Dispositional Negativity in the Wild: Social Environment Governs Momentary Emotional Experience

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Dispositional negativity—the tendency to experience more frequent or intense negative emotions—is a fundamental dimension of temperament and personality. Elevated levels of dispositional negativity have profound consequences for public health and wealth, drawing the attention of researchers, clinicians, and policymakers. Yet, relatively little is known about the factors that govern the momentary expression of dispositional negativity in the real world. Here, we used smart phone–based experience-sampling to demonstrate that the social environment plays a central role in shaping the moment-by-moment emotional experience of 127 young adults selectively recruited to represent a broad spectrum of dispositional negativity. Results indicate that individuals with a more negative disposition derive much larger emotional benefits from the company of close companions—friends, romantic partners, and family members—and that these benefits reflect heightened feelings of social connection and acceptance. These results set the stage for developing improved interventions and provide new insights into the interaction of emotional traits and situations in the real world, close to clinically and practically important end-points.

Keywords: ecological momentary assessment (EMA), individual differences, neuroticism, personality

Supplemental materials: http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000339.supp
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**Dispositional Negativity**

Often termed neuroticism or negative emotionality, dispositional negativity is a trait-like phenotype that first emerges early in development, persists into adulthood, and reflects a combination of genetic and environmental factors (B. W. Roberts et al., 2017; B. W. Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Soto & John, 2014; Vukasovic & Bratko, 2015). Dispositional negativity is a broad construct that subsumes a number of other, more narrowly focused traits, including behavioral inhibition, neuroticism, self-criticism, trait anxiety, and low self-esteem (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002; Mahaffey, Watson, Clark, & Kotov, 2016; Shackman, Tromp, et al., 2016; Stanton, Rozek, Stasaki, Ellickson-Larew, & Watson, 2016; Watson, Stanton, & Clark, in press).

Individual differences in dispositional negativity have important consequences for health, wealth, and wellbeing (Shackman, Kaplan, et al., 2016; Shackman, Tromp, et al., 2016). Individuals with a more negative disposition show lower levels of objective socioeconomic attainment (Damian, Su, Shanahan, Trautwein, & Roberts, 2015; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Shanahan, Baudry, Roberts, Macmillan, & Russo, 2014) and experience lower levels of subjective well-being (Steel, Schmidt, & Shulz, 2008). They are more likely to divorce (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), to engage in unhealthy behaviors (Gale et al., 2016; Hylvania, Hintsanen, et al., 2015; Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, & Watson, 2010), to develop emotional disorders (Hylvania, Ellovainio, et al., 2015; Jerominus, Kotov, Riese, & Ormel, 2016; Zinbarg et al., 2016), to become physically ill (Weston, Hill, & Jackson, 2015), and to die prematurely (Chapman, Fiscella, Kawachi, & Duberstein, 2010; Terracciano, Lockenhoff, Zonderman, Ferrucci, & Costa, 2008; R. S. Wilson et al., 2005). As a consequence of these adverse outcomes, dispositional negativity imposes a tremendous burden on global health care systems (Goodwin, Hoven, Lyons, & Stein, 2002; ten Have, Oldehinkel, Vollebergh, & Ormel, 2005) and the economy (Cuipers et al., 2010).

**Dispositional Negativity in the Real World**

Despite its profound consequences for health, wealth, and wellbeing, remarkably little is known about the situational factors that govern the expression and experience of dispositional negativity in the real world. To date, most experience-sampling studies have focused on context-independent (i.e., aggregate) measures of positive and negative affect (e.g., Aldinger et al., 2014). A smaller number of studies have highlighted the importance of negative events, showing that dispositionally negative individuals are prone to heightened distress in response to hassles, conflicts, and other daily stressors (e.g., S. L. Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000). For example, Bolger and Zuckerman (1995) used data gleaned from end-of-day diaries to show that young adults with a negative disposition (median split of $n = 94$) report significantly higher levels of depression on days marked by interpersonal conflict. At present, the role of other contextual factors and the consequences for other facets of momentary experience remains rarely explored and poorly understood. Understanding the factors that govern the real-world expression of dispositional negativity is important. The identification of modifiable targets, such as social context, has the potential to inform the development of scalable, low-cost intervention strategies for a wide range of important public problems and would begin to address fundamental questions about the interaction of personality traits and situations (Caspri, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005).

