

Streamlined analysis could help people better manage their emotions

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Bipolar disorder is characterized by transitions between depression and mania.
Credit: Wikipedia

The many strategies people use to manage their emotions fall into three

core groupings, according to newly published research from the University at Buffalo.

Since a lot of psychopathology is related to difficulty in regulating emotions, the findings can potentially benefit researchers and clinicians trying to better understand and treat a range of psychological disorders, everything from anxiety to [substance abuse](#), by streamlining assessment and giving people the tools necessary to more constructively work with their emotions.

"The groupings can be useful for clinicians who are trying to better characterize the nature of the emotion regulation difficulties their clients are having," said Kristin Naragon-Gainey, an assistant professor in UB's Department of Psychology, and an expert on emotion and affect in mood and anxiety disorders. "Because it's not always feasible for researchers to assess every strategy, they may now be able to narrow down from the larger group into the core underlying groupings."

The findings were published in the April 2017 issue of the journal *Psychological Bulletin*.

Emotion regulation is a term that describes how people respond to and attempt to modify an [emotional](#) experience. Someone anxious about public speaking may use distraction to take their mind off a presentation in order to feel calmer.

"It's about trying to change your emotions. What are you doing? Where are you? What is your goal?" said Naragon-Gainey.

Emotion regulation becomes problematic when emotions can't be downgraded, like a lingering sadness that can't be managed, or if the strategy is unhealthy, such as substance abuse.

"There are different motivations for substance abuse, but one common motivation is that it's a means of emotion regulation," said Naragon-Gainey. "If a therapist has a client who is using drugs or alcohol to change their emotions in some way this research may help identify if that client is lacking in other skills."

For her analysis, Naragon-Gainey and a research team comprised of UB graduate students Tierney McMahan and Thomas Chacko, looked at hundreds of studies that reported correlations between different emotion regulation strategies to understand how they relate to one another.

Naragon-Gainey says people tend to use multiple strategies simultaneously. If one doesn't work then they'll move on to another. But it has been unclear to what extent these strategies are distinct.

Could the many strategies identified in a large body of research be synthesized into something much simpler and applied in a streamlined manner to psychopathology?

"What we found was that these strategies weren't so highly related that they seemed redundant," she said. "So people did fairly uniquely and specifically report on using certain strategies. Many of the strategies were related, but not everyone who used avoidance also uses rumination, for example."

The researchers identified three core groupings to describe 10 strategies within each group.

The first group included strategies related to attempts to evade emotions, including distraction and avoidance.

"It's associated with low mindfulness so that you're not aware of the present moment," said Naragon-Gainey. "Your thoughts and attention

are elsewhere and you're trying to feel better through that."

The second grouping involves a tendency to stay fixed on [negative thoughts](#) such as failure and self-blame. In this grouping, people try hard to put things out their minds, but nevertheless, can't stop thinking about the negative thoughts.

Although any strategy can be useful, those [strategies](#) in the third grouping, such as acceptance and problem-solving, are more likely to be useful across multiple situations.

Naragon-Gainey says she hopes to take the research further by asking subjects to assess their emotions on a daily basis. Traditionally, the researchers in the [emotion regulation](#) field ask about emotions sometimes long after the fact. It's convenient, but perfect recall is impossible.

"In the lab, we're sending people questions as they go about their day," she says. "This will provide a better sense of how well this applies to people's lives and give researchers even more confidence that we're getting at what's happening to people."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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