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## *Sakhim* of *Han* as a mature suppression: Implications for cancer patients' emotional coping<sup>†</sup>

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This study searches for the possibility that *Sakhim* of *Han* as a mature suppressive mechanism may play a useful role in emotional coping of cancer patients. The preponderance of the growing literature suggests that emotional inhibition, that is, suppression or repression would increase vulnerability to stress-related diseases such as cancer. However, although emotional inhibition and cancer may be clearly related, the inhibition hypothesis has weaknesses: the existence of experimental counter evidence, the partiality of suppression-related discussions, and the overlooking of cultural influences. This article criticizes the conceptual underpinnings of emotional inhibition theories and provides a rationale for successful suppression. The psychological process of *Sakhim* and presuppositions for successful *Sakhim* are analyzed. Implications for cancer patients' emotional coping are discussed.

*Key Word:* the inhibition hypothesis, suppression, repression, cancer, *Sakhim*, *Han*

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The majority of contemporary theories dealing with cancer and emotion have relation to the “inhibition hypothesis” (Consedine, Magai, & Bonanno, 2002; Giese-Davis & Spiegel, 2002). The inhibition hypothesis supposes that emotional inhibition, that is, suppression or repression would increase vulnerability to stress-related diseases (Greenberg & Stone, 1992; Polivy, 1998; Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994). James Pennebaker (Pennebaker, 1990, 1993, 1995) is probably the most well-known scholar advocating the view that emotional inhibition can injure physical and psychological health.

Recently, however, Consedine et al. (2002) warned that the inhibition hypothesis has shown a dogmatic tendency in that conceptual bases are accepted uncritically and results from other domains of psychology are absorbed in a selective and self-supporting manner. One of the problems that the inhibition hypothesis has is that it totally ignores the possibility of effective suppression. Thus, from the point of the inhibition hypothesis, *Sakhim* of *Han*, the representative cultural wisdom of Korea, becomes nothing but a maladjustive mechanism threatening health.

In this study, we will take the inhibition hypothesis under critical review, then search for the possibility that *Sakhim* of *Han* as a mature suppressive mechanism may play a useful role in emotional coping of cancer patients. And we

will analyze the psychological processes of *Sakhim* and presuppositions for successful *Sakhim*.

## The Inhibition Hypothesis and Cancer

### The Inhibition Hypothesis

Pennebaker (1990, 1993, 1995) has proposed that inhibiting thoughts, feelings, and behaviors adversely affect physical health as well as psychological well-being. According to him, inhibition is physiological work in that such coping is accompanied with physical effort (heavy heart or sweating hands) not to think, feel, or behave. His theory and related theories suppose that prolonged inhibition would be a burden to both mind and body and would increase the probability of stress-related illness in the long run. In contrast, it has been proposed that the letting-go experiences or confronting stressful life events by means of expressive writing produces physical health improvements (Francis & Pennebaker, 1992; Greenberg & Stone, 1992; Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990).

### The Influence of Repression and Suppression on Cancer

A variety of clinical observations and empirical research have linked the incidence of cancer with greater emotional inhibition (McKenna, Zevon, Corn, & Rounds, 1999). Some

researchers (Canning, Canning, & Boyce, 1992; Dattore, Shontz, & Coyne, 1980; Temoshok & Heller, 1984) have continued to hypothesize that repression as a psychological defense may be connected with the development of cancer. In particular, Temoshok and Heller (1984) described this relationship in the notion of “the Type-C (cancer-prone) personality”. Others (Greer & Morris, 1975; Giese-Davis & Spiegel, 2002; Gross, 1989) have suggested that suppression may be related to the onset of cancer.

Although many researchers have often confused suppression with repression in the cancer literature, it is possible to distinguish between the two (Giese-Davis & Spiegel, 2001). According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.; *DSM-IV*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 756), repression is defined as dealing with emotional conflict or stressors “by expelling disturbing wishes, thoughts, or experiences from conscious awareness”. In contrast, all the definitions of suppression have the conscious awareness of disturbing wishes, thoughts, or experiences in common (Giese-Davis & Spiegel, 2001). Suppression involves the intentional process to avoid thinking about disturbing problems, wishes, feelings, or experiences (Vaillant, 2000). Although Vaillant (2002) suggests that as people age, the rigidity of repressed style may soften, most scholars (Giese-Davis & Spiegel,

2001; Weinberger, 1990) believe that no current psychological intervention is authorized to be effective for changing repressive style. Furthermore, repression is a difficult construct to measure because theoreticians have historically linked etiology with unconscious processes that make the individual unaware of, and therefore unable to self-report about, the connections between his or her affect and cognitions, disturbing wishes, and experiences (Giese-Davis & Spiegel, 2001; Holmes, 1990). However, suppression can be not only easily assessed by scales measuring consciousness but also significantly benefited by psychological interventions emphasizing emotion-regulation strategy (Giese-Davis & Koopman et al., 2002). Thus, suppression has attracted academic attention in the psychological intervention researches for people with cancer.

