

Relative Effectiveness of Reappraisal and Distraction in Regulating Emotion in Late-Life Depression

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Objectives: *The present study compares the effectiveness of two strategies, reappraisal and distraction, in reducing negative affect in older adults induced by focusing on personally relevant negative events and stressors. Participants:* 30 adults with major depressive disorder (MDD) and 40 never-depressed (ND) comparison participants ages 60 years and over (mean age = 69.7 years). **Design and Measurements:** *Participants underwent three affect induction trials, each followed by a different emotion regulation strategy: distraction, reappraisal, and a no-instruction control condition. Self-reported affect was recorded pre- and post-affect induction, and at one-minute intervals during regulation. Results:* Across groups, participants reported greater reductions in negative affect with distraction than reappraisal or the no-instruction control condition. An interaction between group and regulation condition indicated that distraction was more effective in reducing negative affect in the MDD group than the ND group. **Conclusions:** *These results suggest that distraction is an especially effective strategy for reducing negative affect in older adults with MDD. Finding ways to incorporate distraction skills into psychotherapeutic interventions for late-life MDD may improve their effectiveness, especially for short-term improvement of affect following rumination. (Am J Geriatr Psychiatry 2013; ■:■—■)*

Key Words: Late-life depression, emotion regulation, reappraisal, distraction

Major depressive disorder (MDD) has been characterized as a disorder of emotion regulation, in which cognitive, behavioral, and biological processes that typically manage corrections to negative affect are less effective in modulating negative emotions.¹ Individuals who cannot effectively manage their emotions or who rely on ineffective emotion regulation strategies are theorized to be at higher risk for both the onset and the prolongation of a depressive

episode.² What is less clear is which strategies are most likely to be effective regulators of affect. In particular, emotion regulation in the context of late-life depression is of interest. Late-life MDD typically follows a chronic remitting course, which is exacerbated by age-related health and cognitive challenges,^{3,4} Identifying regulation strategies that are maximally effective in this population may help to tailor psychosocial interventions to the unique needs of depressed elders.

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LLD Reappraisal and Distraction

Distraction is an emotion regulation technique in which attention is intentionally directed away from a negative stimulus and to a more positive or neutral topic. Distraction involves volitional, self-aware direction of attention to a chosen topic, and is differentiable from suppression (“trying not to” think, feel, or express something) or incidental distraction (e.g., being presented with a task that draws attention, without requiring an intention on the part of the participant to re-direct attention). The recent comprehensive classification and meta-analysis of emotion regulation strategies by Webb et al.⁵ describes “active distraction” as one of the most effective strategies studied. The ability to self-distract is predictive of positive outcomes in infants and children,⁶ is associated with reductions in induced negative affect,⁷ and is associated with a lessening of the anxiety about, and experience of, physical pain.⁸ In healthy younger adults, distraction is preferred over reappraisal in high-intensity emotional contexts.⁹ Similarly, distraction may require less effort than other regulation strategies such as reappraisal when regulating emotion that has already arisen, while neither distraction nor reappraisal are associated with high cognitive effort when used in anticipation of an emotional stimulus.¹⁰ Distraction appears to interrupt emotion generation at an earlier stage than reappraisal, as indicated by an earlier reduction in the late positive potential than reappraisal following emotional image exposure under electroencephalogram.¹¹ There is indirect evidence that older adults may make more efficient use of incidental distraction than younger adults following an emotional stimulus.¹² Thus, distraction may be a regulation strategy that is well-suited for use by older adults.

Reappraisal, meaning reframing or thinking differently about a stimulus in order to change its emotional tone, is currently one of the most studied emotion regulation strategies (e.g., Ochsner and Gross¹³) and is considered to be one of the most effective.⁵ Reappraisal has been found to reduce subjective, behavioral, and physiological indicators of negative affect,^{12,14,15} (for a review, see Webb et al.,¹³) and to improve memory for negative stimuli,¹⁶ potentially reflecting deeper cognitive processing of the stimuli. Reappraisal is most effective when used as an antecedent-focused emotion regulation strategy, implemented before a full emotional response has developed.^{15,17} Functional neuroimaging studies indicate that reappraisal

involves an interaction between dorsal prefrontal cortex (PFC) regions involved in working memory and selective attention; ventral PFC regions associated with language and response inhibition; anterior cingulate regions responsible for cognitive control; medial PFC and frontal pole regions associated with reflecting on affective states; and emotion processing regions including amygdala and insula.¹² This complex set of interconnecting functions is reflective of the cognitive processes required to hold a representation of a stimulus in mind (i.e., an appraisal), judge its emotional tone, generate an alternative representation (i.e., reappraisal), compare the emotional tone of the reappraisal with that of the original appraisal, and use executive resources to implement the chosen reappraisal.

Given the cognitive complexity required by reappraisal, it is not surprising that reappraisal use may be susceptible to disruption. Depressive symptoms are associated with reduced use of reappraisal,^{18–20} a reduction which may be exacerbated by reduced cognitive inhibition of negative stimuli.²⁰ Use of reappraisal, but not distraction, was associated with less efficient downregulation of amygdala activation in individuals with remitted depression.²¹ Likewise, aging is associated with difficulty in reappraisal. Compared with younger adults, older adults report less success in downregulating negative affect via reappraisal in experimental contexts^{22,23} (“detached” but not “positive” reappraisal²⁴), an effect which may be related to reduced PFC activation during reappraisal attempts.^{22,23} In a recent study of older and younger adults tested at peak and off-peak points in the circadian cycle, older adults were less successful in regulating negative affect using reappraisal than a younger cohort, whereas no age differences were observed in regulation using an incidental distraction task.²⁵ Overall, aging is associated with improved emotional control and ability to dampen negative emotions,^{26–28} with a corresponding reduction in the frequency^{26,29,30} and intensity^{26,31,32} of negative affect. That improvement tapers in the middle 70s and beyond.³³ Several empirically grounded theories of emotional functioning in late life, including Carstensen’s Socioemotional Selectivity Theory,³⁴ Labouvie-Vief’s Dynamic Integration Theory,³⁵ and Urry and Gross’s Selection, Optimization, and Compensation with Emotion Regulation framework³⁶ converge on the idea that age-related cognitive changes place a limit on the emotional advantages

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