Informational Properties of Anxiety and Sadness, and Displaced Coping

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Replicating Raghunathan and Pham (1999), results from two experiments confirm that while anxiety triggers a preference for options that are safer and provide a sense of control, sadness triggers a preference for options that are more rewarding and comforting. Results also indicate that these effects are driven by an affect-as-information process and are most pervasive when the source of anxiety or sadness is not salient. Finally, our results document a previously unrecognized phenomenon we term *displaced coping*, wherein affective states whose source is salient influence decisions that are seemingly—but not directly—related to the source of these affective states.

Research on how affect influences consumer behavior has historically focused on the contrast between "good" and "bad" moods, that is, on the differential influence of affective states that vary in valence (see Pham 2004 for a review). It is only recently that researchers began recognizing that affective states of the same valence may exert different influences on behavior (Lerner and Keltner 2000; Raghunathan and Pham 1999). In an early demonstration of this idea (Raghunathan and Pham 1999), subjects were placed in an anxious, sad, or neutral mood and given choices between pairs of gambles and pairs of jobs in which one option was high-risk/high-reward and the other was low-risk/low-reward. Although the choices were completely unrelated to the source of anxiety or sadness, anxious subjects preferred the low-risk/low-reward option, sad ones preferred the high-risk/high-reward option, and neutral mood subjects fell in between.

These widely cited results, along with other conceptually related findings (e.g., Lerner and Keltner 2000), have prompted numerous studies on the so-called beyond-valence effects of discrete affective states (e.g., Garg, Inman, and

Mittal 2005; Raghunathan and Corfman 2004; Tiedens and Linton 2001; Yi and Baumgartner 2004; Zeelenberg and Pieters 2004). However, as with most other beyond-valence studies, the Raghunathan and Pham (1999) studies were limited in two ways. First, the studies were somewhat ambiguous with respect to the process underlying their effects. Raghunathan and Pham (1999) speculated that the phenomenon was driven by an affect-as-information process (Schwarz and Clore 1996) whereby feelings of anxiety and sadness are interpreted as information regarding the choices one had to make. Although their findings were generally consistent with this interpretation, Raghunathan and Pham (1999) did not provide direct evidence that an affect-as-information process was indeed at work. Second, Raghunathan and Pham (1999) did not fully define the boundaries for their findings. It is obvious that affective states will influence decisions that are directly related to their source (e.g., an angry customer's decision to change the service provider), as has been documented in the coping literature (e.g., Luce 1998). Less obvious are the conditions under which feelings influence decisions not directly related to their source—as in Raghunathan and Pham (1999) and other beyond-valence studies.

In this article we report two experiments that extend the Raghunathan and Pham (1999)—and previous beyond-valence research—in two major directions. First, we report more direct evidence that the effects of anxiety and sadness are driven by an affect-as-information process. Second, we identify two determinants of when anxiety and sadness evoked in one life domain (e.g., at work) will influence decisions in another (e.g., at home). Doing so allows us to document a previously unrecognized phenomenon we call *displaced coping*, wherein affective states whose source is

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salient influence decisions that are seemingly—but not directly—related to the source of these states.

ANXIETY AND SADNESS AS INFORMATION

According to the affect-as-information framework, people make judgments and decisions by inspecting their feelings and interpreting what these feelings mean for the issue at hand (Schwarz 1990; Schwarz and Clore 1996). Most studies within this framework have focused on how people extract information from the valence of their feelings (Pham 2004). However, Raghunathan and Pham (1999) hypothesized that an affect-as-information mechanism is also used to extract information beyond sheer valence. They suggested that feelings of anxiety are interpreted as a signal that the environment is uncertain and uncontrollable and that feelings of sadness are interpreted as a signal that a source of reward (e.g., pleasure, comfort) has been lost. As a result, while anxiety steers preferences toward options that reduce risk and uncertainty, sadness steers preferences toward those that are more rewarding—and this even when the decision is unrelated to the source of anxiety or sadness. Although Raghunathan and Pham's (1999) results were consistent with this hypothesis, they did not provide direct evidence that an affect-as-information process was indeed at work.

