Journal of Research in Personality 120 (2026) 104681

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Research in Personality

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrp

Patiently waiting: The role of trait patience during stressful waiting periods

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Patience
Worry
Waiting
Coping

ABSTRACT

This investigation tests whether people higher in trait patience navigate stressful waiting periods with greater emotional well-being and less maladaptive coping. In one exploratory study (N = 799) and three conceptual replications (Ns = 217, 410, 411), undergraduates completed a baseline survey assessing trait patience before entering a laboratory paradigm where they experienced uncertainty while awaiting feedback on their intelligence (Study 1), social skills (Study 2), health risk (Study 3), and attractiveness (Study 4). Participants completed measures of worry, positive and negative emotion, distraction, and suppression during the wait. Mini *meta*-analysis findings show that patient people worry less and feel less negative and more positive emotion when waiting for personally-relevant news, while avoiding the relatively maladaptive coping strategies of distraction and suppression, with the strongest associations emerging for positive emotion.

1. Introduction

Imagine two women awaiting their results from a medical test. One is racked with worry, enduring sleepless nights and distracted days until the results are available. The other barely gives it any thought, content to focus on other things and assume the best while waiting. What distinguishes these women? This investigation tests the role of trait patience in such waiting experiences. In one exploratory study and three preregistered conceptual replications, we examine whether people who find it easier to be patient with life challenges also experience less worry and better emotional well-being while awaiting uncertain news, and whether those differences might be attributable to different coping strategies during the wait.

1.1. Trait patience

Defined as the "propensity of a person to wait calmly in the face of frustration, adversity, or suffering" (Schnitker, 2012, p. 263), trait patience involves regulating emotions in response to objectionable delays or circumstances that impede goal pursuit. In addition to patience as a broad personality trait, unique factors of patience can be specified based on the domains in which people must regulate their impatience: with other people (interpersonal patience), chronic life struggles (life hardship patience), and daily annoyances (daily hassles patience).

Researchers have examined the well-being correlates of patience, demonstrating a host of salubrious outcomes (even after controlling for Big Five personality traits) with both self-report and informant-report data (Schnitker, 2012; Shubert et al., 2022. One such outcome is the experience of positive and negative emotions in daily life, though associations with negative emotions are mixed. For example, people high in trait patience are higher in positive emotionality and lower in negative emotionality in correlational analyses (e.g., Mehmood et al., 2020), but experimental studies show non-significant effects for patience cultivation activities on negative emotions (e.g., Schnitker, 2012, Study 3).

Research suggests trait patience has beneficial effects because it facilitates adaptive emotion regulation strategies that enable successful goal pursuit, which improves well-being (Schnitker, 2012). For instance, people who are more patient in pursuit of their goals are likely to engage in more cognitive reappraisal and less expressive suppression (Ratchford & Schnitker, 2024). However, it is unknown how patience relates to how people cope during uncertain waiting periods where worry is common, and studies have yet to examine the associations between trait patience and other emotion regulation strategies.

1.2. Uncertain waiting periods

Uncertain waiting periods, in which someone must wait to find out personally-relevant information, are emotionally fraught experiences. People report high levels of worry and anxiety, exceeding clinical

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2025.104681
Received 14 August 2025; Received in revised form 7 November 2025; Accepted 19 November 2025
Available online 20 November 2025
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diagnostic thresholds for anxiety disorders during high-stakes periods (e.g., waiting for medical test results; Lampic et al., 2001). Although waiting can be stressful for anyone, some people find it easier than others, namely those high in dispositional optimism and low in need for closure and uncertainty intolerance (e.g., Sweeny and Andrews, 2014). Those individual differences reflect some of the challenges of waiting for uncertain news. When people face an uncertain future, they must balance the emotional comfort of optimism against the preparative benefits of bracing for the worst (Sweeny et al., 2006), and they must confront the existential discomfort of functioning without information they need or want.

Another challenge of uncertain waiting periods is a battle with time (Rankin et al., 2019). We want to know if we got the job now, but the interview process will take at least another month. Thus, patience is a virtue—or at least a comfort—in such moments. The current investigation tests whether people who are more patient in general and in specific domains find it easier to wait well for uncertain news.

