

# Social anxiety and romantic relationships: The costs and benefits of negative emotion expression are context-dependent<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

In general, expressing emotions is beneficial and withholding emotions has personal and social costs. Yet, to serve social functions there are situations when emotions are withheld strategically. We examined whether social anxiety influenced when and how emotion expressiveness influences interpersonal closeness in existing romantic relationships. For people with greater social anxiety, withholding the expression of negative emotions was proposed to preserve romantic relationships and their benefits. We examined whether social anxiety and emotion expressiveness interacted to predict prospective changes in romantic relationship closeness over a 12-week period. For people with less social anxiety, relationship closeness was enhanced over time when negative emotions were openly expressed whereas relationship deterioration was found for those more likely to withhold emotions. The reverse pattern was found for people with greater social anxiety such that relationship closeness was enhanced over time for those more likely to withhold negative emotions. Related social anxiety findings were found for discrepancies between desired and actual feelings of closeness over time. Findings were not attributable to depressive symptoms. These results suggest that the costs and benefits of emotion expression are influenced by a person's degree of social anxiety.

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*Keywords:* Social anxiety; Emotion expressiveness; Self-regulation; Suppression; Close relationships

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## 1. Introduction

Suppressing or withholding emotions tends to have undesirable consequences. Suppressing emotions appears to increase physiological tension, decrease well-being, reduce cognitive resources, and impair abilities to attend to, describe and understand emotions and effectively work with them toward goals (e.g., Gross & John, 2003). There has been less research on the social consequences of failing to openly express emotions. Expressing and sharing emotions has social benefits that include (a) providing self-disclosures that are integral to intimacy development, (b) demonstrating responsiveness to partners and their shared experiences, (c) communicating feelings about partners and the status of the relationship, (d) making shared events more memorable and meaningful, and (f) allowing for preemptive discussions of disagreements to prevent relationship volatility and damage (e.g., Keltner & Kring, 1998). Additionally, if a person is feeling distressed, expressing these feelings can be a self-soothing therapeutic process (Pennebaker, 1997) and facilitate the provision of social support by relationship partners (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001).

Although a greater unwillingness to express emotions appears to be generally unhealthy, it is necessary to examine boundary conditions and exceptions. In prospective studies, relationship deterioration is best predicted by failures to respond to the distress communicated by partners', an imbalanced ratio of infrequent positive affect to frequent negative affect during communications, and the presence of at least one partner with emotion disturbances (Cartensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Gottman & Levenson, 1992, 1999; Levenson & Gottman, 1985). These data suggest that relations between emotion expression and relationship outcomes may be moderated by whether or not people in existing relationships are particularly socially anxious (emotional vulnerability).

### 1.1. *Social anxiety and negative emotion expression in romantic relationships*

Social anxiety involves the fear of being negatively evaluated by others. These evaluative concerns lead to unwanted anxious feelings, thoughts, and sensations in (real or anticipated) social situations. To limit contact with these unwanted experiences, socially anxious people<sup>1</sup> exert a great deal of effort to avoid and control anxiety and the situations that might induce it (Clark & Wells, 1995; Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). According to these models, socially anxious people tend to avoid their emotions as a safety behavior to prevent the possible display of undesirable feelings to others which may invite social blunders, embarrassment, and rejection. Their primary goal is to avoid rejection at all costs and maintain some degree of connectedness to others. These individuals can be expected to fear the negative consequences of openly expressing negative emotions such as anxiety and anger toward someone else. After all, these emotional reactions may cause people to view them as unappealing or vulnerable which, in turn, may be troublesome for their relationships. Emotion regulation may be construed as a functional activity that maps onto the regulator's primary goals. If socially anxious individual's primary motive is to avoid negative social outcomes, limiting the amount of information shared with others seems to be consistent with the goal of minimizing the potential for humiliation or rejection.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though social anxiety is best conceptualized as a continuum, we have consistently used the term "socially anxious people" as a less cumbersome description of people scoring high on measures of social anxiety compared to those with lower scores.

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