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5

Does Expressing Emotion Promote Well-Being? It Depends on Relationship Context

Margaret S. Clark and Eli J. Finkel

Questions concerning whether it is best to express or suppress felt emotions have long been of interest to psychologists. Is expressing pride in one's accomplishments a good thing? It does allow others to celebrate one's accomplishments, but it can lead to one being judged as arrogant. Are fears best confided to others or should they be suppressed? Expressing fears may elicit help and comfort or derision and exploitation. What will happen if one expresses sadness? Will companions express compassion and reassurance or pity and avoidance? Most generally, is expressing one's emotions good or bad for your personal well-being?

Our answer to all of these questions is, "It depends." To the extent that emotions carry information about one's needs, we argue, the wisdom of expressing them to others depends importantly, even crucially, on the relationship context within which one finds oneself. Our position is simple: Expressing emotion is likely to be beneficial in the company of others who care about one's welfare. The more companions care, the wiser expression of emotion is likely to be. Such expressions are more likely to be accepted, elicit care, and maintain or strengthen the caring relationship. In sharp contrast, if one finds oneself with companions who do not care about one's welfare, it is generally unwise to express emotions indicative of one's needs. At best, the expressions will be ignored; at worst, one may be avoided, derided, or exploited.

In this chapter, we review evidence supporting these claims. First, we make a theoretical case that expressing emotions – such as fear, sadness, happiness, and pride – is less risky and more beneficial in communal relationships (in which partners assume responsibility for one's welfare and provide benefits noncontingently) than in other relationships. Second, we review empirical evidence that, indeed, emotions are more often expressed when people perceive their partner to have a communal relationship with them than when they do not hold this perception. Third, we make a theoretical and empirical case that expressing emotion in communal contexts

will produce a host of social, cognitive, and physiological benefits that are unlikely to accrue when emotion is expressed in noncommunal contexts.

A THEORETICAL CASE THAT PEOPLE SELECTIVELY EXPRESS EMOTION IN COMMUNAL RELATIONSHIPS

Our argument that it is wiser to express emotion in communal relationships than in other relationships is based on two assumptions. First, expressing most emotions conveys information about one's current need state (or lack thereof) to the target of the expression. Second, any given person's relationships with other people vary in terms of the extent to which the relationship partner assumes responsibility for that person's needs.

Expressed Emotion Conveys Information About Our Needs

Emotion researchers have long recognized that emotion, as experienced internally, communicates information to oneself. Negative emotions generally indicate that one has a need. They cause a person to pause and attend to that need (Frijda, 1993; Simon, 1967). The novice skier who takes a wrong turn and finds herself staring down an extremely steep and icy slope, for instance, is likely to feel fear. The fear is a signal that she has a need for safety and that she ought not ski down the slope. Positive emotions indicate that one's needs have been met and that an activity ought to be continued. For instance, the warm contentment a child feels as his mother reads him a picture book signals the child that being with his mom and reading books are good. Positive emotions can also encourage a person to try new things and to explore his or her environment (Frederickson, 1998).

However, emotions are not entirely private affairs. They can be perceived on one's face (Keltner et al., 2003), in one's tone of voice (Scherer, Johnstone, & Klasmeyer, 2003), and in one's posture (Riskind, 1984). In addition, of course, people often verbalize their emotions (Reilly & Seibert, 2003). Some have noted that such outward expression of emotion is adaptive because it conveys to others that they may share the same need (or opportunity to have a need be met) as the emotional other (Levenson, 1994). For instance, a skier's fearful facial expression may alert other skiers to the steep slope ahead, and a toddler's giggles may alert siblings that whatever is going on is enjoyable and prompt them to join the fun.

We would agree. However, we suggest that an additional and perhaps more important function of emotion expression is to communicate information about a person's welfare *to others*, thereby enabling and encouraging those others to attend and respond to the person's need states. For instance, the fearful skier's facial expression can summon reassurance from a companion, a toddler's giggles encourage his mom to keep reading to him, and, of course, an infant's cries of distress cause parents to come running.

Relationships Vary in Communal Strength

We refer to the degree to which one person assumes responsibility for another's welfare and will benefit that other noncontingently as the *communal strength* of a relationship (Clark & Mills, 1993; Mills & Clark, 1982; Mills et al. in press). That people perceive certain relationship partners to be more concerned with their welfare than other relationship partners is obvious. Most people, for instance, perceive their mothers to be more concerned about their welfare than, say, an acquaintance at work.