In addition to emotional well-being, we investigated two relatively ineffective coping strategies: distraction and suppression. Although distraction can be a powerful tool when deployed strategically (i.e., by finding flow; Rankin et al., 2019), people's efforts to distract themselves from thinking about their uncertainty and efforts to suppress both feelings and expressions of anxiety predict greater distress, not less (Sweeny et al., 2016). Thus, we tested whether trait patience might mitigate the use of those strategies during uncertain waiting periods.

1.3. Overview & Hypotheses

Our approach combined exploratory and confirmatory analyses to examine the role of trait patience during uncertain waiting periods. We first conducted exploratory tests in a large study using one waiting paradigm (waiting for intelligence feedback). We then preregistered three additional tests with studies that used different waiting paradigms to both replicate and test boundary conditions of our initial findings.[1] We preregistered the confidence intervals from Study 1 as our standard for replication (i.e., effects falling within those confidence intervals are considered "successful" replications). We close with a mini *meta*-analysis of the confirmatory studies. All materials, data, and analysis code, as well as our detailed preregistration, are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF).

2. Study 1: Waiting for IQ feedback

Descriptive statistics for all measures (Supplemental Table 1) and demographic information for all samples (Supplemental Table 2) can be found on OSF.

2.1. Participants

Undergraduate students ($N = 799$) participated in a study for partial course credit ostensibly about evaluating their analytical skills. Data collection occurred in three waves.

2.2. Procedure

After completing a lengthy baseline survey (including the trait patience measure), participants then took a short intelligence test comprising 10 items from the Raven's Matrices test (Raven, 1938). As they awaited their results, participants completed measures of worry, emotions, distraction, and suppression. Thus, the predictors and outcome variables were separated by approximately 15 min in this and all subsequent studies.

Several elements of the study are not pertinent to the current investigation (see OSF for full procedures and measures). Most notably, we measured autonomic nervous system activity during the session, and each version of the study included a manipulation that did not affect the measures of interest (Sample 1a, $N = 343$: test described as predictive of success in high- vs. low-paying jobs; Sample 1b, $N = 297$: participants responded to an optimism or control prompt; Sample 1c, $N = 159$: participants responded to a pessimism or control prompt).

2.3. Measures

In all studies, we assessed trait patience with Schnitker's (2012) 3-Factor Patience scale (1 = *not like me at all*, 5 = *very much like me*), consisting of three subscales: interpersonal patience (4 items, e.g., "I am patient with other people"),[2] daily hassles patience (3 items, e.g., "In general, waiting in lines does not bother me"), and life hardships patience (3 items, e.g., "I am able to wait out tough times").

We assessed worry in all studies with a 3-item measure used frequently in studies of uncertain waiting periods (e.g., Sweeny et al., 2016); exact wording depended on the study context: "I feel anxious when I think about [X]," "I am worried about my outcome on [X]," and "I can't seem to stop thinking about [X]" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). In Study 1, the relevant tail was "the intelligence test."

We assessed emotion in each study with the Brief Affect Measure (Revord, 2021; 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*), which includes low- and high-arousal items. We combined across arousal levels to create composites of positive and negative emotion.

We assessed the coping strategy of distraction with a single item (e.g., Sweeny et al., 2016); exact wording depended on the study context: "I am trying to distract myself from thinking about [X]." We assessed the coping strategy of suppression with a 3-item measure (e.g., Sweeny et al., 2016); exact wording depended on the study context: "I am trying to hide my feelings about [X]," "I am trying to suppress my feelings about [X]," and "I am trying not to be anxious about [X]" (for both, 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

2.4. Results

Table 1 presents key results of bivariate correlations between trait patience on the one hand and worry, negative and positive emotion, distraction, and suppression on the other.[3]

2.4.1. Full scale

Participants high in trait patience worried less, reported less negative and greater positive emotion, and engaged in less distraction and suppression while awaiting their intelligence test feedback. Notably, the effect size for positive emotion was twice the effect size for negative emotion, and the absolute value of the confidence intervals did not overlap, indicating a stronger effect for positive emotion.

2.4.2. Subscales

Results for interpersonal and daily hassles patience mirrored those of the full scale, albeit with notably smaller effect sizes in most cases. Results for life hardship patience were similar in magnitude to those with

[1] Following initial peer review, we opted for a significant deviation from our preregistration. Rather than control for personality and religiosity in our hypothesis tests, we opted for bivariate correlations in an effort to provide the most straightforward test of the links between trait patience and waiting experiences. We retain all other aspects of the preregistered plan, and the preregistered results are posted on OSF.

