



# Purposely stoic, accidentally alone? Self-monitoring moderates the relationship between emotion suppression and loneliness

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers have claimed that loneliness is a public health crisis, resulting in higher rates of morbidity and mortality. Previous research has found that self-monitoring (one's tendency to be aware of and fit one's behavior to norms of social appropriateness) and emotion suppression (the act of inhibiting behavioral and non-verbal expressions of emotion) are predictors of increased loneliness. The current study examined these connections further, proposing that the link between suppression and loneliness is moderated by self-monitoring. Undergraduate students ( $N = 142$ ) completed measures of loneliness, self-monitoring, and emotion suppression. The hypothesized interaction was significant. Supplementary analyses indicated that at average and high levels of self-monitoring, higher suppression is significantly associated with higher loneliness, but this association was not found at low levels of self-monitoring. This is some of the first evidence to demonstrate a link between emotion suppression, self-monitoring, and loneliness. Replications in other age groups are recommended along with future research designed to examine mechanism of effect between these variables.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Loneliness

In a 2017 plenary address to the American Psychological Association, Julianne Holt-Lunstad proposed that loneliness and social isolation are a public health crisis, one that may be even more hazardous than obesity (Holt-Lunstad, 2017). In their systematic overview (a review of meta-analyses, systematic and non-systematic reviews), Leigh-Hunt et al. (2017) concluded that loneliness and social isolation are associated with an increase in all-cause mortality, with the strongest evidence for a link with cardiovascular disease. Further, the health risks of loneliness may stem from factors other than just disease. In a general population study of over 7000 adults, Stickle and Koyanagi (2016) found that loneliness was a significant predictor of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, even when controlling for common mental disorders.

Aside from the link with increased mortality, loneliness - "the subjective experience that one's social network is insufficient in size or unsatisfactory in quality" (De Jong Gierveld, 1987 as cited in Böger & Huxhold, 2018) - has also been associated with poorer mental health, including increased depressive symptoms (Cacioppo, Hughes, Waite, Hawkey, & Thisted, 2006), increased social anxiety (Lim, Rodebaugh, Zyphur, & Gleeson, 2016), and increased generalized anxiety and panic

attacks (Beutel et al., 2017). The problem is not likely to go away anytime soon; researchers assert that the number of people reporting loneliness is increasing both in the United States and abroad (Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens, & Cacioppo, 2015).

Not only has research examined the multitude of negative outcomes associated with loneliness, but it has also examined a myriad number of predictors (e.g., Mahon, Yarcheski, Yarcheski, Cannella, & Hanks, 2006). Surprisingly, one factor that has not received a lot of research attention is emotion regulation, specifically emotion suppression.

### 1.2. Emotion suppression

Emotion suppression is defined as the "conscious inhibition of one's own emotional expressive behavior while emotionally aroused" (Gross & Levenson, 1993, p. 970). Although emotion suppression does succeed in decreasing nonverbal expressions of emotion (but not fully eliminating them (e.g., Gross & Levenson, 1997)), research has also shown that suppression may actually result in increases in the emotion one is attempting to suppress (Dagleish, Yiend, Schweizer, & Dunn, 2009). Further, while other emotion regulation strategies such as reappraisal are associated with enhanced well-being, emotion suppression is associated with poorer well-being - increased feelings of depression and decreased self-esteem, optimism, life satisfaction, and purpose in life

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(Gross & John, 2003). Additional work demonstrates that functional reappraisal strategies (e.g., up-regulating positive emotions and down-regulating negative ones) are less likely to be used by those who are lonely (Hawkley, Thisted, & Cacioppo, 2009; Kearns & Creaven, 2017). Research has also found a link between emotion suppression and increased mortality (Chapman, Fiscella, Kawachi, Duberstein, & Muennig, 2013).

The use of suppression strategies is not without social consequences. Gross and John (2003) found that people who frequently use emotion suppression are less likely to share their positive and negative emotions with others and report greater feelings of inauthenticity. Although multiple studies have demonstrated that peers do not report greater disliking of people who emotionally suppress, these same studies have found that emotion suppression is negatively correlated with feelings of social support received both cross-sectionally (Gross & John, 2003) and prospectively (Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009), and with peer reports of interpersonal warmth and closeness of their relationships (English, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2012).