Suppression may amplify cancer patients' suffering (Cordova et al., 2003). Although people with cancer tend to show reluctance to express subjective suffering, it has been reported that their suppressive attitudes can bring about severe disturbance of moods (Classen, Koopman, Angeli, & Spiegel, 1996; Watson & Greer, 1983). In contrast, a majority of studies have demonstrated that expressing emotions shows emotional stability and better quality of life in people with cancer (Iwamitsu et al., 2003; Stanton et al., 2000). Especially, there has been reported a positive association between active

expression of emotions and longer survival (Jensen, 1987; Reynolds et al., 2000). Actually, it has been reported that people with cancer who participated in supportive-group therapy emphasizing emotional expressions may live longer (Fawzy et al., 1993; Giese-Davis & Koopman et al., 2002; Richardson, Shelton, Krailo, & Levine, 1990; Spiegel, Bloom, Kraemer, & Gottheil, 1989).

In considering the fact mentioned above, it seems that suppression does not help cancer patients. However, there is much room for reconsideration, because the inhibition hypothesis on which suppression-related research is based has weaknesses.

### **The Critique of the Inhibition Hypothesis**

The critique of the inhibition hypothesis can be summarized in the following three issues: the presentation of experimental counter evidence, comments on the partiality of suppression-related discussions, and the overlooking of cultural influences.

#### **Experimental Counter-examples to the Inhibition Hypothesis**

Pennebaker (1990) instanced the white-bear dilemma as representing the difficulty of suppression. Wegner, Schneider, Carter, and White (1987) conducted a thought suppression

experiment in which participants were instructed to try not to think of a white bear for five minutes. This study showed that it is very difficult to suppress our thoughts, because, on average, participants reported having thought of white bears approximately seven times. Especially, suppression seemed to result in a subsequent rebound of absorption with white bears later on. Given the paradoxical effect of suppressing thoughts of white bears, Wegner et al. (1987) argued that suppression must be a maladaptive strategy and prolonged suppression would bring about acceleration of physical burn-out, which in turn might result in rapid increase in the risk of stress-related diseases.

According to Johnson (1994), however, it is possible to forget target stimuli intentionally. In “intentional forgetting” or “directed forgetting” experiments, subjects are presented with two separate lists of words. Midway through presentation of the list, participants are asked to forget the first half of the list (the to-be-forgotten set) and to memorize the second half of the list (the to-be-remembered set). After a short delay, participants take a surprise recall test of all words, including those presented in the to-be-forgotten set. In the recall test, participants reproduce more items from the to-be-remembered set than from the to-be-forgotten set.

This directed forgetting paradigm can be applied to emotional material (Myers, Brewin, &

Power, 1998). Myers et al.'s (1998) experiments provide evidence that repressors have poorer recall for negative experimental material as well as for negative autobiographical memories. Although Myers et al.'s (1998) findings are limited by the fact that the relationship between clinical accounts of the repression of traumatic memories and the repressive coping style is as yet uncertain, it is possible that a subset of individuals who have been traumatized in childhood might also display superior directed forgetting.

In directed forgetting experiments, the to-be-remembered set functions as a strong distracter for the to-be-forgotten set. However, a distracter was not provided in suppression studies. In fact, Wegner et al. (1987) too recognized that a rebound effect of suppression did not happen when participants were asked to focus on one salient distracter (e.g., red Volkswagen) whenever the to-be-suppressed material comes to mind. These results suggest that distracters may play a critical role in whether or not suppression produces a subsequent rebound of absorption with the target material (Rassin, Merckelbach, & Muris, 2000). Thus, contrary to the inhibition hypothesis, it is not impossible to suppress target stimuli effectively.

#### **The Possibility of Successful Suppression**

Hitherto the inhibition hypothesis has too

often neglected the possibility of successful suppression. There, however, is growing evidence to believe that neuro-biological investigations of cognition may provide a mechanism for effective suppression (Anderson & Green, 2001; Brewin & Beaton, 2002).

In fact, suppression scales (e.g., the White Bear Suppression Inventory; WBSI; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994) based on the inhibition hypothesis have focused on not suppressive attempts *per se* but ineffective suppression (Rassin, 2003). For example, the WBSI items include not only suppression proneness but also the presence of intrusive thoughts. This suggests that correlations between suppression and negative outcomes in the health related-researches using WBSI may have been exaggerated.

