

# Social anxiety and romantic relationships: The costs and benefits of negative emotion expression are context-dependent<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

In general, expressing emotions is beneficial and withholding emotions has personal and social costs. Yet, to serve social functions there are situations when emotions are withheld strategically. We examined whether social anxiety influenced when and how emotion expressiveness influences interpersonal closeness in existing romantic relationships. For people with greater social anxiety, withholding the expression of negative emotions was proposed to preserve romantic relationships and their benefits. We examined whether social anxiety and emotion expressiveness interacted to predict prospective changes in romantic relationship closeness over a 12-week period. For people with less social anxiety, relationship closeness was enhanced over time when negative emotions were openly expressed whereas relationship deterioration was found for those more likely to withhold emotions. The reverse pattern was found for people with greater social anxiety such that relationship closeness was enhanced over time for those more likely to withhold negative emotions. Related social anxiety findings were found for discrepancies between desired and actual feelings of closeness over time. Findings were not attributable to depressive symptoms. These results suggest that the costs and benefits of emotion expression are influenced by a person's degree of social anxiety.

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*Keywords:* Social anxiety; Emotion expressiveness; Self-regulation; Suppression; Close relationships

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## 1. Introduction

Suppressing or withholding emotions tends to have undesirable consequences. Suppressing emotions appears to increase physiological tension, decrease well-being, reduce cognitive resources, and impair abilities to attend to, describe and understand emotions and effectively work with them toward goals (e.g., Gross & John, 2003). There has been less research on the social consequences of failing to openly express emotions. Expressing and sharing emotions has social benefits that include (a) providing self-disclosures that are integral to intimacy development, (b) demonstrating responsiveness to partners and their shared experiences, (c) communicating feelings about partners and the status of the relationship, (d) making shared events more memorable and meaningful, and (f) allowing for preemptive discussions of disagreements to prevent relationship volatility and damage (e.g., Keltner & Kring, 1998). Additionally, if a person is feeling distressed, expressing these feelings can be a self-soothing therapeutic process (Pennebaker, 1997) and facilitate the provision of social support by relationship partners (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001).

Although a greater unwillingness to express emotions appears to be generally unhealthy, it is necessary to examine boundary conditions and exceptions. In prospective studies, relationship deterioration is best predicted by failures to respond to the distress communicated by partners', an imbalanced ratio of infrequent positive affect to frequent negative affect during communications, and the presence of at least one partner with emotion disturbances (Cartensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Gottman & Levenson, 1992, 1999; Levenson & Gottman, 1985). These data suggest that relations between emotion expression and relationship outcomes may be moderated by whether or not people in existing relationships are particularly socially anxious (emotional vulnerability).

### 1.1. *Social anxiety and negative emotion expression in romantic relationships*

Social anxiety involves the fear of being negatively evaluated by others. These evaluative concerns lead to unwanted anxious feelings, thoughts, and sensations in (real or anticipated) social situations. To limit contact with these unwanted experiences, socially anxious people<sup>1</sup> exert a great deal of effort to avoid and control anxiety and the situations that might induce it (Clark & Wells, 1995; Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996). According to these models, socially anxious people tend to avoid their emotions as a safety behavior to prevent the possible display of undesirable feelings to others which may invite social blunders, embarrassment, and rejection. Their primary goal is to avoid rejection at all costs and maintain some degree of connectedness to others. These individuals can be expected to fear the negative consequences of openly expressing negative emotions such as anxiety and anger toward someone else. After all, these emotional reactions may cause people to view them as unappealing or vulnerable which, in turn, may be troublesome for their relationships. Emotion regulation may be construed as a functional activity that maps onto the regulator's primary goals. If socially anxious individual's primary motive is to avoid negative social outcomes, limiting the amount of information shared with others seems to be consistent with the goal of minimizing the potential for humiliation or rejection.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though social anxiety is best conceptualized as a continuum, we have consistently used the term "socially anxious people" as a less cumbersome description of people scoring high on measures of social anxiety compared to those with lower scores.

Ironically, there is minimal work on how social anxiety operates in the context of existing relationships (Jackson & Wenzel, 2002). Socially anxious people are more socially isolated, less likely to be married or in romantic relationships, and have unsatisfactory social relationships (Wittchen, Fuetsch, Sonntag, Muller, & Liebowitz, 2000). This does not mean that anxious individuals are devoid of close relationships, in fact, responses to anxiety-provoking situations are often muted and more likely to be approached in the presence of romantic partners (i.e., they serve as safety mechanisms; Carter, Hollon, Carson, & Shelton, 1995). However, there is little data on existing romantic relationships and how they differ as a function of people's social anxiety. While it is useful to examine relations between social anxiety and feelings of closeness in romantic relationships, it may be even more valuable to determine how social anxiety and different styles of emotion expression and regulatory strategies predict changes in relationship closeness (for better or worse) over time.

#### *1.1.1. More expression may have costs*

The benefits of expressing emotions may change when people suffer from excessive social anxiety. Socially anxious people who openly express their social fears and self-doubts, ruminative thoughts about previous and upcoming social events, anger, and other negatively charged experiences may be burdensome to their partners (Wenzel, Graff-Dolezal, Macho, & Brendle, 2005). The chronic negative content of their verbal and non-verbal expressions and their frequent desire to avoid life events may eventually erode the social support and vitality of romantic partners. Relationships with socially anxious people may lead to the induction of negative affect (mood contagion effect), lost opportunities for pleasure (due to avoidance), and being the recipient of regular reassurance seeking and complaining that may result in acts of rejection (Alden & Taylor, 2004; see related work on depression; Segrin & Abramson, 1994). These “demand-withdraw” and “non-regulated” interchanges can lead both partners to feel increasingly disconnected, less cared for, and less satisfied in their relationship (Gottman & Levenson, 1992, 1999). Socially anxious people often demonstrate dependency in their close relationships as evidenced by submissiveness, clinging behaviors, and an over-reliance on them for care and reassurance (Davila & Beck, 2002). Feelings of dependency may increase risk-averse behaviors and less emotional expressiveness to avoid the possibility of abandonment by heavily utilized romantic partners. Together, excessive social anxiety and tendencies to be expressive of negative emotions are proposed to lead to relationship deterioration over time.