[2] In all studies, one item from the interpersonal patience subscale was omitted ("When someone is having difficulty learning something new, I will be able to help them without getting frustrated or annoyed"); scores are calculated without that item.

[3] Results from our preregistered regression models are posted on the paper's OSF page.

Table 1
Bivariate correlations among key study variables.

	Worry	Negative emotion	Positive emotion	Distraction	Suppression
	r [95 % CI]	*r* [95 % CI]	*r* [95 % CI]	*r* [95 % CI]	*r* [95 % CI]
Study 1					
Trait patience	−0.15** [-0.22, −0.08]	−0.14** [-0.21, −0.07]	0.28** [.22, 0.35]	−0.15** [-0.22, −0.08]	−0.17** [-0.24, −0.10]
Interpersonal patience	−0.09** [-0.16, −0.02]	−0.10** [-0.17, −0.03]	0.24** [.17, 0.30]	−0.11** [-0.18, −0.04]	−0.13** [-0.20, −0.06]
Daily hassles patience	−0.09** [-0.16, −0.02]	−0.09* [-0.16, −0.02]	0.13** [.06, 0.20]	−0.09* [-0.16, −0.02]	−0.10** [-0.17, −0.03]
Life hardships patience	−0.17** [-0.23, −0.10]	−0.13** [-0.20, −0.06]	0.27** [.20, 0.33]	−0.15** [-0.21, −0.08]	−0.17** [-0.24, −0.10]
Study 2					
Trait patience	**−0.10** [-0.23, 0.04]	**−0.13** [-0.26, 0.01]	**0.26**** [.13, 0.38]	−0.02 [-0.16, 0.12]	−0.05 [-0.19, 0.09]
Interpersonal patience	−0.01 [-0.15, 0.12]	**−0.05** [-0.18. 0.09]	**0.19**** 0[.05, 0.31]	−0.01 [-0.15, 0.13]	−0.02 [-0.16, 0.12]
Daily hassles patience	**−0.11** [-25, 0.02]	−0.21** [-0.34. −0.08]	**0.15*** [.02, 0.28]	**−0.02** [-0.15, 0.12]	−0.005 [-0.14, 0.13]
Life hardships patience	−0.09 [-0.23, 0.04]	−0.02 [-0.15, 0.12]	**0.26**** [.13, 0.38]	−0.02 [-0.16, 0.11]	**−0.10** [-0.22, 0.04]
Study 3					
Trait patience	**−0.09** [-0.18, 0.01]	**−0.16**** [-0.25, −0.05]	**0.30**** 0[.21, 0.39]	**−0.12*** [-0.22, −0.02]	**−0.17**** [-0.26, −0.07]
Interpersonal patience	0.03 [-0.07, 0.13]	**−0.11*** [-0.20, −0.008]	**0.26**** 0[.17, 0.35]	**−0.04** [-0.14, 0.06]	**−0.06** [-0.16, 0.04]
Daily hassles patience	**−0.12*** [-0.22, −0.02]	**−0.14**** [-0.24, −0.05]	**0.16**** 0[.07, 0.26]	**−0.11*** [-0.20, −0.006]	**−0.16**** [-0.26, −0.06]
Life hardships patience	**−0.12*** [-0.22, −0.02]	**−0.09** [-0.19, 0.006]	**0.25**** [.16, 0.34]	**−0.14**** [-0.23, −0.04]	**−0.18**** [-0.27, −0.08]
Study 4					
Trait patience	**−0.20**** [-0.29, −0.11]	−0.22** [-0.31, −0.13]	**0.27**** [.18, 0.36]	**−0.13**** [-..22, −0.03]	**−0.16**** [-0.25, −0.06]
Interpersonal patience	**−0.11*** [-..21, −0.01]	**−0.17**** [-0.27, −0.08]	**0.21**** [.11, 0.30]	**−0.06** [-0.15, 0.04]	**−0.07** [-0.17, 0.02]
Daily hassles patience	**−0.13**** [-0.23, −0.04]	**−0.10*** [-0.20, −0.001]	**0.19**** [.10, 0.28]	**−0.13**** [-0.23, −0.04]	**−0.12*** [-0.22, −0.03]
Life hardships patience	**−0.23**** [-0.32, −0.14]	−0.24** [-0.33, −0.15]	**0.22**** 0[.13, 0.31]	**−0.12*** [-0.21, −0.02]	**−0.17**** [-0.27, −0.08]

Note: $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Effects in bold fall within the Study 1 confidence interval for that effect.

the full scale. Again, the effect sizes for positive emotion were significantly larger than for negative emotions.

