



# Predicting short-term positive affect in individuals with social anxiety disorder: The role of selected personality traits and emotion regulation strategies



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## ABSTRACT

Recently, research has provided support for a moderate, inverse relationship between social anxiety and dispositional positive affect. However, the dynamics of this relationship remain poorly understood. The present study evaluates whether certain personality traits and emotion regulation variables predict short-term positive affect for individuals with social anxiety disorder and healthy controls. Positive affect as measured by two self-report instruments was assessed before and after two tasks in which the participant conversed with either a friend or a romantic partner. Tests of models examining the hypothesized prospective predictors revealed that the paths did not differ significantly across diagnostic group and both groups showed the hypothesized patterns of endorsement for the emotion regulation variables. Further, a variable reflecting difficulty redirecting oneself when distressed prospectively predicted one measure of positive affect. Additional research is needed to explore further the role of emotion regulation strategies on positive emotions for individuals higher in social anxiety.

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## 1. Introduction

Although it was initially proposed that diminished positive affect was specific to depression and differentiated the Axis I mood and anxiety disorders of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000), a growing body of work has indicated that this affective pattern may also characterize individuals with social anxiety disorder (e.g., Brown, Chorpita, & Barlow, 1998; Watson, Clark, & Carey, 1988). In a meta-analysis evaluating the magnitude, consistency, and specificity of the relationship between social anxiety symptoms and positive affect, Kashdan (2007) found a moderate, inverse relationship between the constructs ( $r = -.36$ ; 95% CI:  $-.31$  to  $-.40$ ). Additionally, comorbidity with depressive symptoms or other emotional disturbances did not account for this result (Kashdan, 2007). In addition to lower levels of dispositional positive affect, higher social anxiety is also associated with less frequent, lower intensity,

and less lasting positive experiences, as well as fear responses to overtly positive social experiences and lower self-reported expression of positive emotions as compared to lower social anxiety (Kashdan, Weeks, & Savostyanova, 2011; Turk, Heimberg, Luterek, Mennin, & Fresco, 2005).

Collectively, the extant literature has provided support for a link between excessive social anxiety and reduced hedonic activity. In one such study, Eisner, Johnson, and Carver (2009) found that even after controlling for lifetime depressive symptoms, tendencies to endorse strategies aimed at diminishing or discouraging positive affective states (i.e., dampening) were positively related, whereas endorsement of strategies aimed at enhancing and sustaining positive affective states (i.e., savoring) was inversely related, to symptoms of social anxiety disorder. Eisner and colleagues' findings provided initial evidence that people with social anxiety disorder are not only characterized by lower trait positive affect, but may also employ maladaptive emotion regulation strategies that are detrimental to maintaining this affect. Furthermore, there has been some research showing that individuals higher in social anxiety tend to use strategic thought suppression, a form of emotional response regulation that involves inhibiting ongoing expressive behavior (Gross, 1998) and has been linked to the dampening of positive emotions (Gross & John, 2003; Gross & Levenson, 1997; Spokas, Luterek, & Heimberg, 2009). Werner, Goldin, Ball, Heimberg, and Gross (2011) reported that in addition to greater

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use of avoidance and expressive suppression, individuals with social anxiety disorder reported less success in implementing cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression strategies during a laboratory speech task and two social anxiety-evoking situations. Moreover, it has been proposed that people with excessive social anxiety are characterized by deficits in understanding of, and negative reactivity to, emotions (e.g., Turk et al., 2005)

Taken together, these studies have laid the groundwork for further investigation into how the relationship between social anxiety and positive experiences may vary as a function of how people manage their emotions in everyday life. To our knowledge, there have only been two studies directly examining short-term positive affect variation in individuals with excessive social anxiety. In the first, an experience-sampling assessment of positive emotions and events over a 21-day period, Kashdan and Steger (2006) found that individuals higher in trait social anxiety reported fewer positive events on days when they experienced greater social anxiety and used emotional suppression; however, this effect was not present for individuals lower in trait social anxiety. Further, participants generally reported the most intense positive emotions on days when they were both least socially anxious and most accepting of emotional experiences irrespective of dispositional social anxiety.

