

# What's Good, When, and Why?

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Promising new work in emotion regulation suggests that the means by which we decide how to regulate what we feel — and even recognize our own emotions — might be the most productive areas for examining the intricacies of mood. Prominent psychological scientists came together at the 24<sup>th</sup> APS Annual Convention to discuss the latest paradigm-shifting research in the field.

APS Fellow George A. Bonanno, Columbia University, who has worked with trauma victims for years to examine coping strategies, opened the panel by talking about normal resilience. The mental and biological processes that convert traumatic stress into posttraumatic stress disorder get a fair amount of attention from the mental health community, but the way that people cope successfully with trauma is less familiar to psychological science.

“Instead of focusing on why people experience psychopathology,” Bonanno urged, “we need to understand how people are resilient.”

In Bonanno’s work, he examines the variety of strategies that people use to cope with stressful life events. But rather than ask which coping strategies are universally good or universally bad, he hones in on *expressive flexibility*, which is the ability to choose among various means of expressing — and experiencing — emotions.

To measure this flexibility, Bonanno asked volunteers to look at emotionally charged pictures and either express their emotional response or conceal it. Another group rated these responses in terms of their emotional content. A comparison of the intensity of expressed and suppressed feelings provided a measure of expressive flexibility and demonstrated that it was robust within individuals over repeated tests.

What’s more, this measure matched up with subjects’ reactions to stressful life events. In groups of

people dealing with grief, the ones whose grief was most severe and protracted had the lowest scores on tests of emotional flexibility. Bonanno pointed out that these low-scoring individuals didn't just have less intense expression of emotional highs and lows, but also were less effective at repressing of emotions when asked to conceal their feelings.

"This is not about not having enough emotion," he explained, "it's really about modulation."

Next was Gal Sheppes from Tel Aviv University, Israel, whose work compares two different cognitive regulation strategies: *disengagement* and *reappraisal*. Each of these strategies can be beneficial — in the right context. By disengaging from an emotional event, people can circumvent all those pesky feelings, but they don't get to learn what those feelings are all about. By reappraising those emotions, people get to explore their emotional response, but reappraisal can easily lead to mulling, moping, and even obsession.

In a series of experiments involving emotionally charged pictures, Sheppes gave study participants the chance to disengage from a stimulus by skipping over it or to reappraise the stimulus by pausing on it. As he hypothesized, the more emotionally intense images were the ones participants tended to disengage from, suggesting that disengagement is normal when emotions run too high.

What surprised Sheppes, and convention attendees, was that participants still tended to skip over the emotionally heavy images even when they had financial incentive to reappraise them. The desire to disengage from difficult emotional processing outweighs even one of the most fundamental human motivators: money.

"We know less about our emotions than we think we do," Todd B. Kashdan, George Mason University, explained as he began to discuss his own work on people's efforts to understand their own feelings. Kashdan's work focuses on *meta-emotions*, a term he uses to describe a person's conceptual knowledge about emotional experience.

By comparing the emotional self-assessments of college students with their underage drinking habits, Kashdan found that students who were able to finely differentiate between complex emotions were a third less likely to binge drink. In other contexts, researchers have shown that complex understanding of emotions could lead to greater emotional regulation. While tools for measuring meta-emotions are still in development, a strong measure of emotional awareness promises to be an exciting new analytical tool in studies of emotion regulation.

Finally, Iris B. Mauss, University of California, Berkeley, talked about her work on cognitive reappraisal abilities (CRA), in which she asks how thinking about feelings can be more or less adaptive in different contexts. Studies have shown that reappraisal can shape an emotional experience, but how that shaping winds up being helpful or hurtful is unclear.

Even though Sheppes' work suggests that people avoid mulling over emotionally charged stimuli, Mauss's work suggests that CRA might be especially valuable when emotions are running high. Mauss examined the role of reappraisal in managing stress by asking community participants to explain their own life stresses and to take a CRA survey to measure their skills at contemplating life events. Sure enough, those with greater reappraisal ability were better at managing stress.

But reappraisal isn't always adaptive; Mauss offered the example of a boss firing an employee because the company is failing, as compared to a boss firing an employee because the employee is slacking off. In the first situation, the stress is uncontrollable, and reappraisal would amount to rumination and obsession — what Mauss called *emotion-based coping*. In the second situation, reappraisal can lead to relevant behavior changes and can make a situation better; it becomes *problem-based coping*. While problem-based coping is generally adaptive in that it allows an individual to change their behavior productively, emotion-based coping tends not to be.

Comparing the reappraisal abilities of participants with their reactions to stress, Mauss found that the participants who had control over their situations tended, unsurprisingly, to benefit from strong reappraisal abilities. But reappraisal skills ended up being a burden for those with less control over their situations. As Mauss explained, “Participants who are good at changing themselves suffer when they apply that ability in situations where they should actually apply their resources and their efforts to change the situation.”

What these lines of research suggest is that there aren't any coping mechanisms that are effective in every situation — each emotional regulation strategy has a time and a place when it can help out or hinder. But the flexibility to choose between different strategies is a kind of emotional intelligence that is always useful.