So far, cancer research dealing with suppression tends to define suppression literally. For example, Giese-Davis and Koopman et al. (2002) defined suppressor as "a person intentionally avoids thinking about disturbing problems, desires, feelings, or experiences" (p. 918). Although they borrowed the concept of suppression from *DSM-IV*, they overlooked the underlying context. They concluded that suppressive regulation strategy of people with cancer should be changed by supportive-expressive group therapy. However, the tenor of suppression presented in *DSM-IV* is that it is a highly adaptive defense and

“results in optimal adaptation in the handling of stressors” (p. 752).

King and Emmons (1990) emphasized the importance of discriminating between inexpressive individuals who are comfortable and those who are tense, strained, and vulnerable to psychological distress and disease. They suggested that ambivalence over emotional expression might serve as an important variable in the relation between emotional inhibition and health problems. Ambivalence over expression can refer to inexpressive individuals who are inhibiting their desire to express as well as to expressive individuals who feel regret for their expressiveness (King, 1998). From this point of view, comfortable inexpression may conform to the suppression of *DSM-IV*. Thus, people should not be misidentified as suppressors simply because they are inexpressive.

According to Rassin (2003), there are individual differences in the suppression efforts and successful suppression is reliably assessable. In an attempt to compensate for the shortcoming of previous suppression scales, he constructed the successful suppression scale, namely, Thought Suppression Inventory (TSI).

In essence, the belief that suppression is wholly maladaptive and expression is universally adaptive is a false dichotomy. Until now, in emphasizing the importance of the letting-go experiences, the inhibition hypothesis

has overlooked the paradox of distress expression (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999). Emotional disclosure is associated with maladaptive function as well as adaptive function. Expression of emotion may intensify psychological distress (Laird, 1974; Lanzetta, Cartwright-Smith, & Kleck, 1976). And letting-out can obstruct constructive coping efforts based on an internal locus of control (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Not all suppressions are maladaptive and not all expressions are adaptive. Thus, without discriminating between effective and ineffective suppression (or expression), suppression (or expression) *per se* would become a hollow term.

### The Overlooking of Cultural Influences

The existing literature on the inhibition hypothesis tends to give parsimonious attention to the influence of culture on suppression (Consedine et al., 2002). In the light of this insight, the inhibition hypothesis runs counter to Erikson's (1950) “triple bookkeeping” (p. 46). According to him, for understanding human life, it is necessary for the clinicians to consider three contemporaneous processes: biological, psychological, social-cultural systems. He argued that there is “intrinsic wisdom” (p. 73) in the culture, and it provides certain balances in an individual's life for emotional experiences in daily life. Further, Kennedy-Moore and

Watson (1999) suggested that a judgment of suppression may be part of an individual's highly valued cultural belief system and the effects of suppression may well vary depending on what meaning the individual and the culture attribute to it.

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), whereas "*the ego-focused emotions*" are emphasized in Western cultures, "*the other-focused emotions*" are accentuated in East Asian cultures. *The ego-focused emotion* is experienced by "*independent self*", which is regarded as the keynote of individualist cultures. And *the ego-focused emotion*, such as private anger, personal frustration, and individual pride, originates generally from the obstruction, breakdown, or the affirmation of internal attributes (one's own desires, needs, or ability). In contrast, the subject of *the other-focused emotion* is "*interdependent self*", which is considered as the keynote of collectivist cultures. And *the other-focused emotion* results typically from the motive to promote interpersonal harmony.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) surveyed how frequently Japanese respondents experienced each of the two-types of emotion. In the results, a correlation matrix for the emotions showed that *the other-focused emotions* were clearly separate from *the ego-focused emotions* in Japanese culture. Furthermore, neither positive nor negative *ego-focused emotions* had

any significant correlation with *the other-focused, positive emotions* (e.g., feeling of connection with someone). However, these *ego-focused emotions* were significantly related to *the other-focused, negative emotions* (e.g., feeling of indebtedness) and *the other-focused, ambivalent emotions* (e.g., feeling like leaning on someone).

For those with interdependent selves, emotional expressions tend to be thought of as a courteous ritual. In East Asian cultures, the public display of one's own internal emotions (especially private anger) may be at odds with his/her *interdependent self* and result in social conflict. On the contrary, in Western societies expressing the internal emotions (even private anger) tends to be accepted as a culturally sanctioned behavior. Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that in East Asian cultures, anger tends to arise from outside of the existing interdependence (e.g., rage against out-groups). Consistent with this assertion, Stipek, Weiner, and Li (1989) found that when explaining situations that induce anger, Chinese respondents were significantly more likely to report a situation in which something happened to someone as a cause of anger, such as "A guy on a bus did not give his seat to an old woman" (p. 114). Conversely, for Americans, the major cause of anger was the situation in which they themselves were the victim such as, "A friend broke a promise" (p. 114).

