

Individuals' Well-Being Linked With When and How They Manage Emotions

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Reframing how we think about a situation is a common strategy for managing our emotions, but a new [study](#) suggests that using this reappraisal strategy in situations we actually have control over may be associated with lower well-being. The [findings](#) are published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“Our results caution against a ‘one strategy fits all’ approach, which may be tempting to recommend based on many previous findings regarding reappraisal as a strategy for regulating emotion,” says psychological scientist Peter Koval of Australian Catholic University. “Simply using any given emotion regulation strategy more (or less) in all situations may not lead to the best outcomes—instead, contextually-appropriate emotion regulation may be healthier.”

Recent work on emotion regulation has highlighted the fact that flexibility in using emotion regulation strategies is key to healthy functioning. Koval and his research team decided to investigate how situational context might play a role in the relationship between emotion regulation and well-being in people’s everyday lives.

The researchers recruited 74 adults to participate in a 7-day study that involved responding to periodic survey questions delivered via smartphone. The survey app sent prompts at random intervals of 40 to 102 minutes between 10:00 am and 10:00 pm each day, asking the participants whether they had “looked at things from a different perspective” and/or “changed the way [they] were thinking” in response to their feelings since the last prompt. Participants were also asked to rate how much control they felt they had over what had happened since the last prompt. For each question, participants could choose a response ranging from 0 (not at all) to 100 (very much so).

Before beginning the 7-day study, participants completed validated measures assessing symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and neuroticism, as well as measures of social anxiety and self-esteem. These measures provided the researchers an indication of participants’ well-being.

Results showed that participants successfully complied with the survey instructions, answering about 87% of the prompts delivered, on average. The researchers found no reliable associations between participants’ well-being and their overall use of reappraisal as a means of regulating emotion in daily life, in line with the notion that reappraisal is not a one-size-fits-all strategy.

The researchers did find, however, that participants who reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress, neuroticism, and social anxiety were more likely to use reappraisal in response to situations they perceived as controllable, whereas participants who reported higher well-being tended to use reappraisal more in situations they felt they had little control over.

“We found that people with higher well-being increased their use of reappraisal as contexts became less controllable, whereas individuals with lower well-being showed the opposite pattern,” Koval and colleagues explain in their paper.

Given that the study measured reappraisal use in daily life over a single week and assessed well-being on just a one occasion, the results do not tell us whether more situationally-appropriate use of reappraisal leads to greater well-being, or vice versa. Despite this, the researchers argue that the findings suggest that context—in this case, how much control an individual believes he or she has over situations—does make a difference in the outcomes of emotion-regulation strategies.

“When a situation can be directly changed, reappraisal may undermine the adaptive function of emotions in motivating action,” the researchers write.

Koval and colleagues are currently conducting a large follow-up study, in which they track participants’ emotion regulation in daily life over the course of 3 weeks. They plan on extending their work by examining additional emotion regulation strategies, contextual factors, and measures of well-being.

All data have been made publicly available via the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at <https://osf.io/j8zge/>. The complete Open Practices Disclosure for this article can be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>. This article has received the badge for Open Data. More information about the Open Practices badges can be found at <https://osf.io/tvyxz/wiki/1.%20View%20the%20Badges/> and <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/25/1/3.full>.

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