

# An Experimental Investigation of Co-rumination, Problem Solving, and Distraction

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Co-rumination involves excessive dwelling on negative aspects of problems within a dyadic relationship (Rose, 2002). While research has focused on the tendency to co-ruminate within particular relationships, we were interested in examining the behavior of co-rumination outside the context of a preexisting relationship. Using an experimental manipulation of co-rumination, the primary goal of this study was to experimentally test the effects of co-rumination and examine its associations with negative and positive affectivity. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three interviewing style conditions: a co-ruminative style, a problem-solving style, or a distracting style. Results revealed that the co-rumination condition significantly differed from both the distraction and problem-solving conditions on overall negative affect, sadness, and anxiety, but not on hostility. There were no significant differences among groups on positive affect. In conclusion, this investigation revealed detrimental effects of co-ruminative behavior even between strangers.

*Keywords:* co-rumination; negative affect; positive affect; experimental manipulation

CO-RUMINATION IS DEFINED AS EXCESSIVE dwelling on negative aspects of problems within a dyadic relationship (Rose, 2002). Specifically, it is an interpersonal process in which dyads disclose and discuss problems in a non-solution-focused manner. As a construct that integrates the friendship and self-disclosure literatures, Rose (2002) explored the possible adaptive and maladaptive consequences of co-rumination in the friendships of children and adolescents in the initial cross-sectional study of co-rumination. Results demonstrated that the tendency to engage in co-rumination is predictive of internalizing distress and of perceived friendship quality among adolescents. Thus, the results suggested that co-rumination has both positive and negative aspects, or significant trade-offs for adjustment.

The association between co-rumination and symptoms of anxiety and depression has been examined in several studies. In a follow-up to the original study, Rose and colleagues (2007) not only replicated the concurrent association between co-rumination and internalizing symptom levels, but also demonstrated that co-rumination predicts changes in internalizing symptoms across a 6-month period. In an extension of this work, Hankin, Stone, and Wright (2010) studied

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the longitudinal associations among co-rumination, internalizing symptoms, and stress generation. They replicated the findings of [Rose \(2002\)](#) and [Rose and colleagues \(2007\)](#) by finding positive concurrent and prospective association between co-rumination and internalizing symptoms across a 5-month period. Further, [Hankin and colleagues \(2010\)](#) revealed that co-rumination predicted increases in internalizing symptoms. Studies have also found that co-rumination is retrospectively associated with a history of depressive disorder ([Stone, Uhrlass, & Gibb, 2010](#)) as well as predictive of future onsets of depressive disorder.

However, there have been some mixed findings in the literature when specifically looking at the relationship between co-rumination and depressive and anxious symptoms. Recently, the importance of distinguishing between depressive and anxious symptoms was revealed in [Dirghangi and colleagues' \(2015\)](#) work examining monozygotic twins from birth to adolescence utilizing self-reports. The sample consisted of 364 monozygotic twin pairs born between 1995 and 1998 that were part of a larger ongoing longitudinal twin study, where zygosity was assessed by examining genetic markers. Co-rumination was associated with differences in anxiety, but not depression. However, these divergent findings may not be surprising as anxious symptomatology developmentally precedes increases in depression, which does not peak until approximately age 15 ([Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994](#)). In addition, [Starr and Davila \(2009\)](#) examined co-rumination among early adolescent females. They found that co-rumination was positively related to depressive symptoms, but did not predict longitudinal increases in depressive symptoms over a 1-year period. Contrary to depression, a negative relationship between co-rumination and social anxiety was found. This finding is likely explained by the social nature of co-rumination; individuals high in social anxiety quite likely would not seek the company of others during times of distress, or do not engage others about their own problems.

Further, the relation between co-rumination and affective problems may differ depending on relationship type. [Calmes and Roberts \(2008\)](#) found that self-reported co-rumination was positively associated with depression in an undergraduate population, but only when the co-rumination occurred between close friends. This association was not found when the co-rumination occurred with parents, roommates, or romantic partners. Yet, a positive correlation between co-rumination and anxiety was found when individuals co-ruminated with their parent. Examining mother-child relationships in particular, [Waller and Rose \(2010\)](#) found support for the positive

association between mother-child co-rumination and child anxiety symptoms in fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders. They also found support for the relationship between co-rumination and depressive symptoms in children. Findings were based on self-report, where youth were read the measures aloud during class time and mothers completed mailed questionnaires at home. These findings suggest that the effects of co-rumination may not be universal; rather, such effects are relationship-dependent. In support of this, [Barstead, Bouchard, and Shih \(2013\)](#) found that co-rumination was positively associated with depression in undergraduates but only when participants were allowed to report on the confidant of their choice, rather than just same-sex peers. Further, [Dam, Roelofs, and Muris \(2014\)](#) examined co-rumination in a large sample of adolescents and found that co-rumination with a best friend was associated with depressive symptoms but only when levels of communication with other peers was low. Taken together, these findings suggest that co-rumination may not be universally maladaptive, but rather the relationship context is the more important determinant of affective problems than co-ruminative behavior itself. The first aim of the present study was to examine the effects of co-ruminative behavior outside of the context of a preexisting relationship.

#### MEASUREMENT OF CO-RUMINATION

To date, research on co-rumination has primarily focused on the self-reported tendency to co-ruminate either at the trait or daily level. Individual self-report on co-rumination may not reflect actual behavior, and verifying the results with other methods is important. Recently, some investigators have examined the more immediate effects of daily co-ruminative behavior rather than examining self-reported trait co-rumination. Utilizing a daily diary paradigm, [White and Shih \(2012\)](#) found that daily co-rumination was predictive of increases in depressed mood within the day. They utilized a modified version of the Co-Rumination Questionnaire ([Rose, 2002](#)) to assess daily co-rumination by using the questions that were more specific to co-ruminative behaviors versus co-ruminative tendencies. [White and Shih's \(2012\)](#) work was an important advance from relying on participants to be accurate retrospective reporters of co-rumination to assessing co-rumination in a more direct behavioral manner. Similarly, [Hruska and colleagues \(2015\)](#) utilized a daily diary paradigm to focus on the behavior of co-rumination among adolescents. They found that co-rumination amplified the harmful effects of daily life stress, similar to diathesis-stress interactions in the rumination literature. However, co-rumination

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