**Title:**

Reappraisal and Distraction of Intense Emotions: use and forecasting in naturalistic studies  
  
**About:**

Researchers often study how we manage emotions in controlled settings, using participants who are trained in specific strategies, told when to use them, and given limited options for self-regulation. While these methods are invaluable, they may not reflect how the general public—who typically aren’t trained, prompted, or restricted—naturally manages emotions in high-intensity, high-stress situations. Our study explored this by examining how people regulate their emotions in dynamic, complex scenarios like haunted houses and intense horror movie clips, with minimal training or prompting. We also asked others to predict how they would handle these situations and compared those predictions to what people actually did. Across four studies, we found that distraction, at high emotional intensities, was less successful, used less often, and relied upon less than people predicted it would be. These results challenge established findings from existing research about the strengths and weaknesses of strategies like reappraisal and distraction. Our findings emphasize the need to study emotions in realistic contexts. By better understanding how people truly respond to stress, we can develop more effective tools and strategies to help individuals navigate intense, real-life situations.  
  
**Importance:**  
How we regulate emotions in high-stress, high-intensity situations shapes the decisions we make for our safety, security, and well-being. To improve our understanding, it’s crucial to study how people naturally regulate emotions in real-world contexts. Traditional study designs, while offering strong experimental control, often train participants to use specific strategies, prompt them when to act, or limit their choices—contexts that differ from everyday emotional regulation. By using dynamic, complex stimuli and less controlled designs, our research builds on existing findings to explore emotion regulation in situations that better mirror real-life challenges. This approach provides valuable insights into emotional decision-making and practical strategies for managing intense emotions in the real world.

**Perspective:**

The availability of tools like natural language processing lexicons (e.g., USE, NRC), accessible study design platforms (e.g., jsPsych, PsychoPy), and complex stimulus libraries (e.g., Neuroscout) has made it easier for researchers to give participants more freedom in their behaviors while still capturing, quantifying, and analyzing those behaviors effectively. Controlled experiments remain invaluable for what they are uniquely suited to uncover, but they should be conducted alongside and informed by naturalistic study designs, which help extend theoretical insights into practical, real-world applications. Ed Diener and colleagues made this argument excellently in their 2022 paper, Beyond Experiments.