



# Loneliness, positive life events, and psychological maladjustment: When good things happen, even lonely people feel better! ☆



Edward C. Chang<sup>a,\*</sup>, Mine Muyan<sup>b</sup>, Jameson K. Hirsch<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Educational Sciences, Middle East Technical University, Turkey

<sup>c</sup> Department of Psychology, East Tennessee State University, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated loneliness and positive life events as predictors of psychological maladjustment (viz., depression, hopelessness, & suicidal behaviors) in a sample of 327 adults. Beyond the expected role of loneliness in psychological maladjustment, positive life events were found to further augment the prediction of depression, hopelessness, and suicidal behaviors. In addition, the presence of positive life events was found to buffer the positive association between loneliness and maladjustment. Specifically, the positive association between loneliness and psychological maladjustment was found to be weaker for those who experienced a high number of positive life events, as opposed to those who experienced a low number of positive life events. Some implications for helping adults perceive or appreciate the presence of positive events in their lives are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Psychological maladjustment, ranging from depression to suicidal behaviors, represents a global public health concern (Nock et al., 2008), especially in adults (Stravynski & Boyer, 2001). For example, findings from international studies indicate that depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, affecting over 350 million individuals (World Health Organization [WHO], 2012). Similarly, suicide represents the second leading cause of death among young adults in college (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2012). Given the magnitude and severity of these types of maladaptive psychological outcomes, it is not a surprise that researchers have been eager to identify potential factors that may place individual at heightened risk for maladjustment.

One variable that has been identified as a potential risk factor for psychological maladjustment in recent years has been loneliness (see Heinrich & Gullone, 2006, for a review). According to Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980), *loneliness* is defined as having feelings and thoughts of being isolated and disconnected from others. For example,

consistent with the contention that loneliness is a risk factor for maladjustment, Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Thisted (2010) found that greater loneliness was associated with greater depressive symptoms in adults. Findings from other studies examining psychological maladjustment in adults have also indicated a reliable positive association involving loneliness with hopelessness (Chang, Sanna, Hirsch & Jeglic, 2010) and suicidal behaviors (e.g., Stravynski & Boyer, 2001).

Beyond loneliness, however, researchers have long implicated life events in the prediction of psychological maladjustment in adults. In particular, findings from studies of adults over the past several decades examining the potential impact of life events have consistently found a positive association between experience of negative life events (e.g., death of a loved one, failing an exam) and maladjustment (for reviews, see Kessler, 1997; Liu & Miller, 2014; Tennant, 2002). Indeed, similar to findings obtained in studies of loneliness, negative life events has also been found to be positively associated with psychological maladjustment, including greater depression (e.g., Roca et al., 2013; Spinhoven et al., 2011), greater hopelessness (e.g., Bonner & Rich, 1988; Hjemdal, Friborg, & Stiles, 2012), and greater suicidal behaviors (e.g., Joiner & Rudd, 2000; Wang et al., 2012). Interestingly, in one recent study examining both loneliness and negative life events, Chang et al. (2010) found that they not only uniquely predicted hopelessness, but that the interaction of the two further augmented the prediction of hopelessness and suicidal behaviors. Thus, beyond loneliness, negative life events appear to not only have the potential to add to the prediction of maladjustment in adults, but to also exacerbate the dysfunctional link

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\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States.

E-mail address: [change@umich.edu](mailto:change@umich.edu) (E.C. Chang).

present between loneliness and psychological maladjustment. Yet, few studies have examined for the role of positive life events in predicting maladjustment in adults.

According to [Needles and Abramson \(1990\)](#); see also, [Kleiman, Riskind & Schaefer 2014](#)), positive life events may not only represent an important explanatory variable or predictor of psychological maladjustment, but it may also function to buffer the link between important individual differences risk variables and maladjustment. Consistent with this view, for example, these investigators found that the negative link between positive attributional style and hopelessness was buffered by level of positive life events experienced (e.g., those who reported a high number, compared to a low number, of positive life events reported the lowest level of hopelessness). However, to date, no study has, for example, examined the potential role of positive life events as a potential buffer of the positive association present between loneliness and psychological maladjustment in adults.

## 2. Purpose of the present study

Given these possibilities, we conducted the present study to: 1) determine the extent to which loneliness predicts psychological maladjustment (viz., depression, hopelessness, & suicidal behaviors); 2) examine whether positive life events might add to the prediction of maladjustment beyond loneliness; and 3) determine if the loneliness  $\times$  positive life events interaction might further add to the prediction model.

