Research Article

When Asking ''Why'' Does Not Hurt

Distinguishing Rumination From Reflective Processing of Negative Emotions

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ABSTRACT—*Two experiments examined the psychological operations that enable individuals to process negative emotions and experiences without increasing negative affect. In Study 1, type of self-perspective (self-immersed vs. self-distanced) and type of emotional focus (what vs. why) were experimentally manipulated following the recall of an anger-eliciting interpersonal experience. A why focus on emotions from a self-distanced perspective (distanced-why strategy) was expected to enable "cool," reflective processing of emotions, in which individuals can focus on their experience without reactivating excessive "hot" negative affect. Findings were consistent with this hypothesis. Study 2 replicated these findings and furthermore demonstrated that (a) the degree to which individuals construe their recalled experience in abstract versus concrete terms mediates the effect of the distanced-why strategy and (b) the status of the recalled experience (resolved vs. unresolved) does not moderate the effectiveness of the distanced-why strategy. These findings help disentangle the mechanisms that may allow adaptive working through from those that lead to rumination.*

A fundamental assumption in theory, research, and clinical practice on emotion regulation is that it is helpful to process and work through negative emotions (e.g., Greenberg, 2002; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001; Rachman, 1981; Stanton, Kirk, Cameron, & Danoff-Burg, 2000). For example, confronting

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negative emotions is an essential component in the treatment of anxiety-related disorders (e.g., Foa & Kozak, 1986). In addition, the expression and analysis of one's emotions about unpleasant experiences has been associated with diverse physical and mental health benefits (e.g., Giese-Davis & Spiegel, 2002; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997; Stanton et al., 2000). However, efforts to constructively analyze emotions such as anger or sadness can easily become hazardous by entangling individuals in rumination that further increases negative affect (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Teasdale, 1988). In this vein, experimental studies have shown that focusing on one's negative feelings, and their causes and consequences, increases and prolongs negative affect (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998).

The question then is, how can individuals face negative emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them? We addressed this question in two studies, which were guided by the hot/cool systems model of self-regulation (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999)—a broad model of effortful control that draws extensively from the literature on the mechanisms enabling delay of gratification (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989) and is consistent with diverse findings and theorizing on self-regulation (e.g., Derryberry & Rothbart, 1997; Gross, 2001; Lieberman, Gaunt, Gilbert, & Trope, 2002; Posner & Rothbart, 2000; Trope & Liberman, 2003). In this model, stimuli can be mentally represented either in terms of their concrete, emotionally arousing, "hot" features or in terms of their abstract, informational, "cool" features. These representations are connected to two closely interacting but distinctive regulatory systems: Hot representations, on the one hand, elicit reflexive processing that is predominantly under stimulus control, leading to automatic approach and avoidance behaviors. Cool representations, on the other hand, enable cognitively driven, reflective processing that is more effortful and is instrumental in inhibiting automatic responses activated by hot representations.

In this model, negative emotional experiences can be mentally represented either in concrete, hot or in more abstract, cool terms. Whereas the former type of representation should serve to increase the intensity of felt emotions and activate automatic defensive scripts (i.e., avoidance, blame, intellectualization), the latter should allow one to contemplate emotional experiences without activating intense levels of affect. Therefore, a key to preventing rumination should involve representing events that activate strong negative emotions more abstractly, so that they can be processed in a more cool, reflective mode. We examined two variables that may influence the ability to mentally represent emotional experiences in this manner: type of *self-perspective* (self-immersed vs. self-distanced), which concerns the psychological vantage point people adopt while focusing on their emotions and experiences, and type of *emotional focus* (what vs. why), which concerns the content of people's thoughts about their experiences and emotions.

TYPE OF SELF-PERSPECTIVE: SELF-IMMERSED VERSUS SELF-DISTANCED

When people focus on past emotional experiences, they typically do so from a self-immersed, or egocentric, perspective, in which self-relevant events and emotions are experienced in the first person (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Both while events take place in real time and while people are working through past experiences, a self-immersed perspective is likely to direct people to focus selectively on the concrete features of their experiences (e.g., the specific chain of events and emotions felt), leading them to "relive" the experiences and increasing their negative arousal (McIsaac & Eich, 2004; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). Negative arousal, in turn, makes cognitive analysis of one's emotions difficult (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999).