Given the link between emotion suppression and negative personal and social outcomes, it is surprising that more research has not examined the connection between it and loneliness. Only one study to our knowledge has directly examined the relationship. Verzeletti, Zammuner, Galli, and Agnoli (2016) found a positive correlation between emotion suppression and loneliness in a sample of adolescents aged 14–18, even when controlling for gender and cognitive reappraisal. Some work has examined the link between loneliness and a potentially related but opposite construct, emotional expressivity (a dispositional tendency to express one's felt emotions to others; Krings, Smith, & Neale, 1994). A study found that higher levels of emotional expressivity in a sample of adolescent males (grades 10–12) were associated with lower feelings of loneliness (Pollastri, Raftery-Helmer, Cardemil, & Addis, 2018). However, this relationship only emerged for emotional expressivity around friends, not around non-friends. Further, this work also highlights the importance of emotional flexibility, specifically that showing expressivity around friends but not non-friends was associated with less loneliness. This potential sensitivity to social contexts suggests another construct that may be important to consider: self-monitoring.

### 1.3. Self-monitoring

Self-monitoring theory “concerns differences in the extent to which people value, create, cultivate, and project social images and public appearances” (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000, p. 531). According to the theory, people vary in their ability and motivation to be aware of social appropriateness norms and self-present expressions and actions that fit with those norms in the current situation (Snyder, 1974). High self-monitors are consciously aware of social pressures to behave appropriately, and change their behavior as situations change, whereas low self-monitors rely on their internal cues rather than focusing on situational appropriateness of their actions. Self-monitoring develops along with social perspective taking (Clark & Delia, 1976) and communication abilities (Delia & Clark, 1977). Although the ability to self-monitor can be used to portray one's emotions accurately and appropriately, this same ability can be used to suppress emotions (Snyder, 1974). Further, emotion regulation and self-monitoring may utilize overlapping areas of the brain, such as the orbitofrontal cortex (Banks, Eddy, Angstadt, Nathan, & Phan, 2007; Beer, John, Scabini, & Knight, 2006).

Similar to the research suggesting potentially problematic social outcomes for those high in emotion suppression, self-monitoring theory proposes that those high in self-monitoring may also have social lives that are negatively influenced by this tendency. In an early study, Ickes and Barnes (1977) examined unstructured social interactions between unacquainted dyads. They found that high self-monitors talk first and initiate more conversational sequences but also report feeling a higher need to talk and perceived themselves and their interaction partners as

being more self-conscious during the interaction. This higher experience of self-consciousness was especially true when high self-monitors interacted with low self-monitors. Subsequent research has found that self-monitoring is associated with less self-disclosure (Bryan, Dodson, & Cullari, 1997), use of less adaptive coping strategies when dealing with friendship dilemmas (Gaines, Work, Johnson, Youn, & Lai, 2000), less trust (Norris & Zweigenhaft, 1999), a greater likelihood of perceiving power differentials in their romantic relationships (Oyamot, Fuglestad, & Snyder, 2010), lower relationship satisfaction, higher relationship dissatisfaction, and greater likelihood of divorce (Leone & Hall, 2003).

In their review of the social nature of self-monitoring, Ickes, Holloway, Stinson, and Hoodenpyle (2006) concluded that “high self-monitors act self-consciously to manage the impressions they create and that they devote substantial cognitive and emotional resources to their social performances” (p. 681). The implications for the use of these resources is only beginning to be understood. For example, although high self-monitors can and do experience positive affect, when they experience social interactions where they are less successful in achieving their desired effects, there is a greater experience of negative affect (e.g., rejection, Ickes et al., 2006). Further, another review from the same year (Leone & Hawkins, 2006) similarly concluded that while much has been learned about self-monitoring in friendships and romantic relationships, much work remains including in the area of loneliness.

Similar to the paucity of research examining emotion suppression and loneliness, there is very little research on the connection between self-monitoring and loneliness. To our knowledge, only one published study has examined the relationship. Clinton and Anderson (1999) found inconsistent relationships between components of self-monitoring and types of loneliness.