There are two determinants of perceiving that any particular relationship partner will or will not assume communal responsibility for our needs. One is obvious: Some partners really are more responsive to our needs than are others. It is wise to express emotion to these people. The other determinant lies in our own personality rather than in the reality of a partner's caring. Even when partners do care, many studies have shown that certain people may not perceive that care. Such people have been variously labeled as insecure (Ainsworth et al., 1978), rejection sensitive (Downey & Feldman, 1996), or low in self-esteem (Murray et al., 1998). These people are undoubtedly overrepresented among those who are chronically low in communal orientation (Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987) or low in perceived social support (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). These people tend not to express emotion even when partners do care (i.e., even when it would be wise to express emotion).

People Should Selectively Express Emotions Indicative of Their Needs to Those Who Care About Those Needs

Putting the assertion that expressions of emotions convey information about our needs to relationship partners, together with the assertion that a person's relationship partners vary in the extent to which they care about the person's needs, leads to the conclusion that people should selectively express emotions to communal partners. The stronger the relationship, the more emotion it makes sense to express. It is within communal relationships that partners are most likely to react positively to such expressions (Clark & Taraban, 1991), attend to the needs that are conveyed (Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986; Clark, Mills, & Corcoran, 1989), provide support in response to the needs (Clark et al., 1987), and feel good about helping (Williamson & Clark, 1989, 1992). It is also within communal relationships that people expect partners to respond to their needs (Clark, Dubash, & Mills, 1998).

Relationship Type:

Does the Partner Actually
Behave Communally
Toward the Individual?

	Yes	No
Personality: Yes Does the Individual *Perceive* that Others Care About His or Her Needs?	High	Low
No	Low	Low

FIGURE 5.1. Emotion expression as a function of relationship type and personality.

In contrast, it ordinarily makes little sense to express emotions revealing one's needs outside the context of communal relationships. At best, the other will ignore one's needs. At worst, the other will exploit one by taking advantage of the vulnerabilities revealed. Consider, for example, a child who has been teased by peers and is distressed. Should he display this distress? Our analysis suggests that the answer is "yes," if the other cares about his welfare and "no" otherwise. The child would be wise to express the distress to a caring parent who is likely to react with comfort, reassurance, and advice, but unwise to reveal the distress to the taunting peers who may redouble their taunting as a result of knowing that they can get a reaction from him.

When Will People Express Emotion?

We have just argued that expression of emotion should be highest in normatively strong communal relationships. But will it be? Not necessarily. It is the *perception* of such responsiveness that will guide a person's emotion expression. It is important to keep in mind that some people are chronically low in perceiving that partners care (even when partners *do* care).

Given this, we suspect that a partner's actual communal orientation will combine with a person's chronic tendency to believe that close partners care to determine expression of emotion. In Figure 5.1, the type of relationship a partner actually has with a person (communal or not) is crossed with that person's chronic beliefs that "close" others care or do not care, thus creating four cells. We predict that expressions of emotion indicative of one's needs
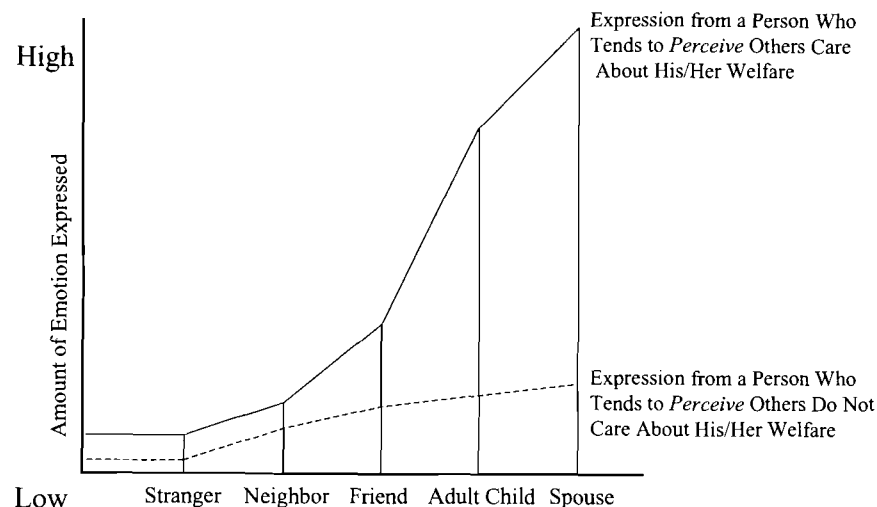

FIGURE 5.2. Two hypothetical people's level of emotion expression as a function of the degree to which various members of their social network care about their welfare. [For this figure, we assume that the amount that others actually care about their welfare increases from left (stranger) to right (spouse).]

are likely to be high (and to seem adaptive to the expresser) in just one cell – that in which people who have a chronic tendency to perceive that intimate partners do care are paired with partners who actually do care for them (e.g., friends, romantic partners, family members) (M. S. Clark & E. J. Finkel, in press). In all other cells, emotion expression should be low.

