

BRIEF REPORT

Emotional Clarity in Daily Life Is Associated With Reduced Indecisiveness and Greater Goal Pursuit

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Affect-as-information theory posits that understanding of one's emotions (i.e., emotional clarity) can be leveraged to make decisions and attain goals. Furthermore, recent work has emphasized the dynamic nature of emotional clarity and its fluctuations in daily life. Therefore, we sought to test how momentary emotional clarity, experienced in everyday life, would be associated with levels of indecisiveness and goal pursuit. Following affect-as-information, we hypothesized that emotional clarity would be associated with lower indecisiveness but greater goal pursuit. We also hypothesized that indecisiveness would be associated with less goal pursuit with momentary emotional clarity being a potential moderator of this association. Adults ($N = 215$, $M_{\text{age}} = 44.3$) experiencing a range of depression, a disorder characterized by indecisiveness, completed a self-report measure of indecisiveness and 2 weeks of experience sampling assessing momentary emotional clarity, goal pursuit, and negative affect. Momentary emotional clarity showed robust links to lower indecisiveness and greater goal pursuit that were not accounted for by negative affect. We did not observe a link between indecisiveness and goal pursuit. Emotional clarity appears to play a role in motivational and cognitive processes that unfold in daily life.

Keywords: emotional clarity, goals, decision making, indecisiveness, experience sampling

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Emotional clarity is the ability to identify and describe one's feelings (Gohm & Clore, 2000) and fluctuates in daily life (Thompson & Boden, 2019). Higher emotional clarity (primarily at the trait level) has been linked to important well-being outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction; Eckland & Berenbaum, 2023; Lischetzke et al., 2012) and lower levels of emotional clarity to poorer mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety; Boden & Thompson, 2015; Eckland & Berenbaum, 2021), illustrating a critical role in psychological health. In contrast, processes that may mediate links between emotional clarity and psychological health outcomes have received much less attention. Several theoretical approaches (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Clore et al., 2013; Larsen, 2000) suggest that emotional clarity may be relevant to decision making and goal pursuit, but empirical tests of these assertions are scarce. The

pursuit and attainment of goals in everyday life contributes to a fulfilling life (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), which may be facilitated by emotional clarity and hindered by difficulty in making decisions (i.e., indecisiveness). Therefore, the present study leverages experience sampling methodology (ESM) to examine associations between emotional clarity, indecisiveness, and goal pursuit.

Goals are internal representations of desired states and motivate behavior (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Carver and Scheier (1990) described emotions as tools for judging discrepancies between one's desired state (i.e., their goal) and their current state (i.e., a measure of goal progress). The affect-as-information approach (e.g., Clore et al., 2013) further posits to the extent one understands their emotions; information can be leveraged to make decisions and meet goals. Having a better understanding of one's goals and needs

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is thought to facilitate having those goals and needs met (Emmons, 1986). These theoretical approaches suggest that emotional clarity, which varies across moments, should facilitate goal pursuit in daily life.

Research has also yet to examine the associations between emotional clarity and indecisiveness, despite affect-as-information theory suggesting the importance of understanding one's emotions in effective decision making. Though most have trouble making decisions at some points in their lives (i.e., moments of indecision), people who are high in indecisiveness (a trait involving a generalized difficulty making decisions independent of decision content; Appel et al., 2021) may experience decision-making difficulty that disrupts functioning (e.g., disturbances in activities of daily life, occupation, relationships). Indecisiveness is a symptom of major depressive disorder, which has been characterized by diminished emotional clarity (Thompson et al., 2015). A link between diminished emotional clarity and indecisiveness would help explain how deficits in emotional clarity contribute to depressive symptomology.

Last, indecisiveness may disrupt functioning through disturbances in goal pursuit. Those who are more indecisive may have trouble working toward and attaining goals due to uncertainty about how to pursue their goals. Indeed, delaying decisions (a behavioral component of indecisiveness) has been linked to not completing tasks critical to one's goals despite the ability to meet those goals (Ferrari, 1994). Since emotional clarity is linked to a better understanding of one's needs (Dizén et al., 2005) and goals (Eckland & Berenbaum, 2023), moments of low emotional clarity may exacerbate confusion about decisions needed to successfully complete goals. Therefore, the final aim of the study was to examine whether the association between indecisiveness and goal pursuit changes in the context of fluctuating emotional clarity.

