, poor impulse control, worry, and high negative affect (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Neuroticism is a strong predictor of psychological problems, especially those related to affective disturbance (Watson, Gamez, & Simms, 2005).

Neuroticism is related to the various manifestations of depression. Prospective studies show that high premorbid levels of N predict the first incidence of depression (Hirschfeld et al., 1989), as well as recurrences (Kendler, Neale, Kessler, Heath, & Eaves, 1993). Roberts and Kendler (1999) found that the genetic factors that contribute to N account for close to half of the genetic variance of unipolar depression, and conclude that N is an expression of an underlying genetic vulnerability to this disorder. Data from non-clinical samples also provide evidence that N serves as a trait vulnerability for both anxiety and depression (Clark, Watson, & Mineka, 1994; Krueger, Caspi, Moffitt, Silva, & McGee, 1996; Trull & Sher, 1994).

Gray's (1982) behavioral motivation model suggests that N is related to activity of the *behavioral inhibition system* (BIS). The BIS is proposed to initiate passive-avoidant behavior in the presence of threatening or conditioned aversive stimuli, novel stimuli, and perceptual cues signaling the absence of positive reinforcement. Thus, high N levels are hypothesized to be related to heightened vigilance towards punishment cues and a slowed rate of habituation towards aversive stimuli. This can consequently lead to an increase in distress and greater risk for development of depressive symptoms.

### 1.2. Stressful life events and depressive symptoms

Past research on psychological outcomes of stress has focused predominantly on major life events, with strong evidence suggesting that the risk of depression is significantly increased following the occurrence of these stressors (Kessler, 1997). However, in recent years researchers have also examined the stresses of daily living. Part of the reason for this shift is due to evidence that daily hassles mediate the effects of major life events on mental and physical well-being (Delongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982; Wagner, Compas, & Howell, 1988; Pillow, Zautra, & Sandler, 1996).

Prior studies reveal that daily hassles frequency and severity are associated with depression (Lovejoy & Steuerwald, 1997) and predict the onset of depressive symptoms (Cummins, 1990). However, the majority of individuals exposed to a high frequency and intensity of hassles do not experience a depressive episode, suggesting that a moderating vulnerability factor must be

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