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Negative mood regulation mediates the relationship between distraction and engagement in pleasurable activities among college smokers

Lee M. Cohen ^{a,*}, Dennis E. McChargue ^b, Holly E.R. Morrell ^a

^a *Texas Tech University, Department of Psychology, Box 42051, Lubbock, TX 79409-2051, United States*

^b *University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Department of Psychology, 238 Burnett Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0308, United States*

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Abstract

Smoking for negative mood alleviation is a strong predictor of early smoking and early dependence among undergraduates. Little is known about whether adaptive cognitive coping processes (e.g., distraction) may help decrease the likelihood of student smoking for negative mood regulation. The present study tested the hypothesis that distraction would predict (a) greater engagement in adaptive pleasant pastimes and (b) lower rates of smoking behavior among undergraduates ($n = 162$, 41.9% female). We further assessed whether negative mood regulation expectations would explain both relationships. Results indicated that negative mood regulation fully mediated the relationship between distraction and engagement in pleasurable activities among college smokers. Although the relationships among distraction, negative mood regulation, and cigarette consumption were not significant, they were in the expected direction (negative). Results from the present study point to the importance of prevention efforts focused on enhancing cognitive coping skills in college smokers. Such a focus may lead to more frequent adaptive cognitive coping during negative mood states, presumably instead of smoking.

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* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 806 742 0818.

E-mail address: lee.cohen@ttu.edu (L.M. Cohen).

1. Introduction

More than 430,000 Americans die each year from smoking-related illnesses, making smoking the leading cause of preventable death in the United States (Fiore et al., 2000). Alarming, college-aged adults represent the largest age group reporting current cigarette use (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2005). Specifically, 39.5% of the 18–25 year olds surveyed reported smoking cigarettes in the past month, as compared to 11.9% among those individuals aged 12–17 and 24.1% among those aged 26 or older (SAMHSA, 2005). Despite these estimates, results from existing cessation trials for college-aged smokers have been tenuous at best (O'Neill, Gillispie, & Slobin, 2000) and are comparable to the poor abstinence rates following treatment of late adolescent smokers (Moolchan, Ernst, & Henningfield, 2000).

Prior research suggests that young adults report emotion regulation as one of the most important reasons for continued use of cigarettes (Spielberger, Foreyt, Reheiser, & Poston, 1998). For example, cross-sectional studies indicate that symptoms of depression predict initiation (Escobedo, Reddy, & Giovino, 1998; Patton et al., 1998), experimentation, (Patton et al., 1998; Wang, Fitzhugh, Eddy, Fu, & Turner, 1997), and progression to regular cigarette smoking among young adults (Patton et al., 1996). Among college-aged male smokers, lower levels of positive affect and higher levels of negative affect also predict dependence on cigarettes (McChargue, Cohen, & Cook, 2004a). Similarly, college female smokers reporting elevated symptoms of depression have been shown to be more dependent on nicotine than their non-depressed peers (McChargue, Cohen, & Cook, 2004b). Finally, situations that have the ability to induce negative moods have been shown to be strongly associated with cigarette smoking (Spielberger & Jacobs, 1982). Despite evidence linking negative moods to increased smoking, little is known about adaptive processes that may serve to decrease mood regulating smoking behavior.

One plausible adaptive coping process, primarily studied among depressed individuals, is the cognitive response style of distraction. According to response styles theory, distraction is defined as a process of deflecting attention from negative internal states (e.g., depressed mood) to more pleasant external stimuli (e.g., engaging in an enjoyable activity with friends) that may serve to divert an individual's maladaptive pattern of responding to negative mood states (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Specifically, depressed and non-depressed individuals who use pleasant distracting activities to aid in alleviating negative mood states significantly reduce the duration (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) and severity (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993) of their depressed moods. Furthermore, distraction has been positively associated with higher negative mood regulation expectations (Flett, Blankstein, & Obertynski, 1996) and increased positive affect (Stone, Kennedy-Moore, & Neale, 1995).

Although distraction has been shown to be an adaptive response to depression, little is known regarding whether such an adaptive response may act as a buffer to health compromising behaviors that are closely tied to mood regulation, such as cigarette smoking. Given that individuals dependent on nicotine have reported that cigarette smoking helps to regulate mood states (Hall, Muñoz, Reus, & Sees, 1993) and that negative affect plays a prominent role in relapse to smoking among those who wish to quit (Shiffman & Waters, 2004), it is plausible that smokers may become dependent on nicotine in part due to mood regulatory processes. To date, it is unclear whether adaptive coping responses to dysphoria can help buffer young smokers from becoming dependent on nicotine.

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