



## Personality moderates the interaction between positive and negative daily events predicting negative affect and stress

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### ABSTRACT

A 30-day diary study examined personality moderators (neuroticism and extraversion) of the interaction between positive and negative daily events predicting daily negative affect and night-time stress. Multi-level analyses revealed positive daily events buffered the effect of negative daily events on negative affect for individuals low in neuroticism and individuals high in extraversion, but not for individuals high in neuroticism or individuals low in extraversion. Positive daily events also buffered the effect of negative daily events on that night's stress, but only for participants low in neuroticism. As such, this research linked today's events to tonight's stressfulness. This study advances our understanding of how neuroticism and extraversion influence within-person associations between positive and negative events predicting negative affect and stress.

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### 1. Introduction

Previous research indicates that positive and negative daily events influence negative daily mood (e.g., Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989; Clark & Watson, 1988; Stone, 1987). As an extension of this research, more recent studies have examined the interaction of positive and negative daily events predicting negative affect (David, Green, Martin, & Suls, 1997; Nezlek & Allen, 2006; Nezlek & Plesko, 2003). Most research that has explored this interaction predicting negative affect, however, has provided mixed evidence of a “buffering effect” (i.e., positive events mitigate the impact of negative events on negative affect).

Individual difference variables appear to influence within-person relations between events and moods (Bolger & Schilling, 1991; David et al., 1997; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000; Nezlek & Allen, 2006; Nezlek & Plesko, 2003). Therefore, the buffering effect of positive events may only be evident for some people. The primary goal of the current study was to determine whether neuroticism and extraversion moderated the buffering effect of positive events on the relation between negative events and negative affect. In addition, longitudinal findings suggest that positive events may buffer the effect of negative events on distress (Reich & Zautra, 1981; Shahar & Priel, 2002). The current research extends this past research by exploring personality moderators of the buffering effect of a day's positive events on the relation between that day's negative events and stress experienced that night.

#### 1.1. The interaction of positive and negative events: buffering

Research on positive events buffering the effect of negative events on affect has provided mixed results. Though some evidence suggests that positive events buffer the effect of negative events on negative affect (Nezlek & Allen, 2006), other research has failed to support this buffering effect (David et al., 1997; Nezlek & Plesko, 2003). Nezlek and Allen (2006) reported that positive events buffered the effect of negative events on high activation negative affect (e.g., guilty, afraid) and low activation positive affect (e.g., calm, relaxed). On the other hand, David et al. (1997) in a cross-sectional study and Nezlek and Plesko (2003) in a diary study failed to find evidence of the buffering effect. For example, David and colleagues (1997) reported a non-significant interaction between desirable and undesirable events predicting negative affect (see Nezlek & Plesko, 2003 for similar findings predicting daily affect). However, positive events have been shown to buffer the effect of negative events on other psychological outcomes, such as depressive symptoms (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Cohen, McGowan, Fooskas, & Rose, 1984; Nezlek & Allen, 2006; Nezlek & Plesko, 2003), evaluations of daily self-worth (Nezlek & Plesko, 2003) and distress (Reich & Zautra, 1981; Shahar & Priel, 2002).

Few studies have examined the trait-level moderation of the within-person interaction between positive and negative daily events predicting negative affect. Though Nezlek and Plesko (2003) tested for trait-level moderators of the daily events interaction, they did not find any such moderation when predicting negative affect. On the other hand, Nezlek and Allen (2006) found that depression and family support moderated the interaction between

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daily events predicting low activation positive affect (i.e. calm, satisfied and relaxed) and daily mood (i.e. difference between mean negative affect and mean positive affect), respectively. These researchers also reported that neuroticism and extraversion did not moderate the interaction between positive and negative events predicting affect. However, trait-level moderation (i.e., trait negative affect, self-esteem, and depression) of the interaction between positive and negative events has been found for outcomes such as daily self-esteem and depression (Nezlek & Plesko, 2003).

### 1.2. Neuroticism: moderation of the buffering effect

As a Big Five personality factor, Neuroticism characterizes individual differences in the predisposition to experience negative affect (e.g., Watson & Clark, 1984; McCrae & John, 1992; Costa & McCrae, 1980). People high in neuroticism (compared to those low in neuroticism) are more reactive to negative affect manipulations in the laboratory and negative events in everyday life (Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Larson & Ketelaar, 1991). Marco and Suls (1993) as well as Bolger and Schilling (1991) reported that neuroticism is indicative of a heightened sensitivity to stressful events and, subsequently, more negative affect and distress in both between- and within-subject analyses (c.f. David et al., 1997). Such findings suggest that neuroticism is an important contributor to daily negative affect and stress through its interaction with negative events.