#### *1.1.2. Less expression may have benefits*

A different profile is expected for socially anxious people who are less expressive in their romantic relationships. Inhibiting negative emotions is a way to prevent automatic, reflexive responses to social events perceived as evaluative and threatening (Hirsch & Clark, 2004). The prototypical behavioral responses of these people include extreme social withdrawal and isolation (Ishiyama, 1984) and/or outward expressions of anger and hostility toward others (Ayduk, Downey, Testa, Yen, & Shoda, 1999; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). Strategically engaging in less expression of emotions may control these undesirable reactions and protect against explicit rejection. Preventing rejection by romantic partners would allow for the continuation of shared experiences, sense of safety and reassurance, and behavioral evidence of acceptance. Additionally, socially anxious peoples' chronic stream of negative emotions, thoughts, and feelings can be disrupted and diluted by the more evenly balanced valence of partners' experiences. Regulatory control may sustain the care and support of romantic partners, which may grow over time as clear social roles in the relationship are adopted (e.g., partner as

caregiver and provider/initiator of pleasure). With avoidance social motives, socially anxious people are expected to willingly sacrifice being expressive, authentic, assertive, and happy to avoid failure and abandonment by their romantic partners (Gilbert, 2001; Leary, 2000). The satisfaction of psychological needs such as competence, autonomy, and personal growth are expected to be subservient to satisfying the need to belong. Sustaining their romantic relationship and relevant psychological and social benefits may lead socially anxious people to experience greater feelings of closeness with romantic partners over time (Aron et al., 2004).

#### *1.1.3. Discrepancies between desired and actual feelings of relationship closeness*

Our interest extends to how social anxiety and emotion expression work together to predict discrepancies between obtained and desired closeness and how these discrepancies change over time. Research has shown that large discrepancies between ideals that one aspires to and hopes for and what currently exists is a major determinant of dissatisfaction, disappointment, and dejection, priming fears of failure (Higgins, Vookles, & Tykocinski, 1992). Most of this work has centered on self-concept discrepancies. We extended this work to social anxiety and self-rated closeness in romantic relationships. Fitting with predictions about changes in relationship closeness over time, we expected socially anxious people who tend to express negative emotions to be more hypersensitive to discrepancies between desired (ideal) and current feelings (actual) of closeness. For socially anxious people who are plagued by doubts about abilities to form relationships and be valued by others, feelings of closeness within a romantic relationship can become a litmus test of whether or not they feel a sense of social inclusion. This can explain why biases to threat are particularly salient in close relationship contexts (Leary, 2000). In essence, socially anxious people who tend to express their negative emotions are likely to be more attuned to ideal-actual discrepancies in self-rated closeness, desire more closeness than currently perceived, and subsequently, feel less close to partners over time. Their attention is expected to be attuned to unfulfilled desires, amplifying internal and interpersonal conflicts.

#### *1.1.4. Emotion expression in less anxious individuals*

The willingness to express emotions was expected to have a reverse pattern on romantic relationship closeness and sensitivity to unfulfilled levels of closeness in less anxious people. For less anxious individuals, the social benefits of open, emotion expression and the costs of generally withholding emotions were expected to map onto predominant work on the healthy social consequences of this regulatory strategy (Keltner & Kring, 1998; Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001). By definition, these people are not overly concerned about negative evaluation and do not demonstrate the information-processing biases to social threat of their socially anxious peers. For less anxious individuals, open and flexible communication of negative emotions in moderate dosage was expected to be a useful strategy in the development and maintenance of closeness in romantic relationships and linked to positive social outcomes. In contrast, withholding the expression of negative emotions was expected to predict relationship deterioration. Moreover, less expression of negative emotions was expected to elicit greater sensitivity to discrepancies between ideal and actual self-rated closeness over time (dovetailing with general erosion in self-rated closeness).

### *1.2. The present research*

We sought to extend the few existing studies on how social anxiety operates in romantic relationships with attention to ways in which people relate to and express emotions. The costs and

benefits of emotion expression on feelings of closeness in romantic relationships were expected to be relative to people's dominant motives, demands, and behavioral tendencies. Social anxiety and emotion expression were expected to interact to predict changes in (a) self-rated relationship closeness and (b) discrepancies between desired and actual closeness over a 12-week period. For socially anxious people, minimizing the expression of negative emotions was proposed to serve a (relative) protective function in the prevention of feared relationship abandonment and failure. Less emotion expression was expected to sustain and perhaps even enhance feelings of closeness in romantic relationships over time, whereas expressing negative emotions was hypothesized to predict relationship deterioration. In contrast, less expression of or the withholding of emotions was expected to lead to poorer relationship closeness outcomes over time in less anxious individuals.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through research postings on various internet websites. Additionally, undergraduate psychology students were recruited from a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic area. The students received research credit for their participation and were required to complete an initial survey at Time 1 (T1) and 3-month follow-up survey at Time 2 (T2) to receive course credit.

