



## Winter 2017 Members

(L-R) Top: Dr. C. Purdon, K. Barber, B. Chiang, M. Xu, T. Hudd, N. Zabara, Dr. D. Moscovitch

(L-R) Bottom: O. Merritt, J. Taylor, J. Dupasquier, J. Szabo

# Anxiety Studies Division Annual Newsletter

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## New in the Anxiety Studies Division

In the seventh year of our operation, we are pleased to share the third edition of the Anxiety Studies Division (ASD) Newsletter. In this issue, you will be updated on our research division's recent findings, current studies, and newest publications.

Dr. Moscovitch and his students present their findings on the role of self-compassion and fear of positive evaluation in social anxiety. Dr. Purdon and her students are finishing data collection on several studies. Stay tuned for their findings on the nature and importance of doubt in OCD, factors explaining the persistence of compulsions, and on how threat cues in our environment capture and hold our attention, to be reported in the next newsletter.

Our work depends upon the generous donation of your time. We are sincerely grateful for your continued support! If you would like to suggest the ASD to a friend or family member, please invite them to call us at **519-888-4567 ext. 35920** or email us [anxiety@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:anxiety@uwaterloo.ca) - we always welcome new members of our research participant pool.

Please also follow us on our website ([www.uwaterloo.ca/anxiety-studies](http://www.uwaterloo.ca/anxiety-studies)) and Facebook page ([fb.me/AnxietyStudiesUWaterloo](https://fb.me/AnxietyStudiesUWaterloo)) to access treatment resources and keep up with the latest anxiety-related news!

# Research Findings

## Concerning Compliments? Fear of positive evaluation in social anxiety

By: Kevin C. Barber & David A. Moscovitch

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### What did we investigate?

Research tells us that socially anxious people tend to be excessively concerned with how they are being judged and viewed by others. They also have a tendency to judge their own social behaviours negatively and expect that others will evaluate them negatively as well. For example, a socially anxious individual may consider that a moment of physical awkwardness, such as a stutter or a pause in a conversation, is both immediately obvious and offensive to their interaction partner and evidence of their incompetence in a social situation. This fear of negative evaluation in social anxiety has been extensively supported. But could socially anxious individuals also fear positive evaluation? While it seems counter to conventional logic that positive social feedback, compliments and praise for example, lead to anxious distress instead of alleviating it, recent studies suggest that socially anxious individuals fear positive evaluation as significantly as they do negative evaluation. However, the vast majority of these studies are based on participants' pen-and-paper reports. Since we often predict we will react one way to a situation but in reality behave an entirely different way when actually faced with it, we aimed to investigate the existence and the role of positive and negative evaluation in a laboratory setting.

### What did we do?

We invited both high and low socially anxious undergraduate students into our lab and asked them to introduce themselves on a 3-minute video. They were told that this short film will be viewed by another participant, prior to having a face-to-face conversation with that other participant. They were also told that the skills demonstrated in the introductory video would be evaluated by a trained researcher and that their strengths and weaknesses would be publicly disclosed during a feedback session in front of the other participant prior to their face-to-face conversation. We then asked the participants to predict their reactions to being evaluated positively or negatively.

### What were our results?

Both high and low socially anxious undergraduates found the idea of negative evaluation to be anxiety *provoking*, but the prospect of positive evaluation to be anxiety *reducing*. These results are in contrast to the existing theories of fear of positive evaluation in social anxiety.

### What might our results mean?

Our results suggest that although the idea of receiving positive evaluation is linked to some feelings of anxiety for socially anxious individuals, it is significantly less anxiety-provoking than the prospect of negative evaluation. This means that the fear of positive evaluation may be overpowered by the fear of negative evaluation. It is also possible that the anxiety associated with positive evaluation only happens after receiving it, not before. For example, most people would say they likely prefer to receive a positive rather than negative evaluation in the workplace, but after receiving a glowing review from their boss, those with social

anxiety might then begin to fear an increase in expectations, worry that their future performance may not meet the expected standard, and start to distrust the positive feedback received as being inaccurate. In any case, it appears that not all situations and

contexts are associated with fear of positive evaluation.

Barber, K., & Moscovitch, D. (in press). Reactions to prospective positive vs. negative evaluation in the laboratory: a comparison of high and low socially anxious participants. *Journal of Experimental Psychopathology*.

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## Research Findings

### *Scared to Share: Self-compassion and personal disclosures*

By: Jessica Dupasquier & David A. Moscovitch

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#### What did we investigate?

Being able to talk with others about distressing events in our lives can help us in a number of ways. Disclosing our negative feelings and experiences helps us reduce stress, gather support, feel closer to people we share with, and increase our satisfaction in life. Sharing our distress is a fundamental skill that allows mental health professionals to understand our problems and work with us to come up with plans for fixing them. Unfortunately, some individuals tend to avoid disclosing their emotional suffering to others. Research suggests that a number of these individuals may be afraid of doing so because they worry that others will not be compassionate or that they will become too reliant on compassion from others to make them feel better. Those who fear receiving compassion from others also tend to be fearful of self-compassion, as they may be concerned it will make them weak or that they are undeserving and incapable of taking a kind, non-judgmental stance towards their own distress. We felt this supposed link

between self-compassion and self-disclosure needed further investigation. We asked if being self-compassionate would make people who are afraid of receiving compassion less concerned about the risks of sharing distressing experiences with others, and if so, whether that would also encourage them to share more when distressed.

