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# The Positives of Negative Emotions: Willingness to Express Negative Emotions Promotes Relationships

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*Four studies support the hypothesis that expressing negative emotion is associated with positive relationship outcomes, including elicitation of support, building of new close relationships, and heightening of intimacy in the closest of those relationships. In Study 1, participants read vignettes in which another person was experiencing a negative emotion. Participants reported they would provide more help when the person chose to express the negative emotion. In Study 2, participants watched a confederate preparing for a speech. Participants provided more help to her when she expressed nervousness. In Study 3, self-reports of willingness to express negative emotions predicted having more friends, controlling for demographic variables and extraversion. In Study 4, self-reports of willingness to express negative emotion measured prior to arrival at college predicted formation of more relationships, greater intimacy in the closest of those relationships, and greater received support from roommates across participants' first semester of college.*

**Keywords:** *close relationships; friendship; emotional expression; intimacy; negative emotion*

Emotion and emotion expression are hallmarks of everyday life as a human being. People frequently express emotions to others, particularly to close relationship partners (Pennebaker, 1995; Rimé, 1995). Whereas the notion that expressing positive emotion has

multiple benefits is noncontroversial, many programs of research have suggested that expressing negative emotions to others has negative consequences (e.g., Bell, 1978; Locke & Horowitz, 1990; Sommers, 1984). Acknowledging these previous findings, we predicted that expression of negative emotion can and often does have positive consequences as well.

## Literature on Liking and Expression of Negative Emotions

There is a substantial literature suggesting that people react negatively to others' expressions of negative emotions. For example, Bell (1978) reports evidence that the more negative a target person's mood, the less that target is liked, an effect which is diminished but not eliminated when the perceiver himself or herself is sad.

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Sommers (1984) found that people described as expressing negative emotions are judged to be less likable, less social, and less popular than those who do not express these emotions. Locke and Horowitz (1990) found that when people who were not especially dysphoric were paired with someone who was mildly dysphoric, they were less satisfied, perceived the other to be colder, and spoke about increasingly negative topics over time (although dysphoric persons actually seemed more satisfied interacting with similarly dysphoric persons). Other research has demonstrated that expression of negative emotion increases as the intimacy of a romantic relationship decreases (Tolstedt & Stokes, 1984). Finally, there is plenty of evidence that chronically depressed (Coyne, 1976; Marcus & Nardone, 1992; Segrin & Abramson, 1994) and angry (Averill, 1982; Dodge & Coie, 1987) persons are disliked and rejected by others.

Based on such evidence, it would be reasonable to suggest that suppressing rather than expressing negative emotions should facilitate the development of relationships. We do not believe these findings are paradoxical in light of our own predictions, however. Willingness to express negative emotion when one has a need is not the same thing as constant or indiscriminant expression of negative emotion to people with whom there is no chance or desire for a close relationship. We suggest that expression of negative emotion appropriate to the situation and to a new communal relationship will signal trust, be welcomed, and elicit responsiveness. This, in turn, can get a relationship "off the ground." Moreover, we suggest that as relationships develop, most people who are willing to express negative emotion do so only as they experience events that elicit the emotion and that they do so selectively to those who seem as if they are interested in forming or strengthening communal relationships.

It is important to note that existing studies showing drops in liking in reaction to others' negative emotions typically have not allowed for the possibility of a relationship's forming (e.g., Bell, 1978; Sommers, 1984); have investigated the effects of chronic, unrelenting tendencies to express negative emotion (e.g., Coyne, 1976; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Marcus & Nardone, 1992), have looked at negative emotion expression in the context of already distressed relationships (Tolstedt & Stokes, 1984), or have left open the possibility that the sample of negative emotion expression experienced might be indicative of a chronic, unrelenting tendency to express negative emotion (e.g., Bell, 1978; Locke & Horowitz, 1990; Sommers, 1984). These are all conditions under which we would agree that expression of negative emotion ought to reduce liking and produce avoidance of the person expressing the negative emotion.

### Why Should Willingness to Express Negative Emotions Promote Relationship Development and Intimacy?

We suggest that any emotion that conveys one's need state is appropriately and productively expressed within the context of a communal or potential communal relationship in which one's partner is or wishes to be non-contingently responsive to the other's welfare. We argue that expressing such emotions provides partners with information about one's needs, thereby helping the partner respond in an appropriate and caring manner (Clark & Brissette, 2000; Clark & Finkel, 2004; Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001). We further argue that expression of these emotions also suggests to partners or potential partners (as well as to the self through self-perception processes) that one trusts the partner not to take advantage of one's vulnerabilities. Therefore, expression of negative emotion should promote others' responsiveness to the self as well as the establishment of relationships and the development of a sense of intimacy within those relationships.

In the present set of studies, we investigated the effects of willingness to express anxiety (in all four studies) as well as annoyance, fear, and sadness (in Studies 3 and 4) on elicitation of help and the development of relationships. We selected these particular emotions because they convey needs. Fear and anxiety, for instance, convey a need to escape, cope with, or reappraise whatever stimulus is producing the emotion. Annoyance could convey that one perceives an injustice has occurred and may need help correcting, reappraising, or coping with that injustice. Sadness suggests that a loss has occurred and one could use aid in attempts at coping or replacing what was lost.