However, in working through negative experiences, the self can also be "distanced," and individuals can process their negative feelings and experiences from an ego-decentered, third-person perspective (e.g., James, 1890; Libby & Eibach, 2002; Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). This self-distanced perspective should reduce the negative arousal that typically occurs when people attempt to work through negative emotions, allowing them to process their experiences more reflectively. These expectations are consistent with work on mindfulness and meditation (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992), and are reflected in therapeutic techniques that encourage people to consider negative feelings and experiences from diverse perspectives (e.g., Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Linehan, 1993; Teasdale et al., 2000).

BOUNDARY CONDITIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DISTANCING: INTERACTION WITH TYPE OF EMOTIONAL FOCUS

Although adopting a self-distanced perspective may be a useful first step in preventing rumination, we predicted that its usefulness in enabling reflective processing should depend critically on the type of emotional focus people adopt while focusing on their past experiences and feelings. We distinguished between two types of emotional focus—a focus on *what* emotions were being felt versus a focus on *why* one was experiencing those emotions. Although conceptually distinct, these two types of emotional focus are often merged in studies of emotional processing (Stanton et al., 2000) and rumination (e.g., Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). However, it seems necessary to distinguish between them because they may exert opposite effects on the types of mental representations that become activated (Mischel, 1974; Trope & Liberman, 2003; Watkins & Teasdale, 2001), thus affecting the ability to maintain a self-distanced perspective.

Specifically, a what focus is likely to activate relatively concrete and descriptive representations of the specific emotions experienced (e.g., "I felt enraged, violated, abandoned") that are likely to re-immerse the individual in the recalled negative experience, making it difficult to maintain a self-distanced perspective. Consequently, we expected that a what focus should lead to heightened levels of negative affect regardless of whether the individual initially adopts a self-immersed or a self-distanced perspective.

In contrast, we predicted that the form that a why focus takes should depend on the type of self-perspective one adopts. When the self is immersed in a negative experience and predisposed to focus on the concrete, descriptive features of that experience and the feelings it arouses (McIsaac & Eich, 2004), it should be relatively difficult to reason abstractly. Thus, focusing on the why from this self-immersed perspective should lead to concrete representations of reasons (e.g., "because he said I made no sense") and superficial attributions of blame (e.g., "because my partner was being horrible"), which, in turn, should lead to increased negative affect. However, when the self is distanced, a why focus should further facilitate the activation of relatively abstract representations of the reasons underlying the negative experience (e.g., "because we had a difference in opinion"). Such abstract construals should enable the individual to focus on his or her negative emotions, but without increasing negative arousal. Thus, we expected the adoption of a why focus from a self-distanced perspective to facilitate reflective processing of emotions and decrease negative affect.

THE PRESENT STUDIES

On the basis of this conceptualization, we hypothesized that reflective processing of negative emotions would be observed when individuals adopted a self-distanced perspective while engaging in a why focus (distanced-why condition). All other combinations of type of self-perspective and type of emotional focus (i.e., distanced-what, immersed-why, and immersed-what conditions) were predicted to elicit ruminative processing, resulting in increased negative affect. Study 1 tested this hy-

pothesis directly using a guided-imagery paradigm following the recall of an autobiographical anger-eliciting interpersonal experience. Using the same paradigm, Study 2 explored the proposed underlying processes. Specifically, it examined whether participants' construals of their recalled experience (concrete vs. abstract) mediated the effectiveness of the distanced-why strategy on attenuating emotional reactivity. Study 2 also examined a potential moderator likely to be both conceptually and clinically important, specifically, whether or not the negative event has been resolved.