At this point in time, an important question should be raised; are those with *the interdependent selves* suppressive? They may be suppressive in respect that they are reluctant to express private anger. However, they may not be suppressive in respect that they are quite willing to express public anger. From this point of view, there can be no absolute suppression or expression at the conceptual level. Furthermore, there can be no universal suppression or expression from the cultural standpoint. Thus, as for the suppression-related research, it is important to look into which sides are inhibited and disclosed by suppressors in the specific culture.

In summary, contrary to the inhibition hypothesis, there can be successful suppression. And suppression cannot be defined universally. Only there can be different types of suppression depending on cultural background.

### ***Han* and Successful Suppression**

In considering cultural difference, we may refer to the Individualism scale developed by Hofstede (2001). Ranging from 0 to 100, the score is interpreted that the higher score a country gains the more individualistic traits a citizen of the country possesses. America's value on the individualism index is 91. Conversely, Korea's index value is 18. Therefore, America can be said to have an

individualist culture and Korea can be said to belong to the collectivist culture.

Consistent with this analysis, Diener, Suh, Smith, and Shao (1995) reported that Korean subjects showed significantly higher acceptance of negative emotions than U.S. participants. The tendency of Koreans to accept negative emotions more easily than Westerners may have been condensed into "*Han*".

### ***Sakhim* of *Han***

The representative national feeling for Korean people is *Han* (Shim, 1990). That is why Korean culture is called a culture of *Han*. Nevertheless, *Han*, as the character itself, has been shared by Korea, China, and Japan, *Han* as the representative emotion for Koreans is the most important key concept in understanding the national trait of Koreans (Choi & Kim, 1992). Furthermore, although *Han* is described in the dictionary as a heartburning, grudge, spite, or regret, *Han* is much more complex and has been considered essentially indescribable. Nevertheless, *Han* may be defined as a psychological process in which sorrow acquires a meaning to life through the very wisdom that the sufferer has managed to gain after going through tragic events.

In Korea, the typical coping strategy for *Han* is "*Sakhim*" (digestion, ripening, and maturation). According to Cheon (1993), "*Sakhim* of *Han*" is a kind of emotional



suppression mechanism that operates by subsiding deep into dark emotions and, as a result, freeing oneself from those gloomy emotions. At the same time, *Sakhim* of *Han* is a kind of maturation process which makes one's spirit become more mature and mellow through the process of internal fermentation of dark emotions. When we consider this transformation process of *Sakhim*, it seems to be very natural that the most frequently used coping strategy for Koreans appears to be suppression (Park, 1991). It is needless to say that *Sakhim* and suppression are different and can not be reduced to one concept. However, the fact that Koreans' most used defense mechanism is suppression seems to have something very much to do with the cultural tradition of *Sakhim*.

*Sakhim* of *Han* is the main cultural motive to make Korean life reach a kind of artistic state. The enhancement process of *Sakhim* is described in a poem, *Your Silence*, written by *Han* (1926/1996), one of representative national poets in Korean history.

I transferred the uncontrollable power of sadness and laved my forehead in it to quench the old ill with a fresh hope (p. 7).

Kim (1998), the ex-president of Korea who gained the Nobel prize for peace, asserted potential energy of *Han* in Honorary Degree Commemorative Lecture Meeting held at Korea

University.

*Han*, the special emotion of us, Korean people, has been potential energy for our nation. *Han* can be regarded as a struggling feeling to make cherished wishes come true... We, Koreans are the nation who never give up but struggle to overcome any frustration...Being with this *Han* spirit, I'm absolutely sure that we can overcome the crisis of International Monetary Fund (IMF), reunite, and become an advanced country.

When Korean people do not have strength to accept the terms their life offers them, they would neither surrender themselves to the terms nor force their own terms upon it. Koreans strive to achieve the natural harmony with the oppressive condition of life instead. That is the soul in Korean culture. This soul of Korean culture runs through certain attitudes to life such as contemplation on life, philosophic ripeness, living free from worldly cares. A poet, *To My Disease* written by Cho (1968/1987) illustrates this characteristic attitude very well.

Though you have gone somewhere  
with no news at all  
When I turn away from the work  
I was long occupied with to take  
a moment's breath of rest,  
Then you call on me without fail.

You, always the gloomy visitor,  
Come treading a dark sound scale

and leading an ominous shadow.  
But since you are my old friend,  
I regret the time I had forgotten you.

You persuade me to rest  
and teach me reverence of life.  
And what you whisper into my ears  
is always such nothing  
That I close my eyes tightly  
but I am terribly glad  
To hear that low and heavy voice of yours.  
Your hand feeling my warm brow  
is warmer than my hand,  
The wrinkles of your thin brow  
are more pathetic than mine.

