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## Psychological distress and cognitive emotion regulation strategies among farmers who fell victim to the foot-and-mouth crisis

Nadia Garnefski \*, Netty Baan, Vivian Kraaij

*Division of Clinical and Health Psychology, University of Leiden, P.O. Box 9555, 2300 RB Leiden, The Netherlands*

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### Abstract

This study focused on the relationship between the use of specific cognitive emotion regulation strategies and psychological distress among 288 farmers who had fallen victim to the foot-and-mouth crisis in The Netherlands. The specific cognitive strategies they used to handle the crisis were measured by the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ). Relationships were studied by means of Pearson correlations, multiple regression analyses and structural equation modelling. Positive relationships were found between psychological distress and self-blame, other-blame, rumination and planning. Negative relationships were found between psychological distress and positive refocusing and positive reappraisal. The results suggest that cognitive emotion regulation strategies may be a useful target for intervention.

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*Keywords:* Cognitive-coping; Depression; Anxiety; Intrusion; Avoidance; Foot-and-mouth crisis

*“Everything I worked for has gone. My life has been destroyed. I really don’t know what to do”*

*“All my animals were killed. It was awful. But I will survive. We have to go on and we will”*

Two farmers who fell victim to the foot-and-mouth crisis.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 71 5273774/54; fax: +31 71 5273619.  
E-mail address: [garnefski@fsw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:garnefski@fsw.leidenuniv.nl) (N. Garnefski).

## 1. Introduction

March 21, 2001, The Netherlands became the third country in Europe to fall victim to the foot-and-mouth disease. Following European rules, all cattle on affected farms and all cattle on farms within a 2-km radius around affected sites were killed and destroyed in an effort to stop the disease from spreading further. In addition, restrictive measures were taken for farms within a radius of 10km regarding the transport of their animals. Between March 21 and April 22 more than 270.000 animals were killed, turning the foot-and-mouth crisis into a major traumatic event for a large number of dairy farmers.

Studies in a wide range of populations have demonstrated that exposure to traumatic events may result in long-term psychological adjustment problems, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, high levels of intrusion and avoidance, and symptoms of depression or anxiety (e.g. Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000; Shalev, 1996). It is also known that a strong relationship exists between intensity of the trauma and subsequent psychological distress (Shalev, 1996). However, it has also been shown that not everyone who experiences a traumatic event goes on to develop psychological distress (Brewin et al., 2000). There is increasing evidence that (ongoing) psychological distress in response to the experience of negative life events or traumata may be associated with the use of maladaptive cognitive styles (Bryant, Moulds, & Guthrie, 2001).

One factor that has been hypothesised to be important in determining whether psychological problems will go on to develop, or not, is the cognitive emotion regulation strategies someone uses to deal with the traumatic event (Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001; Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2002). Recent studies have shown that the cognitive emotion regulation strategies of self-blame, rumination and catastrophising are related to the reporting of more symptomatology, while other strategies such as positive reappraisal are related to the reporting of less symptoms of psychopathology (Garnefski et al., 2001; Garnefski, Legerstee, Kraaij, van den Kommer, & Teerds, 2002; Garnefski, van den Kommer, et al., 2002; Kraaij et al., 2003; Kraaij, Pruyboom, & Garnefski, 2002). These findings suggest that by using certain cognitive strategies, people may be more vulnerable to developing psychopathology in response to negative life events or, the other way around, that by using other cognitive strategies, people may more easily tolerate or master negative life experiences. As these conclusions are based on the use of cognitive strategies considered from a *style* perspective, however, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the functionality of specific cognitive emotion regulation strategies in specific stress situations (e.g. Garnefski et al., 2001; Garnefski, van den Kommer, et al., 2002).

Although empirical studies on the functionality of specific cognitive strategies in specific stress situations are scarce, some data are available which suggest that coping effectiveness depends importantly on the type of stressful situation that the individual confronts (Thoits, 1995) and that some cognitive strategies may in certain circumstances even be associated with opposite outcomes. For example, certain forms of ruminative thinking or self-blame have been found to be helpful in coping with certain stressful life events (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Tedeschi, 1999). It has therefore been suggested that new studies should focus on questions such as whether strategies that are considered (in)adaptive in earlier studies are indeed (in)adaptive in all specific circumstances (Gross, 1999) and to identify the types of strategies which reduce distress or ill health in response to particular types of situations (Thoits, 1995). It may very well be true that a certain cognitive strategy

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