People in the current study were women that completed both waves of data (i.e., T1 and T2). There were a total of 89 women who were involved in a romantic relationship at both time points of data collection.<sup>2</sup> Of the 163 women involved in a romantic relationship at T1, 12 people ended their romantic relationship at T2 (7.4%), and 25 people failed to participate at T2 (21.9%). Thus, 101 of 163 people in romantic relationships at T1 completed data at T2 (62%). There were no statistically significant differences between people who remained in romantic relationships and broke-up at T2 on any of the demographic, independent, and dependent variables under study. Overall, only 15.3% of participants dropped out before the second wave of data collection. For the final sample of 89 women, the majority were European American (73%), with the remaining participants defined themselves as African-American (2.2%), Asian (2.2%), Hispanic (4.5%), Mixed/Other (11.2%), and 1.3% indicating no response. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 47 years ( $M = 24.79$ ,  $S.D. = 7.48$ ). At T1, the length of time that participants reported being in their romantic relationships ranged from less than 1 month (2.2%), between 1 and 6 months (15.7%), 6 months and 1 year (9.0%), 1 and 5 years (55.1%) and greater than 5 years (18.0%).

### 2.2. Procedure

Data were collected with a confidential web-based survey (PsychData) using the highest security standards (encrypted data transfer with no individual IP addresses collected).

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<sup>2</sup> Of those participants in a romantic relationship at T1 and T2, there were only 18 men or 16.8% of the sample. Because men and women differ in their appraisals, feelings, and behaviors in romantic relationships and our sample of men was too small to examine sex as a moderating variable in our models, we excluded men from the current paper. In terms of recruitment, 82.8% of our final sample was obtained from a large, public university in the Mid-Atlantic area. There were no statistically significant differences between this group and those recruited from Internet websites on any of the demographic, independent, and dependent variables under study. Moreover, all interaction effects between social anxiety and emotion expressiveness were similar for the two groups.

Participants were emailed a direct website address to provide survey responses. The same measures were used at T1 and T2.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Social anxiety

The 19-item *Social Interaction Anxiety Scale* (SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998) assesses tendencies to be fearful and avoidant of social interactions due to concerns about being negatively evaluated. Participants rated various statements assessing anxiety of social situations (e.g., “I find myself worrying that I won’t know what to say in social situations”) along a 5-point Likert scale (0 = “Not at all” to 4 = “Extremely”). The SIAS has been shown to have excellent psychometric properties (Mattick & Clarke, 1998), is highly sensitive to clinical interventions, and reliably differentiates individuals with and without social anxiety disorder (e.g., Brown et al., 1997).

#### 2.3.2. Depressive symptoms

The 21-item *Beck Depression Inventory-II* (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996) assesses the severity of depressive symptoms. Participants rated 21 groups of statements and selected the most appropriate for each group (e.g., for the group under the title Sadness, people selected either “I do not feel sad”, “I feel sad much of the time” or “I am sad all the time” or “I am so sad or unhappy that I can’t stand it”). The BDI-II demonstrates strong psychometric properties and reliably distinguishes between clinical and general community samples.

#### 2.3.3. Emotion expressiveness

The 16-item *Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire* (BEQ; Gross & John, 1995) assesses individual differences in the behavioral expression of emotions and the willingness to react emotionally. The BEQ consists of three subscales that measure the tendency to express positive emotions (e.g., “When I’m happy, my feelings show”), the tendency to express negative emotions (e.g., “I’ve learned it is better to suppress my anger than to show it”), and the intensity of impulses to express emotions (e.g., “I am sometimes unable to hide my feelings, even though I would like to”). Responses are provided using a 7-point Likert scale; rated from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 7 (“Strongly agree”). The BEQ appears to demonstrate strong psychometric properties, with a 2-month test-retest reliability of .86 (Gross & John, 1995). In addition, three studies have supported the three subscale factor structure of the BEQ (Gross & John, 1995; Gross & John, 1997; Gross & John, 1998). Convergent and discriminant validity with self and peer ratings has shown that the subscales differentially predict negative and positive emotion expressive behavior in the laboratory (Gross & John, 1997; Gross & John, 1998). Only the positive and negative emotion expressiveness subscales and the total score were used in the present investigation.

#### 2.3.4. Interpersonal closeness

The *Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale* (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) is a single-item measure that assesses relationship closeness along a 7-point Likert scale. Each answer choice pictorially displays a pair of circles with increasing degrees of overlap, ranging from complete separation (1) to almost complete overlap (7). Participants select the pair of circles that most

accurately represents their perceived level of closeness with their romantic partner, with greater overlap representing greater closeness.

Although the IOS is a one-item scale, it has excellent construct validity. The IOS has shown convergent validity with longer more resource intensive measures of relationship closeness, such as the subjective closeness inventory ( $r = .77$ ; Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997), the Sternberg Intimacy Scale ( $r = .45$ ; Sternberg, 1988), and the Measure of Intimacy ( $r = .63$  for women; Swann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2003). Large positive correlations have also been found with measures of relationship satisfaction ( $r = .69$ ), commitment ( $r = .67$ ), and investment ( $r = .55$ ) (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998; see Carson, Carson, Gill, & Baucom, 2004 for related findings). In addition, the IOS has been negatively correlated with the degree to which people believe their needs could be fulfilled in an alternate relationship ( $r = -.46$ ) (e.g., another dating partner, friends and family; Rusbult et al., 1998). The IOS has shown strong test-retest reliability after a 2-week interval ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and was a better predictor of partners staying in relationships over a 3-month interval than more extensive measures (Aron et al., 1992).

