

Rethinking the Role of Worry in Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Evidence Supporting a Model of Emotional Contrast Avoidance

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The Contrast Avoidance model (Newman & Llera, 2011) proposes that individuals with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) are hypersensitive to sharp upward shifts in negative emotion that typically accompany negative events, and use worry to maintain sustained intrapersonal negativity in an attempt to avoid these shifts. Although research shows that worry increases negative emotionality and mutes further emotional reactivity to a stressor when compared to the worry period (e.g., Llera & Newman, 2010), no study has tracked changes in negative emotionality from baseline to worry inductions followed by a range of emotional exposures. Further, no study has yet assessed participants' subjective appraisals of prior worry on helping to cope with such exposures. The present study tested the main tenets of the Contrast Avoidance model by randomly assigning participants with GAD ($n = 48$) and nonanxious controls ($n = 47$) to experience worry, relaxation, and neutral inductions prior to sequential exposure to fearful, sad, and humorous film clips. Both physiological (nonspecific skin conductance responses [NS-SCRs]) and self-reported emotional changes were observed. Results indicated that worry boosted negative emotionality from baseline, which was sustained across negative exposures, whereas low negative emotionality during relaxation and neutral inductions allowed for sharp increases in response to exposures.

This research was conducted in compliance with the Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki) and the standards established by the Pennsylvania State University's Institutional Review Board.

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Furthermore, GAD participants found worry to be more helpful than other conditions in coping with exposures, whereas control participants reported the opposite pattern. Results provide preliminary support for the Contrast Avoidance model. This suggests that treatment should focus on underlying avoidance patterns before attempting to reduce worry behavior.

Keywords: generalized anxiety disorder; worry; emotion; contrast avoidance; skin conductance

A NUMBER OF MODELS HAVE POSITED that for those with GAD, the central feature of worry may be recruited as an attempt to manage overwhelming emotional experiences (e.g., Borkovec, Alcaine, & Behar, 2004; Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, & Fresco, 2005; Newman, Castonguay, Borkovec, & Molnar, 2004; Roemer, Salters, Raffa, & Orsillo, 2005). Indeed, despite its anxious associations, those with GAD endorse positive beliefs about worry, including its utility in coping with negative emotions (Borkovec & Roemer, 1995; Penney, Mazmanian, & Rudanycz, 2013). Some regulation models (e.g., Newman et al., 2004) have even suggested that worry functions to avoid or suppress negative emotions, based on experimental data showing that worry reduces emotional responding to a subsequent negative stressor when compared to the prior worrisome state (e.g., Borkovec & Hu, 1990).

Confounding the argument that worry facilitates emotional avoidance, however, is abundant evidence that worry creates and sustains negative emotionality. For example, a number of studies show that worry is physiologically activating, leading to increased sympathetic and decreased parasympathetic

nervous system activity (Andor, Gerlach, & Rist, 2008; Brosschot, Van Dijk, & Thayer, 2007; Llera & Newman, 2010; Stapinski, Abbott, & Rapee, 2010). Worry is also subjectively activating, such that individuals with and without GAD self-report higher negative emotion when induced into a worried state (Andor et al., 2008; Borkovec, Lyonfields, Wiser, & Deihl, 1993; Llera & Newman, 2010). Moreover, negative affectivity is included in the definition of worry (Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & DePree, 1983).

To clarify the inconsistency with regard to models of worry as emotional avoidance, Llera and Newman (2010) directly tested the effects of worry inductions on both emotional impact as well as subsequent responding to various emotional exposures. Both GAD analogues and nonanxious control participants were randomly assigned to worry, relaxation, or neutral inductions, and were subsequently exposed to standardized film clips representing fearful, sad, calm, and happy emotions. Emotional responding was measured in terms of self-reported negative affect and heart rate variability (HRV). Results showed that worry led to lower HRV (or vagal withdrawal, indicating a stress response) for the GAD group compared to relaxation (with neutral in between), and higher negative affect for all participants compared to both relaxation and neutral activity. Additionally, extending the results of Borkovec and Hu (1990) to a GAD sample, this study found that for both GAD and nonanxious groups, worry led to less physiological and subjective reactivity in response to the fearful exposure compared to relaxation when using the worry and relaxation periods as baselines. Worry also led to less subjective reactivity than both relaxation and neutral inductions in response to the sad exposure (but did not interfere with physiological responding).

If worry had suppressed negative emotionality during these film clips, then findings would have supported the view that worry facilitates emotional avoidance. However, absolute levels of emotionality during the film clips were equivalent regardless of prior induction type. In fact, data from Llera and Newman (2010) suggested that the worry induction boosted negative emotionality levels, which only precluded further increases in response to subsequent negative exposures. This indicates that worry not only failed to suppress or avoid emotion, but actually created a heightened negative emotional state that was sustained across the negative film clips. These data are synchronous with similar studies on worry and subsequent fear exposures (Peasley-Miklus & Vrana, 2000;

Stapinski et al., 2010). In sum, findings from exposure studies dovetail with the perspective that worry prolongs negative emotion (Newman & Llera, 2011), based on data showing that negative emotions remain even following worry termination (Brosschot et al., 2007; Zoccola, Dickerson, & Yim, 2011).

Such findings led Newman and Llera (2011) to propose the Contrast Avoidance model of GAD (see also Newman, Llera, Erickson, Przeworski, & Castonguay, 2013), which builds upon earlier models of worry as an emotion regulation strategy (e.g., Borkovec et al., 2004). This model states that the emotional implications of worry for those with GAD represent neither failed nor successful attempts at emotional avoidance. Instead, the model posits that those with GAD engage in worry as a coping strategy to *perpetuate* negative emotions as a means to avoid negative emotional contrasts. A negative emotional contrast is experienced as a surge of negative emotion that is distinct from the valence of the preceding state, such as a shift from a positive or euthymic state to one that is anxious. However, such emotional contrast could be avoided if the current emotion was similar in strength and valence to the one that immediately preceded it.

The Contrast Avoidance model is based partly on early cognitive research on affective contrasts. Such research indicated that the perception of a stimulus could be moderated by its preceding state, such that an unpleasant stimulus was perceived as even more unpleasant if it followed a positive stimulus, and less unpleasant if it was preceded by something more noxious (Bacon, Rood, & Washburn, 1914; Manstead, Wagner, & MacDonald, 1983). For example, a surge of fear caused by a scary stimulus will be experienced more acutely if preceded by a pleasant or neutral state, or attenuated if preceded by an equally fearful state. In the latter case, it is important to recognize that feelings of fear are still experienced in the moment, but it is the perception of a *contrast* that has been averted.

According to the Contrast Avoidance model of GAD (Newman & Llera, 2011), because worry itself generates a negative intrapersonal state, a person who is chronically worried would experience less emotional contrast when encountering negative events (e.g., “If I already feel bad now because I’m worried, then I cannot feel much worse if something bad actually happens”). Importantly, this sequence does not constitute emotional avoidance because the worrier is actually experiencing *sustained* negative emotionality. Given data showing emotional hyper-reactivity and modulation difficulties in GAD

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