The present study tests three hypotheses using ESM in a large sample of adults recruited from the community with varying levels of depression. First, we hypothesized that indecisiveness would be associated with diminished momentary emotional clarity (Hypothesis 1). Next, we hypothesized that higher indecisiveness would be associated with a reduced likelihood of reporting goal pursuit, whereas higher momentary clarity would be associated with a greater likelihood of reporting goal pursuit (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we tested the hypothesis that in moments of higher emotional clarity, individuals would be more likely to pursue a goal despite their trait indecisiveness (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Transparency and Openness

Data and R analysis code can be found at <https://osf.io/wyjf6>. This study was not preregistered. The sample size was determined using an a priori power analysis for the parent project. This study uses multilevel models (linear mixed models and multilevel logistic regression) with $N = 215$ at Level 2 and over 10,000 observations at Level 1 (up to 70 per person). For linear mixed models, a Level 2 sample size of 100 produces unbiased regression coefficients and variance components with as few as five Level 1 observations (Maas & Hox, 2005). For multilevel logistic regression, a minimum sample size of 50 at both levels is recommended (Moineddin et al., 2007).

Participants and Procedure

A total of 215 adults participated in the present study, originally recruited for a large-scale project on emotion and depression. Participants were recruited via a medical school participant registry and ads posted at local businesses. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 77 years old ($M = 44.3$, $SD = 16.1$), and 66% were women and 34% were men. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 69.8% White, 19.5% Black, 2.8% Asian, 0.5% Native American, and 7.0% other/multiracial with 0.5% not reporting.

Individuals completed a phone screen and were scheduled for an in-person laboratory session and sent a hyperlink to self-report measures. At the laboratory session, the participants were administered the Structured Clinical Interview for *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition* (First et al., 2015). We recruited three groups, increasing the potential for variation in indecisiveness. If participants were in a current depressive episode ($n = 48$), were not currently in a depressive episode but had at least two fully remitted depressive episodes ($n = 80$), or were healthy controls (i.e., no history of mental health disorders; $n = 87$), they were eligible for participation. The sample of 215 did not include 22 participants (e.g., withdrew, experienced app problems).

Eligible participants completed additional self-report measures and an ESM tutorial during which experimenters helped participants install the Status/Post iOS app, developed by Christopher Metts, MD, on their own iPhones or a provided fourth-generation iPod Touch. This app allowed data to be collected offline. The day after the laboratory session, the 14-day sampling period began, during which participants were prompted to complete five surveys a day (i.e., 70 surveys). Surveys occurred randomly within five 3-hr windows each day ($M = 3$ hr, 0 min, 181 s apart; $SD = 1$ hr, 1 min, 35 s), with a 15-min window to start the survey. On average, participants completed 74.8% of surveys ($SD = 18.3$, range = 20%–99%). Participants were compensated for the lab session (\$12/hr) and ESM portion (\$40), receiving a bonus (\$10) for completing at least 80% of the ESM surveys. The study was approved by the Washington University in St. Louis Institutional Review Board (Nos. 201709046) and complied with American Psychological Association ethical standards in the treatment of participants.

Measures

Trait Indecisiveness

We assessed participants' tendency toward indecisiveness using the 15-item Indecisiveness Scale (Frost & Shows, 1993). Participants rated each statement (e.g., "I find it easy to make decisions" [reverse-scored]), using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Higher sum scores indicate higher indecisiveness. Internal consistency of the items was good in this sample ($\alpha = .89$, $\omega_{\text{total}} = .92$). Scores were moderately positively associated with the indecisiveness item of the Structured Clinical Interview for *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition* mood module, $r = .38$, $p < .001$.

ESM Measures

Emotional Clarity. To measure momentary clarity, participants were asked at each survey to rate the statement, "At the time

of the beep, I was clear about my feelings,” using a 5-point scale (0 = *not at all*, 4 = *a great deal*). This item had the highest factor loading on the Clarity of Feelings subscale of the Trait Meta Mood Scale (Salovey et al., 1995) with a modified stem for ESM assessments and has been used in other ESM studies (e.g., Thompson & Boden, 2019). Using multilevel modeling, momentary emotional clarity was positively associated with a 13-item measure of trait emotional clarity (Palmieri et al., 2009; $\beta = .02$, $SE = .005$, $p < .001$, semipartial $R^2 = .06$).