As an additional measure, we used a modified version of the IOS to measure the amount of closeness people *desired* in their current relationship (i.e., perceptions of ideal levels of closeness; Aron et al., 1997). This scale has been used and validated in multiple studies (e.g., Aron et al., 1997; see Mashek & Sherman, 2004 for unpublished laboratory data). We included this scale to be used in conjunction with the IOS to measure the discrepancy between actual and desired closeness (similar to Aron et al., 1997).

### 2.3.5. Relationship break-up

A one-item measure was used to determine if an individual was in a relationship at T1 that ended by T2 (i.e., “Did you end a romantic relationship in the past 3 months?”).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Preliminary analyses

There were no statistically significant differences on T1 predictor or outcome measures between individuals who (1) did and did not complete the 3-month follow-up survey or (2) who were or were not in romantic relationships at T1. Only 12 women experienced a relationship break-up from T1 to T2. Based on this low frequency, it was not surprising that social anxiety, emotion expressiveness, or depressive symptoms at T1 failed to significantly predict relationship break-ups.

Means, standard deviations, and alpha internal consistency coefficients for all scales at T1 and T2 are reported in Table 1. All scales had acceptable psychometric properties. Mean social anxiety scores at T1 ( $M = 23.83$ ; S.D. = 14.91) were similar to those found for large non-clinical samples (Heimberg, Muller, Holt, Hope, & Liebowitz, 1992; Mattick & Clarke, 1998) and scores at least one standard deviation above the mean were similar to those found for samples of individuals with social anxiety disorder (Brown et al., 1997).

As shown in Table 1, social anxiety had minimal relations with romantic relationship closeness ( $r$ s ranged from .04 to .16) and small to moderate inverse relations with emotion expressiveness ( $r$ s ranged from  $-.12$  to  $-.35$ ). The test-retest correlation for social anxiety ( $r = .85$ ) was extremely large and was acceptable for romantic relationship closeness and different types of emotion expressiveness ( $r$ s ranged from .67 to .72).

Table 1  
Means, standard deviations, and internal consistency coefficients for, and zero-order relations between all variables

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1.	T1 SIAS	–	.85**	.16	.05	.16	.15	–.03	–.11	–.11	–.09	–.12	–.25*	.59**
2.	T2 SIAS	–	–	.16	.04	.14	.21	–.06	–.22	–.13	–.24*	–.12	–.35**	.53**
3.	T1 IOS	–	–	–	.67**	.61**	.45**	.06	.08	.06	.16	.19	.03	.09
4.	T2 IOS	–	–	–	–	.46**	.50**	.00	.11	–.01	.11	.03	.13	–.05
5.	T1 IOS-Desire	–	–	–	–	–	.57**	.02	.07	.01	.10	.13	–.01	.06
6.	T2 IOS-Desire	–	–	–	–	–	–	–.10	–.06	–.06	–.02	–.12	–.12	.18
7.	T1 BEQ	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	.72**	.87**	.60**	.73**	.52**	.05
8.	T2 BEQ	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	.61**	.83**	.53**	.74**	.11
9.	T1 BEQ-Negative	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	.67**	.50**	.36**	–.01
10.	T1 BEQ-Negative	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	.35**	.46**	.08
11.	T1 BEQ-Positive	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	.67**	–.20
12.	T2 BEQ-Positive	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–.19
13.	T1 BDI-II	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
<i>M</i>		23.83	21.08	5.22	4.88	5.59	5.57	79.35	79.72	24.83	26.13	22.94	22.83	12.31
<i>S.D.</i>		14.91	13.01	1.31	1.49	1.38	1.24	14.96	15.48	6.93	7.20	4.27	4.57	9.83
$\alpha$		.94	.93	N/A <sup>a</sup>	N/A <sup>a</sup>	N/A <sup>a</sup>	N/A <sup>a</sup>	.90	.97	.78	.93	.84	.95	.90

All *p*-values were two-tailed. T1, Time 1; T2, Time 2; SIAS, Social Interaction Anxiety Scale; IOS, Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale; IOS-Desire, Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale-Desired Closeness; BEQ, Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire – Total Score; BEQ-Negative, Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire – Negative Expressiveness subscale; BEQ-Positive, Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire – Positive Expressiveness subscale; BDI-II, Beck Depression Inventory-II.

<sup>a</sup> The IOS and IOS-Desire are one-item scales, respectively.

\* *p* < .05.

\*\* *p* < .01.



### 3.2. Social anxiety, emotion expression, and their interaction as predictors of changes in relationship closeness

We conducted a hierarchical regression model to examine whether types of emotion expressiveness moderated the effects of social anxiety on changes in romantic relationship closeness. T2 relationship closeness served as the dependent variable. T1 (baseline) relationship closeness was entered to create residual change scores from T1 to T2. Next, social anxiety and emotion expressiveness at T1 were entered. The social anxiety  $\times$  emotion expressiveness interaction was entered in the final step. For interaction terms, predictor variables were centered to minimize multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). We conducted separate models to test three types of emotion expressiveness as a potential moderating variable: negative emotion expressiveness, positive emotion expressiveness, and general emotion expressiveness (the BEQ total score).

