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## Emotional intelligence under stress: Useful, unnecessary, or irrelevant?

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### Abstract

This investigation among 158 freshmen examined the association between emotional intelligence (emotion-relevant abilities) and stress (feelings of inability to control life events), considering personality (self-perception of the meta-emotion traits of clarity, intensity, and attention) as a moderating variable. Results suggest that emotional intelligence is potentially helpful in reducing stress for some individuals, but unnecessary or irrelevant for others. We highlight results among the highly stressed intense but confused participants in particular because they have average emotional intelligence, but do not appear to use it, presumably because they lack confidence in their emotional ability.

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### 1. Introduction

Stress can be defined as a person–environment relationship (Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1966). One way to measure this type of stress is to assess self-perceptions of the ability one feels to control events and one's feelings of besiegement by current problems. For most, life seems easier when

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it is predictable and controllable. For example, when a romantic relationship breaks apart, the impact of the breakup is influenced by individual difference factors such as having seen the end coming, knowing that the negative emotions will soon pass, or feeling competent to find another romantic partner. Such feelings of prediction and control can ease the strain of the breakup. However, feelings of prediction and control do not necessarily lessen the intensity of the sadness one experiences; they do help individuals feel less burdened, and more able to deal with the breakup. Feelings of control are the first step in coping with stressful events, without them progress toward a solution is unlikely. The present research investigates individual differences that may influence this sense of control. Note that we did not examine stress as current life problems (stressors) or as emotional reactions (distress), but as one's perceived ability to manage the person–environment relationship.

The benefits of a sense of control are well known. For example, it is associated with mental well-being (Beck, 1976), progress in therapy (Shapiro, Bates, Greenzang, & Carrere, 1991), and physical health (for a review see Shapiro, Schwartz, & Astin, 1996). Given the robust benefits provided by feelings of control, it is important to learn more about how to increase these feelings. By examining individual differences associated with perceived stress, we can discover more information about psychological states and processes involved in a sense of control.

The current research investigated individual differences that might predict such feelings of stress, that is, these feelings of inability to control events and self-perception of being inundated by current events. Specifically, we examined emotional intelligence ability, its relationship to perceived stress, and the moderating function of the self-reported personality traits of emotional intensity, emotional clarity, and attention to emotions. We first discuss emotional intelligence (EI) and its expected relation to stress then, proceed to the meta-emotion traits of clarity, intensity, and attention.

## 2. EI and stress

Predictions about the relation between EI and stress likely depend on which model of EI is employed because definitions vary widely (Matthews, Roberts, & Zeidner, 2004) to include constructs as diverse as self-awareness, motivation, optimism, empathy, assertiveness, and happiness. Mayer and Salovey (1997) view EI as ability, that is, a set of skills for processing emotion-relevant information. This model is the only one for which an objective, ability measure has been developed (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003). Other models assess *self-perceived* EI. Research on the relation between objective EI and stress as feelings of control is scarce (Ciarrochi, Dean, & Anderson, 2002; Matthews & Zeidner, 2000).

We chose the Mayer and Salovey (1997) model to frame our investigation because it is theory-based, well articulated, and more narrowly defined than other models. Additionally, it views EI as emotion-relevant ability and omits speculation about other constructs. Importantly, we used this model in our work because it is performance-based rather than mere self-report. Our intent was to compare actual EI with self-perceived EI. The Mayer and Salovey model defines EI as consisting of four branches: perceiving emotion, using emotion to facilitating thought, understanding emo-

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