STUDY 1

Method

Sample and Procedure
One hundred fifty-five undergraduate students (69 men, 86 women; mean age = 21.48 years, SD = 4.87 years) participated individually in partial fulfillment of a course requirement or to earn $10. Participants completed the study on their own, guided by taped instructions, which began by informing them that the present study explored how language and feelings interact. They were then asked to recall an interpersonal experience in which they felt overwhelming anger and hostility (procedure adapted from Ayduk, Mischel, & Downey, 2002). Subsequently, participants were instructed to adopt either a self-immersed perspective (e.g., "go back to the time and place of the experience and relive the situation as if it were happening to you all over again . . .") or a self-distanced perspective (e.g., "take a few steps back and move away from your experience . . . watch the conflict unfold as if it were happening all over again to the distant you . . ."). They were then asked to focus on either the specific feelings and sensations they were experiencing (*what* focus) or the reasons underlying their feelings (*why* focus) while actively maintaining the perspective they were initially told to adopt (e.g., "think about the reasons underlying your emotions" vs. "think about the reasons underlying the emotions of the distant you"). Hence, the design of the study was a 2 × 2 factorial (ns = 38, 39, 39, and 39 in the immersed-what, immersed-why, distanced-what, and distanced-why conditions, respectively). Subsequently, anger was assessed in all groups both implicitly, using a word completion task, and explicitly, using a self-report measure. Participants were then asked to rate their current level of emotional closeness to the person involved in their recalled experience. They were then debriefed, compensated, and dismissed.

Measures
Implicit Anger. A word completion task consisting of 21 word fragments that could be completed by filling in one or two letters was used as an implicit measure of anger accessibility (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997). Of the 21 word fragments, 7 could be completed as either neutral words or anger words (*insult, hate, mad, kill, anger, rage,* and *hit*),

matched for frequency using the *Educator's Word Frequency Index* (Zeno, Ivens, Millard, & Duvvuri, 1995). On average, participants completed 19.44 (SD = 1.59) of the 21 word stems with actual words. The mean number of critical fragments completed with anger words was 3.30 (SD = 1.48).

Explicit Negative Affect and Anger. Following the word completion task, participants completed the Negative Affect (NA) subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*; M = 1.76, SD = 0.68). Because anger was the specific emotion induced in our recall paradigm, we also computed a discrete anger index (i.e., responses to "hostile" and "irritable"; M = 1.93, SD = 0.98), following Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988).

Covariate: Level of Emotional Closeness. We reasoned that participants' current level of emotional closeness to the other person involved in their recalled experience (i.e., the individual they had an argument with) might influence negative affect. Therefore, we had participants rate their level of emotional closeness to the other person on a 7-point scale (M = 3.88, SD = 2.35). This variable was not related to experimental condition (F < 1).

Results
To test the hypothesis that anger and negative affect would be lower in the distanced-why group than in the other experimental groups, we conducted a planned contrast comparing the distanced-why condition against the average of the other three (distanced-what, immersed-what, immersed-why) while controlling for level of emotional closeness.

As predicted, relative to the other three groups, the distanced-why group displayed significantly less implicit anger, $F(2, 152)$ = 6.06, p < .05, d = 0.45; explicit anger, $F(2, 152)$ = 11.84, $p \leq$ .001, d = 0.69; and global negative affect, $F(2, 152)$ = 9.65, p < .005, d = 0.59 (see Fig. 1). Thus, participants who adopted a why focus while maintaining a self-distanced perspective manifested lower levels of anger on both explicit and implicit measures. In contrast, a focus on the reasons underlying one's emotions (why focus) without adopting a self-distanced perspective was ineffective in reducing anger and negative affect. A focus on what was felt (what focus), regardless of whether or not a self-distanced perspective was adopted, was equally ineffective.

STUDY 2

Study 2 was conducted to replicate and extend the basic findings from Study 1, focusing specifically on the distanced-why and immersed-why conditions. We chose to compare these conditions because they are the most relevant for disentangling rumination from reflective processing of emotions.

