

Rethinking Emotional Stability: Uncovering the Role of Suppressed Emotions and Social Desirability Bias Among Women Educators

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ABSTRACT

Emotional stability is considered as a protective personality trait when looked up in psychological literatures that are associated with lowering stress and enhancing well-being (Steel et al., 2008; Kroencke, Geukes, & Denissen, 2020). However, a pilot study of women educators revealed an unexpected positive correlation between emotional stability and perceived stress (Das, 2025). This paradox is confounding and suggests gaps in assumptions that have been made about personality traits and their expression and measurement within a given culture and professional framework. One possibility focuses on emotional suppression and social desirability, which is the phenomenon in which people report higher emotional stability in order to conform to social expectations while undergoing heightened psychological stress (Gross & John, 2003; Paulhus, 2002). This is especially the case for women professionals in collectivist cultures, who are admired for their calmness and self-restraint (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008) a prominent personality aspect of a respectable women under the Indian societal outlook. The study illustrates the need to refine personality–stress models to incorporate gendered, culturally discriminated coping strategies that subvert conventional trait–outcome relationships. These findings, in particular, urge us to exercise methodological caution and propose context-sensitive, mixed-method frameworks in stress and personality research.

Introduction

In personality psychology, emotional stability is often seen as the opposite of neuroticism. It is usually linked to resilience, calmness, and the ability to handle stress well. People who score high in emotional stability are often described as calm and relaxed, and they tend to be less affected by negative feelings like anxiety, sadness, or irritability (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Research consistently supports this view, showing that emotional stability leads to lower perceived stress and higher subjective well-being (Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008; Kroencke, Geukes, & Denissen, 2020). Generally, emotional stability is considered a protective trait that helps shield individuals from the damaging effects of stress.

However, results from this pilot study challenge this common belief. Contrary to established findings, our results showed a positive link between emotional stability and perceived stress among women educators. This suggests that participants who reported higher emotional stability also reported higher stress—an unexpected outcome since evidence usually indicates the opposite. Instead of dismissing this as an anomaly, this contradiction encourages a closer examination of what emotional stability means and how it is measured in specific cultural and occupational settings.

One possible explanation is the concept of emotional suppression. Studies have found that some people, especially in professional settings, control their emotional expression by hiding negative feelings and maintaining a calm facade (Gross & John, 2003). While this approach might create an appearance of emotional stability, it can increase internal stress by blocking real emotional processing. Additionally, social desirability bias—the tendency to present oneself positively in self-report surveys—may lead individuals to overstate traits associated with composure and control, even if these don't reflect their true emotional experiences (Paulhus, 2002).

These issues may be particularly relevant for women in collectivist cultures, like Indian educators, who often face significant pressure to show self-control and calmness during challenges (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008). In these environments, emotional stability may not genuinely reflect stress resilience but may instead signal a culturally encouraged emotional suppression.

This paradox raises an important research question: Is emotional stability always a true shield against stress, or can it sometimes hide deeper emotional struggles shaped by suppression and social expectations?

By exploring this contradiction, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how personality relates to stress. It emphasizes the need to view emotional stability not as an unwavering protective factor, but as a trait whose expression can change across different cultural, gender, and professional contexts. This investigation is both theoretically and practically important. It calls for more careful methods in personality assessments and the development of stress-management strategies that acknowledge the complexity of emotional regulation in real-world work environments.

Literature Review

Emotional Stability and Stress

Many studies treat emotional stability, or low neuroticism, as a protective factor against stress and adjustment issues. People with higher emotional stability

tend to view events as less threatening, show lower daily stress reactions, and recover more quickly from minor annoyances (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Suls & Martin, 2005). Classic research on personality places emotional stability within the Big Five traits, highlighting calmness, even-temperedness, and resistance to negative feelings (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Consistent with this view, higher emotional stability predicts lower perceived stress and greater well-being in both cross-sectional and diary studies (Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008; Kroencke, Geukes, & Denissen, 2020).

