



# Examining the Impact of Distress Tolerance on Depression and Anxiety

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## Abstract

Distress tolerance (DT) can be defined as an individual difference in ability to withstand negative emotional, cognitive, and/or physical states (Bernstein & Brantz, 2012). DT has been identified as a contributing factor to the development and maintenance of many different forms of psychopathology including mood and anxiety disorders (Leyro et al., 2010). However, the relation of DT to depression and anxiety remains relatively unclear (Williams et al., 2013; Laposa et al., 2015). This study utilized an undergraduate sample to examine the moderating effects of DT and negative life events (NLE) on anxiety and depression. Results indicated that greater NLE was associated with greater anxiety and depression and that greater DT was associated with lower anxiety and depression. Further, results suggested that the effect of NLE on depression depended on level of DT. However, this was not the case for anxiety. The effect of NLE on anxiety did not depend on level of DT. Thus, adding a DT component to treatments for depression may help reduce depression by promoting the acceptance and tolerance of subjective distress (or NLE).

## Introduction

- Distress tolerance (DT) has been defined as an individual's ability to withstand negative emotional, cognitive, and/or physical states.
- DT has been associated with mood and anxiety disorders (Leyro et al., 2010). How DT specifically and differentially relates to depression and anxiety is not as clear in the research literature.
- Knowing how DT differentially relates to depression and anxiety will help to identify possible vulnerabilities for these types of distress as well as potential mechanisms of change, through DT, in depression and anxiety treatments.

## Method

### PARTICIPANTS

- $N = 122$  undergraduate from a larger study examining the temporal stability of DT.

### PROCEDURE

- Each participant spent one hour in the lab completing a series of questionnaires including:
  - Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS)
  - Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS)
  - Negative Life Events Questionnaire (NLE)
- Participants received research credit for completion of the study.
- Simultaneous multiple linear regression tested whether DT moderated the relation between NLE and depression/anxiety.

## Results

Figure 1. Moderation Models



Table 1. Multiple Linear Regression Results

	Depression	Anxiety
NLE	$pr = .16, p = .043^*$	$pr = .20, p = .018^*$
DT	$pr = -.41, p < .001^*$	$pr = -.35, p < .001^*$
NLE x DT	$pr = -.17, p = .014^*$	$pr = -.13, p = .076$

## Conclusions

- Greater NLE was associated with greater depression and anxiety.
- Greater DT was associated with lower depression and anxiety.
- The interaction between NLE and DT indicates that for depressive symptoms, those with low DT may be more reactive to NLE than those with high DT.
- DT may not significantly affect the relation between NLE and anxiety. However, further study of this issue is recommended.
- Adding a DT component to treatments for depression may help reduce depression by promoting the acceptance and tolerance of subjective distress (or NLE).

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