**The Present Study**

The widespread dissemination of smart phone technology affords new opportunities for understanding the factors that shape the expression of dispositional negativity in the real world or ‘wild.’ Here, we used smart phone-based ecological momentary assessment (EMA) to intensively sample key components of momentary emotional experience—including affect (positive and negative), social motivation (approach and avoidance), and appraisals about the future (pessimism and optimism)—in the daily lives of 127 young adults. We focused on young adulthood because it is a time of profound, often stressful developmental transitions (e.g., moving away from home, forging new social relationships; Alloy & Abramson, 1999; Arnett, 2000; Hays & Oxley, 1986). In fact, more than half of undergraduate students report overwhelming feelings of anxiety and more than a third report severe feelings of depression (American College Health Association, 2016), with many experiencing the first onset of psychopathology during this period (Beesdo, Pine, Lieb, & Wittchen, 2010; Fava et al., 2010; Kessler et al., 2005). Because EMA data are captured in the real world, in real time (e.g., who are you with?), they circumvent the biases that distort retrospective reports, such as end-of-day diary entries, and can provide insights into how experience dynamically responds to changes in context (Supplementary Figure S1 and Supplementary Table 1; Barrett, 1997; Lay, Gerstorff, Scott, Pauly, & Hoppmann, 2016; Stone, Shifman, Atienza, & Nebeling, 2007). Subjects were selectively recruited from a much larger pool of previously screened individuals $(n = 2,501$; Figure 1a), which enabled us to characterize relations between a broad spectrum of dispositional negativity (Figure 1b) and fluctuations in momentary experience across different real-world contexts for the first time.

We were particularly interested in understanding the impact of social context. Momentary experience is saturated with emotion, and emotion is profoundly social. Emotional experiences are rou-

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1 See also Brewer et al., 2007; Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Ching et al., 2014; Eddington, Majestic, & Silvia, 2012; Emmons & Diener, 1986; Heit & Cheavens, 2014; Hepburn & Eysenck, 1989; Karmjan, 1999; Komulainen et al., 2014; Kuppens, Oravecz, & Tuerlinckx, 2010; Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Nizek, Dossche, & Timmermans, 2007; Lay & Hoppmann, 2014; McConville & Cooper, 1999; Ode, Hiltmert, Zieleke, & Robinson, 2010; Ong, Zautra, & Reid, 2010; Park, Armeli, & Tennen, 2004; Rusting & Larsen, 1998; Schimmack, 2003; Sherry & Hall, 2009; Skalina, Gunthert, Ahrens, & Weenze, 2015; Tennen, Affleck, & Zautra, 2006; Tong et al., 2006; Verduyn & Brans, 2012; Watson, 1988; Williams, 1981, 1990; Wilson, Thompson, & Vazire, in press.

DISPOSITIONAL NEGATIVITY IN THE WILD

Using multilevel models (MLMs), we tested two competing predictions about the moment-by-moment interaction of dispositional negativity and the social environment. One possibility is that individuals with a more negative disposition are more dependent on close companions for regulating their chronically elevated distress. Consistent with this possibility, dispositionally negative individuals retrospectively report that they often cope with stress by seeking the comfort, empathy, and emotional support of intimates (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). This motivates the prediction that individuals with a more negative disposition critically rely on and derive larger emotional benefits (e.g., larger decrements in negative affect) from the company of close companions.

Another possibility is that more negative individuals fail to capitalize on available socioemotional support. Consistent with this prediction, individuals with a more negative disposition report lower levels of perceived social support (Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991; Swickert, Hittner, & Foster, 2010) and reduced satisfaction with their close companions (Dyrenforth, Kashy, Donnellan, & Lucas, 2010; Slatcher & Vazire, 2009; R. E. Wilson, Harris, & Vazire, 2015). They tend to behave in ways that promote social discord and rejection (Creed & Funder, 1998; Shackman, Tromp, et al., 2016); to experience more frequent or severe interpersonal conflict (Berry, Willingham, & Thayer, 2000; Brock, Dindo, Simms, & Clark, 2016; Buss, 1991; Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005; Hutteman et al., 2014; Kendler, Gardner, & Prescott, 2003; Mehl, Gosling, & Pennebaker, 2006; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2002); to overreact when conflict does occur (Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995); and to experience heightened loneliness (Mund & Neyer, 2016; Pressman et al., 2005; Stokes, 1985). Taken together, these observations motivate the prediction that dispositionally negative individuals derive smaller emotional benefits (e.g., smaller decrements in negative affect) or even costs from the company of close companions.

Using a moderated mediation framework (Hayes, 2013), we also examined whether the interactive effects of dispositional negativity and the environment reflect momentary differences in perceived social connection. Work by our group and others suggests that heightened feelings of social connection, engagement, acceptance, and intimacy are a key feature of high-quality relationships and play an active role in promoting positive affect and buffering stress (Brown, Strauman, Barrantes-Vidal, Silvia, & Kwapił, 2011; M. S. Clark & Lemay, 2010; Coan & Sbarra, 2015; Myers, 1999; Reis & Shaver, 1989; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2006).