In our first model, as shown in Table 2, there were no main effects on changes in relationship closeness but we found support for the social anxiety  $\times$  negative emotion expressiveness interaction effect in predicting changes in relationship closeness,  $F\Delta(1, 70) = 10.38$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .07$ ,  $p = .002$ , Effect Size  $r = -.36$ . This interaction was explored with simple slope analyses (see Aiken & West, 1991). When conditioned at 1 standard deviation below the mean on social anxiety, greater negative emotion expressiveness was related to increases in relationship closeness,  $b = .44$ ,  $t(12) = 2.36$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .10$ , whereas when conditioned at 1 standard deviation above the mean on social anxiety, greater negative emotion expressiveness was related to decreases in relationship closeness over time,  $b = -.56$ ,  $t(14) = -2.51$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .30$ . Thus, the benefits and costs of expressing negative emotions on the quality of relationships had opposite patterns as a function of whether individuals were less anxious or excessively socially anxious. Data are presented in Fig. 1.

In our second model, we failed to find support for the social anxiety  $\times$  positive emotion expressiveness interaction on changes in relationship closeness ( $p > .20$ ). In our third model, we found support for the social anxiety  $\times$  general emotion Expressiveness interaction effect on changes in relationship closeness,  $F\Delta(1, 70) = 6.38$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .04$ ,  $p = .01$ , Effect Size  $r = -.29$ . As shown in Fig. 2, the pattern of the social anxiety  $\times$  general emotion expressiveness interaction on changes in relationship closeness was virtually identical with the pattern in Fig. 1. Based on these

Table 2

Summary of hierarchical regression model of social anxiety with emotion expressiveness as moderator predicting changes in romantic relationship closeness

Order of entry/predictors in set	General EE as moderator				Negative EE as moderator			
	<i>F</i> for set	<i>t</i> for within-set predictors	<i>pr</i>	$R^2\Delta$	<i>F</i> for set	<i>t</i> for within-set predictors	<i>pr</i>	$R^2\Delta$
1. T1 relationship closeness	68.50***	8.28***	.70	.48***	68.50***	8.28***	.70	.48***
2. Main effects	.03			.00	.15			.00
T1 Social anxiety		1.06	.12			-.30	-.04	
T1 Emotion expressiveness		-.03	-.00			-.49	-.06	
3. T1 SA $\times$ T1 EE	6.38*	-2.53*	-.29	.04*	10.38**	-3.22**	-.36	.07**

All *p*-values were two-tailed. T1, Time 1; SA, social anxiety; EE, emotion expressiveness. In the first model, general emotion expressiveness was the moderator and in the second model, negative emotion expressiveness was the moderator.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

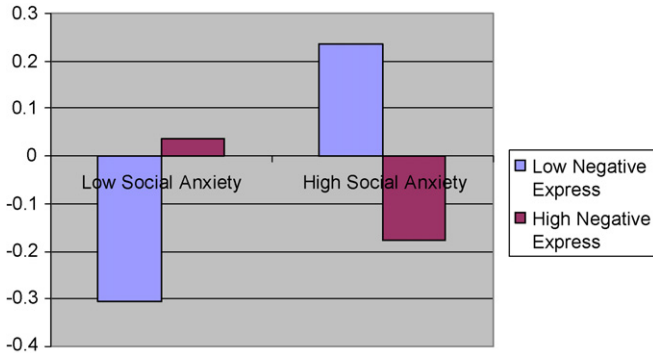


Fig. 1. Residual change in romantic relationship closeness as a function of social anxiety and negative emotion expressiveness. *Notes:* Predictor and criterion variables were transformed into z-scores prior to analyses. High and low social anxiety was defined as at least +1 and –1 standard deviations from the mean, respectively. High and low negative emotion expressiveness was defined as at least +1 and –1 standard deviations from the mean, respectively.

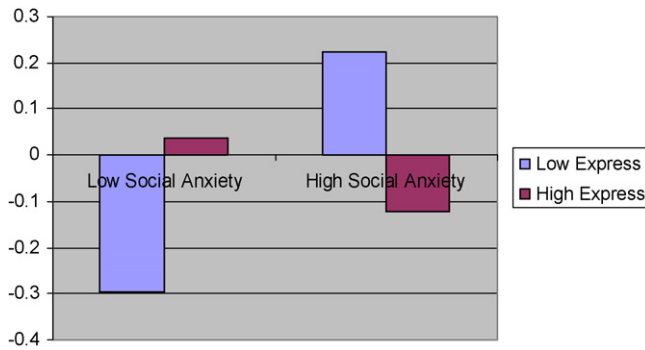


Fig. 2. Residual change in romantic relationship closeness as a function of social anxiety and general emotion expressiveness. *Notes:* Predictor and criterion variables were transformed into z-scores prior to analyses. High and low social anxiety was defined as at least +1 and –1 standard deviations from the mean, respectively. High and low negative emotion expressiveness was defined as at least +1 and –1 standard deviations from the mean, respectively.

findings, it appears that relations between social anxiety and changes in relationship closeness were strongly influenced by the degree to which general and negative emotion response tendencies were expressed behaviorally.

### 3.3. Social anxiety, negative emotion expression, and their interaction as predictors of changes in desired-actual closeness

It was also hypothesized that social anxiety and negative emotion expressiveness would work in tandem to predict how people viewed their romantic relationships compared to what they desired or craved.<sup>3</sup> We conducted a hierarchical regression model to examine whether negative

<sup>3</sup> Hypotheses were specific to the expression of negative emotions but data on positive emotion expression as a moderator of the effect of social anxiety on changes in desired-actual relationship closeness discrepancies are available from the first author.

emotion expressiveness moderated the effects of social anxiety on changes in the gap between desired and actual feelings of relationship closeness. T2 desired minus actual relationship closeness served as the dependent variable. T1 (baseline) discrepancy scores were entered to create residual change scores from T1 to T2, followed by main effects of social anxiety and negative emotion expressiveness at T1 and their interaction.

