

Loneliness, positive life events, and psychological maladjustment: When good things happen, even lonely people feel better! ☆



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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated loneliness and positive life events as predictors of psychological maladjustment (viz., depression, hopelessness, & suicidal behaviors) in a sample of 327 adults. Beyond the expected role of loneliness in psychological maladjustment, positive life events were found to further augment the prediction of depression, hopelessness, and suicidal behaviors. In addition, the presence of positive life events was found to buffer the positive association between loneliness and maladjustment. Specifically, the positive association between loneliness and psychological maladjustment was found to be weaker for those who experienced a high number of positive life events, as opposed to those who experienced a low number of positive life events. Some implications for helping adults perceive or appreciate the presence of positive events in their lives are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Psychological maladjustment, ranging from depression to suicidal behaviors, represents a global public health concern (Nock et al., 2008), especially in adults (Stravynski & Boyer, 2001). For example, findings from international studies indicate that depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide, affecting over 350 million individuals (World Health Organization [WHO], 2012). Similarly, suicide represents the second leading cause of death among young adults in college (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2012). Given the magnitude and severity of these types of maladaptive psychological outcomes, it is not a surprise that researchers have been eager to identify potential factors that may place individual at heightened risk for maladjustment.

One variable that has been identified as a potential risk factor for psychological maladjustment in recent years has been loneliness (see Heinrich & Gullone, 2006, for a review). According to Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980), *loneliness* is defined as having feelings and thoughts of being isolated and disconnected from others. For example,

consistent with the contention that loneliness is a risk factor for maladjustment, Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Thisted (2010) found that greater loneliness was associated with greater depressive symptoms in adults. Findings from other studies examining psychological maladjustment in adults have also indicated a reliable positive association involving loneliness with hopelessness (Chang, Sanna, Hirsch & Jeglic, 2010) and suicidal behaviors (e.g., Stravynski & Boyer, 2001).

Beyond loneliness, however, researchers have long implicated life events in the prediction of psychological maladjustment in adults. In particular, findings from studies of adults over the past several decades examining the potential impact of life events have consistently found a positive association between experience of negative life events (e.g., death of a loved one, failing an exam) and maladjustment (for reviews, see Kessler, 1997; Liu & Miller, 2014; Tennant, 2002). Indeed, similar to findings obtained in studies of loneliness, negative life events has also been found to be positively associated with psychological maladjustment, including greater depression (e.g., Roca et al., 2013; Spinhoven et al., 2011), greater hopelessness (e.g., Bonner & Rich, 1988; Hjemdal, Friborg, & Stiles, 2012), and greater suicidal behaviors (e.g., Joiner & Rudd, 2000; Wang et al., 2012). Interestingly, in one recent study examining both loneliness and negative life events, Chang et al. (2010) found that they not only uniquely predicted hopelessness, but that the interaction of the two further augmented the prediction of hopelessness and suicidal behaviors. Thus, beyond loneliness, negative life events appear to not only have the potential to add to the prediction of maladjustment in adults, but to also exacerbate the dysfunctional link

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present between loneliness and psychological maladjustment. Yet, few studies have examined for the role of positive life events in predicting maladjustment in adults.

According to Needles and Abramson (1990; see also, Kleiman, Riskind & Schaefer 2014), positive life events may not only represent an important explanatory variable or predictor of psychological maladjustment, but it may also function to buffer the link between important individual differences risk variables and maladjustment. Consistent with this view, for example, these investigators found that the negative link between positive attributional style and hopelessness was buffered by level of positive life events experienced (e.g., those who reported a high number, compared to a low number, of positive life events reported the lowest level of hopelessness). However, to date, no study has, for example, examined the potential role of positive life events as a potential buffer of the positive association present between loneliness and psychological maladjustment in adults.