Meta-analyses confirm that neuroticism, or low emotional stability, strongly links with higher perceived stress, negative feelings, and stress-related mental health issues (Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, & Watson, 2010; Lahey, 2009). Additionally, coping studies show that individuals with high neuroticism tend to use less effective coping methods, partially explaining their higher stress levels and poorer outcomes (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). In summary, the consensus in the field is that high neuroticism leads to more stress, while high emotional stability leads to less stress.

Emotional Suppression as a Coping Mechanism

One strong reason why apparent “stability” may not protect against stress is related to how people handle their emotions. Gross’s process model differentiates expressive suppression, which involves holding back outward expressions of emotion after they arise, from cognitive reappraisal, which means changing one’s thoughts before emotions escalate (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003). Research shows that while suppression reduces visible emotional expression, it does not lessen internal negative feelings and often increases physical stress, cognitive burden, and interpersonal tension (Gross & Levenson, 1997; Richards & Gross, 2000; Butler et al., 2003). Individuals who frequently use suppression report lower well-being and more depressive symptoms, while reappraisal is linked to better outcomes (Gross & John, 2003). A meta-analysis of emotion regulation strategies connects suppression with worse mental health indicators and stress-related outcomes (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010).

For working professionals, particularly in roles that emphasize composure, suppression can create a disconnect. Outward calmness that mimics emotional stability can coexist with high internal stress. This dynamic complicates how we understand personality traits based only on self-reports.

Social Desirability Bias in Self-Report Measures

Self-report questionnaires often suffer from impression management and self-deceptive enhancement, which are two types of socially desirable responding (Paulhus, 1991, 2002). In both organizational and educational settings, respondents may present themselves as competent, calm, and resilient to fit expected roles. This can lead to inflated emotional stability scores, regardless of actual stress levels (Uziel, 2010). More generally, common-method variance can distort the

relationships among self-reported measures (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Gender expectations can intensify these biases. Social role theory suggests women are often seen as needing to be agreeable, patient, and emotionally controlled, especially in caregiving or service jobs (Eagly, 1987). Reviews on gender and emotion point out that women navigate complex norms that encourage warmth but punish open displays of negative feelings. This dynamic influences how emotions are expressed and reported (Brody & Hall, 2008). In cultures that value collective harmony, emotional restraint is particularly important, increasing the pressure to appear composed (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008). Altogether, these factors can lead to high "reported" emotional stability alongside high internal stress, generating unexpected correlations in survey results.

Gaps in Literature

Two gaps in the research are especially relevant to this study. First, most studies implicitly treat "reported stability" as "true stability," assuming that high self-reported emotional stability indicates good emotional regulation (reappraisal) rather than ineffective suppression. However, regulatory style is rarely measured alongside trait stability, which limits our understanding (Gross, 1998; Aldao et al., 2010). Second, although social desirability and cultural display rules are well documented, few studies directly examine whether high emotional stability scores relate to suppression or impression management, particularly among women professionals in collectivist cultures (Paulhus, 2002; Matsumoto et al., 2008). To address these gaps, researchers need to employ mixed-methods approaches to reveal hidden emotional struggles and use multimethod measurements that include behavioral and physiological signs of stress. Additionally, studies should focus on separating trait stability from regulation strategies and social presentation.

Method

The pilot study was conducted among women educators in Bangalore, a group often managing both professional responsibilities and domestic expectations, making them an appropriate population for examining stress, well-being, and coping strategies.

Instruments

Four standardized instruments were employed:

- Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) to measure perceived stress.
- WHO-5 Well-Being Index to assess psychological well-being.
- Big Five Inventory (BFI-44) to capture personality traits, with particular attention to emotional stability.
- Mindful Self-Care Scale (MSCS-24) to evaluate frequency and quality of self-care practices.

Procedure

Participants completed the self-report questionnaires in a structured survey format. Descriptive, correlational, and regression analyses were carried out to examine the relationships between self-care, personality traits, perceived stress, and well-being. Moderation analyses tested whether personality traits influenced the strength of self-care's effects on stress and well-being.