Emotion theorists have emphasized the idea that experiencing each of these emotions conveys needs to the self and spurs corrective action (e.g., Frijda, 1993; Simon, 1967). The idea that expressing emotion communicates these same needs to others has received some, but considerably less, attention (e.g., Fridlund, 1991; Jones, Collins, & Hong, 1991). Outside of work on infancy (e.g., Ainsworth & Bell, 1970), the idea that expression of such emotions constitutes a call for assistance and may possibly form the basis of a new relationship has received even less attention. However, if others are concerned with our welfare and desire such a relationship, they are likely to attend to signs of our needs (Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989; Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986), respond to our expressions of negative emotion with support (Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987), and feel good about doing so (Williamson & Clark, 1989, 1992). The resulting sense of feeling trusted and helpful should promote a sense of relationship intimacy within the partner

to whom the emotion has been openly expressed. The resulting sense of having trusted the partner and receiving care should, in turn, promote a sense of relationship intimacy within the partner who has expressed the emotion (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Of course, expressing fear, anxiety, sadness, and annoyance must occur selectively. These emotions should be expressed to those with whom one has an actual or potential communal relationship because these recipients are most likely to welcome and respond to one's dependence. The magnitude of the need conveyed by the emotion should be appropriate for the strength of the communal relationship that currently exists with the other or is desired by the other. Finally, the strength of the expression of emotion ought to be in line with the magnitude of the need itself. Expressing minor fears to potential friends is likely to be more appropriate than expressing major ones. More serious fears, annoyances, and sadness can be conveyed as relationships develop. We believe most people are socially sensitive to the level of emotion that it is appropriate to express in actual and developing relationships. We suspect it is people who are overly reluctant to express negative emotions that reveal vulnerability who have trouble establishing new relationships and deepening their intimacy.

### Existing Evidence Supporting the Hypotheses

There is considerable evidence linking self-disclosure to increased intimacy (see Collins & Miller, 1994, for a review). In fact, two separate groups of researchers have developed techniques to induce closeness between strangers in laboratory settings by having them disclose increasingly personal information (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1999). The vast majority of research on self-disclosure has not separated self-disclosure of fact from self-disclosure of emotion. Some research has looked at effects of disclosure of information as mundane as one's name (e.g., Harrell, 1978). These findings show that self-disclosure induces a sense of closeness, and these findings are consistent with and indirectly support our hypotheses, as expressing negative emotion is one form of self-disclosure. More directly relevant to our hypotheses, Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco (1998) reported work in which they tested aspects of Reis and Shaver's (1988) interpersonal process model of intimacy. They hypothesized and found that self-disclosure of emotion was a better predictor of intimacy than was self-disclosure of fact. This also provides indirect support for our hypotheses, given that many of these self-disclosures are likely to have involved negative emotion.

Most directly relevant to our hypotheses, recent work by Kashdan, Volkmann, Breen, and Han (2007) demonstrated that—for women who are not socially anxious—expressing negative emotion is associated with increased intimacy in romantic relationships.

Moreover, some studies provide evidence that expressing negative emotions in existing or desired communal relationships elicits support. Specifically, Shimanoff (1988) found that when spouses examined messages from their mates, messages including expressions of negative emotions, disclosures of vulnerabilities, or hostilities toward a person other than the spouse prompted more supportive responses than messages lacking this emotional content. Also, Clark et al. (1987) reported a study in which some participants were led to desire a communal relationship with an attractive undergraduate who did or did not express sadness. When these participants later had a chance to help that undergraduate, sadness increased the amount of help given. Furthermore, one study has revealed that secure persons provide more help as their romantic partner's distress increases, whereas avoidant persons actually provide less help as their partner's distress increases (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992).

### Testing Our Hypotheses

We tested our hypotheses in four studies. Study 1 examined whether participants would report a greater likelihood of helping a person described as experiencing and expressing a negative emotion relative to a person described as experiencing but not expressing a negative emotion, or as simply experiencing a negative emotion with no information about whether they express it. In Study 2, participants had the opportunity to help a "nervous" confederate who had either expressed emotion or not. We predicted that participants would help most when the confederate expressed negative emotion. In Studies 3 and 4, we examined whether individual differences in willingness to express negative emotions were correlated with (and, in Study 4, would prospectively predict) success in establishing relationships and intimacy within the closest of those relationships.

## STUDY 1

### Method

#### *Overview*

Participants in an experiment on social situations read two scenarios in which a target person was clearly experiencing a negative emotion (anxiety or sadness). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three

conditions: In the Expression condition, the persons described in the scenarios expressed the relevant negative emotion; in the No-Expression condition, they did not; and in the Control condition, no mention was made of whether the persons expressed the emotion. After reading each scenario, participants rated how much they would help and the general likability of the target person.

### Participants

In all, 108 participants (89 women, 18 men, 1 who did not indicate sex) recruited from a public forum website participated in exchange for entry into a \$50 sweepstakes drawing. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: Expression ( $n = 37$ ), No Expression ( $n = 37$ ), or Control ( $n = 34$ ). To navigate the Internet, one participant used a screen reader program that was not compatible with our online survey. Because the screen reader could not properly read the survey items, we excluded that participant's data from analyses.

### Measures and Procedure

Participants accessed an online survey about "social situations," consisting of two vignettes and items tapping participants' reactions to the scenarios. Participants randomly assigned to the Expression condition were instructed to imagine themselves in the following scenario: "Imagine that you have a roommate who is preparing for an upcoming date, and you're around. S/he is trying to decide which is the best movie to see on the date. You have access to a newspaper, and can see that s/he's nervous. Then, s/he expresses his/her anxiety over the upcoming date to you." Access to the newspaper allowed participants to help with the selection of a movie.

