

QUEEN'S NEWS CENTRE

Press Release



Photo by Stephen Wild

Psychologist Kate Harkness and graduate student Lisa Lee monitor lab coordinator Kelly Anthony-Brown in a "mental state decoding" exercise.

**Mildly depressed people more perceptive than others,
new Queen's study shows**

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KINGSTON, Ont. – Surprisingly, people with mild depression are actually more tuned into the feelings of others than those who aren't depressed, a team of Queen's psychologists has discovered.

“This was quite unexpected because we tend to think that the opposite is true,” says lead researcher Kate Harkness. “For example, people with depression are more likely to have problems in a number of social areas.”

The researchers were so taken aback by the findings, they decided to replicate the study with another group of participants. The second study produced the same results: People with mild symptoms of depression pay more attention to details of their social environment than those who are not depressed.

Their report on what is known as “mental state decoding” – or identifying other people’s emotional states from social cues such as eye expressions – is published today in the international journal, *Cognition and Emotion*.

Also on the research team from the Queen’s Psychology Department are Professors Mark Sabbagh and Jill Jacobson, and students Neeta Chowdrey and Tina Chen. Drs. Roumen Milev and Michela David at Providence Continuing Care Centre, Mental Health Services, collaborated on the study as well.

Previous related research by the Queen’s investigators has been conducted on people diagnosed with clinical depression. In this case, the clinically depressed participants performed much worse on tests of mental state decoding than people who weren’t depressed.

To explain the apparent discrepancy between those with mild and clinical depression, the researchers suggest that becoming mildly depressed (dysphoric) can heighten concern about your surroundings. “People with mild levels of depression may initially experience feelings of helplessness, and a desire to regain control of their social world,” says Dr. Harkness. “They might be specially motivated to scan their environment in a very detailed way, to find subtle social cues indicating what others are thinking and feeling.”

The idea that mild depression differs from clinical depression is a controversial one, the psychologist adds. Although it is often viewed as a continuum, she believes that depression may also contain thresholds such as

the one identified in this study. “Once you pass the threshold, you’re into something very different,” she says.

Funding for this study comes from a New Opportunities Grant from the Canada Foundation for Innovation.

PLEASE NOTE: PDF copies of the study are available upon request.

Contacts:

Nancy Dorrance, Queen’s News & Media Services, 613.533.2869

Therese Greenwood, Queen’s News & Media Services, 613.533.6907

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