Besides baseline scores,  $F\Delta(1, 73) = 25.76$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ , Effect Size  $r = .51$ , we found no main effects on changes in desired-actual relationship closeness discrepancies. We did find support for the social anxiety  $\times$  negative emotion expressiveness interaction effect,  $F\Delta(1, 70) = 7.08$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .07$ ,  $p = .01$ , Effect Size  $r = .30$ . As shown in Fig. 3, the pattern of the social anxiety  $\times$  negative emotion expressiveness interaction fits with other findings. The relative costs and benefits of expressing negative emotions on growing discrepancies between desired and actual feelings of relationship closeness differed as a function of both social anxiety and the degree to which negative emotions were expressed.

### 3.4. Reverse causation models

We sought to examine whether that the interaction of relationship closeness and emotion expressiveness predicts changes in social anxiety. In combination with the prior findings, support for this model would suggest bi-directional relations. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression models to examine whether emotion expressiveness moderated the effects of relationship closeness at T1 on changes in social anxiety. T2 social anxiety served as the dependent variable. T1 (baseline) social anxiety was entered to create residual change scores from T1 to T2. Next, relationship closeness and emotion expressiveness at T1 were entered. The relationship closeness  $\times$  emotion expressiveness interaction was entered in the final step. We found no support for bi-directional relations. Specifically, emotion expressiveness (negative, positive, or general) main or interaction effects (with relationship closeness outcomes as moderator) failed to significantly predict changes in social anxiety.

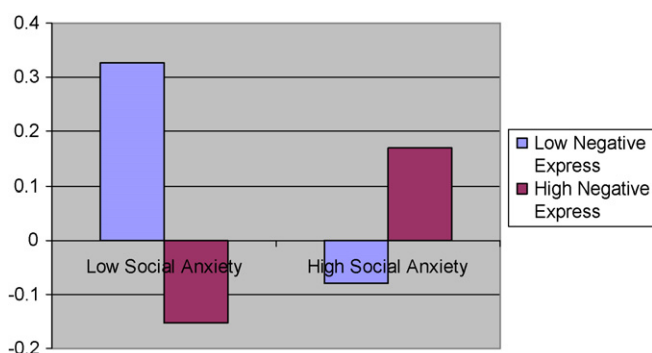


Fig. 3. Residual change in desired-actual romantic relationship closeness discrepancy as a function of social anxiety and negative emotion expressiveness. *Notes:* Higher scores reflect greater discrepancies between desired minus actual closeness over the course of time. Predictor and criterion variables were transformed into z-scores prior to analyses. High and low social anxiety was defined as at least +1 and -1 standard deviations from the mean, respectively. High and low negative emotion expressiveness was defined as at least +1 and -1 standard deviations from the mean, respectively.

### 3.5. Specificity of social anxiety effects

The specificity of social anxiety effects were examined by repeating primary analyses (1) controlling for the BDI-II as a covariate and (2) examining whether relations between depressive symptoms and changes in relationship closeness were moderated by types of emotion expressiveness. Controlling for depressive symptoms had a minimal influence on social anxiety interaction effects on changes in closeness outcomes (effect size  $r$  changes less than .03 for each of the social anxiety  $\times$  emotion expressiveness interaction terms). Additionally, depressive symptoms main or interaction effects failed to significantly predict changes in closeness outcomes and the social anxiety  $\times$  negative emotion expressiveness and social anxiety  $\times$  general emotion expressiveness interactions remained statistically significant even after conservatively accounting for variance attributable to these additional predictors.

We also examined relationship length as a potential confounding variable. Statistically controlling for relationship length had a minimal influence on social anxiety interaction effects on changes in closeness outcomes (effect size  $r$  changes less than .03 for each interaction term).

## 4. Discussion

Across a wide range of previous studies, limiting the expression of negative emotions has been shown to exhibit adverse effects on psychological and social well-being (Gross, 1998; Pennebaker, 1997). Similarly, openly expressing and sharing emotions generally leads to greater social support and intimacy in close relationships (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001). Our study revealed some exceptions to the general consensus that a greater willingness to express emotions is healthy and the opposite is unhealthy. To extend prior work, we examined whether social anxiety and the degree to which emotions are behaviorally expressed predicted changes in feelings of closeness in existing romantic relationships over a 12-week period. Less anxious women felt closer to partners over time and reported smaller discrepancies between current feelings and desired or ideal states of closeness when they were more willing to express negative emotions. The reverse pattern was found for socially anxious women. Socially anxious women felt closer to partners over time when they were more likely to withhold the expression of negative emotions whereas being more willing to express negative emotions led to a deterioration of relationship closeness and greater discrepancies between current and desired levels of closeness over time. For socially anxious women, the inhibition of negative emotional reactions such as withdrawal and hostility, which are easily triggered by social threat cues, may be a strategic attempt to avoid rejection by romantic partners who can be easily overwhelmed and distressed by these behaviors.

Past research has shown that strong feelings of relationship closeness and tendencies to express negative emotions appear to encourage the provision of social support by partners, increasing perceptions of perceived support (e.g., Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987; Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986). Results found that socially anxious people reported increasingly greater feelings of closeness over time in their relationships despite low levels of emotional expressiveness. Thus, socially anxious people can experience adaptive outcomes from their relationship despite a lower propensity to openly express emotions.

