

Staying cool under stress: ASU researchers investigate strategies

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Researchers at Arizona State University show that having a more flexible approach to resolving an acute conflict interaction results in more frustration and anger. These are among the findings that Danielle Roubinov, an ASU doctoral student in clinical psychology, will present at the American Psychosomatic Society Annual Meeting on March 4. Roubinov and two other ASU researchers observed a sample of 65 undergraduate students role-playing a stressful task with a "neighbor" who was portrayed by a research assistant.

It is often assumed that remaining flexible by trying different strategies when negotiating a difficult interaction is optimal, but this may not be the case if the situation cannot be resolved. Researchers at Arizona State University show that having a more flexible approach to resolving an acute conflict interaction results in more frustration and anger.

These are among the findings that Danielle Roubinov, an ASU doctoral student in clinical psychology, will present at the American Psychosomatic Society Annual Meeting on March 4. Roubinov and two other ASU researchers observed a sample of 65 undergraduate students role-playing a stressful task with a "neighbor" who was portrayed by a research assistant (RA).

Participants were told that the neighbor was playing music too loudly and were instructed to ask the neighbor to turn down his or her music. During the interaction, the RAs followed a script of uncooperative responses such that the task could not be resolved.

"We categorized the verbal responses of participants during the task into seven types of negotiation strategies, including problem-solving and aggressive/threatening. Individuals who used a smaller set of strategies were considered less 'flexible' than those who used a greater variety of strategies," Roubinov said.

The ASU team, which included Melissa Hagan, a doctoral student, and Linda Luecken, associate professor of psychology, also looked at the intensity of participants' facial expressions of anger or frustration, and measured participants' biological response to the task using cortisol, a stress hormone.

"Our results indicated that greater flexibility may not be the healthiest approach," Roubinov said. "Unlike less-flexible participants, those who tried a greater variety of responses showed more intense facial expressions of anger and frustration. Cortisol levels in more flexible participants also reflected an unhealthier biological response to stress than the less flexible participants."

The findings in "Flexibility in responding to interpersonal conflict predicts cortisol and emotional reactivity" suggest that in an uncontrollable situation, individuals who use a smaller variety of verbal responses to stress may have more favorable outcomes than those who use a greater variety of responses. "Although being flexible in how you respond to different situations may be beneficial, continuously trying different ways to work out the same situation may lead to greater anger, frustration, and an unhealthier biological response," Roubinov said.

Source: Arizona State University

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