Method

Design Overview

As part of an ongoing program of research focused on the etiology of mood and anxiety disorders, we used well-established measures of dispositional negativity (see below) to screen a racially diverse sample of 2,501 young adults in exchange for course extra credit (66.1% female; 56.7% White, 16.0% Asian, 14.7% African American, 6.8% Hispanic, 5.8% Multiracial/Other; M = 19.8 years, SD = 2.6 years; Figure 1a). Data from the screening assessment were stratified by tertile (high, medium, low) and sex (male, female). For the EMA study, subjects were independently and randomly recruited via email from each of the resulting six strata, enabling us to sample a broad spectrum of dispositional negativity without gaps or discontinuities (Figure 1b), while balancing the inclusion of men and women. Subjects who lacked consistent access to a smart mobile phone were excluded. In practice this never occurred, presumably because of the high rate of smart phone ownership among young adults (i.e., 98.2% of the screening sample). At enrollment, subjects provided informed written consent, were familiarized with the EMA protocol, and recomputed the measures of dispositional negativity. Beginning the next day, subjects completed up to 10 EMA surveys per day for 7 days. At the end of the week, they were debriefed and compensated. All procedures were approved by the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Six subjects were excluded from analyses due to insufficient compliance with the EMA protocol (<50% completed assessments; see below for additional details). The final EMA sample included 127 young adults (50.4% female; 53.2% White, 15.9% Asian, 13.5% African American, 6.3% Hispanic, 11.1% Multiracial/Other; M = 20.1 years, SD = 1.6 years) and captured a sizable portion of the dispositional-negative spectrum, with standardized scores ranging from −1.97 to 2.24 (Figure 1b). The proportion of subjects drawn from each of the sampling strata did not differ, χ²(5) = 2.7, p = .75, indicating similar representation.

Quantifying Dispositional Negativity

We used psychometrically sound measures of neuroticism (Big Five Inventory Neuroticism; John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008) and its anxious facet (International Personality Item Pool Trait Anxiety; Goldberg, 1999; Goldberg et al., 2006) to quantify individual differences in dispositional negativity. Subjects used a 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly) scale to rate themselves on a total of 18 items (e.g., depressed or blue, tense, worry, nervous, get distressed easily, fear for the worst, afraid of many things). At screening (n = 2,501), the neuroticism and anxiety scales were strongly correlated (r = .81) and reliable (α > .82). A composite measure of dispositional negativity was computed by taking the mean of the z-transformed scores (range of standardized scores: −2.55 to 2.92; α = .89; Figure 1a). Among the 127 subjects who successfully completed the EMA study, variation in dispositional negativity displayed good test–retest reliability between the initial screening and a second assessment collected at the start of the week-long EMA study (r = .92; M = 115.5 days, SD = 61.0 days). To minimize the influence of occasion-specific fluctuations in responding, hypothesis testing employed the average level of dispositional negativity across the two assessments (i.e., mean of standardized neuroticism and anxiety scales from both assessments; α = .96; Figure 1b).

EMA Procedures

SurveySignal (Hofmann & Patel, 2015) was used to automatically deliver 10 text messages per day to each subject’s smart phone. Messages were delivered between 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 PM, with 1–2 hours between successive messages (M = 86.5 min, SD = 14.7 min). During weekday hours, messages were delivered during the ‘passing periods’ between scheduled university courses to maximize compliance. Messages contained a link to a secure online survey. Subjects were instructed to respond within 30 min of receiving the message and cautioned to avoid responding at unsafe or inconvenient moments (Latency: Median = 3.03 min, SD = 15.75 min, Interquartile range = .85–15.35 min). At enrollment, several well-established procedures were used to maximize compliance (Palmier-Claus et al., 2011). These procedures included (a) delivering a test message to the subject’s phone in the laboratory and confirming that they were able to successfully complete the online survey, (b) providing subjects with a 24/7 technical support number, (c) 24-hr and 72-hr check-in calls or emails, (d) real-time monitoring of compliance using the Survey-Signal dashboard and recontacting subjects showing low levels of compliance, and (e) monetary bonuses for increased compliance. In the final sample, EMA compliance was acceptable (M = 78.9%, SD = 10.7%) and unrelated to dispositional negativity, r(125) = −.04, p = .69.³

EMA Survey

The most salient social context was assessed using a forced-choice probe: “Who are you with? (acquaintance(s), strangers, alone, close friend(s), romantic partner, or family)”. This was supplemented with two additional yes/no probes: “Are you engaged in face-to-face conversation?” and “Are you engaged in a real-time digital (phone, text, Facebook, video) conversation?” Key components of momentary emotional experience were rated using a 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) scale and included probes of positive affect (cheerful, happy, joyful), negative affect (anxious, nervous, worried), social approach (want to be with other people), social withdrawal (want to be alone), optimism (In the next hour, how positive do you guess the best thing is likely to be?), pessimism (In the next hour, how negative do you guess the worst thing

³A series of MLM analyses indicated that individual differences in EMA compliance were not significantly related to any of the seven outcome measures (positive affect, negative affect, social approach, social withdrawal, optimism, pessimism, and social engagement), t(s) < 1.57, p(s) > .12.
is likely to be?), and social engagement (accepted, connected/engaged). Subjects were also provided with the opportunity to briefly describe the best and worst event in the prior hour (supplementary Figure S1 and supplementary Table 1).