2. Purpose of the present study

Given these possibilities, we conducted the present study to: 1) determine the extent to which loneliness predicts psychological maladjustment (viz., depression, hopelessness, & suicidal behaviors); 2) examine whether positive life events might add to the prediction of maladjustment beyond loneliness; and 3) determine if the loneliness \times positive life events interaction might further add to the prediction model.

Given the strong and reliable association between loneliness and psychological maladjustment in adults (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006), we expected loneliness to significantly predict maladjustment and account for a significant amount of the variance in each of the three psychological maladjustment outcomes examined in the present study. Additionally, given the potential importance of positive life events in helping to abate or reduce maladjustment (e.g., Kleiman et al., 2014), we expected positive life events to account for a significant amount of additional variance in psychological maladjustment beyond loneliness.

Beyond these predictions, we were also interested in testing the hypothesis that positive life events may weaken or buffer the positive relationship between loneliness and maladjustment (e.g., Needles & Abramson, 1990). Specifically, in contrast to past findings that have pointed to negative life events as an important factor that strengthens the association between loneliness and maladjustment (e.g., Chang et al., 2010), we hypothesized that the positive association between loneliness and psychological maladjustment would be weaker for those who experienced a high number of positive life events, as opposed to those who experienced a low number of positive life events. Thus, for example, we expected that among lonely individuals, those experiencing many positive life events would be less psychologically maladjusted than those experiencing a few positive life events.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Data was obtained from 327 college students from a university in the Southeast United States. Among the participants, 219 were female (67%), 105 were male (32.1%), 2 were transgender (0.6%), and one participant failed to indicate his/her gender (0.3%). Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 58 with the mean of 21.81 years ($SD = 5.30$). The majority of the participants were European American (86.5%), followed by African American (5.8%), Asian American (3.1%), and Latino American (1.8%). Among the participants, 9 of them failed to indicate their race (2.8%).

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Loneliness

Loneliness was measured by the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (R-UCLA; Russell et al., 1980). The scale consists of 20 items, with ten

items (reverse scored) describing non-lonely thoughts (e.g., "There are people I feel close to"), and ten items characterizing feelings of loneliness (e.g., "I feel isolated from others"). Respondents are asked to rate the statements on the frequency in which they experience these feelings using a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*). Higher scores on the R-UCLA indicate greater levels of loneliness.

3.2.2. Positive life events

Positive life events were measured by the Life Events Scale (LES; Tomoda, 1997). The LES is a 43-item self-report measure, consisting of two subscales: positive life events (20 items) and negative life events (23 items). In the present study, we only used items tapping for positive life events (POS). Respondents are asked to respond to the questions indicating whether they had experienced the life event 1 (*yes*) or whether they had not experienced the life event 0 (*no*). For this study, we used the sum of the responses for positive life events (LES-POS), which included items assessing for positive or desirable events (e.g., "I did well on an exam"). Higher scores on the LES-POS indicate more experiences of positive life events.

3.2.3. Psychological maladjustment

Psychological maladjustment was measured using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961), the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS; Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974), and the Suicidal Behaviors Questionnaire—Revised (SBQ-R; Osman et al., 2001). The BDI is a commonly used 21-item self-report measure of depressive symptomatology. Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they have experienced specific depressive symptoms in the past week across a 4-point scale (for example, "0 = I do not feel sad" to "3 = I am so sad or unhappy that I can't stand it"). Higher scores on the BDI are indicative of greater depressive symptoms. The BHS is a 20-item measure of hopelessness. Respondents are asked to indicate either agreement or disagreement to these items that assess negative expectancies for the future (e.g., "My future seems dark to me"). Scores on the BHS have been found to correspond highly with clinical ratings of hopelessness (Beck et al., 1974). Higher scores on the BHS indicate greater hopelessness. Finally, the SBQ-R is a 4-item self-report measure developed to directly tap key aspects of suicidality, namely, lifetime ideation and/or suicide attempt ("Have you ever thought about or attempted to kill yourself?"), frequency of suicidal ideation over the past 12 months ("How often have you thought about killing yourself in the past year?"), threat of suicide attempt ("Have you ever told someone that you were going to commit suicide or that you might do it?"), and likelihood of suicidal behavior in the future ("How likely is it that you will attempt suicide someday?"). The responses for each item are given total points and are measured across a 5- to 7-point Likert-type scale, for example, ranging from 0 or 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) or 6 (*very likely*). Higher scores on the SBQ-R indicate greater suicidal behaviors.