The literature suggests a standard test for assessing whether a judgment is based on affect-as-information. If feelings influence a judgment because they are perceived to have informational value, they should logically cease to influence this judgment if the informational value of the feelings is somehow discredited (e.g., Schwarz and Clore 1983). In typical applications of this test, the informational value of feelings is discredited by making respondents attribute their feelings to a source that is clearly unrelated to the object to be evaluated (e.g., Gorn, Goldberg, and Basu 1993; Pham 1998). In experiment 1, we follow this strategy to document that the effects of anxiety and sadness on decisions are indeed driven by an affect-as-information process.

The idea that an affect-as-information process underlies the influence of anxiety and sadness, combined with the proposition that the information being conveyed relates to decision goals, yields an additional prediction. A fundamental aspect of goals is that they exist at different levels of abstraction or specificity (Miller, Galanter, and Pribram 1960). The goal of "living a healthy life" is more abstract (less specific) than the goal of "eating vegetables regularly," which is itself more abstract than the goal of "buying carrots for tonight." If states of anxiety or sadness do convey information that activate decision goals, the range of decisions that these goals will be applicable to—and therefore the range of decisions that these affective states will influence—should depend on the level of abstraction of the goals being activated. Abstract goals, being more broadly applicable, should influence a broader range of decisions than should concrete goals (e.g., Carver and Scheier 1998). We propose that the goals activated by states of anxiety and sadness will be more abstract when the source of these affective states is not salient than when it is salient and more concrete when the source of these affective states is salient than when it is not salient. This is because salience of the source should link the motivational implications of the affective state to its perceived source. As a result, states of anxiety or sadness whose source is salient should have more localized influences on decisions than comparable states whose source is not salient. Following this logic, in experiment 2, we test the prediction that when the source of anxiety or sadness is salient, these affective states will not influence decisions that are not directly related to the source of anxiety or sadness—unless these decisions have some domain resemblance to the source of anxiety or sadness.

EXPERIMENT 1: INFORMATIONAL PROPERTIES OF ANXIETY AND SADNESS

Subjects were 148 undergraduates who took part in a three-stage study. In the first stage, subjects were placed in an anxious, sad, or neutral mood using the same mood manipulation as in Raghunathan and Pham (1999). Because we used the same subject population as in their studies, we do not report further tests of this manipulation. The salience of the source of the affective state was manipulated in the second stage. In the high salience condition, subjects were asked to indicate which aspects of the scenario most attracted their attention. Content analysis of the responses confirmed that this instruction made the source of the affective state very salient. In the low-source-salience condition, subjects did not perform this task. In the ostensibly unrelated final stage, subjects were presented with two product choice tasks: one between two computer games and the other between two cars. One game, called "Hi Chimpee!" (henceforth "Chimpee"), was described as a game in which players have an opportunity to make friends with a nurturing and caring chimpanzee. The other, called "Master of the Universe" (henceforth "Master"), was portrayed as a game that makes players feel powerful and in control by bestowing upon them the "power to build an entire civilization." One of the cars, called XMR, was portrayed as a safe car (e.g., "comes with a computerized dynamic stability control antiskid system"). The other, called SLZ, was portrayed as a comfortable and luxurious car (e.g., "supremely smooth and silky riding sensation"). A pretest ($n = 93$) had shown that Master and XMR were perceived to offer greater control and safety ($M = 5.25$ and 5.98 on seven-point scales) compared to Chimpee and SLZ ($M = 2.28$ and 4.32; $F(1, 89) > 180$, $p < .001$), which were perceived to offer greater warmth and comfort ($M = 3.42$ and 6.07 on seven-point scales) than their counterparts ($M = 2.18$ and 4.11; $F(1, 89) > 40.00$, $p < .01$). After reading each pair of product descriptions, subjects indicated their relative preference on a seven-point scale ("I find [Chimpee/Master] more attractive"; "I find [SLZ/XMR] more attractive").

Results

Preference ratings for the games and cars were converted to a seven-point scale, where higher numbers indicated relative preference for the option offering greater warmth/comfort (Chimpee and SLZ) over that offering greater control/safety (Master and XMR). Results from a 3 (affect) × 2 (source-salience) × 2 (decision domain) mixed ANOVA, with preference for games and cars as a repeated factor, are depicted in figure 1.