EMA Data Reduction

Positive affect, negative affect, and social engagement items were averaged separately for each subject and survey. The resulting scales were highly reliable (αs > .96). For social context analyses, assessments completed in the presence of close friends, romantic partners, or family members were recoded as ‘close’ others, whereas assessments completed in the presence of acquaintances or strangers were recoded as ‘distant’ others. This approach is conceptually similar to the distinction between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ social connections (Granovetter, 1973).

Hypothesis Testing Strategy

Analyses were conducted using SPSS v. 23 (IBM Inc., Armonk, NY). Hypothesis testing focused on six closely related components of momentary emotional experience: affect (positive and negative), motivation (social approach and avoidance), and appraisals about the future (pessimism and optimism). Separate MLMs were computed for each of these outcome measures. Although our primary interest and strongest predictions naturally centered on negative affect, given our focus on dispositional negativity, we reasoned that testing all six measures would provide a more stringent test of our two competing predictions. That is, identifying a convergent pattern of results across the six measures would provide greater confidence than that afforded by any single test.

Hypothesis testing employed MLMs with momentary assessment data nested within subjects. Intercepts were free to vary across subjects. Moment-level predictors were mean-centered separately for each subject. For illustrative purposes, conditional effects are depicted for extreme values (±1 SD) of dispositional negativity or perceived social connection (J. Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

The interactive effects of Disposition and Social Context (Alone, Distant Others, Close Others) were assessed with MLMs incorporating five predictors: (a) mean-centered Disposition, (b) a dummy variable coding the presence of Distant Others (1 = with distant; 0 = not with distant), (c) a dummy variable coding the presence of Close Others (1 = with close; 0 = not with close), (d) a Disposition × Distant Others interaction term, and (e) a Disposition × Close Others interaction term. In these models, Alone served as the reference category. For example, the coefficient for the Close Others predictor captured the difference between being in the company of close companions versus being alone. Likewise, the coefficient for the Disposition × Close Others interaction indicates the degree to which the impact of dispositional negativity on momentary experience is conditional on being in the company of intimates compared to being alone. This can also be interpreted as the extent to which the impact of the situation (Close Others vs. Alone) on experience is conditional on disposition. Distant Others was used as the reference category in follow-up analyses. The same general approach was used to assess the influence of perceived social connection.

A moderated mediation framework (Hayes, 2013) was used to test whether the interactive effects of dispositional negativity and social context reflect momentary differences in perceived social connection. The significance of indirect effects was assessed using a Monte Carlo approach with 10,000 samples (Preacher & Selig, 2012).

Results

Dispositional Negativity Reduces the Quality of Momentary Experience

Higher levels of dispositional negativity had an adverse impact on the quality of momentary experience. Individuals with a more negative disposition tended to experience elevated negative affect, heightened motivation to avoid others, and increased pessimism about the future, ts > 4.31, bs > .22, ps < .001 (Supplementary Tables 2 and 3). Conversely, positive affect and optimism were both reduced, ts < −2.22, bs < −.14, ps < .05. A similar, but not significant effect was found for social approach motivation, p = .12. In short, dispositional negativity influences both positive and negative aspects of momentary experience, consistent with prior daily diary and EMA research (e.g., Aldinger et al., 2014; Ching et al., 2014; David, Green, Martin, & Suls, 1997; S. L. Gable et al., 2000; Howell & Rodzon, 2011; Jacobs et al., 2011; Komulainen et al., 2014; Leger et al., 2016; Ong et al., 2010; Skalina et al., 2015; Watson, 1988; Zautra et al., 2005).

The Social Environment Matters—Preliminary Findings

As a precursor to hypothesis testing, we assessed the amount of time that our sample invested in different social environments. As shown in Figure 2, subjects spent more than half their time in the company of others, consistent with other work in young adults (e.g., ~41 hours/week; Berry & Hansen, 1996; Larson, 1990).

Figure 2. Percentage of momentary assessments completed in each social environment. Rectangles indicate the median and interquartile range. Open circles depict individual subjects. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
Remarkably, on 68.4% of such occasions they were in the presence of close companions, suggesting that friends, romantic partners, and family members are especially well-positioned to influence the quality of momentary emotional experience. Indeed, a regression analysis revealed a dose-dependent effect of time spent with close companions. On average, individuals who spent more time in the company of close companions experienced lower levels of negative affect, higher levels of positive affect, and elevated optimism, \( r(125) > .20, p < .03, \) with no significant effect on pessimism, \( r = .15. \) In contrast, individuals who spent more time alone experienced higher levels of negative affect, \( r(125) = .20, p = .03 \) (other effects, \( p > .11 \)).