Having presented Figure 5.1, we hasten to add that it is too simple. Any given relationship is not simply "communal" or "not communal" in nature. Rather, communal relationships vary in strength. To some (small) extent, individuals expect communal behavior even from strangers. For instance, most people expect that even complete strangers would tell them the time without expecting compensation. Thus, to a very limited extent, we argue, it is perfectly appropriate to express emotion to strangers; it is appropriate as long as the expressed emotion does not call for them to be more than very mildly responsive to our needs. For instance, it seems fine to express mild annoyance regarding the weather to a stranger at a bus stop (because a sympathetic nod or comment is all that is expected). Other communal relationships are much stronger (e.g., ones with friends), and still others are very strong (e.g., ones with parents and spouses). The stronger the communal relationship, the more appropriate and common will be emotion expression conveying greater needs.

Given continuous variation in people's general tendencies to perceive that partners care, as well as in the actual strength of communal relationships, these two variables probably combine to influence emotion expression in something like the way depicted in Figure 5.2. In this figure,

perceptions that others care are depicted along the *y*-axis running from low to high. A hypothetical hierarchy of communal relationships (from weak to strong) is depicted along the *x*-axis. The solid line running through the figure depicts the extent to which a person high in the chronic tendency to believe others care does believe that particular members of his or her network care. The area under that solid curve represents the situations in which that person is likely to express emotion indicative of his own needs. The dashed line running through the figure depicts the extent to which a person low in the chronic tendency to believe others care does believe that particular members of his or her network care. The much smaller area under that dashed curve represents the situations in which that person is likely to express emotion indicative of his own needs.

Strategic Emotion Expression

To this point, we have discussed when people are and are not likely to express the emotions they feel. It is worth noting that our analysis suggests that people can use emotion expression strategically. As one example, within relationships a person perceives to be communal, that person may exaggerate his needs in the hope of unfairly garnering greater support or getting out of some undesired task (Mills & Clark, 1986). For example, people may strategically express more sadness or distress than they are experiencing when in the presence of a communal partner in the hopes of receiving support, getting out of an undesired task, or being reassured that their relationship really is communal. They do so precisely because the other is likely to care. Others have noted the existence of such strategies as well, suggesting that "acting like one is in a bad mood can cause one to obtain desirable attention from others, as well as sympathy, aid and exemption from normal duties" (Parrott, 1993, p. 294; see also Hill, Weary, & Williams, 1986). Even quite young children seem to know they can gain assistance by strategically expressing sadness (Zeman & Shipman, 1996).

A second type of strategic emotion expression may be used when one does not presently have a communal relationship with a given person, but desires to have one and suspects that the other shares that desire. In such a case, expressing emotion may be risky but fruitful. Imagine, for instance, a new college student who knows no one on campus and is lonely. She expresses sadness to another student who is also new at the university and also interested in forming relationships. Her expression communicates her willingness to trust in the other student, suggests a desire for a new friendship, and sets the stage for the other to respond with sympathy and support. The other may avoid her; but, in this case, it is reasonable to suspect the other may respond in kind, and a new communal relationship

may be formed. Indeed, we believe willingness to express appropriate amounts of emotions in such situations is a social skill that will enable people to form new communal relationships and to strengthen existing ones. Indeed, in a recent study, Clark, Graham, & Helgeson (2003) revealed that greater willingness to express emotions (as measured in students prior to their arrival as freshmen at a residential college) predicted the formation of more friendships and romantic relationships over college students' first semester at a residential university, and greater intimacy in the closest of those relationships, corroborated by their roommates' independent reports of providing those students with support.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE SUGGESTING THAT INDIVIDUALS SELECTIVELY EXPRESS EMOTION TO COMMUNAL OTHERS

Having made a case that more emotion ought to be expressed the more communal a relationship is, we turn to the considerable evidence supporting our contention. For instance, Pennebaker, Zech, and Rimé (2001) report having used several techniques (e.g., retrospective reports, diaries, emotion inductions, and observations of social sharing) to tap the extent to which people talk about their emotions (e.g., joy, anger, and fear) to various relationship partners. They found that sharing of emotion-eliciting experiences occurred frequently, but was directed selectively to "parents or close family members, best friends, and/or spouse or companion" – relationships we judge to be normatively communal in nature. Emotion was rarely disclosed to people who did not belong to these circles (see also Fitness, 2000; Rimé et al., 1998; Rimé et al., 1991).