This analysis revealed a main effect of affect ($F(2, 142) = 6.80$, $p < .01$). The predicted anxious $<$ neutral $<$ sadness preference ordering was obtained for both the games ($M = 2.81$, 3.28, and 3.71; $F(2, 142) = 2.46$, $p < .09$) and for the cars ($M = 3.64$, 4.28, and 4.59; $F(2, 142) = 4.63$, $p < .05$). Further, an affect × salience interaction emerged ($F(2, 142) = 8.21$, $p < .01$), indicating that the influence of affect on relative preference depended on whether the source was salient or not. Follow-up analyses revealed that the anxious $<$ neutral $<$ sadness ordering of relative preference was maintained only in the source not salient condition for both the computer games ($M = 2.20$, 3.44, and 4.33, respectively; $F(2, 142) = 8.79$, $p < .01$) and the cars ($M = 2.12$, 3.40, and 4.21, respectively; $F(2, 142) = 8.93$, $p < .01$) and not in the source salient conditions for either the games ($M = 3.42$, 3.12, and 3.08, respectively; $F < 1$) or the cars ($M = 3.04$, 3.36, and 3.16, respectively; $F < 1$).

Discussion

Results of experiment 1, apart from replicating Raghunathan and Pham's (1999) findings of differential influence of anxiety and sadness on decision making, provide evidence for affect-as-information interpretation of the phenomenon. As predicted, the distinct effects of anxiety and sadness were observed when the source of these affective states was not salient but not when the source was made salient. This finding illustrates that salience of the source of affective states is an important moderator of the influence of anxiety and sadness on decision making in unrelated domains. The finding also extends previous affect-as-information research by showing that the informativeness of feelings goes beyond valence to provide more nuanced signals.

EXPERIMENT 2: DISPLACED COPING

Experiment 1 showed that when the decision is totally unrelated to the source of the affective state, making this source salient removes the effects of anxiety and sadness. This is presumably because awareness of the source of feelings reduces the perceived diagnosticity of these feelings for decisions that are clearly unrelated to this source. Theoretically, however, relatedness between source of feelings and the object of a decision is a matter of degree, not a dichotomy. Although feelings of anxiety or sadness whose source is unambiguous were not found to influence decisions that are totally unrelated to their source, such feelings may
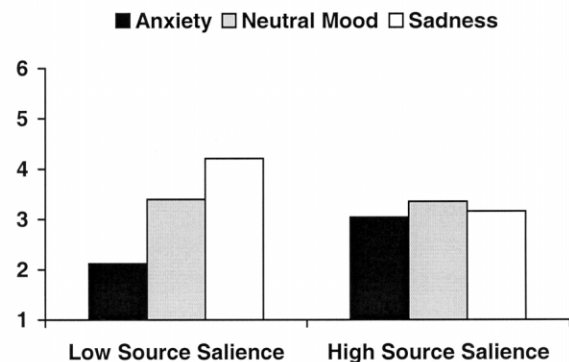
FIGURE 1

EXPERIMENT 1: MEAN PRODUCT PREFERENCE AS A FUNCTION OF AFFECTIVE STATE AND SOURCE SALIENCE

(A) Relative Preference for the More Comforting Computer Game
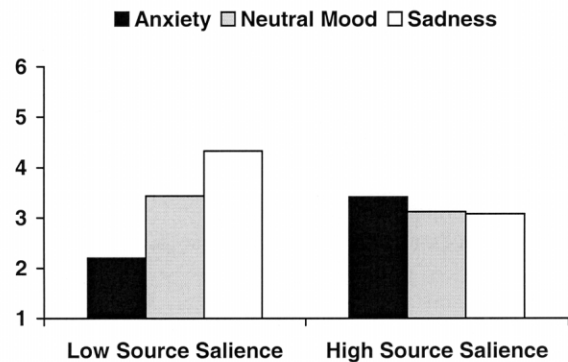
(B) Relative Preference for the More Comfortable and Luxurious Car

still influence decisions that are seemingly related to this source. This is because the more specific goals that are activated by feelings of anxiety or sadness when their source is unambiguous may still be perceived to be applicable if there is some domain resemblance between the source of the affect and the decision. We refer to this phenomenon as *displaced coping*. It is akin to coping in the sense that the affective state motivates a decision or behavior that seems to address the source of this affective state (Lazarus and Folkman 1984); however, it is different from standard coping because the decision/behavior takes place in a domain that is only somewhat but not completely related to the source of the feelings.