Participants assigned to the No-Expression condition read the above paragraph with the last sentence replaced by the following: "Then, s/he does not express his/her anxiety over the upcoming date to you." Participants in the Control condition read the scenario without any mention of whether emotion was expressed. After reading the scenario, participants rated desire to help the target person by answering the question "How likely would you be to look up movie information for your roommate?" Participants also rated the likability of the person using three items ( $\alpha = .93$ ) drawn from the Reysen (2005) Likability Scale (including "This person is likable," "This person is approachable," and "I would like to be friends with this person").

For the second vignette, participants read instructions to imagine themselves in a scenario similar to the one above: "Imagine that you have an acquaintance you'd like to get to know better. S/he is feeling homesick, and

you're around. S/he is looking for money to make an expensive international phone call back home. You have a calling card with extra minutes, and you can see that s/he is feeling down." In the Expression condition, participants then read, "S/he expresses sadness over missing his/her parents to you." In the No-Expression condition, the participants learned of the target "S/he does not express sadness over missing his/her parents to you." Participants in the Control condition read the scenario without any mention of whether emotion was expressed. After reading the vignette, participants made the same helping and likability ratings ( $\alpha = .89$ ) as after the first vignette. After completing these ratings, participants read a screen that debriefed and thanked them.

## Results

### Helping

To assess willingness to help the persons described, we averaged ratings across the two scenarios. Consistent with hypotheses, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect of emotion expression,  $F(2, 105) = 3.42, p < .05$ . Contrast analyses revealed that participants self-reported greater willingness to help when emotion was expressed ( $M = 5.35, SD = 0.70$ ) than when it was not ( $M = 4.92, SD = 0.75$ ),  $F(1, 105) = 2.30, p < .05$ , and when information about expression was not provided (Control condition;  $M = 4.93, SD = 0.92$ ),  $F(1, 105) = 2.21, p < .05$ . There was no significant difference between the No-Expression and Control conditions,  $F < 1$ .<sup>1</sup>

### Likability

To assess likability, we averaged the ratings of the three likability items for both scenarios. A one-way ANOVA revealed no main effect of expression on ratings of likability (averaged across the three items per two scenarios),  $F < 1$ . Consistent with our hypotheses, likability did not decrease when participants rated a person expressing negative emotion. In fact, the mean ratings of likability were slightly higher in the Expression condition ( $M = 4.52, SD = 0.64$ ) than in the No-Expression condition ( $M = 4.34, SD = 0.71$ ) and in the Control condition ( $M = 4.42, SD = 0.58$ ).<sup>2</sup>

## Discussion

The results of Study 1 supported our predictions. More specifically, participants self-reported that they would be more likely to help a person experiencing a negative emotion when that person was described as expressing the



emotion relative to when the person was described as not expressing the emotion (or when no information about expression was available). It is important, and not necessarily intuitive, that such expressions of negative emotion did not decrease liking of the target persons. Indeed, results fell in the opposite pattern—those who chose to express negative emotion tended to be liked more than those who did not (or those for whom this information was unavailable). Although this pattern was not statistically reliable, it argues against the idea that expressing negative emotion leads to disliking as a matter of course and contrasts with previously reported results (e.g., Bell, 1978; Sommers, 1984).

## STUDY 2

Whereas the findings of Study 1 support our hypotheses, they rely entirely on self-reported likelihood of helping and on hypothetical vignettes. We conducted Study 2 to ensure that our findings would generalize to actual behavior in a more ecologically valid situation. In this study, participants were given an opportunity to help a confederate. In two conditions, they knew the confederate to be nervous, and the confederate either did or did not express this nervousness. In a control condition, participants had no information about the confederate's level of nervousness. We predicted that participants would provide the most help when the confederate expressed nervousness and that this expression would not decrease liking.

### Method

#### *Overview*

Participants in an experiment ostensibly on speech evaluation were led to believe an attractive female confederate seen briefly on a television monitor was another participant in an adjacent room. They were then informed that the experimental procedures involved one participant giving two speeches on camera while the other participant evaluated those two speeches. All participants were told that they had been randomly assigned to the evaluator condition. Participants were led to expect future interaction with the confederate. Some participants were told that the confederate was nervous and then saw her express her nervousness (Expression condition); others were told that she was nervous but did not see her express this on camera (No-Expression condition); still other participants were not told anything about her emotional state and saw no expression of nervousness (Control condition). We predicted that participants would provide more help to the confederate when she expressed nervousness.

#### *Participants*

Participants were 45 undergraduates (24 females and 21 males) who received partial course credit or \$6 for compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: Expression ( $n = 15$ ), No-Expression ( $n = 16$ ), or Control ( $n = 14$ ). Nine participants indicated during debriefing that they did not believe the other participant was physically present, and thus their data were excluded from the above count and subsequent analyses.

#### *Procedure*

Participants signed up for an experiment on speech evaluation. They were solicited via flyers posted around a college campus and an online participant pool system.

On arrival, participants were greeted by the experimenter, who was just leaving the room adjacent to the lab to which participants had been directed. The experimenter explained that the other person who would be participating in the experiment had already arrived and the experimental procedures had been explained to her. The experimenter then gave each participant a consent form and led him or her into a lab with access to a desk containing a television monitor and a computer. Participants could see a television monitor showing a female student sitting in another room. The experimenter commented, "Oh, the camera is on. You don't need to see the other participant until she begins her speeches," and turned off the system. The film of the confederate was videotaped and was identical for all conditions.

