Non-expression of emotions: Sex differences and association with illness symptoms

Stephanie Jimenez, Andrea Fernandez, and Grant Benham

The University of Texas – Pan American

Background and Method

The notion that emotional expression is linked to physical health has a long history in psychological literature. The primary aim of the current study was to examine whether two aspects of emotional expression (emotion suppression and difficulty describing feelings) are associated with physical illness symptoms.

One hundred and twenty undergraduate student participants (mean age = 22.7 (5.7)) attended group sessions ranging in size from three to eighteen students. Approximately half of the sample (53%) was female and the large majority (93%) of participants classified themselves as Hispanic. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis and were offered extra credit by their respective professors for participation. Each participant anonymously completed a packet of paper-and-pencil measures that included demographic and health behavior questions, two measures of emotional (non) expression, and a measure of physical illness symptoms. Additionally, emotion suppression was assessed using a concrete example: participants were asked to indicate their most likely crying response when watching a tearjerker movie, ranging from “I would be likely to cry even if I were with people I didn’t know very well” to “I would be likely to get “choked up”, but would hold back my tears even if I were alone (would not express my emotion)”.

Illness

The Cohen–Hoberman Inventory of Physical Symptoms (CHIPS; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). The CHIPS is a 33-item Likert-type scale that asks respondents to rate how much a particular symptom has bothered or distressed them during the last month, and includes items such as “Back pain” and “Diarrhea”. Responses range from (0) “not been bothered by the problem” to (4) “the problem has been an extreme bother”. The final score ranges from 0 to 4 and is calculated as the average of the 33 item ratings. Higher CHIPS scores represent higher physical symptom reporting.

Emotional (Non) Expression

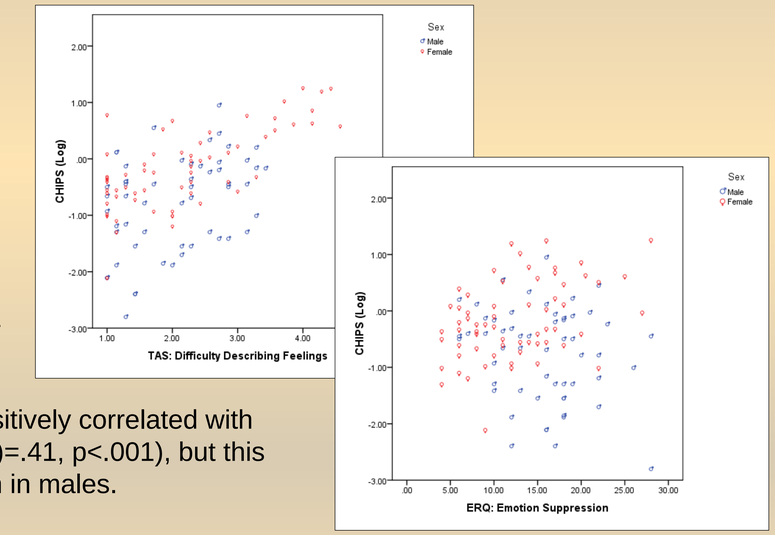
The Toronto Alexithymia Scale – 20 (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994) is a 20-item measure of alexithymia; a construct that refers to difficulty in perceiving, differentiating, and expressing one’s own emotions. The TAS-20 has 3 subscales: Difficulty Describing Feelings, Difficulty Identifying Feeling, and Externally-Oriented Thinking. Each of the twenty items are rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For the purposes of this study, factor 1 (difficulty describing feelings) was used in the analyses. Questions used in this factor include “It is difficult for me to reveal my innermost feelings. even to close friends.” and “I find it hard to describe how I feel about people.”

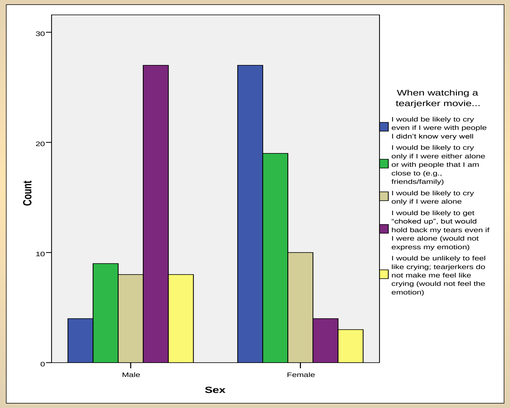
The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003) is a 10-item scale designed to assess individual differences in the habitual use of two emotion regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Items are rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For the purposes of this study, expressive suppression was used in the analyses. Questions used in this factor include “I control my emotions by not expressing them.”

Results

Illness symptoms (CHIPS) data were log transformed to compensate for a non-normal distribution; all other data was normally distributed. Males scored significantly higher than females in emotion suppression (t(1,117)=3.09, p=.003) and significantly lower in illness symptoms (t(1,117)=-4.28, p<.001), but did not differ significantly from females in their difficulty describing feelings (t(1,116)=.98, p>.05).

The associations between emotion expression variables and health were examined separately for males and females. For both males and females, illness symptoms were positively correlated with difficulty expressing emotions (r(55)=.24, p=.04 and r(63)=.42, p<.001, respectively). For females, illness symptoms were positively correlated with emotion suppression (r(63)=.41, p<.001), but this association was not shown in males.





To examine male/female differences in the suppression of crying during a tearjerker movie, a 2X4 chi-square analysis was conducted using sex and crying response. The nature of crying expression/suppression during a tearjerker movie was not independent of the sex of the participant (chi-squared(3)=37.05, p<.001). While females were likely to report freely crying even if amongst people they didn’t know very well, males were more likely to report holding back their tears even if they were alone.

Discussion

In conclusion, our study supports the notion that non-expression of emotion is associated with poorer physical health, but suggests that (i) the association may depend on how one conceptualizes emotion non-expression (e.g., difficulty expressing feelings vs. active suppression of experienced emotion) and (ii) that there are clear sex differences in emotion (non) expression that need to be carefully considered when exploring emotion-health relationships.