Neuroticism may moderate the interaction between positive and negative events when predicting daily negative affect and night-time stress. Individuals high in neuroticism experience a heightened sensitivity to negative events due to poor coping skills (Gunthert, Cohen, & Armeli, 1999; Suls & Martin, 2005; Watson & Hubbard, 1996), ineffective emotion regulation (Kokkonen & Pulkinen, 2001a) and negative schemas (Robinson, Ode, Moeller, & Goetz, 2006), which may preclude these individuals from reaping the benefits of positive events in the face of many negative events. Moreover, for individuals high in neuroticism, negative mood has been shown to increase evaluation speed (Tamir & Robinson, 2004) and enhance performance on cognitively demanding tasks (Tamir, 2005). Therefore, individuals high in neuroticism may be motivated to maintain negative affect in order to obtain these performance effects. Neuroticism is also negatively associated with the savoring of positive events (Bryant, 2003; Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003), making individuals high in neuroticism even less disposed to the possible buffering effects of positive events. Based on these findings, the buffering effect of positive events may only be present among individuals low in neuroticism.

### 1.3. Extraversion: moderation of the buffering effect

Extraversion, another Big Five personality factor, is more closely related to positive affectivity (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1980; McCrae & John, 1992; Zelenski & Larsen, 1999). Although little research has explored the interaction of extraversion and negative events predicting affect, one study which has explored the interaction has failed to find evidence for this effect (Zautra, Affleck, Tennen, Reich, & Davis, 2005). In addition, Lucas and Diener (2001) reported that participants high and low in extraversion did not differ in their ratings of how they would feel after experiencing a set of hypothetical unpleasant events, suggesting that negative events may not evoke differential responses based on level of extraversion. Studies reporting the interaction between extraversion and positive events suggest that extraverts are more sensitive to reward cues, therefore making them more susceptible to the positive affect associated with such cues (Lucas, Diener, Grobb, Suh, & Shao, 2000; Zelenski & Larsen, 1999). Individuals high in extraversion are more reactive to positive affect inductions in the laboratory (Larson & Ketelaar, 1991) and they rate both pleasant social and non-social

situations more positively than their low extraversion counterparts (Lucas & Diener, 2001). On the other hand, some research contends that extraverts are not necessarily more reactive to positive events, but that they experience a greater trait level of positive affect (David et al., 1997; Lucas & Baird, 2004; Zautra et al., 2005).

Extraversion may moderate the interaction between positive and negative events predicting negative affect and night-time stress. Because some research reveals that extraverts are more sensitive to positive affect stimuli (Larson & Ketelaar, 1991; Lucas et al., 2000; Zelenski & Larsen, 1999) and positive events (Lucas & Diener, 2001), and more likely to savor positive events (Bryant, 2003; Wood et al., 2003), they may experience a buffering effect of positive events on the impact of negative events on negative affect and night-time stress. Therefore, the buffering effect of positive events may only be present among individuals high in extraversion.

### 1.4. Current study

The goal of the current study was to evaluate whether neuroticism and extraversion moderate the interaction between daily positive and negative events predicting daily negative affect and night-time stress. This research extends earlier findings, but is distinct from past research in several ways. The current research was concerned with participants' subjective experience of daily events as positive or negative. As such, participants' were asked to report the desirability (vs. undesirability) of events that had occurred each day, allowing participant ratings to determine whether an event was experienced as positive or negative. Therefore, though previous research has focused on more objective events (e.g., Nezlek & Allen, 2006; Nezlek & Plesko, 2003), the current research focuses on people's subjective interpretation of daily events.

Additionally, the current research expands past findings by exploring the day to day relations between positive and negative daily events predicting stress. Using a daily diary design, we are able to evaluate the within-person contingencies between daytime events and night-time stress, and personality moderators of this relationship. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore trait-level (i.e. neuroticism and extraversion) moderation of the buffering effect of daily positive events on night-time stress (as reported the following day). Finally, because depression is related to both negative affect and stress, and has some conceptual overlap with neuroticism, all of our analyses control trait-level depression.

### 1.5. Summary of the hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1.** We hypothesized a three-way interaction between neuroticism, positive events, and negative events predicting both negative affect and night-time stress. We predicted that for individuals high in neuroticism, daily positive events would not buffer the effect of daily negative events on negative affect or night-time stress (i.e. the slope between negative events and negative affect (night-time stress) will not differ based on the amount of positive events experienced that day by participants high in neuroticism). Conversely, for individuals low in neuroticism, daily positive events would buffer the effect of daily negative events on negative affect and night-time stress (i.e. the slope between negative events and negative affect (night-time stress) will be weaker on days participants low in neuroticism experience more (vs. fewer) positive events).

**Hypothesis 2.** We hypothesized a three-way interaction between extraversion, positive events, and negative events predicting both negative affect and night-time stress. We predicted that for individuals high in extraversion, daily positive events would buffer the effect of daily negative events on negative affect and night-time stress (i.e. the slope between negative events and negative affect

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