ABSTRACT
GENERATING ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS
WHEN DEPRESSION IS THE PROBLEM

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Generating alternative solutions for problem situations is a key component of effective problem solving. This process is used to generate a variety of potential options for managing a problem, from which the most effective approach or combination of approaches can be selected for implementation. Impaired alternatives generation provides fewer options from which to select a response, reducing the likelihood that a highly effective approach will be available for implementation, potentially leaving problems unresolved, generating additional problems, and fostering a sense of hopelessness and depression. Depression has been found to impair problem solving further by reducing engagement in the problem solving process, subsequently creating a self-reinforcing cycle of distress. Seeking ways to interrupt this cycle, researchers have investigated generating alternatives for problem situations that may be contributing to depression, then using those alternatives to effectively resolve the contributing stressor. However, use of depression as the problem situation for generating alternatives is absent in the literature.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the process of generating solutions using depression as the contributing problem. A systematic literature review was conducted. Based on the literature, two avenues of investigation were explored: whether generating alternatives for depression would be related to the same variables as other problem situations; whether gender effects or problem labeling would influence alternatives generation. A total of 578 undergraduate university students recruited from a psychology participant pool completed the study. Participants completed vignette-based measures of alternatives generation, questions about familiarity and self-efficacy related to situations in the vignettes, verbal fluency and ideation fluency measures, and self-report measures of depression and problem orientation. Results of correlation analyses indicated a moderate positive relationship between alternative generation measures and ideation fluency and weak positive relationships with measures of verbal fluency. Group comparisons identified a statistically significant three-way interaction effect between vignette situation, problem labeling, and vignette protagonist gender on total alternatives generated. Statistically significant two-way interactions between vignette situation and participant gender were found for both total alternatives generated and quantity of good alternatives generated. Results were interpreted in the context of problem-solving literature and recommendations for future research were presented.