



## Positive daily experiences can buffer the negative effects of daily stress: A conceptual replication



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### ABSTRACT

The present study replicates previous research demonstrating that daily positive events can buffer the effects of daily stress on well-being. The present study differs from previous research in two ways. First, we examined buffering effects among a sample of adults residing in the community. Previous research studied student samples. Second, we measured daily stress more directly (reports of events) than in previous studies (checklists). The present study replicated key findings from previous research. Within-person relationships between daily stress and daily well-being were weaker on days when daily events were more positive than on days when they were less positive. The results support the contention that positive daily experiences can buffer the negative effects of daily stress on daily well-being.

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### 1. Introduction

The present paper describes the results of a conceptual replication of two previous studies (Nezlek & Allen, 2006; Nezlek & Plesko, 2003) that demonstrated that positive daily events can diminish the strength of the relationships between daily negative events and well-being. We thought a conceptual replication of these results was needed because both studies used the same measures of events and outcomes and studied American collegians. The present study used different measures of daily events and well-being and examined the buffering effect in a sample of adults living in Poland.

Similar to the previous two studies, participants in the present study answered a series of questions at the end of each day for two weeks. These questions concerned their daily experiences and their daily well-being defined in terms of affect, self-esteem, and other measures of self-evaluation. The analyses examined the extent to which relationships between the stress of daily events and well-being varied as a function of how positive daily events were.

For present purposes, we relied on the definition of a buffering effect offered by Cohen and Wills (1985, p. 310) in their review of research concerning the buffering effects of social support. They emphasized that buffering refers to a “Stress X Support interaction” in the prediction of well-being not to a main effect for support (i.e., people with more support feel better). Although Cohen and Wills discussed how trait levels of social support buffer the effects of stress, there is no reason to limit the conceptualization of a buffer to either social support or to trait level constructs. We should note however, that the bulk of research on buffering stress appears to concern how trait social support buffers reactions to stress.

The possibility that positive experiences might buffer the effect of negative experiences is consistent with the general emphasis of Fredrickson’s Broaden and Build Model (e.g., Fredrickson, 2013). Fredrickson describes the results of numerous studies that indicate that positive emotions can offset or counter the effects of negative emotions to a degree greater than would be expected by a simple additive model. Although the level of analysis of much of the work Fredrickson and colleagues have done is finer than the level of analysis of the present study, the mechanisms Fredrickson describes may still operate at the more macro level of the present study. We return to this issue in the discussion section.

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The present study examined buffering at the within-person level of analysis, an approach consistent with an increasing interest in within-person variability among personologists. Moreover, we thought that the within-person level of analysis was particularly appropriate to study reactions to stress. By collecting data from the same person across time, we were able to model how daily well-being varied as a function of daily stress. In turn, by collecting data about daily positive experiences we were able to model how daily stressfulness and positivity interacted in the prediction of well-being.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were adults living in or near Warsaw, Poland. They responded to notices posted on internet sites for participants in a “study about everyday functioning.” As part of the study participants completed the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (Sheehan et al., 1998), and individuals who had a current or past history of psychiatric disorders were excluded from the analyses (22 of the 153 participants who provided diary data). For the remaining participants ( $N = 131$ ), the mean age was 36.9 ( $SD = 14.1$ , range 16–71), and 88 were women. Participants were paid approximately \$60. At an introductory session, participants were told about the study and how to use a website to provide their daily reports. For two weeks, at the end of each day participants logged onto this website and answered questions about their daily well-being and the events that had occurred to them that day. Sample sizes were determined in part by estimates of the coverage of confidence intervals provided by Maas and Hox (2005). Their work indicated that with 130 level 2 units and 14 level 1 units there is only a 5% error rate for coverage of the 95% confidence interval.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Daily well-being and daily events

