

Smart to Feel Worried: The Linkage between Emotional Intelligence and Trait-Consistent Mood State

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Abstract

According to the instrumental approach to emotional regulation, individuals may at times deliberately seek to experience negative, rather than positive emotions, in order to facilitate cognitive performance. This is particularly the case in research examining trait-consistent mood states. Tamir (2005) for example, showed that neurotic individuals deliberately increased their levels of negative mood in order to enhance their cognitive performance. However, we hypothesize that this tendency to deliberately gravitate towards experiencing negative mood amongst high-neurotic individuals is also based on their individual ability to self-regulate emotions to match task demands. In the present study, we examine the interactive effects of negative affect, trait neuroticism and emotional intelligence in predicting cognitive performance. 101 undergraduate psychology students participated in a laboratory experiment in which they were induced to feel negative mood (worry), before being asked to complete a cognitively-demanding anagram task. We hypothesized a three-way interaction effect between negative affect, neuroticism and emotional intelligence, and tested our hypothesis via a combined method of three probing strategies— on the basis of face validity, the pick-and-point approach and through slope difference tests (Dawson & Richter, 2006). Results indicate that emotional intelligence is useful for both high- and low-neurotic individuals in positively influencing cognitive task performance under negative mood conditions. Results also showed that emotional intelligence enhances the cognitive performance of neurotic individuals in low negative affect conditions. The results suggest that emotional intelligence also influences the extent to which high- neurotic individuals are able to regulate their emotions to perform better in cognitively-demanding tasks.

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