I see my emaciated form of younger days in you,  
Hearing the echo of those days  
When I tired and tired to be a bit more sincere.

When I said that though I had no attachment to  
nor indulgence in life,  
I found this life was boundlessly beautiful;  
That, even if the punishment of hell awaits me  
I do not fear death,  
You were deeply angered, weren't you?  
You are my cordial and respected friend;  
Whatever you say, I am not offended.  
But still you are of a strange temper.  
When we do not agree with unpleasant expression  
or discouraging speech,  
You come in to persuade me without stopping  
for days and months  
But when I am willing to worship you,  
Then you take off, leaving me alone.

So long, old friend;  
Come anytime you feel like it.  
Let's talk of life together again over cups of tea  
(pp. 155-156).

### Presuppositions for Successful *Sakhim*

Not All the *Sakhim* of *Han* is mature suppression. It takes presuppositions for *Sakhim* to be mature suppression. *Sakhim* is most likely to be beneficial when it is applied to the situations under which emotional expression is not allowed because of social norms and/or a direct problem solving strategy is difficult to try.

Kennedy-Moore and Watson (1999) suggest three conditions under which emotional suppression can reduce arousal of negative feelings. Borrowing from their views, *Sakhim* as an emotional suppression can be regarded effective when it is applied to the following situations. First, *Sakhim* is most likely to be beneficial when emotional expression can incur further retaliation and censure by the target. Second, *Sakhim* is most likely to be beneficial when emotional expression can not produce a desired change in the target's behavior. Third, *Sakhim* is most likely to be beneficial when emotional expression may not produce a disinhibition of strong feeling.

### *Hwa-byung*

#### The Definition of *Hwa-byung*

If the terms of life causing *Han* is too

much distorted and an individual fails to compromise with them, such a condition may result in *Hwa-byung*, a kind of mental illness. In the *DSM-IV*, *Hwa-byung* is defined as follows:

a Korean folk syndrome literally translated into English as anger syndrome and attributed to the suppression of anger. The symptoms include insomnia, fatigue, panic, fear of impending death, dysphoric affect, indigestion, anorexia, dyspnea, palpitations, generalized aches and pains, and a feeling of a mass in the epigastrium. (p. 846).

#### **The Prevalence Rate of *Hwa-byung***

As yet the prevalence rate of *Hwa-byung* in a national sample has not been reported, but some studies suggest that about 4.2% of the general population in Korea (Min, Namgoong, & Lee, 1990) and about 11.9% of Korean American people may suffer from *Hwa-byung* symptoms (Lin et al., 1992). And a review of current literature shows that the highest incidence of *Hwa-byung* occurs among middle-aged, married women of lower socioeconomic status (Chi, Kim, Whang, & Cho, 1997; Min, 1989; Min & Kim, 1986; Min et al., 1990).

#### ***Hwa-byung* and *Sakhim* of *Han***

Since the first research on *Hwa-byung* was reported by Lee (1977), many studies (Min, 1989; Min, 1991; Lin, 1983; Park, Kim, Schwartz-Barcott, & Kim, 2002) have been

conducted in attempt to define the etiology of *Hwa-byung* through interviews with *Hwa-byung* patients. These investigations suggested that *Hwa-byung* was linked to incomplete suppression of anger. The studies using psychological scales instead of interviews also pointed out that *Hwa-byung* was related to inefficient suppression of anger (Chon, Whang, Kim, & Park, 1997; Chon, Park, & Kim, 1998; Min, Park, & Han, 1993).

Min (1991) reported that 85.6% of Korean *Hwa-byung* patients had *Han* and 80.1% of the patients regarded *Han* as the cause of their *Hwa-byung*. The past life experiences of *Han* were more cathartic while those related to *Hwa-byung* have been still disturbing the patients. As a result, he concluded that *Hwa-byung* can be said to be a pathological condition of *Han* resulting from failure to overcome *Han* in its long time course. In this sense, *Han* may reflect painful emotions that Korean people may suffer in a traditional socio-cultural life. However, *Han* can have totally different meanings depending on one's coping style (Cheon, 1993). That is, *Han* means very much negative emotions for those who have not well succeeded in *Sakhim* or suppression, but on the contrary it can mean so much positive emotions for those who have succeeded in *Sakhim*.

In considering the fact mentioned above, it seems that *Hwa-byung* occurs because of

incomplete *Sakhim of Han*.

### The Psychological Metabolism of *Sakhim*

According to Vaillant (1997), psychological maturation of an individual is closely connected with the process of psychological digestion of various life events just like an organism digests foods through the biological metabolic process and turns them into nutrients. At this point, the process of *Sakhim of Han* can be classified into four levels according to the degree of metabolism of events causing *Han* in the psychological world of an individual.