3. Studies 2–4

Our exploratory tests in Study 1 revealed robust associations between trait patience and experiences during an uncertain waiting period, with relatively consistent effects sizes that were strongest when using the full patience scale and the life hardships subscale. We now turn to our preregistered replication, testing the broad hypothesis that our findings will be consistent with those in Study 1 in the context of three different waiting periods. As noted earlier, we preregistered effect sizes that fall within Study 1′s confidence intervals as our replication standard.

3.1. Participants

3.1.1. Study 2

Undergraduate students ($N = 217$) participated for partial course credit in a study ostensibly about evaluating their social skills.

3.1.2. Study 3

Undergraduate students (total $N = 410$; Sample 3a = 207, Sample 3b = 203) participated for partial course credit in a study ostensibly about their exposure to environmental toxins. Data collection occurred in two waves.

3.1.3. Study 4

Undergraduate students ($N = 411$) participated for partial course credit in a study ostensibly about person perception.

3.2. Procedures

All procedures began with consent and then a baseline survey, followed by a waiting period for some kind of evaluative feedback during which participants completed the measures of worry, emotions, distraction, and suppression, then underwent a thorough debriefing. Measures were identical to Study 1 aside from the study relevant stem (Study 2: “being evaluated on my social skills”; Study 3: “the toxin risk assessment”; Study 4: “my photo being rated”). Several elements of each study are not pertinent to the current investigation (see OSF for full procedures and measures). In all studies, we assessed autonomic nervous system activity; additional manipulations are described briefly, none of which affected the measures of interest.

3.2.1. Study 2: Waiting for social skills feedback

Participants recorded a “confessional” style video about themselves and believed they were awaiting feedback from graduate students on

their social skills. Participants responded to an unrelated prompt during the wait, one focused on proactive coping or a control.

3.2.2. Study 3: Waiting for health feedback

Participants took a (fake) health risk assessment and believed they were awaiting feedback on their risk. In Sample 3a, participants played a game during the wait on either a normal or slow setting; in Sample 3b, participants responded to an unrelated prompt during the wait, either one focused on preventive action or a control.

3.2.3. Study 4: waiting for attractiveness feedback

The researcher took a picture of the participant, who was told the picture would be rated by peers. Participants believed they were awaiting feedback on their physical attractiveness peer-rating and responded to an unrelated prompt during the wait, either one focused on benefit finding or a control.

3.3. Results

See Table 1 for key results. Results for Studies 2–4 largely replicated our findings in Study 1. Of the 60 correlations tested, 47 fell within the confidence intervals of the equivalent correlation in Study 1. Of the other 13 correlations, three were stronger than the original estimate. The effect sizes for positive emotion were uniformly higher than for negative emotion. Likewise, the results replicated for 12/12 correlations between positive emotions and patience factors, but only 9/12 results were replicated for negative emotion and patience factors.

4. Mini meta-analysis

We conducted an internal *meta*-analysis of the links between trait patience and waiting experiences, using a sample-size weighted fixed-effects approach similar to Goh et al. (2016). Table 2 presents the results.

The results are consistent with exploratory Study 1, such that people higher in trait patience reported less worry, less negative emotion, more positive emotion, and less use of suppression and distraction to cope during uncertain waiting. These associations were similar across the patience subscales; the weakest associations were between interpersonal patience and worry and distraction, and the strongest associations were between patience and positive emotion.

5. Discussion

Our aim was to conduct a rigorous test of the role of trait patience during high-stakes waiting periods. Our findings suggest that people who are more patient in general worry less and feel less negative and more positive emotion when waiting for personally-relevant news, while avoiding the relatively maladaptive coping strategies of distraction and suppression. Although most associations were statistically significant and largely consistent across studies, the strongest associations emerged for positive emotion, and the weakest associations emerged for distraction.

Table 2
Mini meta-analysis.