Figure 2 also makes it clear that there are marked individual differences in the amount of time devoted to each social environment. For example, the interquartile range (depicted in green) for close others extends from 26.7% to 53.1% of assessments (min = 0%; max = 76%). Importantly, dispositional negativity was not significantly related to the amount of time spent alone with distant others, engaged in face-to-face conversation, or engaged in real-time digital interactions, such as texting, \( r(125) < .12, p > .19. \) There was a trend for individuals with a more negative disposition to spend less time with close others, \( r(125) = -.16, p > .08. \) On balance, these findings suggest that young adults with elevated levels of dispositional negativity are socially active, not isolated, and spend considerable time in the company of intimates. This is consistent with work indicating little to no effect of dispositional negativity on social network size or density (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998; Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002; Molho, Roberts, de Vries, & Pollet, 2016; S. G. B. Roberts, Wilson, Fedurek, & Dunbar, 2008; Sellhout et al., 2010; Totterdell, Holman, & Hukin, 2008; Wagner, Ludtke, Roberts, & Trautwein, 2014; Zhu, Woo, Porter, & Brzeczynski, 2013), the likelihood of developing friendships in young adulthood (Sellhout et al., 2010), the frequency of social interactions (Watson et al., 1992), or the frequency of desirable daily events with family and friends (David et al., 1997).

### Close Companions Enhance the Quality of Momentary Experience

Consistent with our preliminary results, MLM analyses provided additional evidence that the social environment is a key determinant of intraintidual differences in momentary emotional experience (Figure 3 and Table 1). Relative to solitary contexts, the presence of close companions was associated with significantly lower levels of negative affect, social avoidance, and pessimism, \( ps < .001. \) Likewise, being in the company of close companions was associated with higher levels of positive affect, social approach, and optimism, \( ps < .001, \) replicating and extending the results of prior diary (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004; Krueger, Kahneman, Schkade, Schwartz, & Stone, 2009; Watson, 1988; Watson et al., 1992) and EMA studies (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Larson, 1990; Weinsein & Mermelstein, 2007). A similar, but weaker pattern of effects was found for distant companions—only three of the six outcome measures were significant (Table 1). Follow-up analyses revealed that, relative to distant others, the company of close companions is associated with significant decrements in the three measures of negative experience and significant increments in the three measures of positive experience, \( ps < .001. \) This pattern of findings underscores the potent effects of close companions on real-world emotional experience.

### The Impact of Dispositional Negativity on Momentary Experience Strongly Depends on Social Context

MLM analyses also demonstrated that the adverse impact of dispositional negativity on momentary experience is conditional on the social environment (Figure 3). Individuals with higher levels of dispositional negativity reap much larger emotional benefits from the company of close companions when compared to assessments when they were alone or when compared to those with low levels of dispositional negativity (\( ps < .05 \) for all six outcome measures; Tables 1 and 2). These effects were specific to close companions. None of the Disposition × Distant Others interactions were significant in the omnibus model (Table 1) and the Disposition × Close Others interaction remained significant for all six outcome measures when we incorporated Distant Others as the reference category, \( ps < .02. \) Taken together, these observations show that close companions are an important and beneficial governor of momentary emotional experience for individuals with a more negative disposition, consistent with our first competing prediction.4

### The Impact of Close Companions Reflects Heightened Feelings of Social Connection

Momentary fluctuations in the social environment determine perceived social connection. The results described so far indicate that close companions—friends, romantic partners, and family members—have a deeply positive influence on momentary experience and that this is particularly evident for individuals with a more negative disposition. But does this reflect heightened feelings of social connection, engagement, and acceptance? Consistent with this possibility, preliminary MLM analyses showed that fluctuations in the social environment parametrically determine the degree of perceived social connection (i.e., Close Others > Distant Others > Alone) subjects felt more connected in the company of intimates compared to distant others and more connected in the company of distant others compared to being alone (\( ts > 11.86, bs > .31, ps < .001. \))

Individuals with a more negative disposition experience amplified feelings of social connection with close companions. Next, we used a moderated mediation framework to test whether the joint influence of dispositional negativity and social context on momentary experience reflects differences in perceived social connection (Figure 4; Hayes, 2013). Put another way, individuals with a more negative disposition derive significantly larger emotional benefits from the company of intimates—but can this be explained by heightened feelings of social connection?

As a first step, we tested whether dispositional negativity and social context jointly determine feelings of social connection (Dis-

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4 Control analyses indicated that these effects were not due to differential contact with close companions. When we expanded the MLM to include the frequency of assessments with Close Others and the frequency of assessments with Distant Others (including appropriate product terms), the Disposition × Close Others interaction remained significant for all six outcome measures, \( ps < .02. \)
Disposition
Close others
were significant (\(t = -2.15, b = -.06, p < .05\)) and
Disposition × Distant, \(t = 6.78, b = .16, p < .001\) interactions
were significant (\(t_{98} > 2.14, b_{98} > .05, ps < .05; \) Figure 5). Higher
levels of dispositional negativity are associated with lower levels
of social connection when alone (white bars in Figure 5) or with
distant others (gray bars in Figure 5; \(t_{98} < -4.36, b_{98} < -.28, ps < .001\)). This detrimental effect is nearly
abolished in the company of close others (black bars in Figure 5; \(t = -1.95, b = -.13, p = .053\)). Importantly, while the company of close companions is
associated with heightened feelings of social connection (com-
pared to being alone), this effect was much stronger for individuals
with high compared to low levels of dispositional negativity (black
and white bars in Figure 5; \(t = 30.19, b = .96, p < .001\) vs. \(t = 21.22, b = .65, p < .001\)).