Goal Pursuit. At each survey, goal pursuit was measured with the question “Since the last beep, were you focused on completing a task or working towards achieving a goal?” with a binary (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) response option. This item appeared in a block of items on planning, goal pursuit, and behavioral flexibility designed to assess constructs relevant to Radically Open Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Lynch, 2018). Goal pursuit was endorsed for 43.3% of the completed surveys; the range across the three groups was 38% (current major depressive disorder) to 46% (remitted major depressive disorder).

Analytic Plan

We used multilevel modeling because ESM prompts were nested within persons. To test Hypothesis 1, we tested a model with Level 1 momentary emotional clarity as an outcome and grand mean-centered Level 2 indecisiveness as the predictor. We calculated a semipartial R^2 (Edwards et al., 2008) as a measure of effect size. To test Hypotheses 2 and 3, we conducted a series of generalized linear mixed effects regressions. Goal pursuit (a binary variable) was the outcome in each of these models. Therefore, we used binomial (link = logic) generalized linear mixed effects regression models and exponentiated the coefficients to produce odds ratios (ORs) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for each predictor. ORs below 1 (with a 95% CI upper limit below 1) can be interpreted as a decreased likelihood of pursuing a goal since the previous prompt. In contrast, an OR over 1 (with a 95% CI lower limit above 1) can be interpreted as an increased likelihood of pursuing a goal since the previous prompt. For each model we reported two standardized effect sizes (Nakagawa & Schielzeth, 2013): the marginal R^2 (i.e., the percent of variance in the outcome due to fixed effects) and conditional R^2 (i.e., the percent of

variance in the outcome due to fixed and random effects). Since goal pursuit was measured “since the last beep” and emotional clarity “at the time of the beep,” we tested emotional clarity at time t predicting goal pursuit at time $t + 1$. We provide tests of specificity and robustness in [Supplemental Materials](#).

Results

Descriptive statistics and between and within person correlations among variables are reported in [Table 1](#). We found support for Hypothesis 1: Trait indecisiveness was significantly negatively associated with momentary emotional clarity ($B = -.02$, $SE = .01$, $p = .02$, semipartial $R^2 = .03$). This effect held even when controlling for average levels of negative affect during the ESM period and was specific to emotional clarity, not attention to emotion (see [Supplemental Table S1](#)).

We found partial support for Hypothesis 2. Model 1 in [Table 2](#) shows that trait indecisiveness was not associated with the likelihood of goal pursuit in daily life, inconsistent with expectations. However, Model 2 in [Table 2](#) shows that, during prompts where emotional clarity was higher, there was an increased likelihood of pursuing a goal before the next prompt, consistent with expectations. Finally, regarding Hypothesis 3, Model 3 in [Table 2](#) shows no evidence for an interaction between trait indecisiveness and momentary emotional clarity in predicting goal pursuit, inconsistent with expectations. [Supplemental Table S2](#) shows tests of robustness and specificity, indicating that associations were not due to negative affect and were specific to emotional clarity, not attention to emotion.

Discussion

In line with theories, such as affect-as-information, we found evidence that emotional clarity in daily life is linked to goal pursuit and lower trait indecisiveness. Of note, these associations were robust (i.e., not better explained by negative affect) and specific to emotional clarity, not attention to emotion, a related facet of emotional awareness (Thompson & Boden, 2019).

Following affect-as-information theory (Clore et al., 2001), those struggling with decision making reported greater confusion about their feelings in daily life. This finding is consistent with research linking indecisiveness with less accurate interoceptive awareness

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Between- and Within-Person Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	ESM clarity	ESM attention	ESM goal pursuit	ESM NA	Indecisiveness
ESM clarity	—	.56	.04	.03	
ESM attention ^a	.71	—	.03	.10	
ESM goal pursuit	.19	.30	—	.01	
ESM NA ^a	-.04	.14	.01	—	
Indecisiveness	-.16	-.08	-.01	.29	—
Descriptive statistics					
<i>n</i>	10,913	10,913	10,913	10,906	215
<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	1.87 (1.29)	1.37 (1.27)	0.43 (0.50)	0.45 (0.57)	31.32 (8.79)
ICC	.40	.37	.21	.40	

Note. Within-person correlations are above the diagonal; between-person correlations are below the diagonal; correlations with indecisiveness are the Indecisiveness Scale (Level 2) with person means calculated from ESM variables; ESM clarity = Momentary Emotional Clarity (Level 1); ESM attention = Momentary Attention to Emotion (Level 1); ESM NA = average of momentary negative affect items (Level 1); the mean of goal pursuit represents the proportion of surveys where a goal was endorsed (i.e., goal pursuit endorsed/total surveys). ESM = experience sampling methodology; ICC = intraclass correlation.