After seating the participant in front of the computer, the experimenter explained the procedures of the study in greater detail. She told participants that the experiment was assessing the effectiveness of speeches given on camera. They were told that after evaluating two speeches given by the other participant, the two of them would jointly watch and evaluate a third, prerecorded speech. This created the expectation of future interaction with the confederate. The experimenter told participants that after watching each speech, they would evaluate it on the computer. She then explained that the other person would improvise the first speech but would have time to prepare and structure the second speech. The first speech topic was famous Yale alumni.

After giving participants the opportunity to ask procedural questions, the experimenter indicated it was time to start the first speech. In the Expression and No-Expression conditions, the experimenter mentioned that the other person was nervous about having to speak in front of a camera; in the Control condition, she made no such mention.

Participants then watched the prerecorded videotape of the female confederate giving a 3-min speech. The

voice of the experimenter was heard in the beginning of the speech asking the confederate if she was ready. In the Expression condition, the female student expressed nervousness through fidgety nonverbal behavior and the words, "Can we hold on a minute? I'm a little nervous." In the No-Expression condition, the tape was edited such that participants saw the same nonverbal behavior but did not hear any admission of nervousness. In the Control condition, the female student did not appear nervous and instead said, "I'm ready" when asked.

The experimenter then appeared to struggle with the video camera, at which point the screen went blank. After a short time, the camera turned on as the experimenter was apologizing for accidentally turning the camera off. The experimenter then prompted the confederate to begin her speech. The screen-blanking procedure allowed for a clean splice so that the speech itself was identical across the three conditions (i.e., all participants saw the same taped speech after the manipulation and blanking of the screen). Pilot testing indicated that the apparent error actually made the cover story more believable.

After the videotape ended, the experimenter returned to the laboratory. For participants in the Expression condition, the experimenter said, "Whew, she admitted she was nervous." In the No-Expression condition, the experimenter said, "Whew, she seemed nervous," and in the Control condition, she made no comment about the confederate's nervousness. The experimenter then directed participants to an online evaluation form containing 20 questions, 11 of which related to speaker likability (Reysen, 2005). The remaining, distractor questions were related to speech delivery (e.g., tempo, structure, and gestures).

After participants completed the online evaluation form, the experimenter explained that whereas the first speech had been improvised, the other "participant" would have time to prepare a second speech, this time on famous painters of the modern art period. The experimenter explained that the researchers chose an esoteric topic in order to encourage the speaker to do online research on the topic prior to giving the speech. This online research would supposedly influence the way the speaker organized the speech before delivering it on camera. The experimenter explained that the other participant had 10 min to prepare her speech. The experimenter then explained that because participants in the evaluator role had extra time while the other participant prepared, they were encouraged to do online research on the same topic and to e-mail any information they thought might be useful to the speaker. The experimenter told participants they could use the computer to check their own e-mail or surf the Internet after they sent an e-mail to the speaker. We did this to present participants with a situation wherein they had to

balance their desire to help the other student against their desire to use the computer for personal purposes.

The experimenter left participants alone for 10 min, then returned, asked if they had any questions, and indicated that the experiment was over. At this time participants were checked for suspicion, thoroughly debriefed, and either paid or given class credit.

After participants left, the experimenter went back to the computer and checked the history on the browser to count the number of helpful Web sites (i.e., Web sites relevant to the speech topic) visited by each participant during the 10-min period.

## Results

### Helping

To assess actual helping behavior, we counted the number of Web sites visited by each participant that were relevant to the speech task. Consistent with hypotheses, a one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on the number of helpful Web sites visited,  $F(2, 42) = 3.92, p < .05$ . Contrast analyses revealed that participants helped more when the confederate expressed emotion ( $M = 8.67, SD = 4.20$ ) than when she did not ( $M = 5.88, SD = 3.16$ ),  $F(1, 42) = 2.08, p < .05$ . They also helped more in the Expression than in the Control condition ( $M = 5.43, SD = 3.80$ ),  $F(1, 42) = 2.18, p < .05$ . There was no significant difference between the No-Expression and the Control conditions,  $F < 1$ .

### Likability

To assess likability, we took the mean of responses to the 11 items drawn from the likability scale (Reysen, 2005). A one-way ANOVA revealed no main effect of condition on ratings of likability,  $F < 1$ . Consistent with hypotheses, likability did not decrease as a result of expression of negative emotion. Indeed, the pattern was similar to that of Study 1: The mean ratings of likability were slightly higher in the Expression condition ( $M = 5.24, SD = 0.77$ ) than in the No-Expression condition ( $M = 5.04, SD = 0.78$ ) and the Control condition ( $M = 4.90, SD = 0.72$ ).<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion

The results of Study 2 provide further support for our predictions. Whereas in Study 1, participants self-reported that they would be more likely to help someone after that person expressed a negative emotion, in this study, participants actually did help a confederate more after she expressed nervousness. Moreover, this occurred in a relatively ecologically valid experimental

setting whereas the results of Study 1 applied to hypothetical behavior described in vignettes.

As in Study 1, expressions of a negative emotion did not decrease liking of the expresser. Results once again fell into the opposite pattern—participants liked the confederate more when she expressed nervousness than when she did not. Whereas this pattern was not statistically reliable, it once again argues against the idea that expressing negative emotion leads to disliking.

### STUDY 3

Data from Studies 1 and 2 provide support for our hypothesis that expressing a negative emotion that conveys a need elicits support from others. They also provide support for the idea that such expression of negative emotion does not necessarily lead to disliking. These experimental studies did not involve existing, real-world relationships, however, and we wanted to demonstrate that expression of negative emotion could have positive effects on actual relationships with close others. To do this, we conducted a correlational study in which participants self-reported their trait willingness to express negative emotions to others and the quantity of their social ties. Participants also completed a measure of extraversion and self-reported some demographics. We predicted that controlling for these other variables, willingness to express negative emotion would be associated with a greater number of social ties.