We theorized that socially anxious women might be able to preserve their romantic relationships by withholding the onslaught of negatively valenced thoughts, feelings, images, and bodily sensations from their partners. For partners, everyday listening, responsiveness, and provision of reassurance and comfort to more expressive, socially anxious partners could cause

stress-related effects such as fatigue, burnout, and negative mood contagion. Despite finding a single social benefit for socially anxious women who are less expressive of negative emotions, this behavioral tendency has personal and social costs. There is a paradoxical increase in the exact feelings and behaviors that are trying to be avoided (Gross, 1998) and sacrifices in authenticity, the sharing of personal beliefs and intentions (including reinforcement and punishment signals to others for them to learn what is liked and disliked), and communicating the need for affiliation and social support (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Keltner & Kring, 1998). Yet, socially anxious women tend to have a single-minded motive to avoid rejection and social exclusion, especially if an actual relationship has developed (Gilbert, 2001; Leary, 2000), and may be willing to accept these costs as long as they can maintain their romantic relationship. Compared to men, even at the expense of their personal well-being, women are generally more motivated to reduce their expression of emotions to keep close relationship partners satisfied and committed to them (Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 1998). In line with the nature of social anxiety, avoidance social motives, appraisals of low social attractiveness, and persistent attempts to manage anxiety and possible social threats, it seems reasonable that the mere continued existence of a romantic relationship can lead to increased felt closeness over time. The apparent asymmetry between the personal and social costs of inhibiting the expression of emotions in socially anxious people will require more extensive examination within a single sample.

Our findings extend a surprisingly small body of work on social anxiety in the context of romantic relationships (Wenzel, 2002). Social anxiety and tendencies to express negative emotions operated together to affect the degree to which people focused on shortcomings in their romantic relationships. Similar to predictions of changes in closeness over time, more socially anxious women who were expressive of negative emotions were more attentive to discrepancies between actual and desired closeness in romantic relationships. More importantly, the shortcomings of their relationship compared to their hopes and ideals expanded over time. This increasing focus on the unfulfilling nature of their relationship can be an index of actual relationship deterioration, consistent dissatisfaction or low perceived quality of life (Schneier et al., 1994; Wittchen et al., 2000), or information-processing biases toward social failure and threat (Hirsch & Clark, 2004). In contrast to their socially anxious peers, less anxious women who were less expressive of negative emotions reported an expanding discrepancy between perceived and desired closeness over time. Large discrepancies are indicative of relationship dissatisfaction in that the closeness in the relationship does not meet one's needs. For socially anxious women, expressing negative emotions tends to promote growing disappointment in romantic relationships whereas for less anxious women, failing to express negative emotions leads to growing disappointment. Despite our longitudinal findings and support for only a single causal direction, it remains to be seen whether growing actual-ideal discrepancies and how people relate to their emotions (in terms of the willingness to express them) are an antecedent or consequence of relationship deterioration. Nonetheless, these findings provide further evidence of how individual differences in social anxiety provide an important context for understanding how the expression of negative emotions affects how people view their romantic relationships.

People are generally motivated to reduce actual-ideal discrepancies to arrive at a more satisfying state of functioning (Higgins, 1987). However, our findings beg the question of how socially anxious women respond to actual-ideal discrepancies in romantic relationships and whether their responses are different than less anxious women. It is likely that the assertiveness problems, interpersonal dependency in close relationships, and general patterns of conflict avoidance would lead socially anxious women to be more passive than less anxious women in response to recognizing these unsatisfying discrepancies. However, it remains to be seen what

factors predict relationship repair strategies and active attempts to end relationships compared to more passive and passive-aggressive strategies wherein control and direction of the relationship is generally relinquished to partners.

#### 4.1. *Caveats and future directions*

Our findings are limited by a reliance on a relatively small sample of women. Although our sample size was small, the magnitude of our interaction terms, accounting for 4–7% of the variance in outcomes, were larger than typical interaction effects that tend to account for no more than 1–3% (Aiken & West, 1991). The small number of women who ended their relationship 3 months later precluded examinations of how social anxiety and emotion expression affected this process. It also remains to be seen whether the interactive influence of social anxiety and negative emotion expression on relationship outcomes is similar across men and women. Whereas women tend to regulate emotions with the goal of improving relationship functioning, men are more concerned about using their emotions with the goal of maintaining or improving control, status, and power in social contexts (Timmers et al., 1998). Thus, there may be sex differences in how social anxiety operates in romantic relationships.

Our primary outcome measure (the IOS) assessed people's perceived level of closeness to romantic partner and our measure of emotion expressiveness was not modified to be specific to behaviors in romantic relationships. It would have been ideal to have more complex assessment tools and multiple indicators to evaluate emotion expressiveness and regulatory strategies resulting from relationship expectancies, motives, and goals. Perhaps people with excessive social anxiety who are more likely to express emotions are more emotionally intense which leads to various relationship problems. The future use of multi-dimensional measures of romantic relationship functioning can uncover molecular patterns that build on the present findings. Our reliance on self-reports allows for alternative interpretations of our findings, for example, socially anxious people reporting less emotion expressiveness may simply be less aware of the nuances of their relationships which would explain their socially desirable reporting of positive relationship functioning. Emotion expression and relationship closeness are inherently social processes and future work can examine the degree to which the perceptions of people with excessive social anxiety converge with the impressions of romantic partners. A convergence of self-reports, partner reports, and behavioral measures can lead to more refined tests of conceptual models suggesting that socially anxious people may need to strategically regulate their emotions to sustain and thrive in romantic relationships over time. Although the specificity of findings to social anxiety were supported by analyses controlling for the variance attributable to depressive symptoms, other variables that may account for relationship satisfaction (e.g., self-concept dimensions) should be considered as alternative explanations.