^a Variable appears in supplemental tests of robustness and specificity; see [Supplemental Materials](#) for information about how variables were measured.

Table 2
Generalized Linear Mixed Effects Models Predicting Goal Pursuit

Model outcome and predictor	OR	[95% CI]	Marginal R^2	Conditional R^2
Model 1 outcome: goal pursuit			<.01	.32
Indecisiveness	.994	[.974, 1.014]		
Model 2 outcome: goal pursuit			<.01	.33
Momentary emotional clarity	1.052	[1.003, 1.103]		
Model 3 outcome: goal pursuit			<.01	.33
Indecisiveness	.995	[.975, 1.015]		
Momentary emotional clarity	1.046	[.997, 1.098]		
Indecisiveness × Emotional Clarity	.997	[.991, 1.002]		

Note. Indecisiveness = Level 2 grand mean-centered total score on the Indecisiveness Scale (Frost & Shows, 1993); Goal Pursuit: 0 = did not work toward the goal, 1 = worked toward the goal; bolded predictors are statistically significant. CI = confidence interval.

(Furman et al., 2013). Interoceptive awareness has been further linked to emotional clarity, such that people who tend to understand their bodily reactions also tend to understand their emotions (Ventura-Bort et al., 2021). Physiological reactions to stimuli in one's environment are also key to decision making (e.g., somatic marker hypothesis; Damasio, 1998). Since the present study tested trait levels of indecisiveness, future research should examine both emotional clarity and decision making contemporaneously in daily life. Questions, such as whether emotional clarity facilitates decision making when emotion is relevant (vs. irrelevant) to the decision, will help to clarify the boundary conditions of their links and refine the hypotheses made by models such as affect-as-information.

Contrary to our hypotheses, trait indecisiveness was not associated with diminished goal pursuit in daily life, and momentary emotional clarity did not moderate this relation. It is possible that the null association between indecisiveness and goal pursuit is related to the methodology we used to assess indecisiveness. We used a self-report measure of indecisiveness as this construct is typically viewed as a trait in the decision-making literature. In contrast, indecision, which is specific to a situation (Hallenbeck et al., 2022) and not measured in the present study, is more proximal to one's daily goals and may disrupt goal pursuit (e.g., making goals more confusing or the steps to completing one's goals less clear). Future work should test whether times of indecision disrupt goal pursuit in daily life and what mechanisms may explain the disruption (e.g., by diminished goal clarity, by directing effort or resources away from goals). It may also be worthwhile to zero in on which aspects of indecision (e.g., delaying decisions, perceiving decisions as difficulty) are most likely to interfere with goal pursuit.

As expected, we found that momentary emotional clarity was associated with greater goal pursuit in everyday life. However, more work is needed to fully characterize how emotional clarity may facilitate goals and the boundaries of that association. Future research should assess the characteristics of the goals reported in daily life (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Emmons, 1986). For example, momentary emotional clarity is higher following significant events (Thompson & Boden, 2019), possibly due to greater motivation to understand emotions when their source is important or salient. Momentary emotional clarity may be especially helpful when pursuing more significant goals (e.g., being well-prepared for a job interview) or goals emotional in nature (e.g., reducing anger during an argument with one's spouse) rather than all goals in general. Finally, it may be the case that emotional

clarity facilitates decision making about whether to pursue certain goals or to change how one is attempting to achieve a goal (e.g., Simon, 1967).

Limitations and Future Directions

Though theory suggests that emotional clarity would precede decision making and goal pursuit, experimental evidence is needed to make causal conclusions. Using ESM, emotional clarity, at prompt t , was used to predict goal pursuit between prompt t and $t + 1$, providing some evidence of temporal precedence, but these results are still correlational. Furthermore, the present study did not assess the types of goals being pursued. Thus, more work is needed to determine whether emotional clarity facilitates specific types of goal pursuit and whether the link between emotional clarity and well-being is in part mediated by goal attainment. Finally, though trait indecisiveness was linked to diminished emotional clarity in daily life, our results do not speak to whether emotional clarity enhances decision-making ability (either in-the-moment or trait decisiveness). Future work should experimentally manipulate emotional clarity to provide greater causal insights into its links with decision making and goal pursuit.

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