

Lack of Emotional Clarity Uniquely Buffers the Effect of Dissociation in PTSD Symptoms

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INTRODUCTION

Background:

- Prior research has demonstrated that dissociation is associated with trauma-related psychopathology and emotional difficulties (Irwin, 1998 & Shim et al., 2024).
- For the purposes of this study:
 - **Dissociation** → “A disruption and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control and behavior” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
 - **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** → A disorder that may occur when an individual has experienced or witnessed an event in which they believe that there was a threat to life or physical integrity and safety and experiences fear, terror, or helplessness (American Psychological Association, n.d.).
 - **Emotion regulation** → The ability of an individual to modulate an emotion or set of emotions (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Problem & Goals:

- Previous studies have focused on **dissociation as a mediator** between emotion regulation difficulties and PTSD symptoms. However, fewer studies have examined whether **emotion regulation difficulties may moderate the relationship between dissociation and PTSD symptoms**. The present study aimed to address this gap by investigating how emotion regulation difficulties influence the strength of the association between dissociation and PTSD symptoms.

Research Question & Hypotheses:

- The present study examined whether **emotion regulation difficulties moderate the relationship between dissociation and PTSD symptoms**.
- **Hypotheses:** Emotion regulation difficulties would strengthen the association between dissociation and PTSD symptoms.

METHODS

Participants:

- **N=583**
- All participants had **direct trauma exposure**, as determined by the life experience checklist (LEC-5) for DSM-5.

Data Collection:

- Participants were **recruited from Cloudresearch**, an online platform associated with Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Mturk).
 - **Dissociative effects** was assessed using the Dissociative Experiences Scale-Brief (**DES-B**).
 - **Emotion regulation difficulties** were assessed using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale-16 (**DERS-16**).
 - **PTSD** was assessed using the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (**PCL-5**).

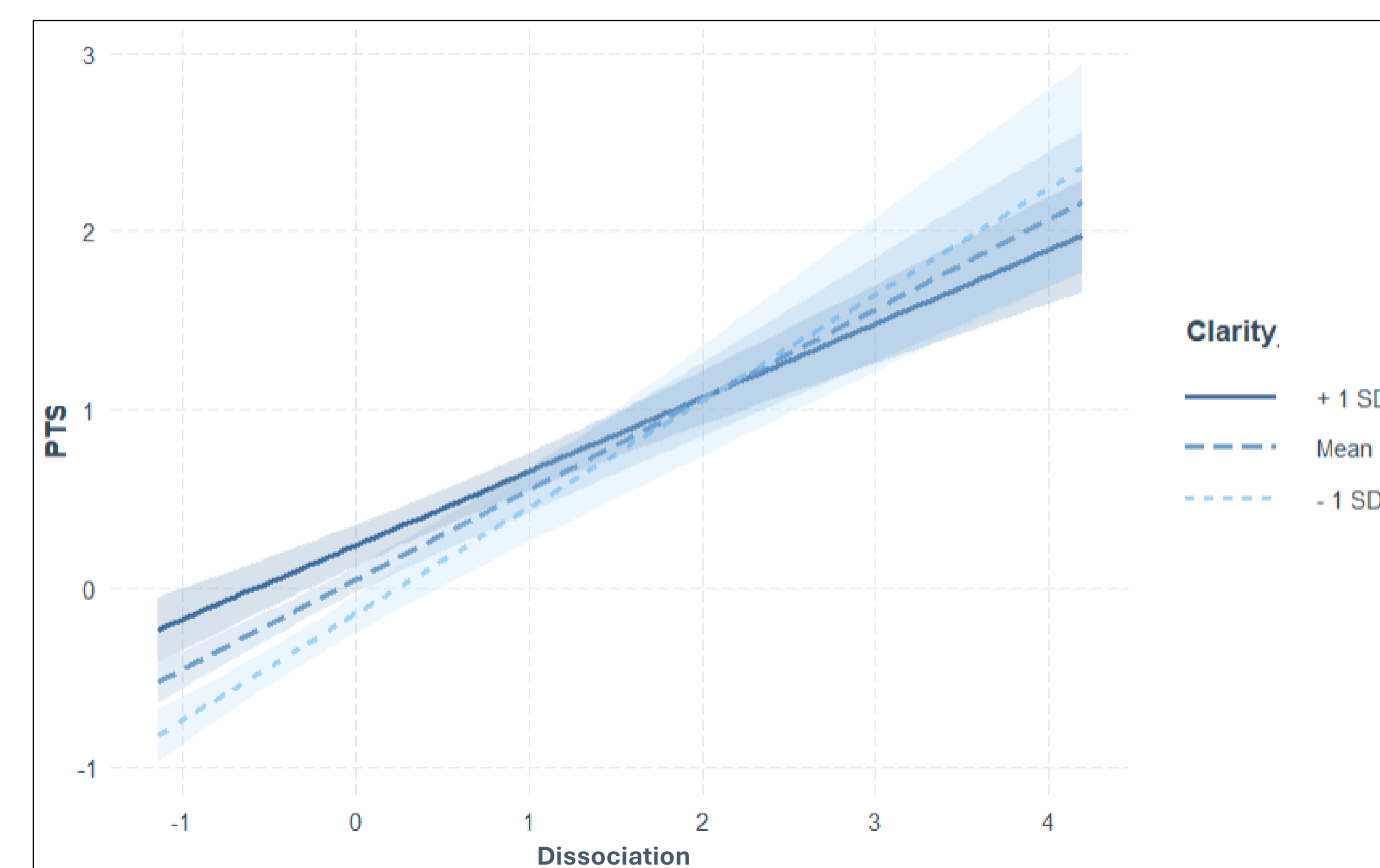
Data Analysis:

