

## **Reducing Depression via Brief Interpersonal Mutuality Training (IMT): A Randomized Control Trial**

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### **Abstract**

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In depression, friendships may be compromised because depressed individuals respond more negatively to peers' success. Increasing empathic support following another's success (Freudenfreude) could improve relationships. The effectiveness of an Interpersonal Mutuality Training (IMT) protocol designed to increase expression of Freudenfreude was evaluated in undergraduates by comparing IMT with a TAU control, Active Listening Training (ALT). Ratings of mood and target relationships were better in the experimental IMT than the ALT group following the 2 week training period. This suggests that IMT improved mood and enhanced relationships.

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### **Introduction**

Depression both compromises relationships and is compounded by poor relationships. Therefore, understanding how those prone to depression may contribute to their interpersonal difficulties is important for both prevention and treatment. Previous research has shown that responses to others' success and failure varies with level of depression (Chambliss, Cattai, Benton, Elghawy, Fan, Thompson, Scavicchio, & Tanenbaum, 2012).

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In addition, undergraduates with mild depression score lower on the Freudenfreude (joy in response to others' joy) scale of the Freudenfreude and Schadenfreude Test (FAST; Cattai, Benton, Elghawy, Fan, LaFerriere, Maloney, Tanenbaum, Thompson, Scavichio, Clayman, Kaylor, McAndrew, McGeorge, Mosher, Petronglo, & Chambliss, 2012). This lower level of Freudenfreude is believed to be associated with reduced relationship satisfaction, since Freudenfreude is mutually reinforcing and fosters greater intimacy.

The current experimental study was designed to assess the utility of Interpersonal Mutuality Training (IMT), comprised of Freudenfreude enhancement techniques aimed at building empathetic responding and tempering competitive responding. Pilot work indicates that teaching people to express joy intentionally following another person's sharing of a success, and to request more details about the victory, enhances relationships. In addition, inserting an expression of gratitude toward the listener following episodes of sharing news about personal success enhances the listener's likelihood of showing Freudenfreude. This first strategy was dubbed "shoy" (short for "sharing joy") and the second dubbed "bragitude" (short for "brag plus gratitude") as simple mnemonics in an Interpersonal Mutuality Training (IMT) protocol.

A pre-post effectiveness study (Chambliss, Clayman, Evans, Ioviero, McFarland, Morley, Napoli, Nolan, Gallagher, Fogel, Cogswell, Baron, & Schnell, 2013) found that ratings of relationship quality increased following two weeks of Freudenfreude Enhancement Training for both of the two designated target relationships identified by the participants. This suggests that this training worked to enhance relationships. Additionally, BDI-II scores decreased following the Freudenfreude Enhancement Training. This reduction in depressive symptoms may be a consequence of enhanced relationship functioning. Alternatively, Freudenfreude Enhancement Training may have increased perceived self-efficacy and thereby reduced depressive helplessness and hopelessness.

In order to evaluate the causal impact of these simple interventions more systematically, the current RCT evaluated students' mood and perception of relationships after use of Interpersonal Mutuality Training (IMT). IMT participants were compared to those in an Active Listening control group.

## Method

Participants in this study were 40 undergraduates (14 male, 26 female) enrolled in an introductory psychology course; the mean age was 19.63 years (s.d.= 0.85). Students volunteered for involvement and received bonus points for participation.

## Measures

Participants were given a survey packet, including a variety of measures, before and after training. Current Mood (Positive and Negative) was evaluated using the UWIST Mood Adjective Checklist (UMACL; Matthews, Jones, & Chamberlain, 1990). This scale consists of 13 mood descriptors rated on a 4 point Likert-format scale (not at all, not much, somewhat, and very much). An author-devised measure of relationship quality was administered after the intervention. On this measure, participants were asked to evaluate two target relationships they had selected on six dimensions (Closeness/Trust, Interest in you, Happiness when with you, Generosity, Jealousy, and Irritation) using a 5 point scale (greatly decreased, somewhat decreased, no change, somewhat increased, greatly increased).

Depression was assessed using the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). This is a self-report measure containing 21 items scored on a scale of 0 to 3. Each question assesses a symptom of depressive disorders.

## Procedure

Students were asked to volunteer to take part in the study. After consenting, participants were given a packet containing the pretest measures. These questionnaires were then collected and analyzed. Scores on the BDI-II were calculated and examined to ensure that students who appeared to have high levels of depression were identified and offered assistance.

Participants were randomly assigned to either the Interpersonal Mutuality Training (IMT) or the Active Listening (AL) treatment as usual control condition. Students in both conditions received a handout describing the value of active listening methods in improving the quality of relationships.

Students in the control group did not receive any instructions about how to enhance Freudenfreude in their relationships.

