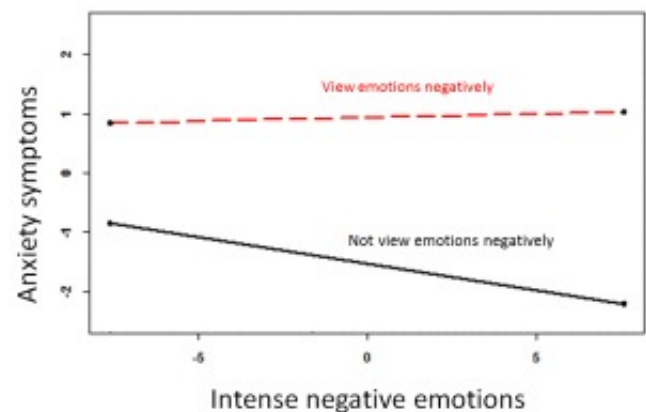


Intense negative emotion can relieve your anxiety symptoms

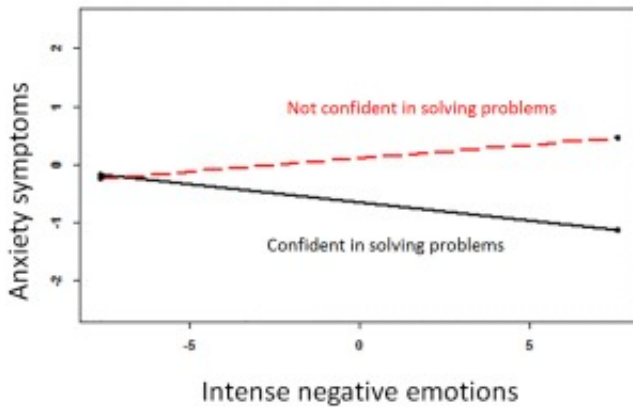
Both our everyday sense and host of psychological literature indicate people who have tendency to experience negative emotion (one may call them neurotics) are prone to suffer from anxiety problems. Such anxiety problems include generalized anxiety disorder, which is characterized by overwhelming worrying about almost anything and associated somatic symptoms (e.g., muscle tension and restlessness). On the other hand, psychological treatments for anxiety problems often involve technique to have people to experience intense negative emotion (called exposure).

This situation is a bit puzzling and begs a question: Is intense negative emotion therapeutic or toxic? This study indicated with a sample of 129 university students that experiencing intense negative emotions on a daily basis (not as therapeutic intervention) can reduce later generalized anxiety disorder symptoms, under certain conditions. These conditions were (a) one is not considering own negative emotions frightening or (b) one has confidence in solving daily encountered problems.



What the present researchers did was to measure generalized anxiety symptoms twice, 3 months apart, among 129 university students. Tendency to experience intense negative emotion was measured at the first time, by presenting brief emotion-eliciting scenes (e.g., I say or do something I should not have done, I see a child suffer, and so on) and asking the intensity of emotions they would feel.

What happened to those indicated feeling more intense negative emotion at the first time, when three months passed? When we focused on students who do not consider their emotion frightening or harmful, surprisingly, those with intense negative emotion at first indicated lower generalized anxiety disorder symptoms than their less emotional peers (Fig 1). In addition, when we focused on students who had confidence in tackling everyday problems (e.g., interpersonal affairs or work-related matters), those students with intense negative emotion again indicated lower generalized anxiety disorder symptoms than their less emotional peers (Fig 2).



Why such things happened? It is somewhat counter-intuitive. Here, it is fruitful to discuss adaptive function of emotions. Emotions, especially negative ones, are thought to work as an alarm to inform upcoming danger, important losses, or violation against one's rights. The work of emotion is to inform and have an individual prepare for such important matters, faster than deliberate thinking. This "fast" nature also implies emotion should dissipate soon after it alarms an individual. Alarm that keep ringing after it role ends is annoying to people.

We measured emotional intensity in a way to reflect situation-specific emotional response. Rather than asking how people are usually experiencing anxiety and/or sadness, we asked people to answer their intensity to experience emotions in each hypothetical situation. Such methods may reflect sharp emotional reactions in the face of emotion-eliciting events. Other measures of emotion may tap chronic (prolonged) experience of emotions.

When one thinks emotions frightening, s/he will be distressed by their occurrence, rather than utilizing emotions. Ironically, effort to avoid emotions may often back fire. It is because repeatedly asking "Has anxiety gone?" ironically remind one of their anxiety. In addition, when one is good at handling daily encountered problems, s/he will successfully utilize alarms to help solve stressful problems. For people who do not think emotions frightening or those who have confidence in dealing with daily problems, intense emotions in specific situations may work as keen alarms. Therefore, they may deal with daily stress successfully and may not be annoyed by their emotions. Therefore, maladaptive anxiety (generalized anxiety disorder symptoms) may decline.

Publication

[Emotional intensity reduces later generalized anxiety disorder symptoms when fear of anxiety and negative problem-solving appraisal are low.](#)

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