



# The Behavioral Emotion Regulation Questionnaire: Development, psychometric properties and relationships with emotional problems and the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire



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## ABSTRACT

A new questionnaire, the Behavioral Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (BERQ) was developed. This questionnaire consists of 5 scales and assesses one's behavioral style or strategies of responding to stressful events to regulate emotions. It is the first questionnaire that measures behavioral coping only and complements the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) which measures cognitive coping. In a sample of 457 adults from the general population the psychometric properties of the BERQ (measuring dispositional coping) and its relationship with well-being and the CERQ were examined. Principal component analyses supported the allocation of items to the subscales, with alphas of all scales being high. All BERQ scales correlated significantly with symptoms of depression and anxiety. Higher use of Seeking Distraction, Actively Approaching and Seeking Social Support was related to fewer depression and anxiety symptoms, suggesting these are more adaptive strategies. Higher use of Withdrawal and Ignoring was related to more depression and anxiety symptoms, suggesting these are less adaptive strategies. The BERQ and CERQ scales were mainly small to moderately correlated with each other. The results suggest that it is important to pay attention to behavioral coping in the development of intervention programs for mental health problems.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Exposure to negative life events has generally been found to be associated with psychopathology across the life span (Kraaij & De Wilde, 2001). Identifying processes that protect or make people more vulnerable to the effects of stressful life events is important for the development of intervention programs for people with emotional problems. The ability to cope with stressful events and to regulate emotions has been found to play an important role in the relationship between stressors and psychopathology (Compas, Connor-Smith, & Jaser, 2004; Sloan et al., 2017).

There are many definitions regarding coping and emotion regulation and these terms are used somewhat interchangeably. In both concepts regulatory processes play a central role. In the case of coping the regulatory processes occur in response to a stressful event, whereas in emotion regulation the regulatory processes occur in response to the presence of an emotion where the emotion can arise from a stressor or not (Compas et al., 2017). In the present study we will connect to the

definitions of coping by Lazarus and Folkman “Constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (1984; p.14) and by Compas et al. (2001) “Conscious and volitional efforts to regulate emotion, cognition, behavior, physiology, and the environment in response to stressful events or circumstances” (2001, p. 89). These definitions have in common that they highlight the role of coping as a process of responding to stress. In addition, they both emphasize coping as a controlled, effortful process, meaning they require conscious, purposeful, and intentional thoughts and behaviors (Compas et al., 2017). The definitions both mention cognitions and behavior to play a role in coping with stressful events to regulate emotions. However, existing coping measures often include strategies that can both be carried out through cognitive and behavioral channels (Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001). Garnefski et al. (2001) argued that cognitive and behavioral coping should not be ranged in one and the same dimension, because thinking and acting are different processes used at different points in time. Therefore, as a first step, they developed a questionnaire (the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire [CERQ]) to measure cognitive coping strategies, while

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excluding the dimension of behavioral strategies. The CERQ appeared to have good psychometric properties (Garnefski et al., 2001; Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2002).

Cognitive coping strategies indeed have been shown to play an important role in the relationship between stressors and well-being. Across samples and stressful events significant relationships were found between Rumination, Catastrophizing, Self-blame (positive) and Positive Reappraisal and Putting into Perspective (negative) on the one hand and depressive symptoms on the other hand (Garnefski, Boon, & Kraaij, 2003; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2006; Schroevers, Kraaij, & Garnefski, 2007). The CERQ has been translated and validated in numerous languages. Cross-cultural comparison between European countries (Potthoff et al., 2016) and Arabic-speaking countries (Megreya, Latzman, Al-Attayah, and Alrashidi, 2016) showed that there were strong relationships between cognitive coping strategies and psychopathology in all countries.

