Empathy Downside:
The Role of Empathy and Autism Traits in Happiness

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INTRO

Prior research has shown that high empathetic people may be more prone to depression than others (Yan et al., 2021). The present research investigated the relationship between empathy and happiness.

We hypothesized that empathetic people may be vulnerable to reduced happiness (and higher levels of depression symptoms) because they may be particularly affected by other people and the dynamics of social relationships, which can be negative and stressful. Also, we hypothesized that those with lower autism traits, which have been found to be related to empathy, may have higher depression systems and lower happiness.

METHODS

Participants

We tested the hypothesis in an online survey with 204 undergraduates (105 men, 99 women).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through SONA and completed an online Qualtrics survey. The data was collected in Spring 2020. From that data, correlations and regressions were completed to assess relationships between several of the variables.

Individuals with higher levels of empathy may be at a higher risk for depression symptoms and lower happiness.

RESULTS

Correlation Matrix

Table 1. Summary of Correlational Results

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.Happiness								
2.Depression Symptoms	**-.43*****							
3.IRI-Fantasy	-.05	**.17***						
4.IRI-Emotional Concern.	**.19****	.12	**.43*****					
5.IRI-Perspective Taking	**.19****	.06	**.32*****	**.57*****				
6.IRI-Personal Distress	**-.35*****	**.32*****	.10	.03 .	.004			
7.EQ	**-.28*****	.09	**-.25*****	**-.56*****	**-.42*****	.10		
8.AQ	**.40*****	**-.27*****	.07	**.30*****	**.26*****	**-.32*****	**-.56**	
9.SNI	**.17***	-.04	.01	.02	.04	-.12	.01	**.14***

Note: IRI = Interpersonal Reactivity Index, EQ=Emotional Quotient, AQ= Autism Quotient, SNI=Social Network Index, ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05

MEASURES

We assessed happiness and depression symptoms while considering autism traits and empathy by using the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002) to measure happiness, the CESD-R (Eaton et al., 2004) to measure depression symptoms, the SNI (Cohen et al., 1997), to measure social network index, the Autism Quotient (AQ, Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) to asses autism traits, the Empathy Quotient (EQ, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004) to asses empathy, and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI, Davis, 1980). With the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, we measured fantasy, emotional concern, perspective taking, and personal distress.

DISCUSSION

For both regression models, the only significant predictors were personal distress, which is one of the empathy components in the IRI and autism quotient. Those reporting higher levels of personal distress also reported lower levels of happiness and higher levels of depression symptoms. Those reporting higher levels of autism traits also reported higher levels of happiness and lower levels of depression symptoms. The results highlight the downside of empathy and a possible protective aspect of autism traits.