#### **Incorporation**

Events such as a loss of a loved one, separation from a loved one, and being treated unjustly can cause *Han*. And it may provoke people to show strong emotional responses. Traditionally, *Han*-provoking events make people experience severe characteristic helplessness, since it is difficult to find a direct solution to *Han*-provoking problems. This is why people tend to experience the feeling of being puppets of fate at this stage. The term incorporation connotes the least complete metabolism of a life event. As a matter of fact, those who experience *Han*-provoking events at the incorporation level will not be able to deal with those events psychologically. The book *The Little Prince* (Saint-Exupéry, 1943/2000) begins with a painting of a boa constrictor that

has swallowed a wholly unmetabolized elephant. This is a vivid image of incorporation. When people experience *Han*-provoking events at the incorporation level, they may suffer from Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

#### **Introjection**

Introjection means the leftover feelings after strong initial emotional responses to *Han*-provoking events gradually diminish. The ill feeling experience that comes from *Han*-provoking events belongs to this stage in general. Although it may come in a sporadic pattern, suffering from tragic events may continue at the introjection level. Those who use introjection might describe their suffering as a feeling like having an undigested thorn in their body. Those who experience *Han*-provoking events at the introjection level may show *Hwa-byung*.

#### **Internalization**

When people manage to endure whatever left behind after tragic events happened, they may become capable of accepting tragic situations as a fate preordained from a former life. It is similar to these proverbs: "Accidents will happen" or "We must eat a peck of dirt before we die". In the psychological world of people with Fatalism, tragic past events may still be there in an incompletely digested form. Thus, they tend to complain of suffering that

they can understand rationally but not emotionally. Those who reflect their lives at the internalization level may experience neurotic problems, since their past wounds have not been healed completely, rather they have been enduring the pain with their teeth clenched. Unlike *Hwa-byung* patients who show an emotional explosion due to the accumulation of anger, neurotic patients using internalization tend to hide their suffering. Thus even the observers who are close to the neurotic patients may not be aware of their suffering.

### Assimilation

In biology, assimilation refers to the phenomena that an organism takes foreign substances, and converts them into nutrients and living tissue of the organism. Psychological assimilation refers to the process through which an individual makes an experience a part of oneself. While biological assimilation happens in the physical world, psychological assimilation

comes in the psychological world. Those who have assimilated *Han*-provoking events will be able to accomplish a comprehensive harmony with their tragic fate. To be able to reach this harmonic state, reappraisal of the tragic events they have suffered must have preceded. They must learn the wisdom of life, reflected in the following proverbs: "Every cloud has a silver lining" or "The end of mirth is the beginning of sorrow". In this process, they come to feel pity for their own tragic situation. And this compassion may extend to compassion for aggressors or for those who are related to *Han*-provoking events, those who are puppets of fate, just like themselves. This process of change is well described in a previously mentioned poem of Cho (1968/1987). This assimilation process can be said to correspond to *Sakhim* in Korean people.

The psychological metabolism of *Sakhim* is depicted in Figure 1.

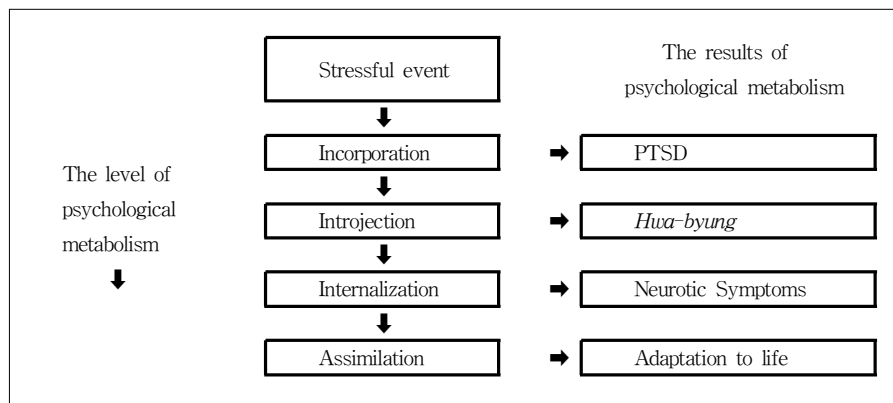


Figure 1. The psychological metabolism of *Sakhim*.

## Emotion-regulation Strategy of Cancer Patients and *Sakhim*

If the *Sakhim* (or suppression) process could yield a mature result, it could be expected to benefit the therapeutic process for people with cancer. There has not been a reported study that focuses on successful suppression (or *Sakhim*) of cancer patients so far. However, there are two types of supporting evidence that show how mature suppression can improve physical health as well as psychological well-being. One is about emotional intelligence and the other is about the defensive mechanism of *DSM-IV*.

