Calm, Cool, and Collected: Research on Affect and Emotion Regulation

February 27, 2011

Alicia Grandey

Sooner or later, we're all a slave to our emotions, whether we're yelling at the driver who just cut us off in traffic or crying after Bambi's mother dies. However, we are usually able to control or minimize these emotional outbursts to at least create the faÃ§ade of an "even keel" for those around us. But what does this suppression cost us? And do these submerged feelings surface in other ways we may not notice?

Researchers addressed these questions and others at the "Emotional Ups and Downs: Experiencing, Self-Regulating, and Capitalizing on Affect" theme program at the APS 21st Annual Convention. Psychologists from a variety of different fields (industrial/organizational, developmental, cognitive, and neuroscience) came together to share their latest findings on emotional regulation and how it subtly (and not-so-subtly) shades our interactions with others.

In fact, one's emotional state can affect interpersonal relationships from the very first meeting, as APS Fellow Nalini Ambady, Tufts University, related in her findings. "In our everyday interactions, we very often form impressions of other people and make decisions based on these first impressions," Ambady explained, as she discussed the importance of first impressions or "thin slice judgments" — very brief observations of another's behavior that can often be accurate and predictive. As an example, Ambady described several previous studies showing how comments made by subjects watching a brief video clip of a professor's behavior often matched end-of-semester reviews by the professor's students. Ambady conducted her own studies to determine how emotional states might influence thin slice judgments. After priming the subjects with videos designed to induce happiness, sadness, or no particular emotion at all, Ambady had them observe brief video clips of a teacher's nonverbal behavior and rate them on perceived effectiveness. She found that the "sad" subjects were less accurate (i.e., their ratings correlated less with end-of-semester evaluations by the teacher's students) than were the "no-emotion" and "happy" subjects, who both correlated equally. After running a similar experiment on subjects diagnosed with depression, Ambady determined that no matter whether the mood was transient or long-lasting, people who are sad tend to be less accurate at judging others based on quick impressions, and she theorized that this is likely due to the rumination and overthinking that often accompanies sadness and depression.

But our emotional states don't just affect our short-term judgments. Most of us are guilty of being a little too optimistic when assessing our own talents and skills or those of our close friends and family. Using fMRI data, Jennifer Beer, University of Texas at Austin, sought to determine whether we make these errors in judgment because we actively distort information to fit our views (*idealistic distortion*) or simply because we rely too much on informational-processing shortcuts. Beer's subjects rated a close other, such as a girlfriend or boyfriend; a non-close other, such as a roommate; and themselves in

comparison to an average peer on personality traits. Beer studied the fMRI data to observe which parts of the brain were activated. She found that the same areas were activated in all cases, but that there was less activity when assessing oneself and a close other. She proposed that our overly idealistic assessments are caused by a lack of cognitive control that is usually present when we judge people we aren't close to. Put simply, we mentally cut our loved ones some slack.

Stéphane Côté

Although controlling our emotions is clearly a challenge in everyday life, the task can be nearly herculean in the workplace. Emotional regulation has its pros and cons on the job — it can improve one's performance and a company's bottom line. But it can also increase an employee's stress level. Anybody who has worked in a customer-service position knows how hard it can be to maintain a smile and good humor in the face of an angry customer. Indeed, the effort may be more costly than we realize. Alicia Grandey, Pennsylvania State University, presented her research into "emotional labor" — emotional management to create a public facial or body display for a wage — and how it may result in added strain on employees. Although Grandey noted the organizational benefits that an employee's emotional labor brings (like increased customer satisfaction), the work creates "an estrangement; a separation of self and a feeling of alienation — â€˜my feelings are not my own and they are owned by the company.'" She urged further research into determining which situations are more or less stressful for workers (such as face-to-face communication versus voice-to-voice) and which factors may reduce the stress of emotional labor on the job (such as additional compensation or job autonomy). On the other hand, Stéphane Côté, University of Toronto, found the more beneficial aspects of emotional control in the workplace. Côté surveyed university employees and medical school students to see how both emotional intelligence and cognitive intelligence correspond with success at work and in school. He found that emotional intelligence and the ability to regulate emotion correlated with a higher socioeconomic standard and increased well-being, although those with high cognitive intelligence did not seem to benefit as much from high emotional intelligence as did those with lower cognitive intelligence.

Seeing how much practice we get regulating our emotions in our everyday lives, it's not surprising that we get better at it as we get older. "We are motivated, as older adults, to have a more emotionally gratifying life," said APS Fellow and Charter Member Fredda Blanchard-Fields, Georgia Institute of Technology. Older adults are often better than younger folks at reading a situation and tailoring their emotional response. In Blanchard-Fields' study, subjects watched films to induce certain emotions and then performed a memory task. Older and younger adults in the experimental group were told to downregulate their emotions while performing the task, but the controls were given no additional instructions. Blanchard-Fields found that older adults performed better when downregulating their emotions, whereas the younger adults' performance was diminished. However, ongoing work suggests that the type of downregulation strategy used makes a difference — that it is more costly for older adults to suppress the expression rather than the experience of an emotion.

Beyond simply helping us get by in our daily lives, the results of emotion studies may also provide valuable new approaches to the treatment of psychological conditions. APS Fellow and Charter Member Ann M. Kring, University of California, Berkeley, believes that because emotion problems are not often unique to a single psychological condition, a transdiagnostic approach — targeting treatments toward emotion problems rather than specific diagnostic categories — might be effective. "Before we can do that," she pointed out, "we need to better understand where the emotion has gone wrong in the first

place.” In a study of schizophrenia patients, Kring broke the experience of pleasure into constituent events (e.g., anticipation, consummation) while also examining the anhedonia that is a common symptom of schizophrenia. She found that schizophrenic patients feel the same pleasure as healthy individuals when they are “in the moment” — actually experiencing the event; the anhedonia only affects the anticipation of a pleasurable activity. Kring suggested emotion-focused meditation as one possible treatment, and her ongoing research will examine the effectiveness of this and other strategies.