3.3. Procedure

Approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. Participants taking an upper-level psychology course (e.g., Abnormal Psychology, Personality Psychology) were recruited from a university in the Southeast United States and received either course-required credit or extra credit upon completion of the survey. All participants were provided with written informed consent, which indicated that all data would be kept strictly confidential.

4. Results

Correlations, means, and standard deviations for all study measures are presented in Table 1. Consistent with past research findings, all of the correlations were significant and in the expected direction. Specifically, loneliness was significantly and positively associated with all of

Table 1

Correlations between measures of loneliness, positive life events, depression, hopelessness and suicidal behaviors in adults.

Measures	1	2	3	4	5
1. Loneliness	–				
2. Positive life events	–.18*	–			
3. Depression	.58*	–.36*	–		
4. Hopelessness	.57*	–.20*	.60*	–	
5. Suicidal behaviors	.46*	–.23*	.50*	.42*	–
Range	20–72	10–50	0–52	1–20	0–14
<i>M</i>	39.50	16.03	10.55	5.14	2.21
<i>SD</i>	12.00	3.82	11.38	3.98	3.27

Note. *N* = 327.

* $p \leq .001$.

the psychological maladjustment outcomes, namely, depression ($r = .58, p < .001$), hopelessness ($r = .57, p < .001$), and suicidal behaviors ($r = .46, p < .001$). Additionally, positive life events was found to have a significant and negative association with depression ($r = -.36, p < .001$), hopelessness ($r = -.20, p < .001$), and suicidal behaviors ($r = -.23, p < .001$). Moreover, a significant and negative association was found between loneliness and positive life events ($r = -.18, p \leq .001$). Finally, all three maladjustment outcomes were found to be significantly and positively correlated with each other ($r_s = .42$ to $.60$), but not so high as to indicate empirical redundancy.

4.1. Examining a model of loneliness and positive life events as predictors of psychological maladjustment in adults

To examine whether positive life events account for additional unique variance in psychological maladjustment beyond loneliness, a series of hierarchical regression analyses predicting depression, hopelessness, and suicidal behaviors was conducted. For each regression model, loneliness was entered in the First Step, followed by positive life events in the Second Step. Lastly, the multiplicative term of loneliness \times positive life events was included in the Third Step to determine whether positive life events may potentially interact with loneliness in predicting maladjustment. Results of these regression analyses are presented in Table 2.

As Table 2 shows, in predicting depression in adults, loneliness was found to be a significant predictor, accounting for 34% variance in depression, $F(1, 325) = 164.90, p < .001$. Similarly, when positive life events was entered in the Second Step, it was found to be a significant predictor, accounting for 7% additional variance in depression, beyond loneliness, $F(1, 324) = 38.14, p < .001$. Moreover, when the interaction

Table 2

Results of hierarchical regression analyses showing amount of variance in depression, hopelessness, and suicidal behaviors accounted for by loneliness and positive life events in adults.

Outcome and measure	β	R^2	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>
Depression				
Step 1: Loneliness	.58***	.34	–	164.90***
Step 2: Positive life events	–.27***	.41	.07	38.14***
Step 3: Loneliness \times positive life events	–.57**	.42	.01	6.66**
Hopelessness				
Step 1: Loneliness	.57***	.32	–	154.63***
Step 2: Positive life events	–.11*	.33	.01	5.31*
Step 3: Loneliness \times positive life events	–.52*	.34	.01	4.95*
Suicidal behaviors				
Step 1: Loneliness	.47***	.21	–	86.36***
Step 2: Positive life events	–.15**	.23	.02	9.42**
Step 3: Loneliness \times positive life events	–.54*	.24	.01	4.50*

Note. *N* = 327.