### Emotional Intelligence and Successful Suppression

Salovey, Mayer, Golman, Turvey, and Palfai (1995) reported a negative correlation between emotional ambivalence and clarity of meta-mood, namely, self-reported competence in describing and identifying one's own emotions. Generally "mood is the term used to describe emotion that endures" (Izard, 1991, p. 21). In contrast, meta-mood or meta-mood experience refers to "the way individuals reflect on their moods" (Salovey, Mayer, Caruso, & Lopes, 2003, p. 258). Contrary to simply knowing if one feels good or bad, meta-mood experiences encompass informational processes that regulate perceptions and thoughts of the emotional framework

(Mayer, Salovey, Gomberg-Kaufman, & Blainey, 1991). The Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS; Salovey et al., 1995) was designed to measure how people think or feel about their emotions, but can also be used as "a proxy for self-perceived emotional intelligence" (Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003, p. 646). Salovey et al. (1995) suggested that those individuals who gained higher scores in clarity of meta-mood tended to show a decline in ruminative thought across time following a distressing event and to rebound from negative feelings. In other words, individuals who experienced feelings clearly were more likely to suppress successfully.

The relation between emotional intelligence and mature suppression can be verified by the research to measure the objective competence of emotional intelligence instead of self-perceived emotional intelligence. Using the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002), Brackett, Mayer, and Warner (2004) found a negative correlation between emotional intelligence and behaviors due to lack of suppression such as illegal drug and alcohol use. In this regard, Salovey et al.'s (1995) and Brackett et al.'s (2004) results provide excellent evidence for superior emotional intelligence (or at least sufficient self-confidence in one's emotional intelligence) may be a precondition for successful suppression.

### **Mature Suppression and Psychological Health**

There have been endless debates about defense mechanisms in the history of Psychology. However, this article will mainly focus on supporting evidence that mature suppression can improve physical health as well as psychological well-being (For surveys of the defense mechanism debate, see, e.g., Holmes, 1990; Vaillant, 1990).

As a method to study defenses, Vaillant (2000) used three diverse prospective studies of lives. In his studies, each cohort had been prospectively studied for over half a century: the "College" sample born about 1920, the "Core City" sample of inner-city men born about 1930, and the "Terman" sample of gifted women born about 1910. For all three samples, his methodology was to keep raters of psychological health and prospective behavioral outcome unaware of defense assessment and to keep raters of defenses unaware of evidence of positive mental health.

Vaillant (1990) argued that contrary to repression, suppression could predict positive health of the College sample. He reported a positive correlation between suppression and psychological health such as global mental health at age 63, maturity of psycho-social development, and marital stability. On the other hand, diagnosis of mental illness and alcohol abuse showed a negative correlation with suppression. Vaillant and Vaillant (1992) found

out that chronic alcoholics in the Core City sample used only one third of suppressions that unimpaired men and low IQ men ( $IQ < 80$ ) in the same sample used. According to Vaillant (1997), the Terman sample also showed a positive correlation between suppression and psychological health such as life satisfaction, mental health, maturity of psycho-social development, job success, marital stability, and job enjoyment. In this regard, prospective studies' results provide substantial evidence that if cancer patients could use mature suppression it would fulfill an adaptive psychological function.

### **Mature Suppression and the Fighting Spirit of Cancer Patients**

It has been reported that a fighting spirit is associated with lower depression, anxiety and mood disturbance and better quality of life in previous cancer researches (Classen et al., 1996; Cordova et al., 2003; Cotton, Levine, Fitzpatrick, Dold, & Targ, 1999; Watson et al., 1991). The fighting spirit refers to "an attitude of optimism in the face of realistic appraisal of the illness" (Classen et al., 1996, p. 434). Up to now, it has been assumed that emotional suppression is significantly associated with a lower fighting spirit (Classen et al., 1996; Cordova et al., 2003). However, mature suppression of people with cancer may have a positive effect on the fighting spirit. As mentioned before, in the case

of public indignation (e.g., life-threatening disease), competent suppressors in East Asian cultures may not be inhibited, or rather, may be highly combative. Under effective suppression, even the psychological energy used for inhibition in the past may be converted into the resources for a fighting will. Probably, we can say the same thing about talented suppressors in Western cultures.

Provided that we do not confound successful suppression with ineffective suppression, suppression may be regarded as a useful coping mechanism for cancer disease. Thus intervention strategies for cancer patients should go beyond simply encouraging emotional expression and move to a point at which we can discern competent suppressors from incompetent suppressors.

## Discussion

Up to now, research on emotional coping of cancer patients has leaned towards focusing on the negative effects of suppression. One of the problems that these studies have is that they fail to discriminate between mature suppression and immature suppression.

