



Relations Among Neuroticism, Coping, and Distress

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Background

- **Neuroticism** is characterized by negative emotionality and stress reactivity, and is a robust **predictor of distress** (Barlow et al., 2013)
- Neuroticism can be viewed as a stable personality trait
 - It is important to identify the **mechanisms** that link neuroticism to distress. One such mechanism is **coping**, which can be defined as **personality in action under stress** (Bolger, 1990)
- Individuals with **higher neuroticism** are:
 - more likely to use **maladaptive coping** with stressors
 - less likely to use **adaptive coping strategies**
 - less likely to **perceive control** over their stressors (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007)
- Research on coping is **limited** by the use of **retrospective, cross-sectional measures**, which are prone to biases (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010)

Specific Aims

- Examine how neuroticism and distress levels correlated to participant's daily use of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies.
- Examine coping over a **14-day period** using a **longitudinal, daily diary design**

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Method

Participants

- Students recruited from undergraduate psychology classes ($N = 260$)
- Most identified as White/European American (71%) and female (74%)
- Mean age = 21 years old ($SD = 3.49$)

Materials

- Personality: Big Five-Short Form
- Stressors: Checklist of 9 stressors
- Stressor severity: 4-pt rating of severity of stressor severity
- Coping: Coping Strategies Inventory-Short Form; R-COPE for rumination
- Distress: CCAPS-34
- **Smartphone app** for daily diaries

Procedure

- Pre-diary (T1): Participants completed the personality measure online
- Diaries: Participants were notified at **9pm every evening for 14 nights** via the smartphone app.
 - Asked to complete brief, daily survey that assessed: Coping, stressor severity, and number of stressors
- Post-diary (T2): Participants completed the distress measure online

Results (r values)

Daily Maladaptive	Neuroticism (T1)	Distress (T2)
Problem Avoidance	.16*	.34**
Wishful Thinking	.32**	.43**
Self Criticism	.31**	.49**
Social Withdrawal	.18**	.36**
Daily Adaptive	Neuroticism (T1)	Distress (T2)
Express Emotions	.01	-.03
Cognitive Restructuring	-.17**	-.24**
Problem Solving	-.33**	-.43**
Social Support	-.02	-.13
Mean stressor severity rating	.33**	.39**
Average number of stressors per day	.19**	.40**
Present Control	-.38**	-.44**
Neuroticism (T1) & Distress (T2)	.57**	

(* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$)

Discussion

- Neuroticism was **positively correlated** with the use of **maladaptive strategies** across **all time points** (Neuroticism and *daily* maladaptive coping $r = .36^{**}$)
- Neuroticism was associated with:
 - **greater** use of **daily maladaptive coping** strategies
 - **less** use of **daily adaptive coping** strategies
- Participants with **higher levels of neuroticism** had **more stressors** ($r = .19$) and **perceived them as more stressful** ($r = .33$)
- Regarding maladaptive coping strategies, participants reported using **wishful thinking most frequently** and **problem avoidance least frequently**
- **Maladaptive coping** strategies were more strongly related to **distress levels** than were adaptive strategies

Strengths

- Longitudinal design
- Daily measures of coping

Limitations

- The sample was primarily comprised of White and female undergraduate students

Implications

- Given recent evidence of **personality change** after interventions (Roberts et al., 2017), coping interventions that target the identified maladaptive strategies in this study may be one way to **reduce neuroticism and distress levels**

