

# Emotional-Support Coping and Problem-Focused Coping: Explaining their Relative Benefits



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## Background

- Emotion-focused coping entails a broad range of strategies such as denial, focusing and venting of emotions, positive reinterpretation of events, and seeking out social support.
- Our research investigated one of these strategies. Emotional support coping, which is defined as actively seeking out friends or family for emotional support, expression, and discussion.
- Our research examined how communication of emotions, attention to emotions, and type of stressful situation moderate the effect of assigned coping strategy on mood.

## Purpose

- Discover how the ability to communicate emotions, to attend to emotions, and reported mood relate to the typical coping style of the participant.
- Identify how the assigned coping strategy as well as the type of stressor experienced affect the participant's mood.
- Determine how the participant's ability to communicate their emotions and to attend to their emotions explains differences in the mood of the participant.

## Method

### Participants

- 40 undergraduate students (17 male and 23 female) ranging in age from 18 to 35.
- Ethnicity of the participants represented the population of UW-Whitewater.
- All participants received extra credit.

### Dependant Measures

- *Mood*: Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)
- *Attention to Emotions*: Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20)
- *Communication of Emotions*: Ambivalence Over Emotional Expressiveness Questionnaire (AEQ)
- *Coping Strategy*: COPE Inventory

### Procedure

- Participants signed up in their classes to attend two separate sessions a week.
- Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions – Problem-Focused Coping or Emotional-Support Coping.
- Participants in both conditions were asked to identify a current stressful situation and were instructed to establish plans to cope with that stressful situation using their assigned coping strategy.
- Both groups responded to questionnaires regarding their mood and their ability to communicate their emotions.
- Participants were encouraged to follow through on the coping plans that they had made for the following week.
- One week later, participants were asked to respond to questions regarding their mood, their ability to attend to their emotions, and their coping style.

## Analyses

- Bivariate correlations were conducted to describe the relationship between dependent measures.
- A Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance was used to determine differences in mood by stressor type and experimental condition.
- Linear regression analysis was used to explain the relative contribution of attention to emotions and communication of emotion to the prediction of mood.