Additional support for the idea that people selectively express emotions to communal partners comes from a study by I. Brissette and M. S. Clark (unpublished data). These researchers examined whether the extent to which people expressed emotion to others varied according to the extent to which those people felt these relationships were communal in nature. Participants rated the communal strength of a variety of their relationships (e.g., relationships with their mother, their father, a specific casual friend, a sibling, their boss, their professor, their cousin, their roommate), with communal strength defined as the extent to which the other person is willing to respond noncontingently to the participant's need. Next, on separate scales, participants rated their willingness to express happiness, contentment, hurt, sadness, anger, disgust, guilt, and fear to each of these partners (both when the emotion was caused by the particular other and when it was caused by someone or something else). As predicted, the within-subject correlations between each person's ratings of how communal their relationships were and their willingness to express each of the sixteen emotions within the relationship were all positive (ranging from +.23 to

+.57). Moreover, all were significant, with the exception of correlations between how communal one's relationship was and willingness to express anger and disgust when those emotions were caused by the partner. (Those two correlations may not have reached significance, because communal relationships are often mutual and expressing anger or disgust caused by a communal partner not only expresses one's own needs, but also may simultaneously interfere with the other person's needs.)

In the individual differences literature, there is also evidence for people expressing more emotion indicative of their own needs within relationships they perceive to be communal. J. A. Feeney (1995), for example, examined links between attachment styles and expression of emotion within dating relationships. She had members of dating couples complete an attachment measure, as well as a measure of emotional control. (The latter was completed with regard to emotions experienced in relation to their dating partner.) The scale tapped willingness to express/suppress anger, sadness, and anxiety. For our purposes, the interesting finding is that secure people were less likely to suppress expressions of emotion than were avoidant people. That is, the more securely attached members of couples were, male or female, the less likely they were to report suppressing anxiety and sadness. In addition, the more securely attached females (but not males) were, the less they suppressed anger. Importantly, these associations remained significant after controlling for the reported frequency of the emotion in question being experienced.

Similar results were obtained in a subsequent study reported by J. A. Feeney (1999), this time with married couples. In this study, attachment styles were used to predict expressions of anger, sadness, anxiety, happiness, love, and pride to the partner – both when these emotions were caused by the partner and when they were caused by something not involving the partner. More secure spouses reported less of a tendency to control/suppress each of these emotions, regardless of the cause (with the exception of wives' willingness to express partner-related pride). Again, all correlations remained significant after controlling for the frequency and intensity of these emotions (with the exception of wives' willingness to express partner-related love). In no case were the correlations reversed from what we would expect, given our theoretical position.

Other work supporting the idea that perceiving one's partner cares will be associated with greater expressions of emotions has been reported by R. L. Collins and DiPaula (R. L. Collins, 1994; R. L. Collins & DiPaula, 1997). These researchers had HIV-positive men fill out a perceived social support questionnaire with regard to five members of their close social network and also a "ways of coping index," which tapped their tendency to suppress the expression of distress when in the presence of others. Consistent with our analysis, after controlling for physical health, these authors observed a significant negative correlation between the average level of support the men perceived they had and their reported tendency to suppress distress.

Finally, a recent study by Clark and Finkel (in press) provides some evidence supporting all three of our postulates, namely that: (a) being in the context of a normatively communal relationship promotes expression of emotion, (b) being high in the tendency to trust others promotes expression of emotion, and, importantly, (c) that relationship context and personality variables related to trusting may *interact* to produce the highest levels of expressing emotions indicating that one has a need (as suggested by Figures 5.1 and 5.2). In this study participants filled out a measure of communal orientation and also provided reports on the extent to which they would express fear, anxiety, anger, happiness, and joy within a business relationship and within a close relationship. People were significantly more likely to say they would express all five emotions within a close relationship other than to someone with whom they did business. In addition, people high in communal orientation (an indicator of trust in partners' caring) were more likely to say they would express all five emotions than were those low in communal orientation. Importantly, for fear and anxiety (the two emotions of these five that indicate the most personal need and vulnerability), relationship context and communal orientation interacted in just the manner suggested in our figures. That is, within a business relationship (in which expressing emotion is normatively inappropriate) stated willingness to express fear and anxiety was not only very low, communal orientation did not make a difference. However, when participants were asked about willingness to express emotion within a close relationship in which such expressions are normatively appropriate, communal orientation made a difference. People high in communal orientation (who presumably are high in trust that others care) reported being significantly more willing to express these emotions than did people low in communal orientation (who presumably have lower trust that others care).

EXPRESSING EMOTION WITHIN COMMUNAL RELATIONSHIPS PRODUCES A HOST OF SOCIAL, COGNITIVE, AND PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Thus far, we have argued that emotions carrying information about our welfare will most often be expressed to partners whom we perceive as being responsive to our needs. We now make a case that people who do express emotion in these contexts will reap many social, cognitive, and physiological benefits, whereas those who express emotion outside the context of communal relationships will suffer costs (Finkel & Clark, 2003). We make a theoretical case for these views and present empirical evidence as it is available. We note at the outset that there is not good empirical evidence for all the theoretical points we will make.