Individuals with a more negative disposition experience at-
tenuated feelings of social connection with distant companions.
Interestingly, this pattern was reversed for distant others (gray and

Table 1
The Impact of Dispositional Negativity and Social Context on Momentary Emotional Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Negative affect</th>
<th>Social avoidance</th>
<th>Pessimism</th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Social approach</th>
<th>Optimism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional negativity</td>
<td>+6.15***</td>
<td>+5.96***</td>
<td>+4.44***</td>
<td>-5.00***</td>
<td>-2.45*</td>
<td>-2.79**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant others</td>
<td>+1.61</td>
<td>-10.90**</td>
<td>+4.23***</td>
<td>-8.00***</td>
<td>+8.00***</td>
<td>+1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close others</td>
<td>-8.69***</td>
<td>-28.19***</td>
<td>-7.23***</td>
<td>26.16***</td>
<td>18.37***</td>
<td>12.50***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition × Distant</td>
<td>+0.08</td>
<td>-1.63</td>
<td>+1.13</td>
<td>-7.78</td>
<td>+2.8</td>
<td>-2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition × Close</td>
<td>-3.15</td>
<td>-6.53***</td>
<td>-2.57</td>
<td>+5.57***</td>
<td>+6.87***</td>
<td>+4.87***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(p < .05\). ** \(p < .01\). *** \(p < .001\).
whether heightened feelings of social connection moderate the deleterious impact of dispositional negativity on momentary experience (Dispositional Negativity × Social Connection → Momentary Experience; path $c$ in Figure 4). As detailed in Table 3, the interaction was significant for all six measures of momentary experience. This result, which reflects assessments of psychological experience (i.e., How accepted, connected, and engaged do you feel?) rather than social context (e.g., Who are you with?), is particularly important because it independently confirms the exaggerated significance of social experience for individuals endowed with a more negative disposition. Furthermore, in these simultaneous MLMs, the Dispositional Negativity × Close Others interaction was no longer significant for four of the outcome measures (negative affect, pessimism, positive affect, and optimism) and was substantially weaker for social avoidance and approach (compare Table 3 to Table 2), underscoring the importance of perceived social connection (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Stokes, 1985) and consistent with the hypothesized moderated mediation model.

As shown in Figure 6 and Table 4, simple effects analyses yielded two additional conclusions. First, the adverse influence of dispositional negativity on momentary experience is reduced (i.e., the regression slope is flatter) in moments when perceived social connection is high (solid line) relative to when it is low (broken line). This is particularly evident for negative affect, social avoid-

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Negative affect</th>
<th>Social avoidance</th>
<th>Pessimism</th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Social approach</th>
<th>Optimism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional negativity, Alone</td>
<td>$+6.15^{***}$</td>
<td>$+.30$</td>
<td>$+5.96^{***}$</td>
<td>$+.37$</td>
<td>$-5.00^{***}$</td>
<td>$-.36$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional negativity, Close others</td>
<td>$+4.74^{***}$</td>
<td>$+.24$</td>
<td>$+2.81^{**}$</td>
<td>$+.18$</td>
<td>$+3.17^{***}$</td>
<td>$+.17$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close others vs. Alone, Low dispositional negativity</td>
<td>$-3.80^{**}$</td>
<td>$-.11$</td>
<td>$-15.02^{***}$</td>
<td>$-.58$</td>
<td>$-3.20^{**}$</td>
<td>$-.11$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close others vs. Alone, High dispositional negativity</td>
<td>$-8.16^{**}$</td>
<td>$-.24$</td>
<td>$-23.84^{***}$</td>
<td>$-.95$</td>
<td>$-6.75^{**}$</td>
<td>$-.24$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a p < .05$. $^b p < .01$. $^c p < .001$.  

![Figure 4](tapraid5/emo-emo/emo-emo/emo99917/emo3314d17z)  
**Figure 4.** Moderated mediation framework. Our results demonstrate that dispositional negativity and social context interactively determine the quality of momentary experience (path $a$). Individuals with a more negative disposition derive larger emotional benefits from the company of close companions. Elevated levels of dispositional negativity are associated with a reduction in the quality of momentary emotional experience, but the presence of other individuals, especially close companions, markedly attenuates this association. We hypothesized that this ‘buffering’ effect reflects momentary variation in the degree of perceived social connection. A moderated mediation framework was used to assess specific aspects of this hypothesis (e.g., paths $b$ and $c$; Hayes, 2013). Black paths indicate moderation and gray paths indicate mediation. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

