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Clarifying emotional transformation: Temporal patterns of emotional involvement and emotional processing

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Nardone, Stephanie Sarah, "Clarifying emotional transformation: Temporal patterns of emotional involvement and emotional processing" (2017). *UWill Discover Undergraduate Conference*. 1. <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/uwilldiscover/2017/session5/1>

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How we feel and what we need: Emotional arousal and emotional processing in a two-chair
intervention for self-criticism

In experiential theory, emotional arousal refers to the intensity of an activated emotional state, (Lang, Greenwald, Bradley, & Hamm, 1993) whereas emotional processing describes one's personal understanding of an activated emotion, (Greenberg & Safran, 1984, 1987; Greenberg, 2010) including its underlying unmet need. Research suggests that high levels of emotional arousal and emotional processing both contribute to positive change in psychotherapy; (e.g. Missirlian, Toukmanian, Warwar, & Greenberg, 2005; Greenberg, Auszra, & Herrmann, 2007) however, there is a lack of research examining the association between emotional arousal and emotional processing within psychotherapy. The present study seeks to clarify the temporal relationship between emotional arousal and emotional processing within an experiential exercise known as a two-chair intervention. In this task, undergraduate participants (N = 45) with self-critical tendencies were asked to enact their self-criticism by alternating between two chairs (Kramer & Pascual-Leone, 2015). Video data will be coded for the level of observed emotional arousal and the presence of emotional processing, as indicated by the verbal expression of an underlying unmet need. We predict that participants who express an unmet need will show higher levels of emotional arousal than those who do not. Furthermore, we predict that participants who express an unmet need will become less emotionally aroused across stages of the two-chair intervention, while participants who do not express an unmet need will not experience a significant change in arousal across stages of a two-chair intervention. Results of this project could inform experiential therapy for self-criticism in determining the patterns of emotional arousal that are associated with emotional processing.

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doi:10.1037/0022-006X.73.5.861