Does Expressing Emotion Produce Social Benefits? Yes, But Primarily Within Communal Relationships

The most straightforward benefit of expressing need-indicative emotions to those with whom one has a communal relationship is that the other person is likely to respond with social support. In line with this notion are studies such as one reported by Shimanoff (1988) involving married couples. Shimanoff found that, when spouses examined messages from their mates, messages including expressions of negative emotions, disclosures of vulnerabilities, and hostilities toward persons other than the spouse promoted more supportive responses than did messages that lacked these emotional contents. In addition, developmentalists have long noted that infants' and children's cries of distress elicit care from most mothers (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Notably, this work involved people in normatively strong communal relationships (spouses, mothers and their children). Is there evidence that these benefits are limited to expressing emotions to others who care for us? There is some. For instance, women's weeping at work apparently elicits embarrassment for the women and confusion and even anger from their co-workers (Hoover-Dempsey, Plas, & Strudler-Wallston, 1986). Moreover, individuals' expression of negative emotions causes people who do not know them and/or do not wish to form close relationships with them to dislike them and to judge them to be unsociable and unpopular (Sommers, 1984).

Of course, the best evidence for the proposition that expressed emotion will be met with support within communal (but not within noncommunal) relationships would come from a study in which equivalent emotion is expressed both to a person who desires a communal relationship with the expresser and one who does not, and in which resulting support (or lack thereof) is observed. Such evidence emerges from an experimental study reported by Clark et al. (1987). In this study, participants were led to desire a communal or a noncommunal relationship with a confederate. In addition, participants were led to believe that the confederate was feeling sad (or not). Finally, all participants were given an opportunity to help the confederate. Not surprisingly, participants helped the other significantly more in the communal than in the noncommunal conditions. Most pertinent to the present point, however, is how the confederate's sadness influenced the amount of help that the confederate received. In the communal condition, the confederate's sadness significantly increased the amount of help participants provided. In fact, it doubled this help. In the noncommunal condition, in sharp contrast, the confederate's sadness had no effect on the participant's helping. (In this study, there was a "floor effect" on helping. Almost no helping was given in the neutral mood condition, and helping actually went down a little bit in the sad condition but did not have

room to drop significantly. In actual social situations, we suspect that a noncommunal other's sadness might actually lead to avoidance of that person.)

If one assumes that securely attached individuals possess more caring, attentive communal attitudes toward their partners (meaning that they are more likely to assume communal responsibility for the partner's welfare) than are avoidant individuals – an assumption for which there is considerable evidence (N. L. Collins & Read, 1990; Crowell & Feldman, 1988; Kunce & Shaver, 1994) – then two additional studies support the point that expressing emotion leads to support in communal, but not in other, relationships. In one study reported by Simpson, Rholes, and Nelligan (1992), women expected that they (but not their spouses) would soon be experiencing a stressful laboratory experience. Among women with securely attached, caring, spouses, those who expressed greater anxiety received greater reassurance, emotional support, and helpful comments from that secure, caring, spouse. In sharp contrast, among women with avoidant, less caring husbands, those who expressed greater anxiety actually received fewer supportive comments. Analogous results also have been obtained by B. C. Feeney & N. L. Collins (2001), who found that, when secure individuals received a note from their partner indicating greater distress, they responded with more supportive comments. Avoidant individuals, in contrast, reacted to greater expressions of distress with fewer supportive comments.

These studies, taken together, suggest that expressing emotion (at least sadness and anxiety and distress) is wise, in that it will elicit social support, at least in existing communal relationships or to partners who desire communal relationships. However, it is less wise to express emotion to noncommunal partners because they do not wish to have a communally oriented relationship with one or because their personality is such that they are not communally oriented even when the situation calls for it. Expressing emotion to such partners actually may result in obtaining *less* support.

Although receipt of help is the most straightforward social benefit of expressing emotion to communal others, we suggest that the interpersonal benefits of expressing emotion to communal partners are unlikely to stop there. Expression of emotion is likely to strengthen communal relationships through a cascade of intra- and interpersonal processes. For example, through self-perception processes (Bem, 1972), the person expressing emotion is likely to conclude that he or she trusts the other and is willing to be dependent on the other. In addition, simply by being the target of expressed emotion, the partner is likely to feel trusted and to see him or herself as a person on whom the other depends. Both feelings and senses are, in our view, crucial to strengthening communal relationships and may be why expression of positive emotion and disclosure of negative emotion

are linked with greater perceived intimacy in daily interactions (Lippert & Prager, 2001).