### 1.4. Current study

The goal of the present study is to add to our understanding of loneliness by examining possible links with emotion suppression and self-monitoring. Although a large body of literature exists on all of these constructs separately and there are conceptual reasons to believe they are linked, there is an insufficient amount of work looking at them together. Seeking to replicate earlier work in children (Verzeletti et al., 2016) in a sample of adults, we predict a positive correlation between emotion suppression and loneliness (Hypothesis 1). Further, we predict that the relationship between suppression and loneliness will be moderated by self-monitoring (Hypothesis 2). Given the work on the negative interpersonal consequences of emotion suppression, we predict the link with loneliness will be exacerbated for those who are chronically aware of the constraints of social situations and motivated to adhere to those constraints.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were undergraduate students recruited from a psychology research pool and upper level psychology classes at a large public university in the southeastern United States. The initial number of participants was 150 but eight participants did not fully complete all measures, and their data were deleted, for a final sample size of 142 participants (101 females and 41 males). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 41, with an average age of 21.20 ( $SD = 4.19$ ). The sample was predominantly White/Non-Hispanic (78.9%) and Black/African-American (17.6%). All study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited for a two-week study about personality and emotion and their influence on daily social and sexual life. The data reported here were collected during a 60-min in-lab orientation session in which participants provided informed consent and completed a battery of measures on

computers. Participants were given either partial course credit or extra credit for their participation.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Loneliness Scale

The Loneliness Scale (LS; Hughes, Waite, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2004) was used to assess one's experience of loneliness. The measure consists of 3 questions that participants respond to using a 1 (hardly ever) to 3 (often) scale. A sample question includes "How often do you feel that you lack companionship?" Scores from each item were averaged together with higher scores indicating greater loneliness. This scale had good reliability ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ) and was similar to reliability estimates found during scale validation ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ; Hughes et al., 2004).

2.2.2. Emotion suppression

The Suppression Subscale of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003) was used to measure emotional suppression. Participants responded to 4 items using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) Likert-type scale. A sample item includes, "I control my emotions by not expressing them". Scores from each item were averaged together, with higher scores indicating greater emotion suppression. This measure had good reliability ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ), and was similar to reliability estimates found during scale validation ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ; Gross & John, 2003).

2.2.3. Self-monitoring

The Self-Monitoring Scale (SMS; Snyder, 1974) was used to assess participant's general tendency to engage in self-monitoring. Participants responded to 25 items using a True/False response scale. Items addressed how others perceive them ("I sometimes appear to others to be experiencing deeper emotions than I actually am") and concerns with self-presentation ("When I am uncertain how to act in social situations, I look to the behavior of others for cues"). Roughly half of the items were written such that a True response would indicate self-monitoring, with the other half written such that a False response would indicate self-monitoring. Responses were summed according to scoring instructions with higher scores indicating a higher level of self-monitoring. The measure had adequate scale reliability ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ) but was lower than reliability estimates found during scale validation ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ; Snyder, 1974).

3. Results

Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1. Preliminary analyses were conducted for gender differences, violations of normality, and presence of outliers. No differences for gender were statistically significant (all  $p$  values > .075). Data were examined and no violations of normality were found. Self-monitoring, suppression, and loneliness were z-scored and examined for outliers more than 3 SD away from the mean and no participant scores merited exclusion. In the following analyses, all variables were z-scored for ease of interpretation.

Correlations were calculated for all the variables of interests and

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics for self-monitoring, suppression and loneliness.

Measure	Descriptive statistics				Correlations		
	Min	Max	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Self-monitoring	4	22	12.77	3.01	–		
2. Suppression	4	25	13.36	5.16	0.04	–	
3. Loneliness	3	9	4.92	1.55	0.10	0.18*	–

Note. Min and Max represent the minimum value and maximum value recorded from participants and not the minimum and maximum values possible on the self-monitoring or suppression scales.

\*  $p < .05$ .

results can be found in Table 1. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, emotion suppression and loneliness were significantly and positively correlated. The correlations between self-monitoring and suppression and self-monitoring and loneliness were positive but were not statistically significant.

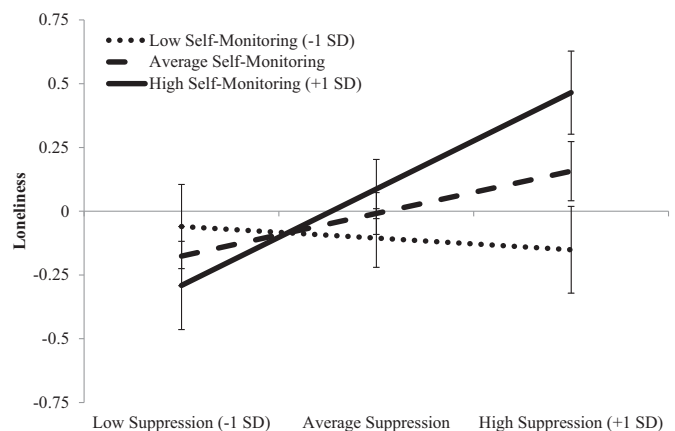
The moderation proposed in Hypothesis 2 was examined using Hayes (2013) PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Model 1), with loneliness as the outcome variable, emotion suppression as the predictor variable, and self-monitoring as the moderator. The overall model was found to be significant in predicting loneliness,  $F(3,138) = 3.87, p = .011, R_{Adj}^2 = 0.058$ .