#### What did we do?

We invited undergraduate students to complete an online questionnaire measuring their fears of compassion from others. A minimum of two days later, we invited these participants to come into the lab and write about a past negative experience in one of three ways: focusing on being kind and understanding about the experience (self-compassion), focusing on their own positive qualities (self-esteem enhancing), or writing down their thoughts and feelings in a non-directive way. Participants were then told they would have the chance to share their negative experience with another participant in writing first and then in person (this other alleged participant did not exist in actuality). We asked to them rate how risky sharing felt before writing the letter the other alleged participant.

#### What were our results?

Our results indicated that when writing about a past negative experience in a self-esteem enhancing way or a non-directive way, the more people feared receiving

compassion, the riskier they felt that sharing their negative experience with the other participant was. However, being afraid of compassion was not related to how risky participants felt sharing was if they had written about it self-compassionately. Thinking about their negative experience self-compassionately helped most for people who were afraid of others' compassion by helping them feel less distressed. Regardless of how they wrote about their negative experiences, the participants did not differ in the degree to which they disclosed within their letters.

### What might our results mean?

These findings are the first to indicate that self-compassion may help make sharing a little less scary for people who tend to expect negative consequences from disclosure. Thinking self-compassionately may help encourage people who are afraid of compassion to open up more to others by making sharing seem less risky. Building and encouraging self-compassion could help improve relationships with others and personal well-being by making it easier for a person to seek out help and talk to those close to them when they are in distress.

Dupasquier, J. (2016). *Impact and moderators of a self-compassion manipulation on perceived risk of disclosure* (Master's thesis).

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## Current Studies

### Washing, Checking, and Goal Definition: A Diary Study

By: Jasmine Taylor & Christine Purdon

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#### What are we investigating?

From time to time, we all repeat certain safety actions more often than we really need to. These actions may include checking that a door is locked or that a stove is off or washing our hands a few times when once would probably do. The purpose of this study is to learn more about why and how actions are repeated in this manner. We are specifically interested in repeated checking, cleaning, and washing actions and the factors which cause people to engage in this behaviour.

#### What are we doing?

In the current study, participants take home a tablet and track a specific checking, washing, or cleaning action for six days. We are interested in how individuals decide when to stop safety-focused behaviours like washing or checking. We are also hoping to learn more about the relationship between these behaviours, thoughts, and mood. For example, it has been suggested that one's confidence in their memory and attention influences the decision to repeat behaviours. Having data collected in your home over the course of six days will be invaluable in gaining an understanding of these behaviours as they occur naturally during everyday tasks.

Data collection will be ongoing for the next four months and we will contact eligible participants via phone and email.

## Lab Members

**Dr. David Moscovitch** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo and is the Executive Director of the Centre for Mental Health Research (CMHR). David's research examines the nature and treatment of adult anxiety, with a particular focus on cognitive-behavioural models of social anxiety.

**Kevin Barber** is a Waterloo graduate student in clinical psychology currently exploring cognitive factors in social anxiety disorder. In particular, he is interested in social hierarchy and fear of positive evaluation.

**Jessica Dupasquier** is a Waterloo graduate student in clinical psychology who is interested in studying self-criticism as a risk factor for a variety of psychological problems, including social anxiety. Currently, she is investigating the relationship between self-attitudes and social beliefs and expectations.

**Nick Zabara** is a Waterloo graduate student in clinical psychology currently examining the types of safety behaviours and cognitive processes demonstrated by individuals with social anxiety. He is particularly interested in examining the effects and processes of social anxiety in social situations and relationship contexts.

**Taylor Hudd** is a Waterloo graduate student in clinical psychology interested in studying cognitive processes that generate and maintain social anxiety symptoms.

**Judit Szabo** is a 4th year Waterloo undergraduate student in psychology interested in studying the development and maintenance of obsessions in obsessive-compulsive disorder. Judit is responsible for coordinating the operation of the Anxiety Studies Division (ASD).

**Dr. Christine Purdon** is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo. Christine is interested in the development and persistence of anxious thoughts, attentional biases to threat, mind wandering, mindfulness and emotion regulation in anxiety, mood and obsessive-compulsive and related disorders.

**Brenda Chiang** is a Waterloo graduate student in clinical psychology who is currently exploring the experience of intrusive images in obsessive-compulsive disorder. More broadly, she is interested in factors that contribute to the persistence of obsessions and compulsions in obsessive-compulsive disorder.

**Mengran Xu** is a Waterloo graduate student in clinical psychology currently investigating the factors that contribute to persistent mind wandering and strategies to manage mind wandering. He is particularly interested in how mindfulness practices and attitudes could enhance our ability to control attention by reducing ambiguity towards negative stimuli.

**Jasmine Taylor** is a Waterloo graduate student in clinical psychology who is interested in the characteristics of compulsive behaviours associated with obsessive compulsive disorder. She is currently examining the phenomenology of compulsive hand washing and the factors that may be involved in its persistence.

**Olivia Merritt** is a Waterloo graduate student in clinical psychology who is interested in the relationship between mindfulness and mental health. In particular, Olivia is interested in exploring the effects of mindfulness-based therapies on compulsions.

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ANXIETY STUDIES