In addition, both social and developmental psychologists have suggested that expressing emotion in a social context often results in partners "catching" the emotion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1991; Hoffman, 1984) – a process that may lead to or heighten feelings of empathy, which, in turn, should result in the person feeling the empathy perceiving that he or she really does care about the emotional person (cf. Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995; Mills, Jellison, & Kennedy, 1976). Moreover, assuming the empathy is openly expressed, perceiving expressions of empathy should cue the person who had initially expressed emotion to feel cared for as well. Of course, empathy itself promotes helping (Batson, 1991; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990) and any boost in helping due to felt empathy ought also to strengthen the communal relationship (Batson et al., 1995).

In sum, emotion expression to a person who is communally oriented toward one is likely to promote a cascade of empathy, care, perceptions of being trusted and caring (in the target of the expressed emotion), perceptions of trusting the other, being willing to be dependent on the other, and being cared for by the other (in the person who has expressed the emotion). In contrast, expression of emotion to a noncommunally oriented person is not likely to have these salubrious consequences. Instead, it may lead to a withdrawal of support and avoidance or, worse, rejection and dislike (in the target of the expressed emotion), and hurt feelings and regret (in the person who has expressed the emotion).

Does Expressing Emotion Produce Cognitive Benefits? Yes, and Perhaps Primarily Within the Context of Communal Relationships

We have noted that expressing emotion to a communal partner produces social benefits – benefits that are not apparent when emotion is expressed within other relationships. In this section, we briefly review evidence that, once emotions are experienced, expressing (and not suppressing) these emotions will also produce cognitive benefits. Given evidence that felt emotion is most commonly expressed (and least often suppressed) within communal relationships, it follows logically that these benefits are most likely to accrue within communal relationships.

What evidence exists for cognitive benefits of expressing rather than suppressing emotion? First, consider evidence that being asked to suppress emotion (relative to feeling free to express it) can impair memory. In one recent study, participants were either instructed to inhibit any emotion expression while watching an upsetting film or they received no emotion-regulation instructions (Richards & Gross, 2000, Study 1). Participants who suppressed their feelings later exhibited poorer memory for the film's auditory and visual details than did participants who simply watched the

film. A follow-up study in the same article provides evidence that emotion suppression leads to cognitive self-monitoring strategies (e.g., subvocalizations). Presumably, this ensures that the emotion is suppressed. These strategies, in turn, however, may interfere with encoding new information.

These studies involved comparisons of the memory performances of those who have suppressed their emotions with those who have expressed their emotions. Studies have also compared memory performance among those who have been induced to *express* their emotions to those who have not received such instructions. In one study, researchers compared a group of participants who wrote on three consecutive days either about their emotions associated with coming to college or about a trivial topic (Klein & Boals, 2001). Working memory was assessed three times over the ensuing seven to eight weeks. Relative to participants who wrote about trivial topics, those who wrote about their emotions exhibited greater improvements in working memory seven to eight weeks later.

Why did this happen? Klein (2002) believes expressing emotion promotes the formation of coherent memory structures about the emotional events, particularly when causal words (such as "because" and "cause," and insight words such as "realize" and "understand") are used (Klein & Boals, 2001). Because emotional memories are often stored as fragmented and poorly organized cognitive structures (Foa & Kozak, 1986), they can remain very accessible and difficult to suppress. Such memories are likely to continue to intrude into consciousness until they are integrated into a schematic representation (Horowitz, 1975). These emotional memories either intrude into awareness or must be suppressed, the latter of which consumes limited cognitive resources (cf. Wegner, 1994). Such intrusive thoughts and efforts to suppress them then results in inefficient allocation of working memory resources and, ultimately, impaired reasoning and problem solving. Emotion expression may facilitate narrative development, allowing the emotion-eliciting event to be "summarized, stored and forgotten more efficiently" (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1248).

Indeed, there is evidence that forming a narrative of emotional events is an adaptive coping strategy (Frankl, 1955/1984; Horowitz, 1979; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Silver & Wortman, 1980). Moreover, research investigating how people cope with emotional life events supports the idea that expressing emotion fosters insight and cognitive closure, thereby reducing demands on the cognitive system (e.g., Pennebaker, 1993; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Results from one study found that incest survivors who had at least one confidant were more likely to have made sense of their victimization than were those who had no confidants (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983). In fact, those participants who had *never* disclosed their incest experience were incapable of forming a coherent narrative thereof.

We have already noted that precisely because emotion appears to be selectively expressed within the context of communal relationships, the

intrapersonal memory benefits of doing so ought to accrue in such relationships. Beyond this, we strongly suspect that expressing emotion to a communally oriented other will set in motion some interpersonal processes that will result in even bigger cognitive benefits than would have occurred if, say, the person merely expressed emotion in journal writing.

