

When the going gets tough, do the passionate get going?

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ABSTRACT

People can be highly motivated to engage in certain meaningful activities in their lives. Vallerand and colleagues (2003) proposed that this form of intense motivation, or passion, comes in two varieties: Harmonious passion involves a balanced, autonomous relationship with an activity, while obsessive passion involves a more rigid, uncontrollable urge to engage in an activity. This article reviews research that has examined how passionate individuals cope when facing obstacles and challenges while pursuing their passions. Studies examining the coping responses of passionate dancers, volleyball players, and hockey fans have linked harmonious passion with problem- or task-oriented forms of coping, and obsessive passion with more avoidant forms of coping. Passionate individuals can encounter challenges while pursuing their passions, and the ways in which these individuals cope and self-regulate in response to these demands is related to whether a passion is more harmonious or obsessive.

RÉSUMÉ

Il arrive que les gens soient très motivés à s'adonner à certaines activités. Vallerand et collègues (2003) suggèrent que cette forme d'intense motivation, cette passion, existe sous deux formes : la passion harmonieuse, qui caractérise la relation équilibrée et autonome que les gens peuvent avoir avec une activité, et la passion obsessive, que l'on associe d'emblée au besoin rigide et incontrôlable de faire une activité. Cet article examine une recherche qui s'est penchée sur la façon dont les personnes passionnées composent avec les obstacles et les défis qui se présentent à eux lorsqu'elles tentent de faire les choses qui les passionnent. Les études qui ont examiné les réactions des personnes passionnées qui font face à un problème — des danseurs, des joueurs de volley-ball et des adeptes du hockey — ont établi un lien entre, d'une part, la passion harmonieuse et les réactions axées sur le problème ou les

tâches à accomplir pour le régler et, d'autre part, la passion obsessive et les réactions davantage axées sur certaines formes de fuite. Dans la poursuite des passions, les façons de composer avec les problèmes et de s'adapter à de nouvelles demandes sont fonction du caractère harmonieux ou obsessif de la passion.



Student members of the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) are often driven by their passion for psychology. This passion motivates us to engage in all the academic activities that are required to prepare ourselves for careers in psychology. However, passionate psychologists in training are also well versed in the challenges and obstacles that are encountered while engaging in academic pursuits: There are exams, deadlines, presentations, and $p > .05$. We can cope with these challenges and demands in different ways, and research has identified that coping in these types of situations is influenced by person-related factors (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Recently, one such individual difference variable that has been linked with coping is the type of passion a person has for an activity.

Passionate Motivation

Passion as a psychological construct has been studied extensively in the context of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Berscheid, 2010; Sternberg, 1986). In 2003, Vallerand and colleagues published a seminal article that applied the concept of passion to a different context: intrapersonal goal pursuit. Rather than focus on the passion that people have for other people, their approach focused on the passion that people have for meaningful activities in their lives. They defined passion as “a strong inclination towards an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy” (Vallerand et al., 2003, p. 757). They also distinguished be-

tween two types of passion based on how an activity can be internalized into a person's identity. A *harmonious passion* emerges when a passionate activity has been internalized autonomously into one's identity, meaning that the activity is congruent with one's personal values and is performed without any contingencies attached to the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2002). With a harmonious passion, the activity is freely incorporated into one's identity and the individual engages in the activity without any pressure to do so. On the other hand, an *obsessive passion* emerges when the activity has been internalized in a controlled and less self-determined way, and is performed because of the external or internal contingencies that are connected with it. With obsessive passion, the individual feels pressured to engage in the activity, which can lead to conflict between the passion activity and other life domains (Vallerand, 2010; Vallerand et al., 2003). As outlined in the dualistic model of passion, personality and environmental factors that influence the internalization process will impact the development of both types of passion; factors that facilitate autonomous and controlled internalization will indirectly lead to the development of harmonious and obsessive passion, respectively (Vallerand, 2010). In general, research has revealed that harmonious passion is positively associated with adaptive outcomes such as positive emotions, while obsessive passion is unrelated to positive outcomes, and is at times associated with maladaptive outcomes such as aggression (Vallerand, 2008, 2010, 2012).

Passion and Coping

Passion types are linked with distinct goal pursuit strategies (Vallerand, 2010). This has led researchers to predict that harmonious and obsessive passions are uniquely related to distinct coping tendencies. Individuals with a predominantly harmonious passion tend to pursue goals by striving for mastery and attempting to reduce the discrepancy between actual and desired states (Vallerand et al., 2007). In demanding situations, this may mean that people with a harmonious passion are more likely to direct thoughts and behaviours towards coping with the problem or source of the stress in order to achieve their goals. Individuals with a predominantly obsessive passion are more likely to engage in goal pursuit with more ambivalence (Vallerand et al., 2007). While goal achievement has the potential to have a positive impact on self-esteem and life satisfaction, goal failure can have equally devastating outcomes (Mageau, Carpentier, & Vallerand, 2011). Therefore, people with an obsessive passion may be likely to ignore or draw themselves away from demanding situations, in order to avoid events that

threaten future goal attainment.

Research examining the relationship between passion types and coping has generally supported these hypotheses. In one of the first studies on this topic, Rip, Fortin, and Vallerand (2006) asked a group of passionate dance students how they cope when suffering from dance-related injuries. Results revealed that harmonious passion was positively related to more active, problem-focused strategies, such as information-seeking and consulting with a professor about the injury, and negatively related to avoidance forms of coping such as hiding or ignoring the injury. In addition, the stronger the harmonious passion, the more likely the dancers were to stop dancing to let their injuries heal. Obsessive passion, however, was positively associated with more avoidant forms of coping, such as ignoring the injury and taking less time off to treat the injury. This study revealed a pattern of coping behaviour in which harmoniously passionate individuals were more likely to acknowledge an environmental stressor and take steps to remedy the situation, while obsessively passionate individuals were more likely to ignore these challenges.