* $p < .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

of loneliness and positive life events was entered in the Third Step, the loneliness \times positive life events term was also found to account for 1% of additional variance in depression, $F(1, 323) = 6.66, p \leq .01$. The full prediction model including loneliness, positive life events, and the interaction term was found to account for 42% of variance in depression, $F(3, 323) = 77.47, p < .001$.

In predicting hopelessness in adults, loneliness was found to account for 32% of variance in hopelessness, $F(1, 325) = 154.63, p < .001$. Additionally, after controlling for loneliness, when positive life events was entered in the Second Step, it was found to account for 1% of additional variance in hopelessness, $F(1, 324) = 5.31, p < .05$. Similarly, when the interaction term involving loneliness and positive life events was entered in the Third Step, it was found to account for 1% of additional variance in hopelessness, $F(1, 323) = 4.95, p < .05$. The full prediction model including loneliness, positive life events, and the interaction term was found to account for 34% of variance in hopelessness, $F(3, 323) = 56.31, p < .001$.

Finally, in predicting suicidal behaviors in adults, loneliness was found to be a significant predictor, accounting for 21% variance in suicidal behaviors, $F(1, 325) = 86.36, p < .001$. Similarly, when positive life events was entered in the Second Step, it was found to account for 2% of additional variance in suicidal behaviors, beyond loneliness, $F(1, 324) = 9.42, p < .01$. Additionally, when the interaction of loneliness and positive life events was entered in the Third Step, the loneliness \times positive life events term was found to account for 1% of additional variance in suicidal behaviors, $F(1, 323) = 4.50, p < .05$. The full prediction model including loneliness, positive life events, and the interaction term was found to account for 24% of variance in suicidal behaviors, $F(3, 323) = 34.53, p < .001$.

To visually inspect the manner in which loneliness and positive life events interacted in predicting psychological maladjustment, we plotted the regressions of depressive symptoms, hopelessness, and suicidal behaviors (see Figs. 1 to 3, respectively) on loneliness (shown at low and high levels, using a $M \pm 1$ SD split) between adults who experienced low versus high positive life events (based on using a $M \pm 1$ SD split) based on our initial regression results. As these figures show, the results of plotting these interactions provide consistent support for the notion that positive life events operates to buffer the positive association between loneliness and maladjustment. Specifically, the positive association between loneliness and each of the three psychological maladjustment outcomes was consistently weaker for the adults who experienced more positive life events, compared to those who experienced fewer positive life events. Independent of their loneliness levels, adults who experienced more positive life events reported lower levels of depression, hopelessness, and suicidal behaviors than those who experienced fewer positive life events.

5. Discussion

The present study was conducted to examine the role of loneliness and positive life events as predictors of psychological maladjustment in adults, and to determine if the presence of high positive life events may weaken the positive relationship between loneliness and maladjustment (viz., depression, hopelessness, & suicidal behaviors) in adults. Consistent with past research findings and the contention that loneliness represents an important explanatory variable in predicting psychological maladjustment in adults (e.g., Heinrich & Gullone, 2006), we found that loneliness accounted for significant amounts of variance (21% to 34%) in maladjustment outcomes. Specifically, greater experience of loneliness in adults reliably determined greater experiences of depression, hopelessness, and suicidal behaviors.