Here are the reasons why. First, when one talks to another person, that partner will send signals as to whether or not he or she comprehends what is being said. These signals will prompt the expresser to use coherent language and logical reasoning so that the partner can then understand. Moreover, and very importantly, an involved, communally minded listener is likely to help the individual construct a narrative by asking constructive questions ("Why do you think you feel that way?"), providing insights ("I think he does that because he's insecure – it probably has nothing to do with you."), or providing reasons why it might make sense to put the issue in the past and move on ("Why worry about it? You'll never see him again.") (cf. L. F. Clark, 1993). Thus, the cognitive benefits of expressing emotion should be more likely to accrue within communal than within noncommunal relationships not only because emotion expression occurs most often in such relationships, but also because it is primarily within such relationships that partners are likely to assist the individual in forming a coherent narrative. By forming such a narrative, rumination and the continued need to suppress the emotion are reduced.

What about the cognitive benefits (or lack thereof) of expressing emotion in noncommunal relationships? We have suggested that because emotion is less commonly expressed and more commonly suppressed in noncommunal relationships, such benefits will be uncommon in noncommunal relationships. But what happens when people *do* express emotion in such relationships? We believe that others almost certainly will not assist the person in analyzing the emotional experience, coming to an understanding of it, or putting it in the past. Instead, we think expressions of emotion indicative of one's own needs to noncommunal others will often create awkward social situations, which may well exacerbate cognitive problems with memory, intrusive thoughts, and rumination. Such expression may make such problems worse because it will add social problems (in addition to emotional reactions to those problems and the need to suppress those emotional reactions) to whatever needs the person expressing the emotion already had. For example, imagine a person who is interviewing for a job. He is nervous and fearful. Expressing that nervousness and fear to a friend ahead of time may be quite useful for all the reasons we have already discussed, but what if he expresses the nervousness and fear to the interviewer? The interviewer is not responsible for those needs. She may look surprised. She may end the interview abruptly. A likely consequence is that the person's fear and nervousness will be increased, leading to even less attention being available to encode information from the environment.

Intrusive thoughts may actually increase ("I can't believe I told her I was nervous!"), and more rumination is likely to take place.

Does Emotion Expression Produce Physiological Benefits? Yes, and Perhaps Primarily Within Communal Relationships

Beyond the social and cognitive benefits of expressing emotion to others, we also believe there are physiological benefits to expressing emotion. Moreover, we suspect that such physiological benefits occur primarily when emotion is expressed to communal partners. As with demonstrations of cognitive benefits to expressing emotion, those who have done research on the physiological benefits of expressing emotion have tended not to take relationship type into account. Thus, we first review some of the evidence that expressing emotion produces physiological benefits. Then, we will comment on why we suggest that these benefits ought to be most likely in communal relationships.

Generally speaking, evidence that expressing emotion produces physiological benefits falls within one of two categories. First, there is evidence that suppressing emotion, once it is felt, may result in immune system suppression. Second, there is evidence that suppressing emotion, once it is felt, may result in sustained physiological responding that exceeds metabolic demands.

Consider first the effects of emotion expression versus suppression on immune functioning. Petrie et al. (1995) have found that people who are asked to write (in private) about the most traumatic and upsetting experiences in their lives exhibited increased antibody levels over time relative to people who wrote about trivial topics. Work from the same laboratory revealed that participants assigned to write about traumas also exhibited lower CD4, CD8, and total lymphocyte numbers relative to control participants, although several other blood cell markers did not differ across experimental condition (Booth, Petrie, & Pennebaker, 1997). Researchers from an independent laboratory have examined the effects of both individual differences in tendencies to express emotion and experimentally induced expressive tendencies on participants' control of latent Epstein-Barr virus (EBV). One study revealed that people high in dispositional tendency to be emotionally expressive not only wrote especially emotional essays in a laboratory context, but they also exhibited lower antibody titer to EBV (signifying effective immune control of this latent viral infection) relative to people who were not as emotionally expressive. Another study used an experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to write or to talk about emotion-eliciting events or to write about trivial topics. Those who talked about emotion-eliciting events exhibited the lowest EBV titer afterward, followed by those who wrote about emotional

events, followed by those who wrote about trivial events (Esterling et al., 1994).

Other research suggests that suppressing emotion may result in sustained physiological responding that exceeds metabolic demands (e.g., Pennebaker, 1989). One marker of physiological activation that has been linked with expression of emotion is skin conductance levels (SCLs). Skin conductance provides an index of sympathetic activity (Dawson, Schell, & Filion, 2000). Suppression of emotion has been linked with higher SCLs, suggesting that when one suppresses emotion (relative to expressing it), general sympathetic arousal is higher (Gross & Levenson, 1993, 1997; Pennebaker, Hughes, & O'Heeron, 1987; Petrie et al., 1995). Gross and Levenson (1993), for example, either instructed participants to suppress emotional reactions to a disgust-eliciting film or gave participants no instructions in this regard. Ratings of participants' body movement revealed that the suppression subjects were able to mask their behavioral emotion expressions relative to control subjects. However, it appeared that they paid a price: They exhibited higher SCLs than those who were permitted to express their disgust.