#### Method

##### *Participants*

Participants were 124 introductory psychology students (42 men, 78 women, and 4 who did not indicate sex) ranging in age from 17 to 23, with a median age of 18. All volunteered to participate during recitation sections of their introductory psychology course.

##### *Materials and Procedure*

Each participant completed a questionnaire packet in a small classroom setting. These packets contained measures of willingness to express negative emotion, quantity of social ties, and extraversion. The willingness to express negative emotion measure was created for this study. Participants rated their willingness to express fear, annoyance/anger, sadness, and anxiety to others in general on a 5-point scale. The reliability for this scale was acceptable ( $\alpha = .69$ ). The measure of quantity of social ties also was created for this study. Participants responded to the following four items with regard only to people they had met at the university and with regard

only to the past 7 days: (a) With how many (if any) different people have you eaten a meal? (b) With how many (if any) different people have you talked on the phone? (c) With how many people (if any) have you socialized (other than eating a meal)? and (d) How many different people (if any) would you consider to be friends? To compute an index of the quantity of social ties, we standardized responses to each of these questions and took the mean of the four standardized scores for each participant. Participants also completed the extraversion items from Saucier's (1994) brief version of Goldberg's (1992) measure of the Big Five personality traits ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and indicated their sex, age, year in school, whether they lived on campus, whether they were in a fraternity/sorority, and, if so, whether they lived in fraternity/sorority housing.

#### Results

Table 1 contains the complete pattern of intercorrelations among our dependent variable and predictor variables. To provide an ecologically valid test of our hypothesis, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis predicting quantity of social ties. On the first step, we entered all of our demographic control variables: sex, age, year in school, fraternity membership, campus housing, and fraternity housing. On the second step, we entered extraversion scores. On the third step, we entered willingness to express negative emotion scores. Table 2 contains the results of this regression analysis. Willingness to express negative emotion predicted a greater number of social ties, above and beyond all other variables. Extraversion scores were no longer predictive of quantity of social ties when we controlled for these other variables (although it was marginally significant before willingness to express negative emotion scores were entered). The results of this analysis clearly supported our predictions.<sup>4</sup>

#### Discussion

This study provided clear support for our hypothesis. Trait willingness to express negative emotion was associated with a greater quantity of social ties. This was true when we controlled for sex, age, year in school, fraternity/sorority membership, campus living situation, fraternity/sorority living situation, and extraversion. It is interesting to note that extraversion scores failed to predict quantity of social ties when willingness to express negative emotion was entered in the same regression equation. This is especially noteworthy given that the measure of extraversion contains more items and exhibited greater reliability than the measure of negative emotion.



**Table 1:** Correlations Between Willingness to Express Negative Emotion, Quantity, and Intimacy of Social Ties, Self-Esteem, Neuroticism, and Sex ( $N = 124$ )

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Willingness to express negative emotion	—	.12	.08	.00	-.15†	.22*
2. Quantity of social ties		—	.24**	.45***	.29***	-.18†
3. Extraversion			—	.17†	.01	-.05
4. Fraternity membership				—	.38***	-.06
5. Fraternity housing					—	.12
6. Sex						—

NOTE: Sex was coded as follows: *Men* = 0 and *Women* = 1.  
 † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2:** Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Quantity of Social Ties ( $N = 124$ )

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1				.36***
Sex	-0.21	0.11	-.15†	
Age	-0.15	0.10	-.23	
Year in school	0.06	0.13	.07	
Living on campus	0.11	0.17	.06	
Fraternity membership	0.91	0.17	.46***	
Living in fraternity housing	1.24	0.44	.24**	
Step 2				.01
Extraversion	0.10	0.06	.14†	
Step 3				.03*
Expression of negative emotion	0.12	0.05	.19*	

NOTE: Sex was coded as follows: *Men* = 0 and *Women* = 1.  
 † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## STUDY 4

To provide additional support for our hypotheses, we investigated data from a prospective study of incoming college students. During Phase 1 of the study, participants reported their trait willingness to express negative emotion before arriving for their 1st year of university study. During Phase 2, participants reported on both the quantity and the intimacy of their social ties at the university at the end of their first semester. We predicted that willingness to express negative emotion would be associated with both a greater number of social ties and greater intimacy with the closest of those ties. We also investigated data from an initially independent study, in which roommates of many of these participants self-reported on how much support they had provided to our participants. We predicted that to the extent that the participant self-reported a high degree of willingness to express negative emotion, the participant's roommate would independently report having provided them with more support.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were individuals about to begin their 1st year of university study. Each was recruited for a study of roommate relationships. In all, 132 men and women completed a first round of individual difference measures, including measures of willingness to express negative emotions to others, self-esteem, and neuroticism. Participants for the subsequent round of data collection were recruited from this group of individuals; 71 individuals (23 men and 48 women) participated in the second phase of the study, which involved measures of the quantity and intimacy of relationships formed during the first semester.

### Measures and Procedure

**Phase 1.** Participants completed the first round of self-report measures the summer prior to their 1st year of university study and, thus, prior to opportunities to form social ties at the university. Participants received and returned the measures by mail.