Study 2 had three goals. First, according to our theoretical analysis, the self-immersed perspective increases negative
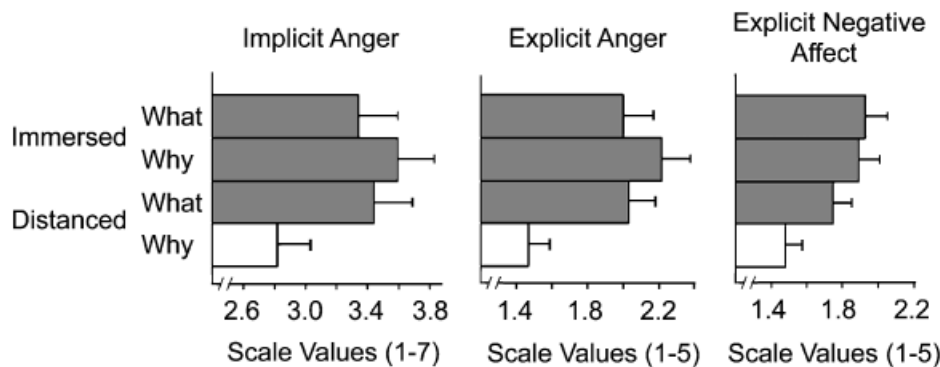
Fig. 1. Results from Study 1: implicit anger, explicit anger, and explicit negative affect as a function of experimental condition. Error bars represent 1 *SE*.

affect because it leads people to relive their past experiences and emotions in the present. To more directly assess this premise, we replaced the PANAS with questions assessing the extent to which and intensity with which participants reexperienced their original emotions while completing the imagery task. We hypothesized that such emotional reactivity would be lower in the distanced-why than in the immersed-why condition.

Second, Study 1 did not assess whether the recalled conflict was resolved at the time of the imagery task. However, recalling an unresolved negative experience is likely to be more affectively charged than recalling a resolved experience and therefore might influence the effectiveness of the distanced-why strategy. Therefore, as a first step toward examining the generalizability of the distanced-why strategy, this study also examined whether the status of the conflict recalled moderated its effectiveness.

The final goal of this study was to directly test the hypothesis regarding the mediating mechanisms underlying the "cooling" effect of the distanced-why strategy. As described earlier, we predicted that engaging in the distanced-why strategy (compared with the immersed-why strategy) would lead participants to construe their experience in more abstract and less concrete terms, and that these construals would, in turn, mediate the effect of condition on emotional reactivity. To examine this hypothesis, we asked participants to describe the stream of thoughts they had during the imagery task in open-ended essays, which were then coded.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Participants were 133 undergraduate students (62 men, 71 women; mean age = 21.60 years, *SD* = 4.65 years). The procedures were identical to those of Study 1, with the following exceptions. Subsequent to the manipulation of type of self-perspective (distanced vs. immersed), all participants were instructed to focus on the reasons underlying their feelings (why focus) while actively maintaining the perspective they were

initially told to adopt; no participants were instructed to engage in a what focus. At the end of the imagery task, participants described in writing the stream of thoughts they experienced during the task. They then indicated (a) the extent to which and intensity with which they reexperienced their original emotions during the imagery task and (b) the status of their recalled conflict (resolved vs. unresolved). Ten participants were excluded from the analyses because their essays revealed that they did not follow the instructions. Exclusions were not significantly related to experimental condition ($t \leq 1$).

Measures

Extent and Intensity of Emotion. Participants rated both the extent to which and the intensity with which they reexperienced during the experiment the original negative emotions they felt in the actual conflict. Ratings were made on scales from 1 (*not at all, not intense at all*) to 7 (*a lot, very intense*). These variables were highly correlated, $r(123) = .76$, $p < .001$, and thus collapsed to form a single index of emotional reactivity ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.53$).[1]

Concrete Versus Abstract Construals. Two independent judges, blind to experimental condition, rated the essays on the extent to which they reflected concrete and abstract construals, using a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 2 (*very much*; all interjudge rs > .74, ps < .001).