Students in the Interpersonal Mutuality Training IMT group received a handout describing the possible value of two Freudenfreude enhancement techniques ("*shoy*": intentionally sharing the joy of someone relating a success story by showing interest and asking follow-up questions and "*bragitude*": intentionally tying words of gratitude toward the listener following discussion of personal successes).

Interpersonal Mutuality Training (IMT) Instructions:

1. Learning how to share others' joy enhances friendships! The magic of SHOY (sharing the joy)!

Competitiveness can ruin good friendships. Instead of cheering on a peer, partner, or family member, we can feel threatened by their victory. We may feel diminished because their success makes us feel less successful. When this occurs, we often fail to reciprocate their good cheer. We may ignore their success. We may say things that undermine their pleasure. These responses are likely to leave the other person dissatisfied and less likely to share their good news with us in the future.

How to solve this relationship problem??? One way involves intentionally communicating empathy when a friend or family member shares good news. Situations where this is possible arise frequently, because people often want to share their good news with their friends. Generally, when they do this they want their success to make their friends and family members happy, too.

Sharing a celebration with a friend or family member can feel great. As a friend, we help others succeed in life. This means that their success in many ways is our success! This means that quite reasonably we can feel good about how we help others when they succeed.

People want to share news of their successes with their friends. Doing so reminds us of when we were little children, and we shared our early accomplishments with our parents. We watched their faces light up as we smiled our first smiles, took our first steps, and spoke our first words.

Our joy at these milestones was multiplied by their joy. Early on in life, we learned how good it feels to share our success with others.

However, all too often a friend's good news can trigger jealousy, unless we realize it says something good about us, too. Replacing envy with pride about how good a friend we are can help us feel better and allow us to mirror our partner's positive feelings.

Jealousy and envy often pop up even in good relationships. These reactions can lead to resentment and anger. Sometimes, verbal and physical attacks can occur. Friendships suffer. Strangely, these bad times are often triggered when friends share good news.

To fix this, when friends share good news: Listen, realize you deserve some of the credit, and consciously try to **share their joy (SHOY)**. Try making comments like the following: "I'm really happy for you. Thanks for sharing! I hope my support helps you keep doing great! Tell me more about it!" That's what we call "SHOY"! Responding with shoy more often may help build better relationships with friends and family members.

## 2. Learning how to share credit enhances friendships! The benefits of "BRAGITUDE" (mixing bragging and gratitude)!

Another strategy that research suggests may be helpful in improving relationships is something we call "**BRAGITUDE**" (mixing bragging and gratitude)! Managing the competitiveness, envy, and jealousy that frequently challenge friendships is not easy. Ironically, these relationship challenges are often triggered when friends share good news. Both overt and subtle competition among peers, partners, and family members often interferes with closeness, fun, and mutual support.

When we share our successes, the stage can be set for competitive feelings in the listener. Their jealousy and envy may lead to their feeling resentful and/or angry. Instead of providing the support and praise we want, the listener may respond negatively, by ignoring, minimizing, or sullyng our success (e.g., "You won the lottery? Bet you're going to have to pay most of it back in taxes"). Friendships deteriorate; we don't want to share our successes with that person again, so we grow more distant.

How to reduce this relationship problem? The answer is not to withhold good news from close friends and family members. The desire to share our accomplishments with others begins early on in life. Remember telling a parent about some success you had? Did they smile? So it's understandable that sometimes we want to share our happiness with our friends. We want our happiness to make them happy, too! But since in adulthood, competition can often get in the way, we need to be sensitive to them and how our success might cause them to react. Hearing about our success may make them feel less able or less lucky. This can make them miserable, frustrated, and even angry. Although refraining from excessive bragging reduces this problem, sharing good news is an important (and sometimes unavoidable) component of satisfying close relationships; learning how to do it effectively can enhance relationships.

In situations requiring sharing of successes, it may be helpful to pair these with expressions of gratitude for the support and assistance of others. That's what we call BRAGITUDE (we considered calling this "antigloat" instead, but more folks liked "bragitude").

By sharing some of the credit for our success, we defuse the listener's competitive feelings, and increase the likelihood that our joy will become mutual. Usually our successes are actually tied in some ways to those close to us. They have listened, supported, or helped in other ways that have enabled us to undertake tasks leading to our success. Coupling statements like "Thank you for being there...I could not have done this without you" with our reports of success can be very helpful. BRAGITUDE comments convey your recognition that your accomplishments really represent a shared victory. This means you should both celebrate!

Active Listening Training (AMT) Instructions:

All too often, we feel that others don't really listen to us.

Sometimes they're distracted or uninterested. Sometimes they're busy deciding what they're going to say. But it feels so good when we really have someone's undivided attention, when it feels that our words truly matter. Nothing is better than feeling fully understood.