Participants completed the same measure of willingness to express negative emotion as was used in Study 3 ( $\alpha = .79$ ). As to the control variables, we assessed self-esteem using the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and neuroticism using the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett 1985). Both measures were reliable;  $\alpha = .89$  and  $\alpha = .82$ , respectively.

**Phase 2.** Thirteen weeks into participants' first semester of university study, we collected measures of the quantity and quality of social ties formed at the university.

We collected two measures of the quantity of social ties. The first was the same measure of quantity of social ties used in Study 3. For the second, we asked participants to list the initials of everyone (from the university) with whom they had (in the past week) eaten breakfast, eaten lunch, eaten dinner, studied for classes,

**Table 3:** Correlations Between Willingness to Express Negative Emotion, Quantity and Intimacy of Social Ties, Self-Esteem, Neuroticism, and Sex ( $N = 71$ )

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Willingness to express negative emotion	—	.26*	.26*	.27**	-.15†	.12
2. Quantity of social ties		—	.13	.05	-.23†	-.01
3. Intimacy of two closest social ties			—	.07	.00	.29**
4. Self-esteem				—	-.59***	-.14
5. Neuroticism					—	.21†
6. Sex						—

NOTE: Sex was coded as follows: *Men* = 0 and *Women* = 1.  
 † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

gone to a show, gone to a party, sat around chatting/talking, watched television, exercised, and done a chore. For this measure, we summed the number of unique initials across all items. That is, we counted each set of initials only once, regardless of the number of items for which it was listed. Because these two measures were substantially correlated ( $r = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), we standardized and combined them for subsequent analyses.

We also included a measure of the quality of one's closest social ties. This measure was designed to tap how understood, validated, and cared for by their partner participants felt and to tap how understanding, validating, and caring they perceived themselves to be toward their partner. Participants completed this measure twice; once as applied to each of their two closest social ties at the university. This measure was designed to tap the three components of intimacy identified by Reis and Shaver (1988): understanding, acceptance, and caring. Items tapping understanding included "This person seems to grasp my feelings very easily," "I really wish this person understood me better" (reverse scored), "I don't have much insight into this person's feelings" (reverse scored), and "I understand this person better than anyone else understands him/her." Items designed to measure acceptance included "This person is always trying to change me" (reverse scored), "This person likes me," "I think this person is a terrific person," and "There are things about this person I'd like to change" (reverse scored). Finally, items tapping caring were "This person would do just about anything for me," "This person does not work very hard to make me happy" (reverse scored), "I could do a lot more to help this person than I do" (reverse scored), and "Taking care of this person makes me happy." We computed the mean across all items for both targets ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

## Results

As noted previously, a substantial number of participants ( $n = 61$ ) who completed Phase 1 of the study did

not participate in Phase 2. To ensure that there were no systematic differences between those who did and did not remain in the study, we conducted independent sample  $t$  tests to compare the groups across all predictor variables. We found no significant or marginally significant differences (all  $ps > .20$ ).

### *Expressing Negative Emotion and Quantity of Social Ties*

Recall that our first hypothesis was that the willingness to express negative emotions to others would be associated with a greater number of social ties. We first computed zero-order correlations for the predictor (expressing negative emotions), control (sex, self-esteem, and neuroticism), and outcome (index of quantity of social ties) variables. See Table 3 for the complete pattern of correlations.

We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis predicting quantity of social ties from willingness to express negative emotion, controlling for neuroticism, sex, and self-esteem (see Table 4 for complete results). Controlling for all three variables, we found a significant association between willingness to express negative emotions and quantity of social ties ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

### *Expressing Negative Emotion and Intimacy of Social Ties*

Recall that our second hypothesis was that the tendency to express negative emotions to others would be associated with greater intimacy in one's social network. We conducted zero-order correlations for the predictor (expressing negative emotions), control (sex, self-esteem, and neuroticism), and outcome (index of intimacy of social ties) variables. See Table 5 for the complete pattern of correlations.

We conducted a regression analysis predicting intimacy with one's two closest social ties from willingness to express negative emotions, controlling for sex, neuroticism, and self-esteem. In this analysis, willingness to express negative emotion remained associated with

**Table 4:** Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Quantity of Social Ties ( $N = 71$ )

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1				.08
Sex	0.10	0.22	.06	
Age	0.09	0.25	.05	
Neuroticism	-1.43	0.64	-.35*	
Self-esteem	-0.16	0.17	-.15	
Step 2				.08*
Expression of negative emotion	0.34	0.14	.30*	

NOTE: Sex was coded as follows: *Men* = 0 and *Women* = 1.  
\* $p < .05$ .

**Table 5:** Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Intimacy of Social Ties ( $N = 71$ )

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1				.20**
Sex	0.36	0.24	.19	
Age	-0.55	0.20	-.33**	
Neuroticism	-1.43	0.64	-.35*	
Self-esteem	-0.16	0.17	-.15	
Step 2				.04†
Expression of negative emotion	0.25	0.14	.21†	

NOTE: Sex was coded as follows: *Men* = 0 and *Women* = 1.  
† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

greater intimacy although the association became marginally significant ( $\beta = .22, p = .07$ ).<sup>5</sup>

#### Additional Data From Participants' Roommates

Study 4 provided evidence that willingness to express negative emotions was associated with both the formation of a greater number of friendships during students' first semester of university study and the establishment of greater intimacy in the closest of their relationships. However, it is possible that these findings emerged as the result of self-report biases. Perhaps people reporting willingness to express negative emotions to others also have a tendency to report having lots of friends and greater intimacy in the closest of their relationships. This seems unlikely given that our findings held when we controlled for self-esteem and neuroticism. Even so, our conclusions would be more convincing if outside sources corroborated our participants' self-reports. Fortunately, we had additional data from 33 of the participants' roommates regarding provision of help to participants.<sup>6</sup>

We hypothesized that participants' self-reports of their own willingness to express negative emotions would be positively related to their roommates' reports of having actually provided help to participants.

