



**DOCTORATE IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY**

**MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Title:** Is Expressive Flexibility Related To Recovery From A Stressful Task?

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Statement of academic probity and professional practice: “I certify that all material in this assessment which is not my own work has been identified and properly attributed. I have conducted the work in line with the BPS DCP Professional Practice Guidelines. This work has been submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the Doctorate in Clinical and Community Psychology Degree, University of Exeter.”

Signed: .....

### **Abstract**

Habitual suppression of emotions has been linked to adverse consequences such as avoidant attachment, lower social support, and reduced relationship closeness (e.g. John & Gross, 2004). However, accumulating evidence that expression and suppression can be both adaptive and maladaptive in different contexts suggests the importance of flexibility in emotional regulation. The present study examined the mechanisms underlying the only laboratory measure of emotional flexibility: the Expressive Flexibility (EF) task (Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal, & Coifman, 2004). This measure has been linked to adjustment over a one-year period, especially in the context of social threat, and among people who have experienced higher levels of life stress (Westphal, Seivert & Bonanno, 2010). We sought to test whether EF is related to physiological recovery from stress in the immediate term. Participants completed questionnaire measures, the EF Task and a stressful public speaking task. In the EF task, participants were filmed suppressing, exaggerating, and not altering facial reactions to negative and positive pictures. A “balanced EF” score was calculated reflecting their ability to suppress and exaggerate with equal success. Regression analyses used EF scores as predictors for psychophysiological indices of stress (SCR and HR) during

and after the public-speaking task. The interaction of EF and social safeness (SSPS) was predictive of the magnitude of SCR recovery, such that for people with lower EF, higher SSPS is predictive of greater SCR recovery. These results converge with previous findings on the suggestion that EF is related to resilience, especially in the context of adversity.

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