As expected, the interaction between self-monitoring and suppression was significant,  $b = 0.212, SE = 0.0899, t = 2.35, p = .020, 95\% CI [0.034, 0.389]$ , and accounted for a significant amount of variance above and beyond that of the independent predictors,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.037, F(1, 138) = 5.55, p = .0199$ . Simple slopes analysis at low and high levels of self-monitoring (Low:  $-1 SD$ ; High:  $+1 SD$ ) revealed a significant relationship between suppression and loneliness at one standard deviation above the mean for self-monitoring,  $b = 0.378, SE = 0.119, t = 3.166, p = .002, 95\% CI [0.142, 0.614]$ , but not for low levels of self-monitoring,  $b = -0.045, SE = 0.124, t = -0.366, p = .715, 95\% CI [-0.290, 0.199]$ . Therefore, these results indicate that at average and high levels of self-monitoring, higher suppression is significantly associated with higher loneliness, but this association between suppression and loneliness is not found at a low level of self-monitoring (see Fig. 1).

4. Discussion

Consistent with predictions, the results provide evidence that emotion suppression and loneliness are related in an adult sample, with greater emotion suppression being associated with greater loneliness. This is some of the first evidence to demonstrate a link between emotion suppression and loneliness. Further, this relationship was moderated by self-monitoring, such that individuals with high levels of self-monitoring exhibited a stronger relationship between emotion suppression and loneliness, whereas those lower in self-monitoring did not.

The current study adds to the literature on the social implications of both suppression and self-monitoring and by extension, loneliness. Future work should examine whether suppression and self-monitoring may interact to disrupt other important mechanisms in building relationships with others. One such mechanism that may warrant further study is reciprocal self-disclosure, derived from social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). According to this theory, acquaintances can deepen a friendship by mutually sharing gradually more intimate details about their lives. Prior work has demonstrated that



**Fig. 1.** Loneliness as a function of suppression and self-monitoring, all variables are z-scored and error bars represent  $\pm 1 SE$ .

high self-monitors are typically more likely to reciprocally self-disclose to an acquaintance (Shaffer, Smith, & Tomarelli, 1982), but this was not examined with respect to emotional suppression. Additional work could also investigate if those high in self-monitoring and emotion suppression have different reactions to social situations, such as the enjoyment of social interactions. Future work should also examine if self-monitoring moderates the relationship between loneliness and other emotion regulation strategies (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, amplification) alongside suppression.

As this work is cross-sectional, we do not make any causal or directional claims about the relationships amongst these variables. For example, instead of emotion suppression leading to loneliness, it could be that loneliness leads to emotion suppression for high self-monitors. In particular, those with higher loneliness are likely to have higher trait negative affectivity (Cacioppo et al., 2006) and trait negative affectivity has also been shown to influence negative emotion suppression (Boland, Papa, & del Carlo, 2019). Future work should investigate these constructs with longitudinal designs to determine if earlier loneliness predicts later emotion suppression for high self-monitors, or vice versa, as well as to determine what role trait negative affectivity may play.

Given that loneliness is not unique to adolescents, future research should replicate these findings in samples of different ages. It is possible that impediments in forming social relationships or deriving benefits from social interactions are relatively more or less important in different age groups. For example, research by Böger and Huxhold (2018) found that the relationship between social integration and loneliness increases as people age while the relationship between negative affect and loneliness decreases.

Whether or not suppression is associated with loneliness may additionally be influenced by cultural upbringing. In contrast to Western cultures, emotional suppression is preferable to emotional expression in Eastern cultures (Kitayama, Karasawa, & Mesquita, 2004). Prior work indicates that greater identification with Eastern values ameliorates the negative social outcomes typically associated with emotional suppression (Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2007). Therefore, the current work may only generalize to individuals who hold Western values and prefer emotional expression over suppression.

Vivek Murthy, the former U.S. surgeon general has recently called attention to the lurking public health crisis of the loneliness epidemic (Murthy, 2017). More research is needed to understand how social and environmental contexts can produce loneliness, but research should also identify individual differences that may be associated with greater loneliness. This work represents a step in this direction, and provides initial evidence that high emotion suppression is associated with greater loneliness, and that this relationship is strongest for those high in self-monitoring.

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