#### Measures and Procedure

The roommates of 33 of our participants had, in the context of a joint investigation, reported on how often

they had provided help to their roommate. In particular they answered the following three questions: "How often do you give information or advice to your roommate?" "How often do you provide encouragement and reassurance to your roommate?" and "How often do you listen to your roommate share problems?" Reliability was good for these items ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

We hypothesized and found that participants' tendencies to express negative emotions were associated with their roommates' independent reports of providing more help to those participants ( $r = .36, p < .05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

We hypothesized that people's willingness to express the negative emotions conveying needs to potentially close relationship partners would (a) elicit help, (b) not cause liking to drop (and might even cause it to rise), (c) help people build larger social networks, and (d) facilitate the establishment of intimacy in people's closest relationships. The four studies reported here yielded evidence supporting all four hypotheses.

*Did expression of negative emotion elicit help from others?* Our first two studies were designed explicitly to test the prediction that expressing negative emotion to potentially close others would elicit help from those others. Data from both supported our prediction. In Study 1, participants who read vignettes describing a person with a need self-reported a greater likelihood of providing help to that person when he or she chose to express the negative emotion. In Study 2, participants who believed a confederate was in an anxiety-provoking situation helped her more with Internet research when she expressed negative emotion to them on videotape. Finally, in a follow-up to Study 4, the roommates of participants who themselves had said earlier (and in a different context) that they were willing to express negative emotions reported that they helped those participants more than did the roommates of the participants who had earlier reported being reluctant to express such emotions.

These data provide strong and unambiguous support for our first hypothesis. It is important to note that these studies complement each other in ways that minimize the weaknesses of each. Whereas Study 1 and the follow-up to Study 4 provide evidence of greater self-reports of helping after expression of a negative emotion, Study 2 demonstrated an analogous pattern with observed helping behavior. Whereas Study 1 and Study 2 provide evidence of greater helping toward people with whom one does not currently have (but may desire) a relationship, the follow-up to Study 4 provides evidence that these processes occur in ongoing relationships. Finally, whereas the follow-up to Study 4 provides correlational evidence that is susceptible to third-variable

and reverse-causality problems, Studies 1 and 2 are experimental and thus not susceptible to these problems.

*Did expression of negative emotion lead to decreased liking?* Whereas some have suggested that expression of negative emotion leads to decreased liking (e.g., Averill, 1982; Bell, 1978; Coyne, 1976; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Marcus & Nardone, 1992; Segrin & Abramson, 1994; Sommers, 1984), we did not make this prediction. We predicted that negative emotion would leave liking unaffected by expression of negative emotion in the context of an ongoing or desired relationship with the person doing the expression. In Studies 1 and 2, participants did not like the person described in the vignettes or the experimental confederate less when that person expressed negative emotion. Indeed, participants liked the person slightly (but nonsignificantly) more when he or she expressed negative emotion—a tendency we think is noteworthy given the consistent pattern across all three targets.

*Is trait willingness to express negative emotion associated with a greater quantity of social ties and greater intimacy within the closest of those social ties?* Studies 3 and 4 were designed to examine the hypothesized impact of expression of negative emotion over time; namely, the building of close relationships. As predicted, results of both studies suggest that people who are more willing to express negative emotion have larger social networks. In Study 3, this association held when demographic variables and extraversion were controlled for. In Study 4, this association held prospectively, when the development of relationships during participants' first semester of university study was evaluated and self-esteem and neuroticism were controlled for. Furthermore, in Study 4, participants reported greater intimacy in their two closest relationships to the extent that they reported greater willingness to express negative emotion.

#### What About the Literature Suggesting That Expressing Negative Emotion Leads to Being Disliked?

In light of past findings offering strong evidence that people dislike those who express negative emotions (Averill, 1982; Bell, 1978; Coyne, 1976; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Marcus & Nardone, 1992; Segrin & Abramson, 1994; Sommers, 1984), some might find the present results surprising. Willingness to express negative emotions not only did not seem to drive people away; it seemed to draw them closer and to make them more likely to help. We suggest that reconciling these findings with our own (and others which suggest that expressing negative emotions is not antithetical to having a good

relationship, e.g., Feeney, 1995, 1999; Kashdan et al., 2007; Laurenceau et al., 1998) is not problematic when one considers to whom negative emotion is expressed and the context in which it is expressed. Willingness to express negative emotions in a manner appropriate to the situation, if and when one is experiencing them, and selectively to others with whom one either has an established communal relationship (Feeney, 1995, 1999) or who might reasonably be expected to desire such a relationship (Clark & Taraban, 1991; the present studies) is likely to promote the development and maintenance of communal relationships. In contrast, expressing negative emotions constantly over time despite partners' supportive efforts, as may occur when a person is depressed (e.g., Coyne, 1976; Marcus & Nardone, 1992; Segrin & Abramson, 1994) and/or expressing negative emotions to people with whom one neither has nor anticipates a communal relationship (e.g., Sommers, 1984) should elicit dislike and avoidance.