Finally, we note some evidence that expressing high-intensity emotion, given that the emotion is felt, is linked with lower blood pressure than is suppressing emotion. For example, in one study among people who experienced their work environment as hostile and tense, those who held their emotions in experienced higher blood pressure than did those who did not (Julkunen, 1996). Another study revealed that high levels of both job stress and anger suppression interacted to predict hypertension (Cottington et al., 1986). More generally, a meta-analytic review of research in this area revealed that the combination of experiencing high levels of emotion and suppressing it results in higher levels of blood pressure (Jorgensen et al., 1996).

As noted, researchers who have linked emotion suppression versus expression to immune functioning, skin conductance, and blood pressure have not simultaneously focused on relationship context. However, because most people suppress expression of emotion outside the context of communal relationships and express emotion within the context of communal relationships, physiological benefits of expressing emotion ought to accrue most often when people are with partners who care about them. Beyond this, we also note that if emotion expression indicative of one's needs were to take place with a person who does not assume a commensurate degree of responsibility for one's welfare, we suspect the same physiological benefits would not accrue. Our reasoning parallels our analysis of why cognitive benefits would be similarly unlikely in such a circumstance. Whereas expressing emotion to another who cares about one's welfare should be both nonthreatening (as the other will not hurt one) and soothing (as one transfers some of one's concerns and needs to the other, allowing that other

to assume some of the worry and receiving comfort and support in return), expressing emotion to a noncommunal is unlikely to be soothing. The other is unlikely to assume some of one's concern and help. Instead, the other may think less of one or even take advantage of one's emotions. Regretting one's expression of emotions, believing that others think less of one, and/or being exploited may, in turn, elicit increased rather than decreased physiological activation.

Imagine the difference between the child who is teased on the playground expressing distress to her parent versus expressing distress to a peer acquaintance in the classroom. The caring parent is likely to soothe the child, hug her, assure her of her own worth (and the other child's shortcomings), and even assume some of the worry of monitoring the situation. The child's physiological activation should drop. In contrast, after revealing her distress to noncaring peer acquaintance, the peer may simply shrug her shoulders and do nothing to comfort or reassure the child. Worse yet, the peer may join in the teasing. Either or both consequences may cause the child to regret revealing her distress and may ultimately heighten rather than diminish physiological activation.

CONCLUSIONS

At the start of this chapter, we asked whether it is better to express emotions or to suppress them. In the past, most researchers have addressed this question without taking the social context into account. We think this has been a mistake, for emotion expression is fundamentally social (Clark, 2002). It conveys to others both our needs and our vulnerabilities, and it is important to take this context into account when deciding whether to express one's emotions or not.

It is often wise, we have argued, to express emotion to others who assume communal responsibility for one's needs. These others are likely to focus on what the emotion indicates about one's needs and to respond to those needs. Expressing (rather than suppressing) emotions in such a context likely produces a cascade of positive social, cognitive, and physiological consequences. We have reviewed evidence that people do selectively express emotion in communal contexts and that doing so does benefit them. Sadly, we have noted, there are some people who are unlikely to take advantage of the benefits of expressing emotion to communal partners. These are people who are not confident that even the seemingly closest partners care about their welfare (e.g., people who are high in rejection sensitivity or people characterized by avoidant attachment).

It is typically unwise, we have further argued, to express emotion indicative of one's needs in noncommunal relationships. Instead, it may be best to suppress these emotions. We believe this is true despite the fact that suppressing emotion has been shown to produce some cognitive and

physiological costs. The reason why is that noncommunal others are unlikely to respond helpfully to our needs and may even exploit our vulnerabilities. As a result, expressing emotion in a noncommunal context may produce: (a) social, cognitive, and physiological costs that exceed the costs of suppressing the emotion, along with (b) few of the social, cognitive, and physiological benefits that typically follow from expressing emotion in communal contexts.

There are good reasons why humans have the abilities to: (a) express emotion conveying their needs to others, (b) suppress or override emotion expressions, and (c) distinguish between relationship contexts in which others care about their well-being. Optimally, people have relationships with others who assume communal responsibility for them; they trust those others, and they are willing to express emotion to those others. Optimally, such people typically suppress the expression of emotion conveying their needs outside the context of their supportive (or potentially supportive) relationships. People who have strong communal relationships and who also match their emotion expression according to relationship context, should, over time, reap many benefits of expressing emotion, avoid most costs of doing so, and minimize costs associated with suppressing emotion.

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PART II

THE INTRAGROUP CONTEXT