Key Findings

1. **Contradictory Correlation:** Unlike most existing literature, emotional stability showed a positive correlation with perceived stress ($r = 0.429$, $p < .001$). This unexpected result suggests that higher reported stability may not always signal resilience, but could reflect suppressed emotional expression or socially desirable responding.
2. **Moderation Effect:** Emotional stability emerged as the only personality trait that significantly moderated the relationship between self-care practices and stress/well-being ($\chi^2 = 89.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.0435$). This indicates that the effectiveness of self-care depends in part on how emotional stability is expressed or managed.
3. **Other Traits:** Traits such as extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience correlated negatively with stress as expected, but did not significantly moderate self-care effects.

Contextual Significance

These findings underscore the importance of interpreting personality–stress relationships through cultural and gender-sensitive lenses. In this sample, emotional stability may represent emotional restraint and suppression rather than genuine resilience, a nuance critical for designing contextually relevant interventions for women educators.

Results and Discussion

several factors.

Suppressed Emotions

Emotional stability, based on self-reports, may not truly show resilience. In professional settings like education, women often feel pressure to seem calm, composed, and balanced, even when they face internal challenges. Research on emotion regulation shows that suppressing emotions limits outward expression but raises internal stress, physiological arousal, and mental load (Gross & John, 2003; Butler et al., 2003). Therefore, participants who scored high on stability might be hiding their distress by suppressing their emotions.

Social Desirability Bias

Self-report questionnaires are affected by impression management, where individuals want to appear in a favorable light. Women educators may feel they need to show patience, emotional control, and competency in both their work and personal lives. This pressure can lead to higher emotional stability scores, even when stress levels are high (Paulhus, 2002; Brody & Hall, 2008). These trends may clarify why stability seems positively connected to stress in this group.

Cultural Lens

Cultural expectations significantly influence perceptions. In collectivist societies such as India, social norms prioritize group harmony and discourage openly expressing negative emotions. Emotional restraint is often seen as a sign of maturity and professionalism (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008). As a result, women educators might downplay their stress levels and overstate their stability, resulting in findings where higher stability aligns with higher perceived stress.

Implications

The surprising positive link between emotional stability and stress in this pilot study prompts a closer look at established personality and stress models.

Theoretical Implications

Emotional stability is usually seen as a shield against stress. However, our findings indicate that in some cultural and professional settings, reported stability may actually show emotional suppression or social desirability bias. This questions the common belief that high stability always means resilience. It shows the need for a more context-driven approach that takes into account cultural display rules and gender expectations.

Methodological Implications

The results also raise concerns about depending solely on self-report measures. If high stability scores partially reflect impression management instead of real stress regulation, then traditional survey methods may miss the true relationship between personality and stress. Future studies should use mixed methods—combining self-reports with qualitative interviews, behavioral indicators, and physiological markers—to better distinguish resilience from suppression.

Research Directions

By indicating that emotional stability can sometimes relate positively to stress, this study opens new paths for research. It suggests the need to examine how cultural and job-related pressures influence the expression of personality traits and how these pressures might distort well-known personality and well-being connections.

Conclusion

The literature shows that emotional stability is a protective factor against stress. Higher stability links to resilience, lower perceived stress, and greater well-being (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Steel et al., 2008; Kotov et al., 2010). However, this pilot study found a surprising positive correlation between emotional stability and stress. This suggests that, in this context, stability may not indicate true resilience. Instead, it might reflect emotional suppression and a desire to meet social expectations, especially among women educators in collectivist cultures where composure is important.

This contradiction emphasizes the danger of assuming that reported stability equals genuine resilience. It highlights the need to consider cultural and gender influences on self-reporting. It also shows the importance of improving measurement tools and using mixed-methods approaches. These can help capture both visible patterns and hidden emotional issues.

Overall, these findings call for more cultural awareness in understanding personality and stress. Emotional stability may not always protect against stress; in some groups, it may hide it. Future research should explore the real experiences of professionals through qualitative stories, interviews, and physiological markers. Well-being programs in workplaces must address not just obvious resilience but also the unseen emotional challenges.

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