How can we use this to improve our relationships? By using active listening techniques!

Active listening promotes improved communication that is attentive to the person conversing with you. It allows for conflicts to be resolved, or avoided entirely, by preventing miscommunication. In order to engage in active listening, think about implementing the following strategies.

Focus all of your attention on the speaker and the message being conveyed.  
Avoid becoming distracted by your own judgments and assumptions.  
Check to see if you've heard things correctly.

Make efforts to understand the speaker's message and reinforce this message through occasional reiteration of the major points they are stating. This will help you focus on the conversation and test that you correctly hear what the other person is trying to convey.

Ask occasional questions to confirm your understanding and gain more insight into the other person's perspective. Paraphrase what you hear by repeating the main points that they are communicating. Summarize the other person's comments periodically by synthesizing the main messages that you believe the other person wants you to receive.

"I hear you saying that when..." "Is that right?"  
Active listening can really enhance relationship success!

All participants were encouraged to use these strategies for two weeks in their two target relationships. At the end of this period, participants completed the posttest survey instruments. Only students choosing to participate and to have their data used were included. Following administration of the posttest, all participants were fully debriefed.

## Results

Directionally adjusted items were totaled to create pretreatment and post-treatment scores on the two mood subscales (positive and negative items) and the BDI-II. Ratings of target relationships' characteristics were averaged across the two targets' ratings. Pretreatment equivalence was evaluated via independent samples t-tests on the mood and BDI -II measures. No significant differences between the experimental and control groups emerged on the pre-training measures.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare mood and relationship target scores of participants in the IMT experimental condition with those of participants in the treatment as usual ALT control condition (Table 1). Significant differences emerged on the positive mood subscale of the UWIST; participants in the IMT group reported more positive affect than those in the ALT control group. A trend in the data suggested a parallel, but statistically non-significant, difference on the negative mood subscale. No significant group differences were found on the BDI-II scores.

Independent samples t-tests also showed that at the end of the study relationship targets were rated as more generous, less jealous, and less irritable among those in the FET group than those in the control group (Table 2). No significant difference emerged on ratings of targets' Closeness/Trust, Interest, or Happiness. These findings suggest that the IMT *shoyand bragitude* interventions had a positive effect on the target relationships which exceeded that associated with ALT.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for IMT and ALT group participants' UWIST positive and negative mood subscales scores

Training condition		N	Mean	S.D.
Positive Mood Subscale ( $t=3.19$ , $df=27$ , $p=.004$ )	IMT group	16	18.69	2.39
	ALT group	17	15.12	3.90
Negative Mood Subscale ( $t=1.82$ , $df=31$ , $p=.078$ )	IMT group	16	10.00	2.78
	ALT group	17	12.12	3.79

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for IMT and ALT group participants' ratings of target characteristics

Training condition		N	Mean	S.D.
Generosity ( $t=3.18$ , $df=27$ , $p=.004$ )	IMT group	14	4.00	.78
	ALT group	15	3.20	.56
Jealousy ( $t=3.55$ , $df=28$ , $p=.001$ )	IMT group	15	2.07	.80
	ALT group	15	2.87	.35
Irritability ( $t=3.45$ , $df=28$ , $p=.002$ )	IMT group	15	1.80	.77
	ALT group	15	2.87	.92

## Discussion

It was hypothesized that students assigned to the IMT experimental condition would show more positive change on the affective and relationship measures than those assigned to the control group. Both groups were expected to show some improvement on these measures, due to the shared active listening suggestion.

The findings generally supported the efficacy of IMT. When compared to the usual strategy for enhancing interpersonal relationships, which involves development of active listening skills, the addition of specific interventions designed to increase Freudenfreude had measurable beneficial effects on both mood and ratings of several target characteristics.

Participants in the IMT group reported significantly more positive mood at the end of the two week period. Since previous studies had suggested that elevating Freudenfreude may be a way of combating depression, the current findings seem promising. Here, those using IMT strategies reported more positive affect, including higher happiness and satisfaction, at the end of the experimental period than those using conventional active listening strategies to improve their relationships. This suggests that IMT may be helpful in either treating or preventing depression.

Those in the IMT group perceived various improvements in their relationships with the two target individuals they identified. At the end of the study, those using IMT strategies reported seeing less irritability and jealousy in their target subjects than those in the control group. The IMT participants also perceived greater generosity in those with whom they had relationships.

Collectively, these findings support the efficacy of brief IMT. IMT may offer promise as an adjunct intervention in either treating or preventing depression in undergraduates. Further research, using a larger and more representative sample, would help to clarify the potential value of offering IMT to various additional audiences.

## References

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