

Why are University Students so Depressed? Distinguishing the Role of Psychological Needs and Affect on Depressive Symptoms

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Introduction

- Mental illness among university students has risen significantly over the past few decades (Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss, & Vanderford, 2018; Storrie, Ahern, & Tuckett, 2010).
- Previous research has shown that both negative mood states and frustration of fundamental psychological needs contribute to depressive symptoms (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013; Watson, Clark, & Carey, 1988).
- Increased negative affect and decreased positive affect are linked to experiencing symptoms of depression (Watson et al., 1988).



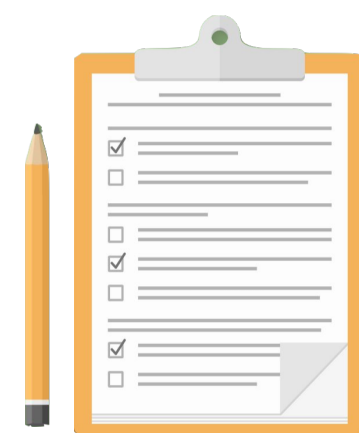
- Frustration of one's basic psychological needs (competence, relatedness, and autonomy) is related to ill-being and an increased likelihood of suffering from depressive symptoms (Ryan & Deci, 2017).
- The present study aims to differentiate the relative contribution of affective factors and psychological needs on depressive symptoms.

Hypotheses

1. Need frustration is associated with end of year depressive symptoms
2. Negative affect predicts end of year depressive symptoms
3. Positive affect negatively predicts end of year depressive symptoms

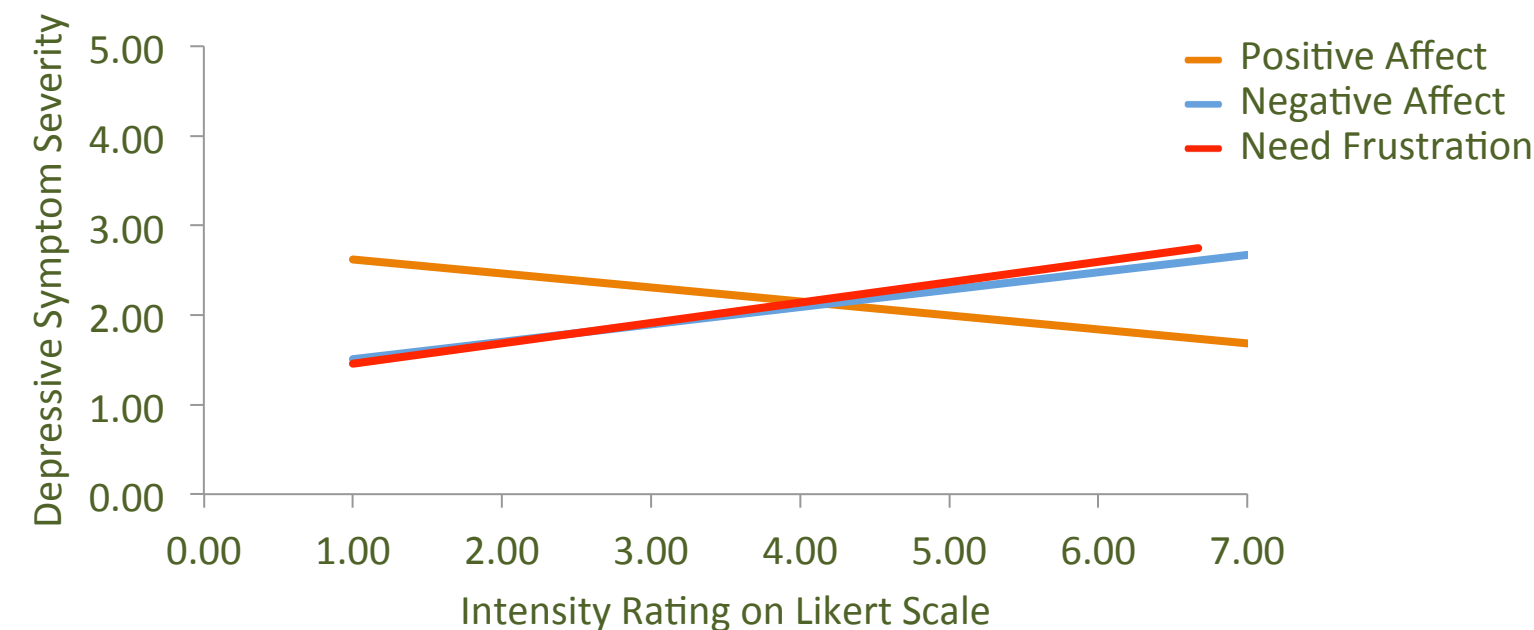
Method

- The 379 participants ($M_{age} = 20.44$, $SD_{age} = 3.19$), who attended a large Canadian public university, completed a series of online surveys administered through Qualtrics at 6 time points during the 2018-2019 academic year.
- The surveys assessed psychological need frustration (BMPN), affect (The Emmons 9-item emotion scale), and depressive symptoms (CESD-R 10).
- Analysis: hierarchical linear regression, controlling for baseline and mid-year depressive symptoms.