Given the strong and reliable association between loneliness and psychological maladjustment in adults ([Heinrich & Gullone, 2006](#)), we expected loneliness to significantly predict maladjustment and account for a significant amount of the variance in each of the three psychological maladjustment outcomes examined in the present study. Additionally, given the potential importance of positive life events in helping to abate or reduce maladjustment (e.g., [Kleiman et al., 2014](#)), we expected positive life events to account for a significant amount of additional variance in psychological maladjustment beyond loneliness.

Beyond these predictions, we were also interested in testing the hypothesis that positive life events may weaken or buffer the positive relationship between loneliness and maladjustment (e.g., [Needles & Abramson, 1990](#)). Specifically, in contrast to past findings that have pointed to negative life events as an important factor that strengthens the association between loneliness and maladjustment (e.g., [Chang et al., 2010](#)), we hypothesized that the positive association between loneliness and psychological maladjustment would be weaker for those who experienced a high number of positive life events, as opposed to those who experienced a low number of positive life events. Thus, for example, we expected that among lonely individuals, those experiencing many positive life events would be less psychologically maladjusted than those experiencing a few positive life events.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

Data was obtained from 327 college students from a university in the Southeast United States. Among the participants, 219 were female (67%), 105 were male (32.1%), 2 were transgender (0.6%), and one participant failed to indicate his/her gender (0.3%). Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 58 with the mean of 21.81 years ( $SD = 5.30$ ). The majority of the participants were European American (86.5%), followed by African American (5.8%), Asian American (3.1%), and Latino American (1.8%). Among the participants, 9 of them failed to indicate their race (2.8%).

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Loneliness

Loneliness was measured by the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (R-UCLA; [Russell et al., 1980](#)). The scale consists of 20 items, with ten

items (reverse scored) describing non-lonely thoughts (e.g., "There are people I feel close to"), and ten items characterizing feelings of loneliness (e.g., "I feel isolated from others"). Respondents are asked to rate the statements on the frequency in which they experience these feelings using a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*). Higher scores on the R-UCLA indicate greater levels of loneliness.

#### 3.2.2. Positive life events

Positive life events were measured by the Life Events Scale (LES; [Tomoda, 1997](#)). The LES is a 43-item self-report measure, consisting of two subscales: positive life events (20 items) and negative life events (23 items). In the present study, we only used items tapping for positive life events (POS). Respondents are asked to respond to the questions indicating whether they had experienced the life event 1 (*yes*) or whether they had not experienced the life event 0 (*no*). For this study, we used the sum of the responses for positive life events (LES-POS), which included items assessing for positive or desirable events (e.g., "I did well on an exam"). Higher scores on the LES-POS indicate more experiences of positive life events.

#### 3.2.3. Psychological maladjustment

Psychological maladjustment was measured using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; [Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961](#)), the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS; [Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974](#)), and the Suicidal Behaviors Questionnaire—Revised (SBQ-R; [Osman et al., 2001](#)). The BDI is a commonly used 21-item self-report measure of depressive symptomatology. Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they have experienced specific depressive symptoms in the past week across a 4-point scale (for example, "0 = I do not feel sad" to "3 = I am so sad or unhappy that I can't stand it"). Higher scores on the BDI are indicative of greater depressive symptoms. The BHS is a 20-item measure of hopelessness. Respondents are asked to indicate either agreement or disagreement to these items that assess negative expectancies for the future (e.g., "My future seems dark to me"). Scores on the BHS have been found to correspond highly with clinical ratings of hopelessness ([Beck et al., 1974](#)). Higher scores on the BHS indicate greater hopelessness. Finally, the SBQ-R is a 4-item self-report measure developed to directly tap key aspects of suicidality, namely, lifetime ideation and/or suicide attempt ("Have you ever thought about or attempted to kill yourself?"), frequency of suicidal ideation over the past 12 months ("How often have you thought about killing yourself in the past year?"), threat of suicide attempt ("Have you ever told someone that you were going to commit suicide or that you might do it?"), and likelihood of suicidal behavior in the future ("How likely is it that you will attempt suicide someday?"). The responses for each item are given total points and are measured across a 5- to 7-point Likert-type scale, for example, ranging from 0 or 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) or 6 (*very likely*). Higher scores on the SBQ-R indicate greater suicidal behaviors.

### 3.3. Procedure

Approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. Participants taking an upper-level psychology course (e.g., Abnormal Psychology, Personality Psychology) were recruited from a university in the Southeast United States and received either course-required credit or extra credit upon completion of the survey. All participants were provided with written informed consent, which indicated that all data would be kept strictly confidential.

## 4. Results

Correlations, means, and standard deviations for all study measures are presented in [Table 1](#). Consistent with past research findings, all of the correlations were significant and in the expected direction. Specifically, loneliness was significantly and positively associated with all of

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