Schellenberg, Gaudreau, and Crocker (2013) examined the relationship between passion and coping by asking a group of collegiate-level volleyball players how they coped with training demands throughout the season. Results were consistent with the findings of Rip et al. (2006): Harmonious passion measured at the start of the season was positively associated with task-oriented coping (such as effort expenditure, seeking support, and thought control) at the end of the season, while obsessive passion was positively associated with disengagement-oriented coping (such as venting unpleasant emotions and disengaging from the source of stress). Moreover, task-oriented coping was associated with increases in goal attainment and decreases in burnout, while disengagement-oriented coping was associated with decreases in goal attainment and increases in burnout. Therefore, not only were harmonious and obsessive passion associated with different coping styles, but these coping styles also had an impact on changes in burnout and goal attainment over the course of the season.

Recent research by Schellenberg, Bailis, and Crocker (2013) examined the relationship between passion types and how individuals coped during the start of the 2012-2013 National Hockey League (NHL) season. At the start of this NHL season, there was a labour dispute between the NHL owners and the NHL Players' Association in which the owners "locked out" the players until both parties reached a new labour agreement. As a result, the start of the season was delayed over three months. The lockout presented a rare case in which passionate hockey

fans were unable to pursue their passion and were uncertain when or if the NHL season would resume. During the lockout, the researchers asked a group of passionate hockey fans from Winnipeg, Manitoba (a city that is well known for having many zealous hockey fans) to report how they coped with the ongoing lockout.

The extent to which the lockout was perceived as a distressing situation depended on whether one's passion for hockey was harmonious or obsessive (Schellenberg, Bailis, & Crocker, 2013). All forms of stress appraisals, including the extent to which the lockout was appraised as threatening, central to oneself, and stressful, were positively associated with obsessive passion but unrelated to harmonious passion. Obsessive passion was also positively correlated with a variety of coping strategies, including denial, behavioural disengagement, seeking emotional support, turning to religion, and using substances such as drugs and alcohol to cope. Harmonious passion showed relatively weak relationships with only a few coping behaviours. To distinguish further between the tendency to attend to or ignore stressors, the researchers asked the hockey fans to report how much they had been monitoring and avoiding information about the lockout that was being reported in local newspapers, on television, and on the internet. Harmonious passion was negatively associated with avoiding information and positively associated with monitoring lockout-related information. However, fans with high levels of obsessive passion were more likely to avoid and less likely to attend to these media reports.

Do Passionate Individuals Get Going?

People with a passion in life, such as many CPA student members, often encounter obstacles and challenges while pursuing their passions. Given the amount of time and energy they devote to their favourite activities, passionate individuals may be even more likely to encounter these obstacles compared to their non-passionate counterparts. But in situations when the going gets tough, do these passionate individuals get going? The research reviewed suggests that the answer depends on (a) whether a passion is more harmonious or obsessive, and (b) what we mean by the term *going*. Research has found that harmonious passion predicts problem- or task-oriented forms of coping. Therefore, individuals with high levels of harmonious passion often cope by going *towards* the problem and actively confront environmental demands. On the other hand, obsessive passion predicts more avoidant forms of coping; thus obsessive individuals tend to cope by going *away* from the problem and disengage from the demands. To

answer our question, both harmonious and obsessive individuals get going when the going gets tough – but they go in different directions.

To this point, I have focused on the ways passionate individuals cope with demands and setbacks related to a passion. However, the coping tendencies linked with harmonious and obsessive passion might follow an opposite pattern if, rather than focus on disengagement from demands, we focus on disengagement from *activities*. For example, Rip et al. (2006) found that obsessively passionate dancers were more likely to ignore an injury while harmoniously passionate dancers were more likely to take steps to treat an injury. This is a situation in which obsessive passion is associated with disengagement from a demand (the injury), while harmonious passion is linked with approach forms of coping. But many dancers will face chronic injuries throughout their careers, and will need to decide whether or not to end their careers because of these injuries. It is this choice of whether to persist in or disengage from an activity where harmonious passion, rather than obsessive passion, might be linked with disengagement. Harmonious passion is characterised by a flexible relationship with an activity (Vallerand, 2010). This might mean that harmonious individuals would be more willing or able to disengage from an activity entirely, particularly if persistence would come at a cost to one's physical well-being. Conversely, obsessive passion is linked with a tendency to rigidly persist in activities, even in situations when it may not be ideal to do so (Vallerand et al., 2003). Although obsessive passion is linked with disengagement from demands within an activity, obsessive passion may be associated with a tendency to remain engaged in the activity itself. In this scenario, we would predict that harmonious and obsessive individuals respond in different ways when the going gets tough. However, when the choice is to abandon the activity entirely, it may be the harmonious individuals who go away from the activity and the obsessive individuals who remain.

There are many opportunities for future research on the relationship between passion and the stress process. This research can adopt alternate research designs (e.g., daily process approach), explore additional coping outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction), and study moderators (e.g., perceived stress) and mediators (e.g., appraisals of threat and challenge) of the passion-coping relationship. Further research will allow for a greater understanding of how passionate individuals cope and self-regulate when the going gets tough. Fortunately, there are many passionate students willing to take on this challenge.

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