Concrete construals were defined as (a) *"what" statements* describing the specific chain of events, behaviors, or emotions experienced (e.g., "He told me to back off") and (b) *blame attributions* that ascribed fault to the partner without providing reasons (e.g., "He was mean"). Judges rated separately whether each essay included any "what" statements (0–2) or blame

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[1]The mean emotional reactivity levels observed in this study were comparable to those observed in prior research using similar recall tasks (e.g., Richards, Beal, Seagal, & Pennebaker, 2000; Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998), the results of which have been shown to predict important real-world mental and physical health outcomes (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; for reviews, see Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001, and Smyth, 1998).

attributions (0–2). These ratings were then averaged to form a single composite index of concrete construals ($M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.42$), $r(123) = .29$, $p \leq .001$.

Abstract construals were operationalized as (a) metacognitive *insight* statements describing a "realization" about or change in the way the participant understood the causes underlying the event, his or her feelings, or his or her partner (e.g., "It may have been irrational, but I understand his motivation . . .") and (b) metacognitive *closure* statements in which the participant indicated he or she was assessing the past experience from a broad perspective, taking into account past and current experiences to make sense of the past (e.g., "Looking back at it now, I can see why it happened . . ."). Judges rated each essay for the presence of insight statements (0–2) and closure statements (0–2). The distribution for closure statements was positively skewed (skew = 2.41) and was normalized by a square-root transformation ($M = 0.16$, $SD = 0.36$). Insight and closure ratings were averaged to form a single composite index of abstract construals ($M = 0.28$, $SD = 0.41$), $r(123) = .29$, $p \leq .001$.

Covariate: Level of Emotional Closeness. Participants rated their level of emotional closeness to the other person involved in the recalled experience on a 7-point scale ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 2.27$). This covariate was not related to experimental condition ($t < 1$).

Covariate: Conflict Status. Participants indicated whether the conflict they recalled during the imagery task was resolved (0 = yes, 1 = no). Thirty-nine percent of the recalled conflicts were unresolved. There was a marginal trend for participants in the immersed-why condition to report more unresolved conflicts than those in the distanced-why condition, $t(121) = 1.77$, $p = .08$.

Results

Emotional Reactivity and Construals of Conflict

A one-way analysis of covariance was performed on each dependent variable, with condition (immersed-why coded as 0, distanced-why coded as 1) as the between-subjects predictor variable and emotional-closeness and conflict-status scores as covariates. As expected, emotional reactivity was lower in the distanced-why than in the immersed-why condition, $F(3, 119) = 4.75$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.46$. In addition, the essays of participants in the immersed-why condition contained significantly more concrete construals, $F(3, 119) = 8.18$, $p \leq .005$, $d = 0.50$, and marginally fewer abstract construals, $F(3, 119) = 3.26$, $p = .07$, $d = 0.35$, than the essays of participants in the distanced-why condition (see Table 1).

Does the Type of Conflict Recalled Moderate the Effectiveness of the Distanced-Why Strategy?

As expected, participants who recalled unresolved negative experiences during the imagery task displayed higher levels of emotional reactivity ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.45$) than participants

TABLE 1

Mean for the Dependent Variables in Study 2

Measure	Experimental condition	
	Immersed-why ($n = 57$)	Distanced-why ($n = 66$)
Emotional reactivity	4.58 (1.46)	3.90 (1.52)
Concrete construals	0.74 (0.43)	0.54 (0.38)
Abstract construals	0.21 (0.36)	0.35 (0.43)

Note. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

who recalled resolved experiences ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.53$), $t(121) = 2.37$, $p < .05$. However, this variable did not moderate the effect of experimental condition on either emotional reactivity ($t \leq 1$) or the construal variables ($ts \leq 1$). These results indicate that the distanced-why condition attenuated emotional reactivity for both resolved and unresolved conflicts.

Do Construals Mediate the Link Between Strategy and Emotional Reactivity?