![Figure 5](tapraid5/emo-emo/emo-emo/emo99917/emo3314d17z)  
**Figure 5.** The deleterious impact of dispositional negativity on perceived social connection is conditional on social context. Multilevel models (MLM) results indicate that individuals with a more negative disposition are hyper-sensitive to some aspects of the social environment, experiencing amplified feelings of social connection in the company of Close Others (black bars) relative to Alone (white bars) and attenuated feelings of social connection in the presence of Distant Others (gray bars) relative to Alone (white bars). Hypothesis testing relied on a continuous measure of dispositional negativity. For illustrative purposes, predicted values are depicted for extreme levels (±1 SD). DN: Dispositional negativity.
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Low levels of dispositional negativity (lower row of Table 5) indicate that individuals with a more negative disposition derive stronger mediation effects. Taken together, these results provide new insights into how the social environment shapes the emotional benefits—lower levels of negative affect, avoidance motivation, and pessimism and higher levels of positive affect, approach motivation, and optimism about the future (Qualter et al., 2015). Instead, our results highlight the key role that close companions—friends, romantic partners, and family members—play in moderating momentary emotional experience (Figure 3) and show that this is particularly evident among individuals marked by high levels of dispositional negativity. In fact, these results show that dispositionally negative individuals derive substantially larger emotional benefits—lower levels of negative affect, avoidance motivation, and pessimism and higher levels of positive affect, approach motivation, and optimism—from the company of close companions relative to the company of strangers or acquaintances, to solitary contexts, or to individuals with a less negative disposition (Figure 3). Moreover, the results of our mediation analyses indicated that these enhanced emotional benefits reflect exaggerated feelings of social connection and acceptance in the presence of intimates (Figures 4 and 5). In short, moment-by-moment fluctuations in perceived social connection play a key role in governing the expression and experience of dispositional negativity in daily life. These results provide a novel framework for understanding the processes that contribute to the development of mental illness and other adverse outcomes linked to dispositional negativity, for guiding the development of improved intervention strategies, and for clarifying the interplay of personality and the environment.

The present observations complement a growing body of laboratory evidence highlighting the importance of social and interpersonal processes for emotion regulation (Coan & Sharr, 2015; Gable & Reis, 2010; Lakey & Orehek, 2011; Zaki & Williams, 2013). Our results suggest that individuals with a more negative disposition are particularly dependent on intimate companions for regulating their persistently elevated distress. Indeed, inspection of Figure 3 indicates that the emotional experience of high-negative individuals most closely resembles that of low-negative individuals when they are in the company of their close companions, particularly for positive facets of momentary experience (e.g., optimism about the future). A broadly similar pattern has been

Table 3
The Impact of Dispositional Negativity, Social Context, and Perceived Social Connection on Momentary Emotional Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Negative affect</th>
<th>Social avoidance</th>
<th>Pessimism</th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Social approach</th>
<th>Optimism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional negativity</td>
<td>+5.54***</td>
<td>+.28</td>
<td>+5.19***</td>
<td>+.33</td>
<td>+3.78***</td>
<td>+.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant others</td>
<td>+3.42***</td>
<td>+.08</td>
<td>-7.96***</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>-1.10</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close others</td>
<td>-2.00*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-16.50***</td>
<td>-.47</td>
<td>-4.42</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition × Distant</td>
<td>+.40</td>
<td>+.01</td>
<td>-1.68</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>+1.39</td>
<td>+.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition × Close</td>
<td>+.47</td>
<td>+.01</td>
<td>-2.19*</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>+1.20</td>
<td>+.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>-13.71***</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-24.36***</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>-16.37***</td>
<td>-.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition × Connection</td>
<td>-5.88***</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-5.61***</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-5.91***</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
observed in several randomized laboratory studies, suggesting that close companions play a causal role in normalizing emotional experience. For example, the presence of a close companion has been shown to normalize negative affect and catastrophic cognitions (“I’m going to die”) in panic disorder patients exposed to a panic-inducing CO₂ challenge (Carter, Hollon, Carson, & Shelton, 1995) and to normalize behavioral signs of anxiety in socially anxious young adults during a videotaped speech challenge (Pontari, 2009). More naturalistic research indicates that dispositionally negative individuals are characterized by poor emotion regulation skills (Suls & Martin, 2005) and are prone to coping with stress by seeking the emotional support of intimates (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Observational studies of married couples show that individuals with a more negative disposition solicit and receive more socioemotional support from their spouses (Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997; Wang & Repetti, 2014) and diary studies of anxiety patients suggest that enhanced spousal support dampens negative affect (Zaider, Heimberg, & Iida, 2010). Collectively, this body of observations suggests that friends, romantic partners, and family members serve as a regulatory ‘prosthesis’ for dispositionally negative individuals.

