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The Relationship Between Self-Focus and Anxiety

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Researchers have linked self-focus with multiple psychological disorders and forms of maladaptive cognition, such as anxiety and depression. Throughout their lifetime, around 33% of U.S. adults suffer from an anxiety disorder, making it the most prevalent mental illness in the country. Anxiety symptoms often co-occur with depressive symptoms, therefore depression and anxiety are often consolidated together in research scenarios. Past studies have shown a positive correlation between negative self-focus and depressive symptoms. However, with anxiety prevalence on the rise, it is worthy of attention independent from depression. This study will look at the relationship between anxiety and negative self-focus. Previous research has shown that anxiety is correlated with higher reports of self-focus, and more severe levels of anxiety are related to negative self-focus specifically. The present study examines self-focused responses on a language task in relation to anxiety. Additionally, this study will consider whether depression mediates the relationship between anxiety and negative self-focus, which has yet to be analyzed in the literature. The Sentence Completion Task (SCT) is an open-ended language task that typically provides participants with beginnings of sentences, known as "stems", and participants then complete the sentences in ways that are meaningful to them. Responses to the SCT are coded for focus (e.g., self, other, both, or neither) and valence (positive, negative, or neutral). A sample of 188 college students were recruited to complete the SCT and the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI). This study predicted that (1) a positive correlation exists between anxiety symptoms and amount of self-focus, (2) negative self-focus is related to higher anxiety levels, and (3) there will be a strong correlation between anxiety and negative self-focus once depression is controlled for. Interestingly, our results showed that anxiety did not correlate with self-focus ($r(155) = .121, p = .130$) or negative self-focus ($r(155) = .071, p = .375$), which does not support findings from previous studies. Since the results from our first two hypotheses were not significant, we did not test the correlation between anxiety and negative self-focus while controlling for depression. This study discusses possible reasons behind the non-significant findings, and suggests that future research could evaluate if anxiety has a strong relationship with external-focused attention.