We defined daily well-being in terms of affect, self-esteem, depressogenic adjustment, rumination, and how much people worried. For affect, we relied upon a circumplex model (Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1998), a combination of positive-negative, active-deactive emotions. Each of these four combinations was measured with three items. All items started with the stem “Today, I felt...”, and participants responded using 7-point scales with endpoints labeled 1 (“Did not feel this way at all”) to 7 (“Felt this way very strongly”). Positive active affect (PA) was defined in terms of happy, proud, and excited/enthusiastic, positive deactive affect (PD) was defined in terms of calm, satisfied, and relaxed, negative active affect (NA) was defined in terms of upset, stressed, and angry, and negative deactive affect (ND) was defined in terms of sad, bored, and disappointed.

Daily self-esteem was measured with three items taken from Rosenberg (1965): Today, I felt that I was a valuable person, at least as good as others; Today, I felt like a failure (reversed); and Today I'm satisfied with myself. Daily depressogenic adjustment was measured using three items based on Beck's (1972) triad: Thinking about today in general how positive were your thoughts about yourself? How well did things go today? Today, how optimistic are you about how your life (in general) will be tomorrow? We measured daily worry with three items based on Meyer, Miller, Metzger, and Borkovec (1990): How much did your worries overwhelm you today? How much today you were not able to stop worrying once you've started to worry? How much did you worry today? Daily rumination was measured with three items based on

Trapnell and Campbell (1999): How much today did you “ruminate” or dwell on things that happened to you? How much today did you play back over in your mind how you acted in a past situation? How much time today did you spend rethinking things that are over and done with? All of these items were answered using 1–7 scales, scored so that higher numbers indicated higher self-esteem, better adjustment, and more worrying. NB: All items were translated and backtranslated by researchers fluent in both English and Polish.

#### 2.2.2. Daily events

When describing the events that occurred each day, participants were told to “recall all the important events that happened today.” Using 7-point scales anchored with 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*, participants rated each event in terms of stressfulness, positivity, importance, and presence (how mindful they were during the event). Using a 10-category system, they also indicated what occurred. In this article we consider only ratings of stressfulness and positivity. The ratings for these items were “how stressful was this event for you and how positive was this event for you?” For each event, a new screen and set of responses appeared, and each day participants could describe as many events as they wanted to describe.

We conceptualized the buffering effect of positivity in terms of a within-person interaction between positivity and stress. We created the term representing this interaction by multiplying daily stress and daily positivity scores. To do this we calculated the mean positivity and stress of the events people reported each day. Stress and positivity ratings were centered on each person's mean stress and positivity (the mean was subtracted from the daily score). These centered scores were then cross-multiplied to create the interaction term. See Nezlek (2011, pp. 36–41) for an explanation of this procedure.

### 2.3. Compliance with instructions

Before analyzing the data we excluded invalid entries. A valid entry was defined as one made after 8:00 pm of the day in question or before noon of the following day. Of the original 1738 daily entries, we deleted 36 because they were entered outside of this interval. This left 1702 days of valid data ( $M = 12.94$ ,  $SD = 2.64$ , range 6–15), and 14,768 events ( $M = 8.65$  per day, between-person  $SD = 2.21$ , within-person  $SD = 1.27$ ).<sup>1</sup> Our MLM analyses took into account differences between people in the number of daily entries, and between- and within-person differences in the number of events. The raw data that were analyzed are available via the Open Science Framework (Nezlek, 2017b).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Reliability analyses

We examined the reliability of our daily measures before conducting our primary analyses following the recommendations of Nezlek (2017a). We used multilevel models in which the items for each measure were nested within days and days were nested within persons. These analyses provided the equivalent of a Cronbach's alpha, corrected for between- and within-person differences in the number of days people provided. The data were analyzed using HLM (Raudenbush et al., 2011).

We thought the reliabilities for the daily measures, presented in Table 1, were acceptable. Moreover, they could not be meaningfully improved by the removal of an item. Therefore, we defined

<sup>1</sup> Events were described on only 1695 days.

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