Concrete and abstract construals were negatively correlated, $r(123) = -.23$, $p < .01$. Therefore, scores for abstract construals were subtracted from scores for concrete construals to form a single construals index, with higher scores indicating a greater number of concrete construals relative to abstract construals. Mediation analysis was conducted following Baron and Kenny (1986), controlling for conflict status and emotional closeness. As in the analysis of covariance, the predictor variable, experimental condition, was significantly related both to the outcome variable, emotional reactivity ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .05$), and to the mediator, concrete (relative to abstract) construals ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .005$). Of critical importance for mediation analysis, the relationship between construals and emotional reactivity was also significant ($\beta = .27$, $p < .005$), and controlling for this effect significantly reduced the size of the effect of condition on emotional reactivity ($\beta = -.13$, n.s.; Sobel's $z = -2.00$, $p < .05$). These results suggest that lower levels of concrete (relative to abstract) construals mediated the effect of the distanced-why strategy on emotional reactivity.[2]

DISCUSSION

The present findings begin to shed light on the psychological mechanisms that enable individuals to process painful experiences in ways that reduce anger and negative affect. Specifically, the findings point to two critical mental operations that function in tandem to facilitate the cool, reflective processing of negative emotions: (a) a self-distanced rather than self-immersed perspective and (b) a focus on the reasons underlying the emotions experienced rather than a focus on what one experienced.

[2]The reverse mediation was not significant (Sobel's $z = 1.64$, $p = .1$).

Theoretically, the combination of these two operations is important because jointly they serve to attenuate emotional reactivity by directing the individual's attention to a less concrete and more abstract analysis of his or her experience. Thus, the individual can re-represent the experience and the emotions it elicited in relatively cool cognitive terms, making sense of them without reactivating their aversiveness (Metcalfe & Mischel, 1999).

A focus on understanding and analyzing one's emotions by asking "why do I feel that way?" is at the heart of diverse therapeutic strategies for working through emotional distress. The present findings point to a boundary condition that delineates when "why" processing is likely to be cool and abstract, resulting ultimately in the attenuation of negative affect, and when it is likely instead to trigger rumination and hot processing. The studies show that asking "why" while one is immersed in an egocentric self-perspective, rather than helping to reduce negative affect, may in fact have the opposite effect, functioning to enhance distress.

It is noteworthy that the processing enabled by the distanced-why strategy is different from both emotional avoidance (e.g., distraction, suppression) and intellectualization (being overly abstract and analytic while repressing emotion) because the emotions are faced (i.e., participants were specifically asked to focus on their emotions) and experienced to some degree, rather than avoided and not felt. This kind of processing is also different from rumination because the emotions are processed, but without activating excessive negative affect. We perceive the distanced-why strategy instead as one that capitalizes on the unique benefits associated with both emotional approach and emotional avoidance strategies in that it functions to downregulate emotional reactivity, as avoidance strategies do when successfully implemented, while simultaneously allowing the individual to focus on and work through negative feelings, a hallmark feature of adaptive emotional approach strategies. Thus, we refer to this kind of processing as "cool," not "cold," processing.

A key question that was not addressed in these studies concerns the long-term impact of the distanced-why strategy. Prior research indicates that strategies and interventions that facilitate abstract thinking about negative past experiences are associated with long-term physical and mental health benefits (e.g., Mergenthaler, 1996; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001). In this vein, the fact that participants in the distanced-why condition (relative to those in the immersed-why condition) displayed a greater tendency to mentally represent their recalled experiences in more abstract and less concrete terms is suggestive of the potential long-term benefits that this strategy may provide. Future research should examine whether these changes in people's mental representations are long lasting, and whether they lead to declines in emotional disturbances over time. To the extent that the distanced-why strategy functions in this capacity, it may provide an alternative route to fulfilling the two criteria,

identified in previous literature, for successful emotional processing—(a) activating an affective memory and (b) modifying that memory with new information that decreases the frequency of future negative responses (Foa & Kozak, 1986).

These studies point to several promising directions for future research, raising a host of new questions. What physiological mechanisms mediate the effectiveness of the distanced-why strategy? Do its beneficial effects generalize to different emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression) and apply to clinical populations? On a broader level, as research on this topic continues, it will become increasingly important to understand not only when and under what conditions the distanced-why strategy is likely to be effective, but also when it is likely to be ineffective and when more "pure" types of emotional avoidance (e.g., distraction) or approach (e.g., exposure) may be more adaptive. Thus, although many questions remain unanswered, the present results take the literature one step further in unpacking the adaptive and maladaptive elements involved in emotional processing.

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