	Worry	Negative emotion	Positive emotion	Distraction	Suppression
	r [95 % CI]	*r* [95 % CI]	*r* [95 % CI]	*r* [95 % CI]	*r* [95 % CI]
Studies 2–4					
Trait patience	**−0.14** [-0.20, −0.08]	**−0.18** [-0.24, −0.12]	**0.28** [.22, 0.34]	**−0.10** [-0.16, −0.04]	**−0.14** [-0.20, −0.08]
Interpersonal patience	**−0.03** [-0.09, 0.03]	**−0.12** [-0.18, −0.06]	**0.28** [.22, 0.34]	**−0.04** [-0.10, 0.02]	**−0.14** [-0.20, 0.08]
Daily hassles patience	**−0.12** [-0.18, −0.06]	**−0.14** [-0.20, −0.08]	**0.17** [.11, 0.23]	**−0.10** [-0.16, −0.04]	**−0.11** [-0.17, −0.05]
Life hardships patience	**−0.16** [-0.22, −0.10]	**−0.13** [-0.20, −0.08]	**0.24** [.18, 0.30]	**−0.11** [-0.17, −0.05]	**−0.16** [-0.22, −0.10]

Note: Effects in bold fall within the Study 1 confidence interval for that effect.

5.1. Implications for trait patience

These findings provide evidence that trait patience is more robustly associated with elevated positive emotion than with mitigated negative emotion. The pattern of results suggests that patience might attenuate the use of regulatory and coping strategies (i.e., worry and suppression) that inhibit the experience of positive emotion. Likewise, highly patient people might be prone to experience low arousal positive affect (e.g., serenity, calm), which experiments have found can reduce rumination and worry (Bahrami et al., 2012). However, patience was only weakly associated with the use of (less) distraction as a strategy to cope with stressful uncertainty. Distraction tends to be more adaptive than suppression, especially when used for short-term coping (Sheppes & Gross, 2012). The pattern of findings for distraction and suppression suggest that patience may be associated with greater openness to experiencing and expressing distress while awaiting uncertain news, while also allowing people to take a mental break as needed.

5.2. Implications for high-stakes waiting and unanswered questions

Patience is more about a battle with time than a battle with fear about the future (Sweeny, 2025), yet our findings suggest that it has a role to play during stressful periods of uncertainty. It is possible that patience boosts positive emotion across contexts, not just during waiting periods, but the robust associations with reduced worry points to a potentially targeted role for patience when people face acute uncertainty about the future.

Why might that be? We suspect the answer lies in one's perception of time. Impatience arises in response to the perception that something is taking "too long" or that time is passing too slowly (Sweeny, 2025), and such perceptions also exacerbate feelings of worry (Rankin et al., 2019). To the extent that patience mitigates that perception of time, it likely soothes feelings of worry too. The role of time perception in the link between patience and worry is a key question for future research, as are the mechanisms by which the associations among patience, worry, emotion, and coping arise. For example, it is possible that patient people use more effective coping strategies, which in turn reduces worry and optimizes their emotion experience during stressful waiting periods. Alternatively, patient people may experience less worry and more favorable emotions for other reasons (e.g., a more balanced relationship with time), which negates the need to strategically cope. Studies that experimentally manipulate each piece of the process can adjudicate among those and other possible paths.

Our investigation provides an initial picture of the role of trait patience during uncertain waiting periods. Subsequent studies can test whether our findings replicate outside of the lab, with different populations, and using different measurement approaches and waiting experiences. In particular, future studies should expand beyond our samples of exclusively college students, albeit students at one of the most diverse institutions in the country.

Taken together, our findings suggest that being patient in general may have a side benefit of turning down the volume on worry during uncertain waiting periods, while also allowing positive emotions to break through. Future studies can test whether these possible benefits are only afforded to the naturally patient or whether their less-patient peers can learn to practice patience in their most worrisome moments.

This research was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation (BCS1941579). This publication was made possible through

the support of the Templeton Religion Trust (#31234, 32669). The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

Author contributions:

- Kate Sweeny: *conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, resources, writing-original draft, writing-review & editing, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition*
- Sarah Schnitker: *conceptualization, methodology, writing-original draft, writing-review & editing, funding acquisition*

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kate Sweeny: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Sarah A. Schnitker:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

All data, materials, and analysis code are openly available.

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