Importantly, apart from this expected pattern of findings, the present study found that positive life events significantly augmented the regression models in predicting all three psychological maladjustment outcomes. That is, positive life events was found to account for additional unique variance (1% to 7%) in maladjustment, even after controlling

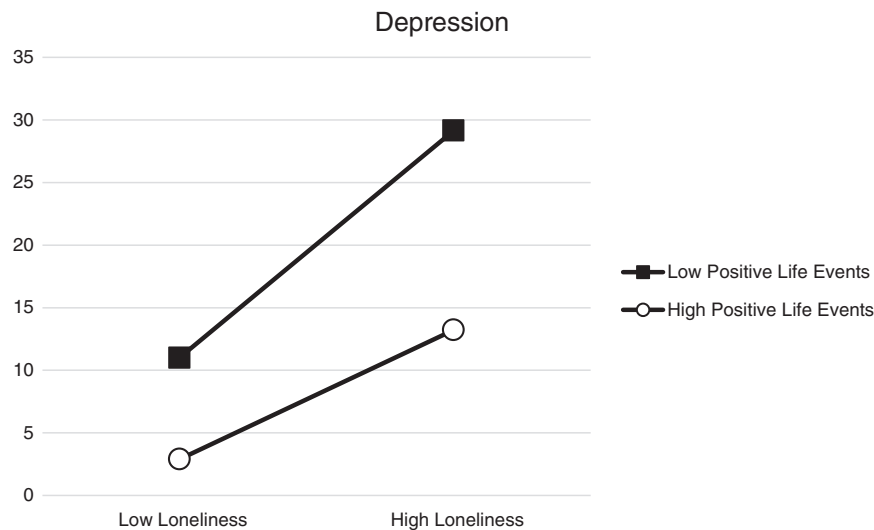


Fig. 1. Loneliness and depression among adults experiencing low vs. high positive life events.

for the variance accounted for by loneliness. In that regard, our findings offer two important implications. First, this pattern makes clear that although loneliness may represent an important and robust predictor of psychological maladjustment (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006), it is not a sufficient predictor of such outcomes. Specifically, our findings point to the value of examining the unique contributions of positive life events in predicting maladjustment in adults. Second, our findings provide some support to the distinct value of examining positive, compared to negative life events. For example, in Chang et al.'s (2010) study examining the role of loneliness and negative life events in predicting psychological maladjustment (viz., hopelessness & suicidal behaviors) in adults, only some support was found for the value of negative life events as a unique predictor of maladjustment after the variance in maladjustment accounted for by loneliness was taken into account. Specifically, negative life events was found to uniquely predict greater hopelessness, but not greater suicidal behaviors in their study. Thus, taken together, these findings indicate that positive life events (or lack of such events) may play a more important and central role in psychological maladjustment, than the presence of negative life events. Interestingly, this pattern is consistent with recent findings indicating that certainty about the absence of future positive events is, whereas certainty about the presence of future negative events is not, predictive of maladjustment in adults (e.g., suicide ideation; Sargalska, Miranda, & Marroquín, 2011).

Finally, an important goal of the present study was to also determine if the association between loneliness and psychological maladjustment in adults was moderated or buffered by different levels of positive life events. Consistent with our hypothesis that the association between loneliness and maladjustment would be weaker for adults experiencing a high versus a low number of positive life events, we found consistent support for a loneliness \times positive life events interaction in predicting all three of the psychological maladjustment outcomes examined in the present study. Specifically, our findings indicated that the positive associations of loneliness with depression, hopelessness, and suicidal behaviors were the strongest among adults who experienced a low number of positive life events, whereas these associations were the weakest among adults who experienced a high number of positive life events. Indeed, an examination of these interactions point to one common conclusion, namely, that even among lonely adults, those who reported a high number of positive life events were less maladjusted or happier than their counterparts who experienced a low number of positive life events.