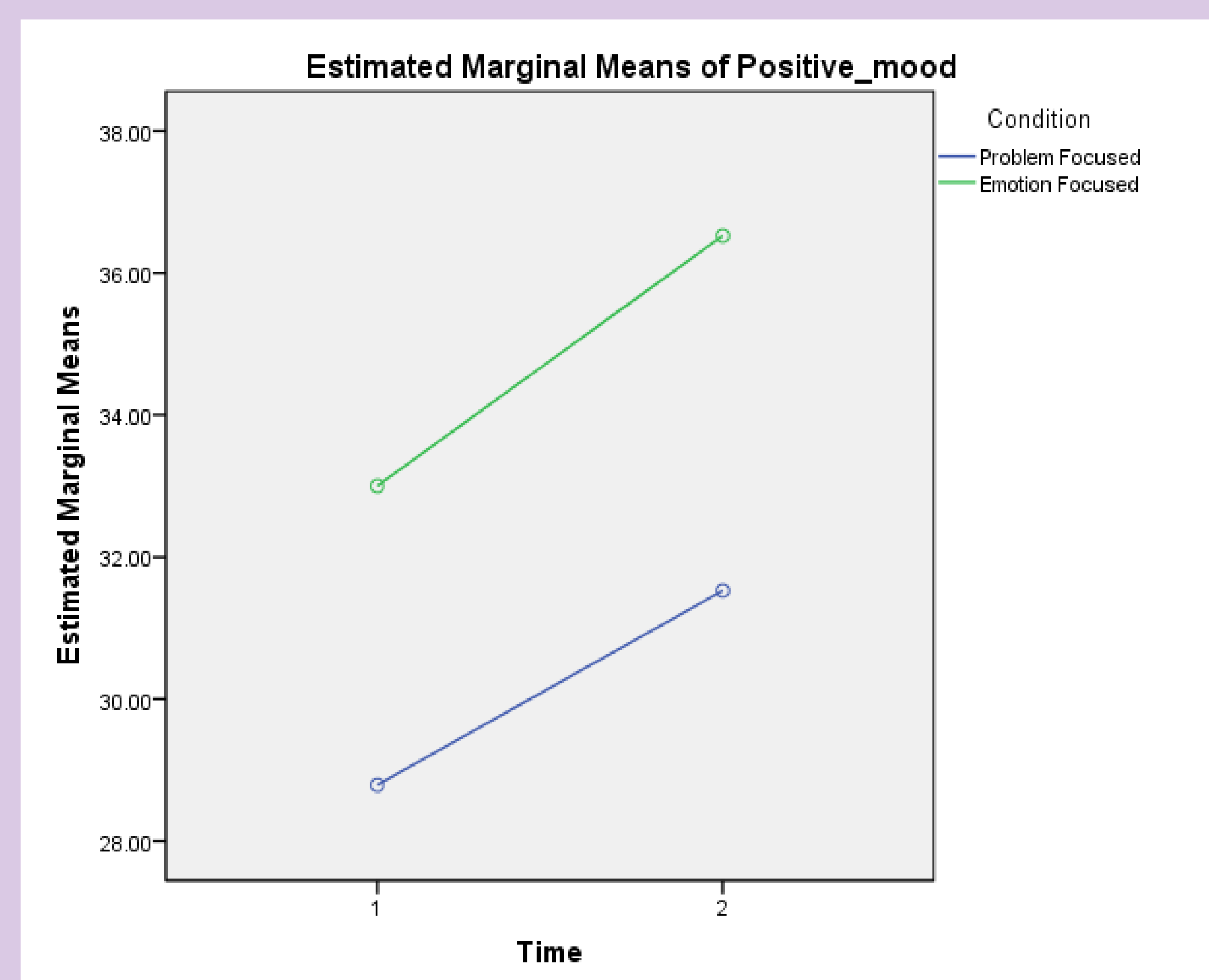
## Results

### Characteristics Related to Typical Coping Style

- Individuals reporting a higher degree of problem-focused coping also reported a higher degree of positive affect at both time one and time two ( $r = .368$ ;  $p < .05$ ;  $r = .336$ ;  $p < .05$ ).
- Individuals reporting a higher degree of problem-focused coping also reported a higher degree of difficulty expressing emotions ( $r = .401$ ;  $p < .05$ ).
- Individuals reporting a higher degree of emotional-support coping also reported a lower degree of externally oriented thinking (higher degree of attention to emotions) ( $r = .333$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

### Effect of Assigned Coping Strategy and Stressor Type on Mood

- Significant main effects for condition ( $F(1,38) = 7.217$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and time ( $F(1,38) = 9.899$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were found for reported mood. However, the interaction between the two was not significant ( $F(1,38) = 0.156$ ,  $p = .695$ ).



- A significant main effect for stressor type was not found on reported mood ( $F(1,38) = .966$ ;  $p = .332$ ).

### Describing the Relative Contribution of Attention to Emotions and Clarity of Communication to Mood

- A significant regression equation was found ( $F(2,37) = 4.364$ ;  $p < .05$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .191 indicating that attention to emotion and clarity of communication explain reported mood at time two.

## Characteristics Related to Reported Mood

- Individuals reporting a lower degree of externally oriented thinking (higher degree of attention to emotion) reported a higher degree of positive emotion at both time one and time two ( $r = -.435$ ;  $p < .01$ ;  $r = -.436$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

### Typical Coping Strategy

- People who generally use problem-focused coping tend to have a higher positive mood.
- Individuals who have difficulty expressing emotions are inclined to use problem-focused coping versus emotional support coping.
- Persons who pay high attention to their emotions are apt to use emotional-support coping

### Assigned Coping Strategy

- Prior to random assignment, individuals in the emotional-support coping condition reported a higher positive mood and both groups increased in positive mood equally from time one to time two.
- The increase in positive mood from time one to time two reported by participants assigned to either condition may have been due to their expectations of change or due to their active planning to use the assigned strategy.
- The type of stressful event the participant experienced had no effect on mood.

### Individual Differences and Mood

- Persons who pay more attention to their emotions and value paying attention to their emotions have a higher positive mood.

## Limitations

- The small sample size of the experiment limited the power of the findings.
- The groups initially were not normally distributed with regard to mood in spite of random assignment.
- Researchers had no control as to whether participants followed through on the coping plans that they had made.
- The results had limited generalization to the population because the population studied was entirely college students.

## Future Research

- Researchers can improve internal validity by training participants to use either emotional-support coping or problem-focused coping in their natural environments.
- Replication of this study's findings would also be beneficial, especially considering the small sample size and the irregular initial distribution.
- Examination of problem-focused coping and emotional support coping with children, adolescents, or the elderly could greatly improve the generalizability of our findings.