

People Sensitive to Criticism May Be Biased Toward Focusing on the Negative

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Being on the receiving end of criticism from loved ones is unpleasant for anybody, but for some people, it may go so far as to affect their mental health.

Research has shown that people who rate their loved ones as being highly critical of them are more likely to suffer relapses and face poorer outcomes when dealing with illnesses such as depression, substance abuse, OCD, agoraphobia, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.

Researchers believe that high sensitivity to criticism may be caused in part by cognitive biases toward interpreting ambiguous information negatively.

That's not to say, however, that loved ones are off the hook: Their criticism may be what makes a person more attentive to negative emotional signals and thus prone to a negative cognitive bias.

To find out how perceived criticism influences the way people process emotional information, Harvard psychological scientist Sara R. Masland and colleagues looked at whether people who report high levels of perceived criticism are, in fact, more likely to interpret ambiguous information negatively.

In the study, 76 adult participants rated how critical "the most emotionally important person" in their lives, such as a spouse, was of them.

They then completed two tasks designed to detect differences in attention to positive, negative, and neutral emotional stimuli.

The researchers hypothesized that people with high levels of perceived criticism would have a harder time ignoring negative emotional information that was irrelevant to the task than would people with low

levels of perceived criticism.

They also predicted that people reporting high levels of perceived criticism would be more inclined to interpret ambiguous information negatively.

In the first task, individuals who reported high perceived criticism needed more time to determine which direction an arrow was facing when it was flanked by angry faces rather than by neutral faces. In other words, they found the angry faces more distracting than did people who reported low perceived criticism.

In the second task, people high in perceived criticism were more likely than those low in perceived criticism to hear a negative word when a neutral and a negative word were blended together in an audio recording, such as “sad” rather than “sand.” According to the researchers, this “indicates that [perceived criticism] is associated with a negative interpretation bias.”

Masland and colleagues note important applications for research on perceived criticism in the mental health field:

“Because [perceived criticism] is so easy to assess, it may allow researchers and clinicians to identify individuals at risk for developing psychopathology as well as those likely to have poorer clinical outcomes,” the researchers conclude.

Masland, S., Hooley, J., Tully, L., Dearing, K., & Gotlib, I. (2014). Cognitive-processing biases in individuals high on perceived criticism. *Clinical Psychological Science*. DOI: [10.1177/2167702614529935](https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702614529935)