- **Moderation analyses** were conducted using **multiple linear regression in R-Studio**, to examine whether emotion regulation moderated the relationship between dissociation and PTSD symptoms.
 - Follow-up analyses examining which levels of dissociation allow specific aspects of emotion regulation to significantly influence PTSD symptoms.

RESULTS

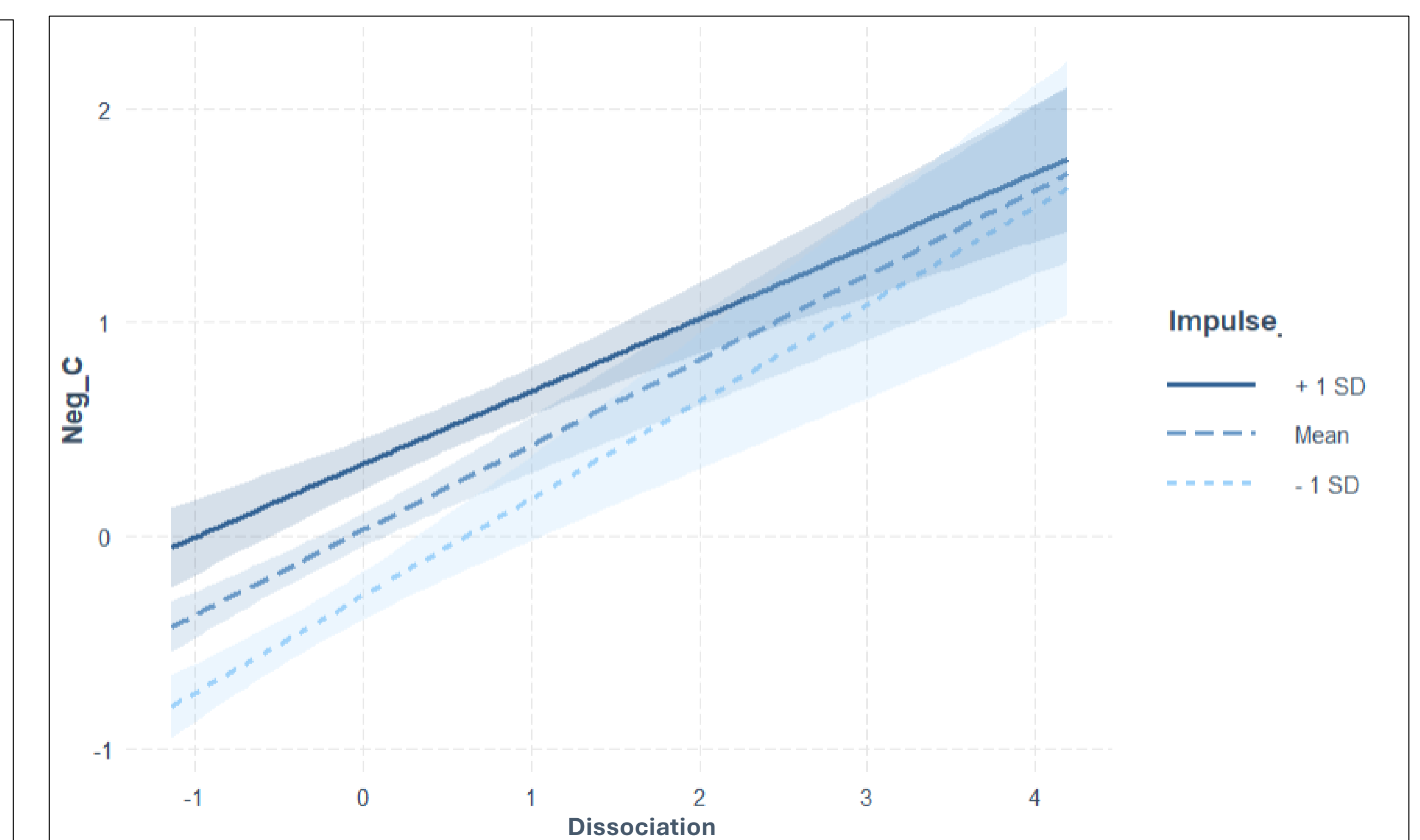
- The interaction between **dissociation and emotion regulation** was **not significant** ($\beta = -0.014$, $SE = 0.030$, $p = .649$), indicating **no overall moderation effect**.
- Because emotion regulation difficulties represent distinct regulatory processes, additional analyses examined **specific DERS subscales**.
- **Lack of emotional clarity** significantly predicted PTSD symptoms ($\beta = 0.19$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$) and interacted with dissociation ($\beta = -0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .01$).
- The interaction between **dissociation and lack of impulse control** trended towards significance ($\beta = -0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .08$).

DISSOCIATION, CLARITY, & PTSD SYMPTOMS



Low clarity combined with high dissociation may reflect emotional avoidance, contributing to greater symptom severity, whereas high clarity may buffer this relationship through greater emotional awareness.

DISSOCIATION, IMPULSIVITY, & PTSD SYMPTOMS



Impulsivity buffered the relationship between dissociation and negative alterations in cognitions and mood.

DISCUSSION

- Results indicated that **dissociation did not moderate the overall relationship between emotion regulation and PTSD symptoms**.
- However, one subsection of emotion regulation, **emotional clarity, significantly buffered the effect of dissociation on PTSD symptoms**.
 - Individuals may identify emotions such as fear, depression, or discomfort without linking them to their trauma. Greater difficulty in identifying emotions reduced the strength of the association between dissociation and PTSD.
 - This suggests that dissociative experiences may be less likely to be perceived as distressing or trauma-related when emotions are not fully understood.
- Similarly, another subcomponent of emotion regulation, **impulsivity, showed a trend toward significance**, suggesting it **may also buffer the relationship between dissociation and PTSD symptoms**.
 - Unlike emotional clarity, impulsivity was not significantly associated with non-interpersonal trauma. Instead, it was **only significant in the context of interpersonal trauma**, particularly negative alterations in cognitions and mood (e.g., persistent negative beliefs about oneself, others, or the world).

Future Directions:

- Future research should **examine specific emotion regulation dimensions** rather than relying on global scores, as there may be differential effects across the subcomponents.
 - Investigating whether **adaptive regulation strategies** (e.g., emotional awareness, acceptance, cognitive reappraisal) show similar moderating effects.
- Clinically, findings suggest prioritizing **stabilization and regulation** before emotional clarification when working with dissociative patients.

References