These findings also provide some potential implications for practice. For example, in working with lonely individuals at risk for psychological maladjustment (see, Masi, Chen, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2011, for a review), collaborating with them to also recognize, value, and/or seek greater positive life experiences may in turn provide sufficient protection

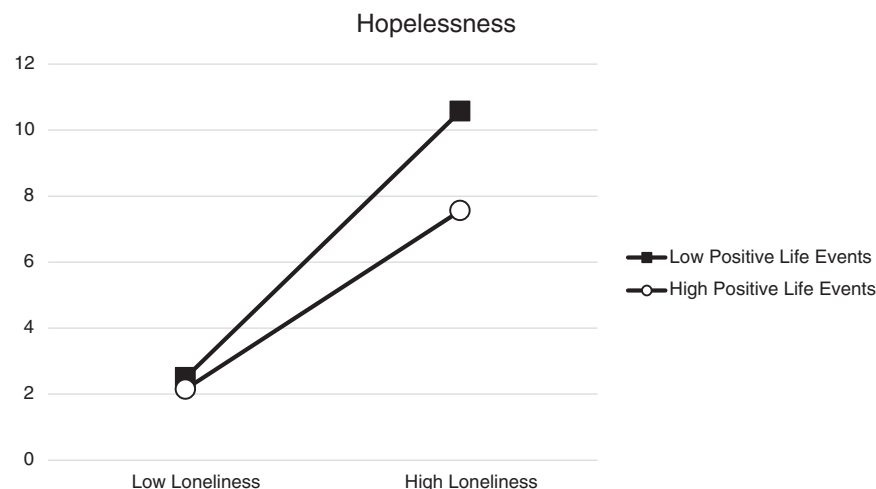


Fig. 2. Loneliness and hopelessness among adults experiencing low vs. high positive life events.



Fig. 3. Loneliness and suicidal behaviors among adults experiencing low vs. high positive life events.

in slowing down or arresting the downward spiral to greater experiences of depression, hopelessness, or suicidal behaviors. Yet, while it may not be easy to help a client simply generate more positive life experiences (especially life experiences that may be outside of one's control; e.g., becoming famous, winning the lottery), at least two strategies may prove to be effective when working with lonely clients. First, it may be helpful for some lonely clients to learn how to recognize and relish even "small" positive life events or uplifts in their everyday lives (e.g., completing a task, visiting someone; Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). Alternatively, in the absence of being exposed to greater positive life events, it may be helpful for some lonely clients to learn how to visualize themselves experiencing important and meaningful positive life events in their future (Sargalska et al., 2011).

6. Limitations

Despite the important findings of the present study, some limitations are worth noting. First, our sample was predominantly European American. Accordingly, it would be important to examine the generalizability of the present findings in more diverse racial/ethnic groups. In addition to racial/ethnic differences, it would be interesting to determine if there may be important differences in findings across other important demographic variables (e.g., age, socioeconomic status, marital status, etc.). Second, although we found positive life events was an important buffer of the positive association between loneliness and psychological maladjustment, it would be interesting to see if positive life events also buffers any dysfunctional association that might be present between loneliness and poor physical health in adults. Third, and relatedly, it would be important in future research to determine if there are specific kinds of positive life events that matter most (e.g., personal vs. interpersonal positive life events). Fourth, although the present study focused on predicting psychological maladjustment, broadly defined, in a college student population, it would be interesting to determine the specificity of loneliness and positive life events as predictors of specific symptoms or conditions (e.g., depressed mood vs. suicidal ideation) in selective populations (e.g., clinically depressed adults). Last, given the cross-sectional nature of the present study, it would be useful to build on the present findings to examine how loneliness and positive life events in college students may interact to predict changes in psychological maladjustment across time.

7. Concluding thoughts

In the present study, we examined the role of loneliness and positive life events as predictors of psychological maladjustment. Findings from

our study indicated two ways in which positive life events may play an important role in predicting maladjustment. First, beyond loneliness, positive life events uniquely add to the prediction of maladjustment. Second, positive life events buffer the positive association between loneliness and psychological maladjustment. Overall, our findings not only highlight the value of positive life events as an important variable in understanding psychological maladjustment in adults, but they go further to indicate how positive life events works in specific ways to account for psychological maladjustment in addition to, and in interaction with, loneliness.

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