Method

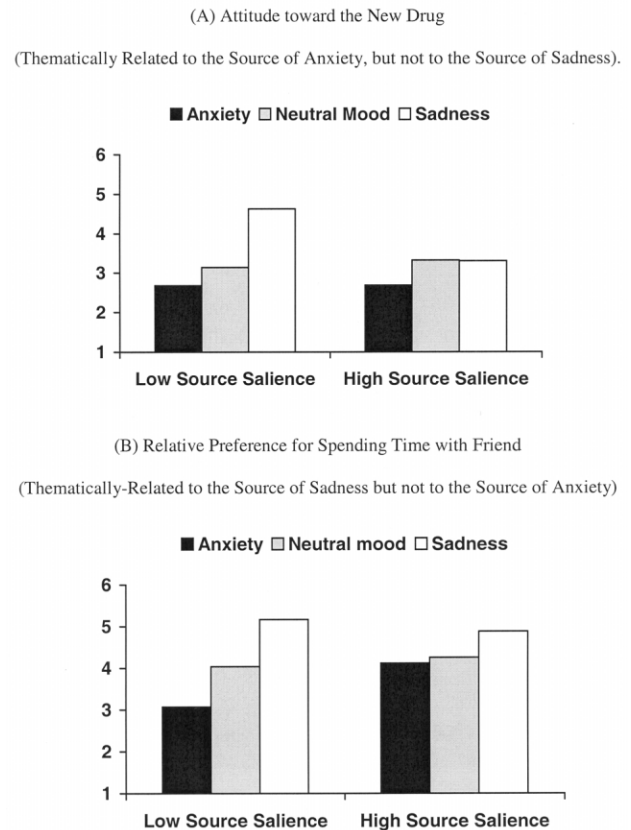Subjects were 164 undergraduates randomly assigned to the conditions of a 3 (affective state) × 2 (source

salience) × 2 (decision domain) mixed design. Similar to experiment 1, the procedure consisted of three stages. In the first stage, subjects were placed in an anxious, sad, or neutral mood using the same manipulations used by Raghunathan and Pham (1999). In the second stage, salience of the source of the affective states was manipulated as in experiment 1. In the third stage, subjects were given two different decisions whose order was counterbalanced. One of the decisions, which involved trying a new drug, was designed to have some domain resemblance to the anxiety manipulation scenario but not to the sadness manipulation scenario. The other decision, which involved prioritizing time between spending time with a friend and studying, was designed to have some domain resemblance to the sadness manipulation scenario but not to the anxiety manipulation scenario. For the new-drug decision, subjects were told that a reputable pharmaceutical company had recently introduced a drug that could, in a matter of weeks, enhance physical attractiveness by raising one's muscle-to-body-fat ratio. The drug, however, was reported to cause irregular heartbeats in some people, thus posing a minor health risk. Subjects were asked to indicate their attitude toward the new drug on a one ("very unattractive") to seven ("very attractive") scale. For the prioritizing-time decision, subjects were asked to imagine that their best friend, who was visiting from out of town, wanted to go out that evening but that the subject had an exam the next day with limited time left to prepare for it. Subjects were asked to indicate how they would prefer to spend the evening on a one ("all the time studying") to seven ("all the time with friend") scale. A pretest ($n = 23$) had shown that the decision about trying the new drug was perceived to be more related to the anxiety scenario ($M = 3.38$ on a seven-point scale) than to the sadness scenario ($M = 1.83$; $F(1, 20) = 6.67$, $p < .05$), whereas the decision about spending time with the friend was perceived to be more related to the sadness scenario ($M = 3.37$ on a seven-point scale) than to the anxiety scenario ($M = 1.52$; $F(1, 20) = 9.54$, $p < .01$). Note that even when the new-drug decision was paired with the anxiety scenario and when the time-with-friend decision was paired with the sadness scenario, perceived relatedness was moderate at best. Therefore, the situation here is different from that in traditional problem-focused coping where the decision context and source of feelings are linked directly (Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

Results

The overall experiment can be seen as consisting of two subexperiments, one for each decision. Results from separate 3 (affect) × 2 (source-salience) ANOVAs—one for each decision—are depicted in figure 2. It was predicted that under low source salience, attitude toward the new drug and preference for spending time with the friend would be most favorable among sad subjects, least favorable among anxious subjects, and intermediate among neutral mood subjects. Thus, in the low salience condition, attitudes were expected to exhibit the same anxious < neutral < sad pattern as observed in experiment 1. However, part of this trend

FIGURE 2

EXPERIMENT 2: MEAN ATTITUDE AND PREFERENCE AS A FUNCTION OF AFFECTIVE STATE AND SOURCE SALIENCE

(A) Attitude toward the New Drug

(Thematically Related to the Source of Anxiety, but not to the Source of Sadness).