### 1.2. The development of the Behavioral Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (BERQ)

As mentioned before, both cognitions and behavior play an important role in coping with stressful events to regulate emotions. The first step of developing the CERQ resulted in an extensive body of literature showing the importance of cognitive coping strategies in this regard. As a second step, it would be interesting to know more about the role of the behavioral strategies. This information could help in developing integrated cognitive and behavioral intervention programs. In addition, it would be interesting to study the relationships between cognitive and behavioral coping to clarify their unique or overlapping role in the adaptation to stressful events. Earlier studies already showed that behavioral coping strategies play an important role in the relation between stressful events and well-being. In a meta-analysis (Kato, 2015) it was found that active coping and seeking social support were both significantly related to a higher level of well-being. In addition, behavioral disengagement was significantly related to lower levels of well-being. Furthermore, another review study reported that distraction has been found to be an effective strategy in dealing with negative life events (Joormann & Stanton, 2016). However, these studies did not include coping measures that were purely behavioral. Self-Regulation Questionnaires (coming from research on Self-Determination Theory) focus on planning, guiding and monitoring one's behavior (Neal & Carey, 2005). While these measures are valuable when studying behavior change in order to achieve one's goals, they are not focusing on a controlled process of responding to stress in a behavioral way. Such an instrument does not exist yet. Therefore, we developed a new instrument, The Behavioral Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (BERQ).

To guide the scale's content, we used the same theory-based or "rational" approach as used in the development of the CERQ (Garnefski et al., 2001). In formulating the dimensions of behavioral coping we made use of existing coping measures. The strategy was to consider coping strategies from these existing measures, either by using and reformulating the behavioral dimension (as far as they were in the measure), by "transforming" non-behavioral coping strategies into behavioral dimensions or by adding new strategies on "rational" grounds. For these purposes we especially consulted and/or made use of the following coping measures: the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS: Endler & Parker, 1990, 1994; Parker & Endler, 1992), the COPE (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989), and the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ: Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). During the development various pilot studies were performed, starting with an initial pool of 32 items. During this process, items with weak loadings were revised or discarded. A total set of 20 items remained. Depending on the introduction of the questionnaire, the BERQ can be used to measure one's behavioral *style* of responding to threatening or stressful life events (dispositional coping), or one's behavioral *strategies* that are used in response to a particular stressful event or situation (situational coping).

**Table 1**  
Factor structure of BERQ: items listed by a priori assignment to scales.

Scale name	Items	Factor loadings
Seeking Distraction	I engage in other, unrelated activities	0.79
	I set my worries aside by doing something else	0.86
	I do other things to distract myself	0.89
	I engage in an activity which makes me feel good	0.83
Withdrawal	I avoid other people	0.87
	I withdraw	0.93
	I isolate myself	0.94
	I close myself off to others	0.92
Actively Approaching	I try to do something about it	−0.85
	I get to work on it	−0.91
	I take action to deal with it	−0.90
	I do whatever is required to deal with it	−0.87
Seeking Social Support	I look for someone to comfort me	0.88
	I ask someone for advice	0.85
	I share my feelings with someone	0.90
	I look for someone who can support me	0.92
Ignoring	I move on and pretend that nothing happened	0.84
	I repress it and pretend it never happened	0.90
	I behave as if nothing is going on	0.87
	I block it out	0.86

The BERQ is a self-report questionnaire that can be administered to people aged 12 years and older (similar to the CERQ).

The questionnaire we developed includes five conceptually distinct scales. Each scale consists of four items (see Table 1 for the items) and refers to what you do following the experience of stressful events. The scales are:

Seeking distraction, which refers to distracting yourself from your emotions by doing something else, in order to cope with the stressful event.

Withdrawal, which refers to drawing yourself back from situations and social contacts to deal with the stressful event.

Actively approaching, which refers to active behavior of yourself to deal with the stressful event.

Seeking social support, which refers to actively sharing emotions and asking for support and advice in order to cope with the stressful event.

Ignoring, which refers to ignoring and behaving like nothing has happened in order to deal with the stressful event.

Based on the literature (Joormann & Stanton, 2016; Kato, 2015), it was expected that Seeking Distraction, Actively Approaching and Seeking Social Support were positive ways of handling stressful events and that Withdrawal and Ignoring were negative ways to handle stressful events.

Aim of the present study is to report on the psychometric properties of the BERQ, such as the factor structure, the Cronbach's alphas, interscale correlations and test-retest correlations. Means and standard deviations of the scales will be presented. In addition we will report on the correlations of the BERQ scales with measures of depression, anxiety and the CERQ scales. We will do this in a general population sample consisting of adults.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

A total of 457 adults participated in the present study. Their mean

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