#### Links With Broaden and Build Theory

Barbara Fredrickson's broaden and build theory of positive emotions states that positive emotions lead to a broadening of attention that can ultimately build psychological and social resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Her ideas are distinct from our own in at least two ways. First, and most obviously, her focus on positive emotions contrasts with our own focus on negative emotions. Second, her theory emphasizes the effects of emotion experience whereas we are emphasizing emotion expression. Still, our theory and findings might have some relevance to this theory.

When a person experiences a negative emotion, regardless of whether it is expressed, he or she will have a narrowing of attentional focus. According to the theory, this should not be associated with building resources; however, we suggest otherwise. Focusing narrowly on the source of the negative emotion is likely to lead the person to take corrective action. One means of doing this is expressing the negative emotion to another person who can provide support. Once the negative emotion is expressed, if the other person provides support, this should lead to an enhanced relationship for both parties. Perhaps broadening and building functions are not limited to positive emotions but are at work with negative emotions as well.<sup>7</sup>

#### Limitations and Future Directions

The present studies have some limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, Studies 3 and 4 are correlational in nature, which renders both susceptible to several alternative explanations. For example, it is possible in Study 3 that participants with larger social networks felt more able to express negative emotion.



Alternatively, it is possible that a third variable, such as willingness to express all emotions, positive and negative, drove the findings in these particular studies. Whereas our Studies 1 and 2 avoid these problems for one of our dependent variables (elicitation of support), future research should work to clarify causality for the remaining dependent variables (network size and intimacy). Second, Studies 3 and 4 used newly created measures of social support and intimacy. The use of preexisting measures would allow for more-direct comparisons with others' research.

One important direction for future research will be to examine the context in which negative emotion expression occurs. For example, is expressing negative emotions generated by a third party different from expressing negative emotions generated by the person being expressed to? Expressing negative emotions generated by a third party might be less threatening to the other person and might therefore be associated with more positive outcomes. Alternatively, expressing negative emotions generated by the person expressed to provides that individual with feedback about how his or her behavior is affecting the expresser. This might lead to a correction of the problem causing the negativity in the first place. Another contextual factor likely to be important is the quality of one's relationship with the other person. Perhaps people would be more willing to express negative emotions in close relationships because they would feel safer. On the other hand, they might be more reluctant to express negative emotions for fear of damaging the relationship. Finally, status is likely to be a factor in determining one's willingness to express negative emotion. People might be more likely to express negative emotions to others when they are of higher status. Consistent with this idea, people perceive others who express anger as being more competent and therefore of higher status (Tiedens, 2001).

One other important task for future research will be to explore personality differences in willingness to express negative emotions. It seems plausible that traits with clear social connotations (e.g., self-esteem, attachment style, rejection sensitivity) might influence one's willingness to express negative emotions. Future research should explore these possibilities.

### Strengths of the Present Research

The present research also has a number of important strengths. First, it raises and supports an argument that is relatively counterintuitive. Indeed, much previous research has argued against the notion that expressing negative emotion has positive interpersonal effects. Whereas we are not trying to make the case that it is

always positive to express negative emotion, our evidence supports our argument that expressing negative emotion can have several positive effects. Second, the present package of studies makes use of several different kinds of samples, from incoming college students, to current college students, to a diverse community sample recruited on the Internet. That we found consistent results across this variety of samples suggests that our findings are not unique to a limited population. Finally, we have presented data from four different studies using very different methodologies that complement one another. Whereas the first two studies were experimental, the last two (and the supplemental study) were correlational. The first set provides clear evidence regarding causality whereas the remaining studies demonstrate effects in actual relationships. Although each one of these studies has some limitations that may render it susceptible to alternative explanations, we believe the overall package provides compelling support for the idea that expressing negative emotion has several interpersonal benefits.

### NOTES

1. The patterns were identical for both of the scenarios. In both scenarios, likelihood of helping was highest in the Expression conditions, next highest in the experience but No-Expression conditions, and lowest in the Control/no-emotion condition.

2. We conducted exploratory analyses to see whether sex predicted helping or liking and to determine whether sex interacted with condition to predict either outcome. No significant main effects or interactions were revealed, all  $F_s(2, 107) < 1$ .

3. We conducted exploratory analyses to see whether sex predicted helping or liking and to determine whether sex interacted with condition to predict either outcome. The only significant effect was a main effect of sex on liking,  $F(1, 45) = 7.04, p < .05$ , such that men reported higher liking for the confederate. Theoretically, this finding is not particularly interesting given that the confederate was an attractive female. No other effects were significant, all  $F_s(2, 45) < 1.06$ .

4. We conducted exploratory analyses to see whether sex predicted willingness to express negative emotions and found that women reported higher willingness ( $M = 4.30$ ) than did men ( $M = 3.87$ ),  $t(117) = -2.04, p < .05$ . We controlled for sex in regression analyses and also explored whether it interacted with willingness to express negative emotion in predicting quantity of social ties and found that it did not,  $\beta = .15, p > .60$ .

5. We conducted exploratory analyses to see whether sex predicted willingness to express negative emotions and found that it did not,  $t(71) = -0.98, p = .33$ . We also explored whether it interacted with willingness to express negative emotion in predicting quantity of social ties or intimacy and found that it did not,  $\beta_s = .95$  and  $-.39; p_s > .20$ .

6. The third and fourth authors had originally pooled resources to collect data together for purposes of examining social network development early in college and the nature of roommate relationships. Whereas there was originally no intention to conduct the specific analyses linking participants' willingness to express negative emotion with roommate reports of providing help, we were able to do so ethically because participants had consented to participating in the joint investigation and had unique nonidentifying code numbers that were constant across the two data sets.

7. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for asking us how our ideas were linked to this particular theory.



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