Assessment of Depressive Affect in Clinical Practice

Walter W. Hudson  
University of Hawaii

Enola K. Proctor  
Washington University

This report describes a new short-form measure of nonpsychotic depression that was designed for use in clinical settings to evaluate the course of therapy with single clients. It has a high reliability and also has good face, discriminant, and construct validity. The scale was developed specially for use in repeated administrations with the same client.

A new short-form measure of nonpsychotic depression, the Generalized Contentment Scale (GCS), was conceived and developed by the first author for use by clinicians and researchers in repeated administrations with the same client so that therapists could monitor and evaluate the effect of treatment over time using single-subject designs (Hersen & Barlow, 1976).

The GCS was designed to measure the degree or magnitude of depression and is structured as a 25-item summated category partition scale that is scored with a range from 0 to 100. Positively and negatively worded items are used to offset the effects of response bias, and the total score is computed as follows: All negatively worded items are denoted as $V$, and all positively worded items are denoted as $X$. The positively worded items are reverse scored by computing $V = 60 - X$, and the total score is then computed as $S = \frac{\sum V - N}{(100)/(N)}$, where $N$ is the number of items completed. If the client responds to all 25 items, the formula simplifies to $S = \sum V - 25$.

The GCS has been partially validated using a markedly heterogeneous sample with respect to education, occupation, and income. The sample consisted of 124 individuals comprising 62 married couples, each of whom completed the GCS, waited a minimum of 2 hours, and then completed the scale again. This procedure provided seven different estimates of test-retest and split-half reliability. After correcting for test length using the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula, these reliabilities ranged from a low of .887 to a high of .963 with a mean of .930.

Since reliability coefficients that are based on correlation techniques are subject to distortion arising from variation in the standard deviation of the samples or populations completing a scale, we computed seven different estimates of the standard error of measurement, which is not influenced by changes in the standard deviation from one sample to the next. The lowest estimate of the standard error of measurement was 3.150, the highest was 5.398, and the mean was 4.240. If we accept the mean as the best estimate of the standard error of measurement, we can say that the "true" GCS score will fall within plus or minus about 8 points of the observed score about 95% of the time. This means that a gain or loss of 4 points or less would likely be disregarded as inherent noise in the scale, but gains or losses exceeding 4 points would suggest real change in the person's level of depression. A change of 8 or more points would almost certainly indicate the presence of real change.

Each person was asked to classify themselves as feeling "pretty good," "a little depressed," or as feeling "very depressed," and these three groups were used to test the discriminant validity of the GCS. Only one person felt very depressed and was included in the group who said they were a little depressed. A one-way analysis of variance indicated that the nondepressed group had a mean of 16.1, as compared to 30.2 for the moderately depressed group. The difference of 14.1 points was highly significant ($p = .001$) and shows that the recommended scoring procedure adequately discriminates between the two criterion groups. Also, one can regard the intraclass correlation of .604 that was computed from these data to be at least a crude estimate of the discriminant validity of the GCS—a value large enough to support the claim that the GCS is a valid measure of depression.

Construct validity of the GCS was established by allowing four other measures to compete against the GCS in a discriminant function, and the resulting standardized discriminant weights clearly showed the GCS to be the most important predictor.

One of the most important characteristics of the GCS is the fact that a clinical cutting score...
of 30 was found to provide a reasonable guideline for use in clinical settings. That is, persons who indicated they were depressed usually scored over 30, and those who were not depressed usually scored below 30.

Thus far a number of clinicians have used the GCS as a tool in monitoring and evaluating treatment for depression. In all instances the therapists have found that GCS scores are remarkably consistent with other types of information available concerning the client's depressive affect. In short, all the evidence we have obtained thus far indicates that the GCS is a highly reliable measure of nonpsychotic depression and that it also has high face, discriminant, and construct validity.

Reference


Received November 29, 1976
GENERALIZED CONTENTMENT SCALE (GCS)

AUTHOR: Walter Hudson

PURPOSE: To measure nonpsychotic depression.

DESCRIPTION: The GCS is a 25-item scale that is designed to measure the degree, severity, or magnitude of nonpsychotic depression. In contrast to many measures of depression, the GCS focuses largely on affective aspects of clinical depression, examining respondents' feelings about a number of behaviors, attitudes, and events associated with depression. A particular advantage of the GCS is a cutting score of 30 (±5), with scores above 30 indicating that the respondent has a clinically significant problem and scores below 30 indicating the individual has no such problem. Another advantage of the GCS is that it is one of nine scales of the Clinical Measurement Package (Hudson, 1982) reproduced here, all of which are administered and scored the same way.

NORMS: This scale was developed with 2140 respondents, including single and married individuals, clinical and nonclinical populations, high school and college students and nonstudents. Respondents were primarily Caucasian, but also included Japanese and Chinese Americans, and a smaller number of members of other ethnic groups. The GCS is not recommended for use with children under the age of 12.

SCORING: The GCS is scored by first reverse-scoring the items listed at the bottom of the scale (5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23, 24), totaling these and the other item scores, and subtracting 25. This gives a range of 0 to 100 with higher scores indicating more depression. For scoring questionnaires with missing items, see Hudson (1982) or instructions for scoring the Index of Family Relations in this book.

RELIABILITY: The GCS has a mean alpha of .92, indicating excellent internal consistency, and an excellent [low] S.E.M. of 4.56. The GCS also has excellent stability with a two-hour test-retest correlation of .94.

VALIDITY: The GCS has good concurrent validity, correlating in two studies .65 and .76 with the Beck Depression Inventory and .92 and .61 for two samples using the Zung Depression Inventory. The GCS has excellent known-groups validity, discriminating significantly between members of a group judged to be clinically depressed and those judged not to be depressed. The GCS also has good construct validity, correlating poorly with a number of measures with which it should not correlate, and correlating at high levels with several measures with which it should, such as self-esteem, happiness, and sense of identity.
This question requires you to enter all responses in the absence of the visual chart.

Please begin with 'I' to initiate your responses.

1. I__
2. I__
3. I__
4. I__
5. It__
6. I__
7. I__
8. Wh__
9. I__
10. I__
11. I__
12. I__
13. I__
14. I__
15. I__
16. I__
17. I__
18. I__
19. I__
20. I__
21. I__
22. I__
23. I__
24. I__
25. I__
This questionnaire is designed to measure the degree of contentment that you feel about your life and surroundings. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Answer each item as carefully and accurately as you can by placing a number beside each one as follows:

1 = Rarely or none of the time
2 = A little of the time
3 = Some of the time
4 = Good part of the time
5 = Most or all of the time

Please begin.

1. I feel powerless to do anything about my life. / 2. I feel blue.
3. I am restless and can't keep still.
4. I have crying spells.
5. It is easy for me to relax.
6. I have a hard time getting started on things that I need to do.
7. I do not sleep well at night.
8. When things get tough, I feel there is always someone I can turn to.
9. I feel that the future looks bright for me.
10. I feel downhearted.
11. I feel that I am needed.
12. I feel that I am appreciated by others.
13. I enjoy being active and busy.
14. I feel that others would be better off without me.
15. I enjoy being with other people.
16. I feel it is easy for me to make decisions.
17. I feel downtrodden.
18. I am irritable.
19. I get upset easily.
20. I feel that I don't deserve to have a good time.
21. I have a full life.
22. I feel that people really care about me.
23. I have a great deal of fun.
24. I feel great in the morning.
25. I feel that my situation is hopeless.