As mentioned above, if suppression works in an immature way, like the opinion of scholars advocating the inhibition hypothesis, it would not only increase vulnerability to stress-related diseases but also have a bad

influence upon the emotional coping of cancer patients. Especially, in considering the fact that Koreans tend to believe that they can be rewarded for suffering even when they just passively endure it without adopting a more positive approach (Choi & Jung, 2001), it is important to understand that all the inhibition is not always of use. If we are not to run into danger with a fatalistic attitude, some prerequisite conditions are needed. *Sakhim* is most likely to be beneficial when it is applied to the situations under which emotional expression is not allowed because of social norms and/or a direct problem solving strategy is difficult to try.

As Salovey et al.'s (1995) and Vaillant's (2000) studies show, if suppression could be a mature process, it would be expected to contribute to physical and psychological health. With respect to this topic, *Sakhim* of *Han*, the cultural wisdom of Korea, can prove to be very significant insights. So far, Western literature dealing with emotional coping of cancer patients (e.g., Giese-Davis & Koopman et al., 2002) seems to overlook oriental wisdom. Confucian culture in East Asian societies sought to mute, or at least to moderate, the public expression of personal sorrow (Schwarcz, 1997). As long as we deal with wisdom, culture matters, because a certain behavior that in one cultural context may be smart, but in another cultural context, stupid (Sternberg, 2004).



In this context, it can be assumed that suppression as cultural wisdom consists of two components. One is the common factor and the other is the specific factor. This approach is analogous to the schemes produced by a two-factor theory of intelligence (Spearman, 1931) and an eclectic-integrative approach of psychotherapy (Garfield, 1995).

The common meta-components of suppression (or *Sakhim*) is emotional regulation through emotional intelligence and mature defense. And specific factors of suppression (or *Sakhim*) are related to cultural pragmatics. The main aspects of the relationship between suppression and culture (cultural contexts of suppression) can be summarized as follows.

First, suffering as an oppressive condition of living which suppression deals with, is a cultural experience. According to Kleinman and Kleinman (1997), "There is no single way to suffer; there is no timeless or spaceless universal shape to suffering" (p. 2). Therefore, each culture will have a unique suffering as an oppressive condition of living which suppression deals with.

Second, the ultimate objective of suppression is to make an individual adapt himself to the cultural world. Suppression can be regarded as a kind of strategy for being. Such a strategy for being deals with, not only changeable suffering, but also people's perceptions of suffering that they are unable to change. People

do not just tolerate suffering. As they cope with suffering, they run after the psychological consummation of their lives. It is just a culture that offers practical tools to consummate life. As there are different traditions of culture, different types of suppression may exist. Thus *Sakhim* is the Korean type of suppression.

Of course, not all the *Sakhim of Han* that Koreans use is always of adaptive. The levels of *Sakhim* can be classified into four categories according to the degree of psychological metabolism of *Han*-provoking events. Incorporation connotes the least complete metabolism of a stressful event and assimilation is the most complete metabolism. *Sakhim* of cancer patients can be effective only when it comes up to the level of assimilation.

In this study, the inhibition hypothesis was subject to critical review and the possibility that *Sakhim of Han* as a mature suppressive mechanism may play a useful role in emotional coping of cancer patients was suggested. Till now, there has not been a reported study that focuses on successful suppression of cancer patients. It thus appears that further empirical research is needed to examine the therapeutic effect of mature suppression (or *Sakhim*) in cancer patients.

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## 성숙한 억제로서의 한의 삭힘: 암 환자들의 정서적 대처를 위한 시사점

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본 연구에서는 성숙한 억제 기제로서의 한의 삭힘이 암 환자들의 정서적 대처 과정에서 유용한 역할을 할 수 있는 가능성을 탐색하였다. 많은 임상 문헌들은 정서적 제지, 즉 억제나 억압이 압과 같은 스트레스 관련 질환들에 대한 취약성을 증가시킨다고 제안한다. 하지만 비록 정서적 제지와 억압이 분명하게 연관되어 있을 지라도, 제지가설은 세 가지 약점을 가지고 있다. 그 세 가지 약점이란 실험적 반증의 존재, 억제와 관련된 논의들에서의 편향성 그리고 문화적 영향력을 간과한 것이다. 본 논문에서는 정서적 제지 이론들의 개념적 토대들을 비판적으로 살펴본 뒤, 성공적인 억제가 존재할 수 있는 이론적인 근거를 제시하였다. 삭힘의 심리학적인 기제와 성공적인 삭힘을 위한 전제조건을 살펴본 후, 암 환자들의 정서적 대처를 위한 시사점이 논의되었다.

주요어: 제지가설, 억제, 억압, 암, 한, 삭힘