An additional way to interpret the findings from the present study would be to examine the results in the context of adult attachment theory. Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding how an individual's perceptions about the self and others influence the course of social relationships. People with secure attachment styles tend to experience feelings of positive self-worth, high levels of interpersonal trust and intimacy, which are thought to lead to healthy relationships. In contrast, people with insecure attachment styles perceive themselves as unworthy of being loved and that people will be unavailable when needed (i.e., anxious attachment) or are distrustful of others and uncomfortable opening up and getting close to people (i.e., avoidant attachment). Insecure attachment is thought to be associated with unhealthy relationships that lack intimacy and closeness. According to attachment theory, the unwillingness

to express negative emotion may be interpreted as a behavioral strategy to prevent exposure to interpersonal tension and conflict as well as private thoughts and feelings related to possible rejection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). In the short-term, this communication pattern may allow the person to avoid rejection from their romantic partner. Past research has shown associations among social anxiety levels, attachment style, and interpersonal functioning in intimate relationships (Eng, Heimberg, Hart, Schneier, & Liebowitz, 2001). However, it remains to be seen whether attachment style provides incremental information over the interplay among social anxiety, emotional self-disclosure, and relationship motives for particular regulatory strategies to understand when and why relationship closeness changes for the better or worse over time.

We believe the merit of the current study is that it suggests several directions for future research studies. To what degree do romantic partners converge in their feelings of closeness and social support, how is this convergence affected or biased by each partners' social anxiety and regulatory styles, and how do these processes change over time? How does giving and receiving social support ebb and flow with social anxiety and emotion regulation strategies on a given day? When socially anxious people openly express their negative emotions, how much does it mentally exhaust romantic partners and burn out social support provision over time? If socially anxious people develop a strategy to suppress their negative emotions to avoid rejection from partners, assessing partner's rating of closeness can provide evidence of whether they are being actively rejected by partners or if their perceptions reflect information-processing biases. Another possible factor is that socially anxious people may have different schemas, expectations, and behavioral response sets for romantic relationships and friendships than their less anxious peers. Future work can also determine whether social anxiety and emotion expression strategies have an interactive influence on relationship closeness in the context of other types of close relationships (e.g., family, friendships). It would also be valuable to study how social anxiety and regulatory strategies operate in different stages of relationship development.

Other unresolved issues include the mechanisms by which less negative emotion expressiveness generates closeness in the relationships of socially anxious people. We can only speculate on the reasons why people with differing vulnerabilities choose to express or suppress their negative emotions (i.e., accounting for function and context and not just content). One possibility is that socially anxious people may feel particularly vulnerable when expressing negative emotions and are extremely sensitive to their romantic partner's reactions. They may be likely to misinterpret slightly negative and ambiguous reactions by their partner as rejecting and a devaluation of the relationship, in turn, concluding that expressing negative emotions is costly. Yet, consideration should be given to the non-random selection of partners by socially anxious people. What are the personality characteristics and affective styles of partners that people with excessive social anxiety gravitate towards? Perhaps they are attracted toward people with similar styles such that less emotionally expressive partners would be more likely to reward (e.g., be comfortable with) socially anxious people who tend to withhold emotions. Alternatively, they may be more prone to develop relations with partners with complementary styles that might allow romantic partners to engage in more dominant behavior patterns (e.g., making plans for shared activities, being the primary caregiver). Research on the interplay of romantic partner styles and the degree of interpersonal complementarity is an important, neglected area of future research.

As processes in the context of close relationships are better understood, the most optimal targets of interventions to improve well-being and flourishing in personal and relationship domains will become clearer. Our preliminary findings suggest the importance of not only addressing social anxiety, but also the way in which people relate to their emotions and their



social motives for their behaviors (approach or avoidance). Whereas less anxious people may seek out closeness with their partner by expressing emotions, socially anxious people may choose not to express their emotions as a strategy to avoid rejection and maintain the survival of relationships. Over the lifespan, the general social avoidance patterns of more socially anxious individuals may have prevented them from having satisfactory opportunities to (a) recognize the relative benign nature of expressing negative emotions in moderate dose or (b) develop appropriate social skills to communicate their feelings in an assertive as opposed to more passive or aggressive/hostile ways (Alden & Taylor, 2004). In the context of romantic relationships, socially anxious people without adequate tools to communicate effectively with their partners may consequently avoid expressing negative emotions and select alternate strategies for developing closeness with their partner such as letting their partner dominate with their emotions, demands, and desires. Socially anxious people may be unable to communicate their negative emotions due to fears of rejection by their partner, inadequate social skills to discuss negative emotions, fears of being in contact with unwanted private events (e.g., anxious or angry feelings), or some combination of cognitive, behavioral, and regulatory processes. This may explain why positive emotional expressiveness did not appear to moderate the influence of social anxiety on closeness levels. Expressing positive emotions may not be functionally independent from the expression of negative emotions.

Despite the lack of closeness in relationships associated with social anxiety and negative emotional expression, socially anxious people still seem to seek closeness with their partners, as represented by discrepancies between actual and desired levels of closeness in romantic relationships. Although expressing some degree of negative emotion generally leads to positive outcomes in the context of social relationships, socially anxious people who were more expressive of negative emotions reported greater gaps between perceived and ideal levels of closeness over time. This implies that socially anxious people's desires for intimacy were not being met by romantic partners. These findings and related data highlight the need to examine emotional expressiveness and self-regulatory processes to gain a better understanding of the romantic relationship functioning of socially anxious people.

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