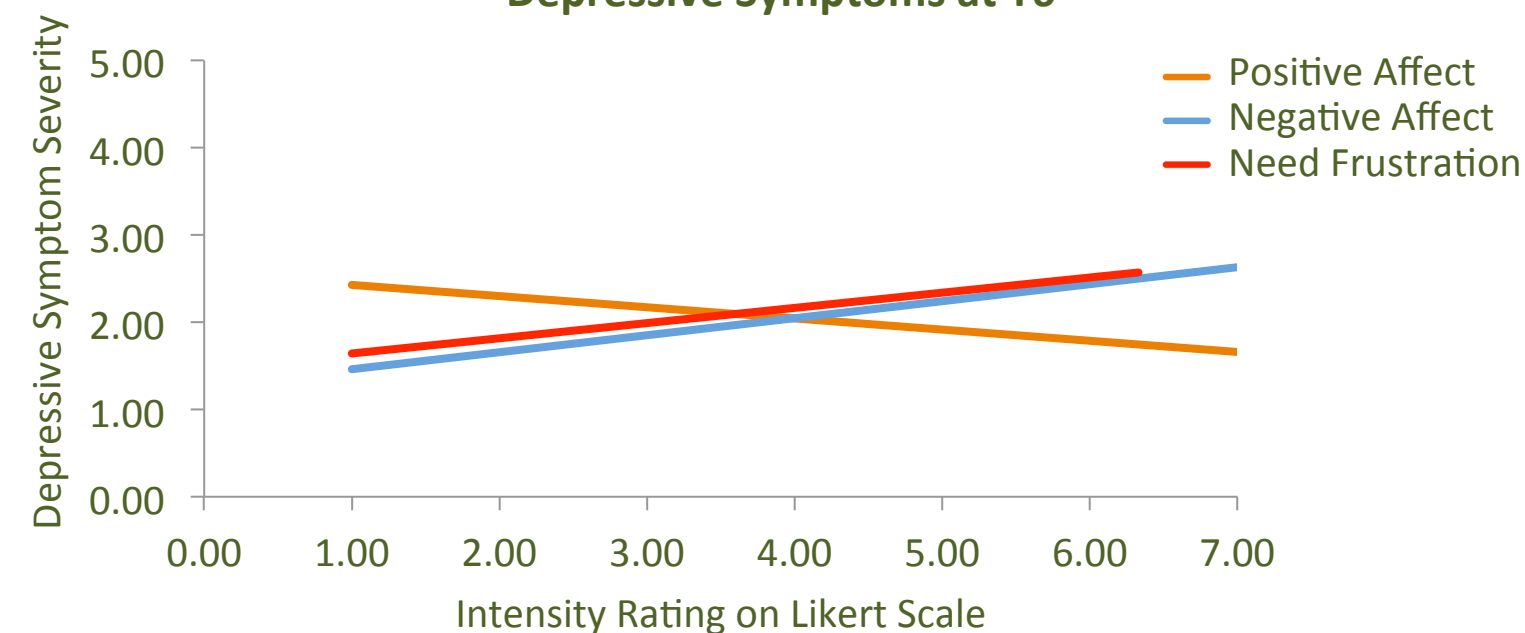


Results

Positive Affect, Negative Affect, and Need Frustration at T2 vs. Depressive Symptoms at T6



Positive Affect, Negative Affect, and Need Frustration at T3 vs. Depressive Symptoms at T6



- Baseline and mid-year depressive symptoms were associated with and accounted for 24% variance in end of year depressive symptoms ($F(2, 284) = 44.75$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .240$).
- Adding affect and need frustration to the model explained an additional 4.2% of the variance in end of year depressive symptoms ($F(5, 281) = 22.06$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .282$).
- Time 3 need frustration and affect explained an additional 2.2% of the variance in end of year depressive symptoms ($F(8, 278) = 15.16$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .304$).
- Time 2 and Time 3 positive and negative affect were not significant predictors of end of year depressive symptoms.
- Time 3 need frustration was significantly associated with more end of year depressive symptoms.

Discussion

- Although it is surprising that affect does not contribute to depressive symptoms, this finding enhances the notion that need frustration and affect are distinct factors, rather than two variables measuring the same construct.
- Perhaps affective changes associated with depressive symptoms are actually the result of need frustration, which is why previous studies have shown affect to predict depressive symptoms (Gunnell, Crocker, Wilson, Mack, & Zumbo, 2013).
- To evaluate if need thwarting universally contributes to the mental health crisis, future research could assess a larger and more varied sample of students
- If need frustration is caught in its early stages, students could seek out need satisfying situations to avoid the onset of depressive symptoms.