(B) Relative Preference for Spending Time with Friend

(Thematically-Related to the Source of Sadness but not to the Source of Anxiety)

was expected to be broken under high source salience. For the new-drug decision, which bore some domain resemblance to the source of anxiety but not to the source of sadness, we expected anxious—but not sad—subjects to continue to be influenced by their anxiety even when its source was made salient. Thus, attitude toward the new drug was expected to exhibit an anxious < neutral = sad pattern in this condition. For the prioritizing time decision, which bore some domain resemblance to the source of sadness but not to the source of anxiety, we expected sad—but not anxious—subjects to continue to be influenced by their feelings even when the source of their feelings was made salient. Thus, preferences were expected to exhibit an anxious = neutral < sad pattern in this condition.

New Drug Decision. A main effect of affect ($F(2, 159) = 8.52$, $p < .01$) indicated that as expected, attitudes toward the new drug were least favorable among anxious subjects ($M = 2.69$), most favorable among sad subjects ($M = 4.02$), and intermediate among neutral mood subjects ($M = 3.24$). More importantly, an affect × salience interaction ($F(2, 159) = 3.55$, $p < .05$) indicated that these effects were moderated by the salience of the

source. When the source of the affective state was not salient, attitudes toward the new drug exhibited the expected anxiety < neutral < sadness ordering (M = 2.68, 3.14, and 4.63, respectively; $F(2, 159)$ = 11.38, $p < .01$). However, when the salience of the source was high, attitude toward the drug no longer exhibited this straight ordering ($F(2, 159)$ = 1.29, $p > .30$) but instead showed the predicted elbow pattern (M = 2.69, 3.33, and 3.31, respectively). Planned contrasts indicated that, in the high-source-salience condition, attitude toward the drug did not differ between the sad and neutral subjects in the high salience condition ($F < 1$), but attitude toward the new drug was lower in the anxiety condition (M = 2.69) than in the pooled sadness and neutral conditions (M = 3.32), although this difference only approached marginal significance ($F(1, 159)$ = 2.57, one-tailed p = .06). Further analyses revealed that raising the salience of the source provoked a significant decrease in the attitude toward the drug among sad subjects ($M_{\text{low salience}}$ = 4.63, $M_{\text{high salience}}$ = 3.31; $F(1, 159)$ = 9.13, $p < .01$) but did not influence anxious subjects ($M_{\text{low salience}}$ = 2.68, $M_{\text{high salience}}$ = 2.69; $F < 1$).

Prioritizing Time Decision. A main effect of affect ($F(2, 159)$ = 12.96, $p < .001$) indicated that preference for spending time with the friend was lowest among anxious subjects (M = 3.57), highest among sad subjects (M = 5.04), and intermediate among those in a neutral mood (M = 4.15). As with the new-drug decision, this main effect was qualified by an affect × salience interaction ($F(2, 159)$ = 2.77, $p < .07$). The anxiety < neutral < sadness ordering was respected in the low-source-salience condition (M = 3.07, 4.04, and 5.17, respectively; $F(2, 159)$ = 14.44, $p < .01$) but not in the high-source-salience condition (M = 4.12, 4.26, and 4.88, respectively; $F(2, 159)$ = 1.97, $p > .15$). As predicted, in the high-source-salience condition, preference for spending time with the friend was significantly higher in the sad condition (M = 4.88) than in the pooled anxious and neutral conditions (M = 4.19; $F(1, 159)$ = 3.82, p = .05), which did not differ from one another, $F < 1$. Further, raising the salience of the source of the affective state provoked a significant increase of preference among anxious subjects ($M_{\text{low salience}}$ = 3.07, $M_{\text{high salience}}$ = 4.12; $F(1, 159)$ = 6.65, $p < .05$) while leaving the preference of sad subjects unchanged ($M_{\text{low salience}}$ = 5.17, $M_{\text{high salience}}$ = 4.88; $F < 1$).