Similarly, Kashdan and Breen (2008) found support for interactions between social anxiety and the emotion regulation tendencies of suppression, positive emotional expression, and negative emotional expression in predicting changes in positive emotions over 12 weeks. Whereas less suppression and greater expression (regardless of valence) predicted greater changes in positive emotions for individuals with lower social anxiety, none of these variables significantly predicted change in positive emotions for individuals with higher social anxiety. Notably, the presence of a relationship between suppression and positive emotions exclusively for those lower in social anxiety directly contradicts the findings of Kashdan and Steger (2006). However, the combination of relatively low social anxiety along with tendencies to be more accepting and expressive of emotions led to the highest levels of positive emotions, which is consistent with Kashdan and Steger (2006). Despite conflicting findings involving suppression, the results of this pair of studies with regard to emotional expression are consistent with research suggesting that greater tendencies to accept and openly express emotions are integral to the increased positive psychological functioning seen in individuals lower in social anxiety (e.g., Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006; Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996).

As an extension of this budding literature, initial work has supported a relationship between emotion regulation strategies and personality traits that, in turn, may have an interactive effect on both positive and negative affective experiences. Collectively, the available research has provided consistent support that neuroticism is associated with maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, and extraversion is associated with adaptive strategies (e.g., Davies, Stankov, & Roberts, 1998; Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003). Likewise, neuroticism correlates positively with increases in negative emotions in response to unpleasant stimuli, whereas extraversion correlates positively with increases in positive emotions in response to pleasant stimuli (Gross, Sutton, & Ketelaar, 1998). Furthermore, research has provided evidence of relationships between social anxiety disorder and these personality traits, with low neuroticism and high extraversion being significantly related to the disorder in epidemiological as well as nonclinical samples (Bienvenu et al., 2001; Bienvenu et al. 2004; Trull and Sher, 1994). Finally, a recent investigation into the facets of extraversion/positive emotionality (E/PE; e.g., sociability) revealed that social anxiety was broadly related to all facets of E/PE after controlling for the higher-order internalizing factor and the overlap

among the individual facets (Naragon-Gainey, Watson, & Markon, 2009; Naragon-Gainey and Watson, 2011).

In sum, there is a well-established relationship between diminished positive affect and social anxiety disorder, but the dynamics of this relationship are not well understood. The present study offers an extension of previous work by evaluating whether certain emotion regulation and personality trait variables prospectively predict changes in state positive affect for individuals with social anxiety disorder as well as demographically equivalent control participants. Positive affect was assessed before and after two behavioral tasks in which the participant conversed with either a friend or a romantic partner. The content of the interactions was controlled to elicit emotional responses; the first task was aimed at promoting social support, whereas the second task was aimed at promoting conflict within the dyad. It is important to note that the current study focused specifically on interpersonal relationships that elicit emotions as opposed to the relationships themselves. For examinations of relationship quality in this sample, please see Rodebaugh et al. (2013), Rodebaugh et al. (2014).

Our first hypothesis was that extraversion would prospectively predict positive affect after the support task, but not necessarily after the conflict task. This hypothesis reflects research showing that individuals are characterized by higher positive affect when acting more extraverted (Fleeson, Malanos, & Achille, 2002). We also proposed that whereas the social support task would lead to increased expression of extraversion to expand positive affect, the conflict task would involve a greater focus on retaining positive affect, indirectly resulting in fewer opportunities for the expression of extraversion. That is, given that the conflict task was aimed to be contentious, increased positive affect seemed unlikely. Our second hypothesis was that difficulties in emotion regulation and the personality trait of neuroticism would prospectively predict positive affect after the conflict task. Taken together, the first two hypotheses predict not only that the magnitudes of these predictive relationships will differ significantly across assessments, but also that the selected variables will be significant predictors of positive affect at specific time points as a consequence of the behavioral tasks. We did not generate hypotheses concerning positive affect fluctuations between the post-support and pre-conflict measurements, a break period that lacked a systematic intervention and therefore would likely be characterized by substantial error variance.

Thirdly, we predicted that the diagnostic groups would show differential endorsement of the emotion regulation variables based on theoretical adaptiveness, although we did not expect the relationships between the predictors and positive affect to differ across diagnosis. Our fourth and final hypothesis was related to relationship type (i.e., friend or romantic partner). We theorized that the romantic relationship would magnify all effects, such that having an emotionally salient interaction with one's significant other would result in greater fluctuations in positive affect regardless of the nature of the conversation (i.e., social support or conflict). Accordingly, we hypothesized that there would be an interaction between relationship type and each of the emotion regulation and personality variables in predicting positive affect, regardless of whether the individual variables are significant prospective predictors of positive affect following the behavioral tasks.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The present study used a subsample of participants from a larger project conducted in the Anxiety and Psychotherapy Laboratory of Washington University in Saint Louis. The full sample has been

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