

# Cognitive strategies for controlling emotional contagion



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## Introduction

This essay will evaluate 'Cognitive strategies for controlling emotional contagion' by Daniel M. Rempala. Emotional contagion can be described as a set of processes that allow one to 'catch' an individual's emotion. It is "the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronise facial expressions, vocalisations, postures and movements with those of another person, and, consequently, to converge emotionally". (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1992, pp. 153-154). Insistent exposure to individuals feeling negative emotions can have a serious effect on one's mental health.

Rempala also takes a scientific point of view when considering the factors that produce emotional contagion. This is supported by the finding of "mirror neurons". These neurons give a neurological foundation for this phenomenon. Emotional contagion is commonly confused with empathy; however, empathy requires one to make a clear set of inferences so that one is able to understand what another individual is feeling. Furthermore, it is largely thought that emotional contagion is ingrained from a young age, whereas, empathy is developed at a later stage in life.

In the study, there are two implied assumptions; Firstly, "catching" emotions from others is advantageous and secondly, psychologists should dedicate themselves to increasing one's capability of feeling not only contagion, but also empathy. The study aims to provide a different interpretation; to be able to experience what one feels; particularly negative feelings and people would excel if they were able to avoid "catching" other people's feelings.

The objective of the study is to allow one to be unsusceptible to other

people's emotions. It aims to do this by challenging the efficacy of four of the cognitive strategies: reflection, control, dissociation and empathic imagery.

Rempala aimed to create a medium between reducing emotional contagion but not reducing engagement between a therapist and client. He achieved this by establishing a cognitive distance. This is due to acknowledging the severity of therapist burnout but not wanting to hinder the client-therapist relationship. Furthermore, he hypothesised that the strategy of empathic imagery would increase contagion over dissociation and reflection. However, the results showed dissociation lessening on both.

## Method

The study consisted of 152 undergraduate students, 49 of which were male and 103 females. They studied at the University of Hawaii and agreed to partake in exchange for course credit. The study uses a self-selecting sampling method. The average age of participants was 23. There was a diverse ethnic sample and many participants which makes the study more effective as it can be generalised to the wider population.

Participants watched two videotaped monologues and were told to reply like a therapist would with a client. The videotape showed clients displaying either positive or negative emotions. Participants were then told to utilise one of the cognitive strategies: dissociation, reflection, empathic imagery or no listening strategy (control), whilst watching the video. At the end of each videotape, participants were instructed to orally reply to the videotaped "client" and carry out affective evaluations based on themselves and the client. Participants were videotaped throughout in order to focus on their <https://assignbuster.com/cognitive-strategies-for-controlling-emotional-contagion/>

facial expressions and verbal answers. This took 30 minutes. However, it should be noted that being videotaped could have an impact on the way the participants acted therefore hindering the accuracy of the results.

Participants were fully debriefed before and after the experiment and given consent forms, therefore the study is ethically sound. Other unrelated questionnaires were provided between the videotapes to ensure the emotion from the previous clip had passed which is extremely effective as it not only provides more accurate results but also lowers the risk of extraneous variables affecting the results.

The Maximally Discriminative Facial Movement Coding System (MAX; Izard, 1985) was used to watch the clips of the videotaped participants. Computer specialists watched all three clips separately, so they would not see the same participant in continuous clips. They simply had to look for facial expressions of happiness or sadness and determine how long it lasted. Moreover, a consensus coding method was used to ensure that when there were disputes between two coders, they cooperatively identified the categorisation of a facial feature and noted how long it lasted.

## Results

The study predicted that empathic imagery would increase emotional contagion versus Hypothesis 1 while dissociation (hypothesis 2) and reflection (hypothesis 3) would decrease emotional contagion versus the control. The cognitive load hypothesis foretold that all listening conditions would lessen contagion. A pair of 4 x 2 x 2 ANOVAs were conducted to test the hypotheses. Instruction, participant, gender, and mood were used as

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independent variables. The dependant variables were facial affect contagion and self-reported contagion.

The ANOVA that was conducted on self-reported contagion showed that participants portrayed more contagion in the sad contagion as opposed to the happy condition. Dissociation was reported to be much lower than the control condition, but this still generally fit the specific effects hypotheses.

The ANOVA performed on the facial affect contagion variable showed that facial affect contagion was increased for the sad video clips in all the instruction conditions excluding dissociation, as it showed higher contagion in the happy clip. All experimental conditions were evidently lower than the control: Empathic imagery displayed the lowest contagion level. After this came dissociation and then reflection.

The special effects hypotheses prophesised that both empathic imagery and reflection conditions would create higher engagement versus the control. They also predicted that dissociation would cause engagement to lessen versus the control. 4 x 2 x 2 ANOVAs were carried out to test these hypotheses. The independent variables in this instance were instruction, gender and mood. The measures of engagement were empathy and genuineness.

The ANOVA that used empathy as the dependant measure showed that all experimental conditions were higher than the control. Nevertheless, the ANOVA displayed only a slight main effect for the instruction condition. Participants in the reflection, dissociation and empathic imagery conditions

showed a notably higher amount of empathy than those of the control condition.

The ANOVA that used genuineness showed that again, all experimental conditions were increased compared to the control. Due to this, a sole significant main effect was created for the instruction condition which then led to participants in the dissociation condition showing more genuineness than the control participants.

### Discussion

The findings of the study back up the notion that emotional regulation strategies can influence emotional contagion. Rempala predicted that Empathic imagery would increase contagion, but it decreased. A substantial result was that empathic imagery was higher than the control for the empathy measure. The dissociation condition was strikingly low on both measures than the control and it was predicted to decrease contagion and engagement. This was the one condition that gave manifestly higher scores for both measures. The reflection condition was expected to increase engagement and decrease contagion. Reflection was the only condition that followed the expectation.

From this, it is apparent that empathic imagery and reflection did not fluctuate a huge amount from the control. Equally, the facial affect contagion strategies all fit the cognitive load hypothesis, thus the concept that cognitive strategies disturb the natural procedure of emotional contagion that would generally happen is reinforced. To further strengthen this idea, similar results were found for the empathy measure.

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The dissociation strategy could also be a factor as participants generally had difficulty understanding it. Participants typically showed higher contagion, notably in the sad condition. Rempala did not foresee that gender would have no impact on the results.

The study has some limitations: Firstly, the study lacks ecological validity. This is because the environment in which the experiment took place did not resemble a therapy session. Evidently, the act of speaking to a computer monitor is not true to life, thus this cannot be applied to real life. Secondly, the sample was unrepresentative as the participants had no knowledge of clinical psychology, which according to (Sweller, 1994) would cause the cognitive load to increase. Rempala aimed to invoke negative emotion, but not too much as it can cause severe distress: Two participants had to be removed from the experiment because they found the video upsetting. They were given the right to withdraw therefore abiding by the British Psychological Society (BPS) guidelines. The study considers and addresses all these limitations.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the study does not coincide with the experimental hypothesis, but it does give support for the original hypotheses as many strategies proved to be successful in lessening some measures of contagion. Additionally, it offers a methodological basis for supplementary research on emotional contagion.

The method of the study is ethically sound as participants were debriefed, given the right to withdraw, their personal data was kept confidential, the <https://assignbuster.com/cognitive-strategies-for-controlling-emotional-contagion/>

participants consented and were offered a manipulation check. This emphasises that the study followed the BPS guidelines.

Overall, the study has some limitations, but the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The study makes some revolutionary discoveries on emotional contagion that could not have been predicted. In addition, there are various interventions put in place in an attempt to decrease extraneous variables.

### References

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