Discussion

These results help clarify the boundary conditions for the influence of anxiety and sadness on decision making. When their source was not salient, these affective states influenced decisions even when the decisions seemed unrelated to the source. In contrast, when their source was salient, these states had more restricted influences: they influenced decisions that had some resemblance to their source but not the decision that did not. Specifically, anxious subjects tended to be risk-averse in the seemingly related new-drug

decision but not in the unrelated prioritizing-time decision. Sad subjects, on the other hand, were reward-seeking in the seemingly related prioritizing-time decision but not in the unrelated new-drug decision. These results demonstrate a previously unrecognized phenomenon we term *displaced coping*. Even if the true source of an affective state is known, anxiety and sadness can influence judgments and decisions that are not directly related to the source—provided that these judgment and decision tasks bear some domain resemblance to the source.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the original Raghunathan and Pham (1999) studies it was found that in choices between gambles and jobs that involved risk-reward trade-offs, states of anxiety stirred preferences toward the lower-risk (lower-reward) option, whereas states of sadness stirred preferences toward the higher-reward (higher-risk) option. In the present research, this phenomenon was replicated with four other types of decisions, suggesting that these effects are robust and generalizable. Across studies and decisions, anxiety consistently triggered a preference for options that were safer or enhanced one's sense of control, whereas sadness consistently triggered a preference for options that provided greater reward, comfort, or indulgence. These findings reinforce the emerging thesis that it is important to define affective states beyond their valence when studying their effects on behavior.

More importantly, this research provides more direct evidence that the effects of anxiety and sadness—and presumably other discrete affective states—on consumer decision making are driven by an affect-as-information process. Consistent with an affect-as-information interpretation, it was found that making the source of anxiety or sadness salient removed their effects on decisions that were totally unrelated to their source. This is presumably because once the source of anxiety or sadness was made salient, subjects realized that their feelings of anxiety or sadness were nondiagnostic with respect to the decisions they had to make. This contingency was most obvious in experiment 1, where both decisions were totally unrelated to the source of anxiety or sadness. It also emerged in experiment 2 in those instances where there was no apparent connection between the decision and the source of the affective state. This contingency supports an affect-as-information interpretation of the phenomenon and extends previous affect-as-information research by showing that feelings provide information beyond their valence. In addition, this finding illustrates an important boundary condition of the effects of anxiety and sadness; if the decision is totally unrelated to the source of the affect, these effects are more likely when this source is not salient.

Our results also suggest that states of anxiety or sadness can influence decisions that are not directly related to their source even when this source is salient. This may happen when there is some domain resemblance between the decision and the source of anxiety or sadness, as was observed in experiment 2. This finding highlights another boundary

condition of the effects of anxiety and sadness on consumer decision making. In addition, it refines our understanding of what makes feelings informative in judgment and decision making. As reflected by the distinction between "integral" and "incidental" affect (Bodenhausen 1993), in previous affect-as-information research, feelings were seen as having their source either in the target itself (e.g., being excited by a new product) or in some irrelevant contextual factor (e.g., the weather). Our results suggest that the relatedness between the source of one's feelings and the object of a decision or judgment—what some have termed the "representativeness" of feelings (Pham 1998)—is a matter of degree, not a dichotomy. Building on Raghunathan and Pham's (1999) suggestion that distinct affective states such as anxiety or sadness convey information in the form of goals that are decision-relevant (see Pham 2004), we propose that the goals that are activated by these affective states are more abstract, and thus more broadly applicable, when the source of these affective states is not salient. When the source is salient, the goals are activated at a more specific level, which narrows down the set of decisions that the affective states will influence. Still, the set of decisions influenced need not be limited to those that are directly related to the source of the affective states as in problem-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). This set may also include decisions that bear only a surface domain resemblance to the source of the affective state, which is what we mean by displaced coping. Although the concept of displaced coping was originally conceptualized as a variant of problem-focused coping (Raghunathan 2000), it is possible that it can occur with the aim of addressing one's emotional state rather than the problem underlying it—an issue future research should address.

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