Relying on intimates for emotion regulation is risky. This is particularly true for dispositionally negative individuals, who tend to behave in ways that promote interpersonal conflict, social re-

![Figure 6](image-url)  
Figure 6. Momentary fluctuations in perceived social connection govern the adverse impact of dispositional negativity on emotional experience. Simple effects analyses demonstrated that the adverse impact of dispositional negativity on momentary experience is attenuated—the regression slope is flatter—during moments when social connection was high (solid line) relative to when it was low (broken line), particularly for negative affect, social avoidance, and pessimism. Individuals with a more negative disposition derive larger emotional benefits from perceived social connection compared to those with a less negative disposition (i.e., the difference between the solid and broken lines is magnified at high levels of negativity). See Tables 3 and 4 for detailed results. Hypothesis testing relied on continuous measures of social connection and dispositional negativity. For illustrative purposes, predicted values are depicted for extreme levels (±1 SD) of social connection.
Dispositional Negativity in the Wild

Table 4
Simple Effects Used to Decompose the Disposition × Social Connection Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Negative affect</th>
<th>Social avoidance</th>
<th>Pessimism</th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Social approach</th>
<th>Optimism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional negativity at low connection</td>
<td>6.88*** .34</td>
<td>5.73*** .36</td>
<td>5.58*** .30</td>
<td>-4.90*** -36</td>
<td>-2.10* -16</td>
<td>-2.75** -18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional negativity at high connection</td>
<td>4.54*** .22</td>
<td>3.40** .21</td>
<td>2.98** .16</td>
<td>-4.10*** -30</td>
<td>-0.95 -0.7</td>
<td>-1.64 -0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection at low dispositional negativity</td>
<td>-5.08*** -0.8</td>
<td>-12.27*** -2.7</td>
<td>-6.81*** -14</td>
<td>47.01*** +64</td>
<td>16.55*** +37</td>
<td>16.13*** +32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection at high dispositional negativity</td>
<td>-14.90*** -2.2</td>
<td>-22.75*** -4.4</td>
<td>-16.93*** -29</td>
<td>59.64*** +71</td>
<td>24.24*** +47</td>
<td>23.46*** +40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 5
Monte Carlo Tests of Mediation (95% Confidence Intervals for the Indirect Effect)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Negative affect</th>
<th>Social avoidance</th>
<th>Pessimism</th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Social approach</th>
<th>Optimism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High dispositional negativity</td>
<td>-.24 to -.18*</td>
<td>-.47 to -.38*</td>
<td>-.32 to -.24*</td>
<td>.63 to .73*</td>
<td>.41 to .50*</td>
<td>.34 to .42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low dispositional negativity</td>
<td>-.08 to -.04*</td>
<td>-.21 to -.15*</td>
<td>-.12 to -.06*</td>
<td>.38 to .46*</td>
<td>.21 to .28*</td>
<td>.18 to .24*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Indirect effect.

*p < .05 based on 20,000 samples.
development of mood disorders (Hengartner, Ajdacic-Gross, Wyss, Angst, & Rossler, 2016; Laceulle, Ormel, Vollebergh, van Aken, & Nederhof, 2014; Naragon-Gainey & Watson, 2014; Ormel et al., 2013; Zinbarg et al., 2016) and these moment-by-moment relations may provide an anhedonic pathway for the development of pathological depression. Second, our results make it clear that individuals with a more negative disposition are not just hyper-sensitive to threat, they are also differentially sensitive to the company of intimates and to environments that elicit feelings of connection, acceptance, and intimacy (Figure 5). Our observations may also provide insights into the mechanisms underlying long-term changes in dispositional negativity. Like other core emotional traits, dispositional negativity is somewhat malleable and continues to evolve across the life span (Fraley & Roberts, 2005; B. W. Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; B. W. Roberts et al., 2017; B. W. Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; B. W. Roberts, Walton, & Viechtlbauer, 2006). Longitudinal studies demonstrate that changes in the social environment (e.g., death of a spouse, remarriage following widowhood, or gradual shifts in marital satisfaction) are associated with long-lasting changes in dispositional negativity (Mroczek & Spiro, 2003; B. W. Roberts & Chapman, 2000; Scollon & Diener, 2006), but the proximal mechanisms have remained unclear. The present results motivate the hypothesis that these changes in emotional disposition reflect the cumulative impact of long-term alterations in the social regulation of momentary experience.

Our results highlight some other valuable avenues for future research. In particular, the present study provides scant information about the social networks in which dispositionally negative individuals are embedded. For example, we do not know whether more negative individuals rely on many or few close companions. Another key challenge is to discover the specific interactional processes that underlie heightened feelings of social connection and acceptance (Casp et al., 2005). Observational and experimental studies of dyadic interactions would be particularly valuable for identifying mechanistically important social processes and these could be combined with EMA procedures to establish their relevance to real-world experience. Intervention studies would afford a crucial opportunity to test whether the relations that we have identified are causally important.

In sum, the present study suggests that intimate companions play a vital role in governing the momentary expression and experience of dispositional negativity in the real world. Our results indicate that individuals with a more negative disposition derive enhanced emotional benefits from close companions and that these benefits reflect heightened feelings of social connection. The results set the stage for developing improved strategies for treating or even preventing the deleterious consequences of extreme dispositional negativity. More broadly, they provide new insights into the ways in which traits and situations interactively regulate momentary emotional states.

References


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