

The Role of Emotional Regulation in Mental Well-being of Indian Adolescents

¹Sunita Devi

Adolescence is an important transitional period of life marked with curiosity and experimentation with risky behaviours and experience of emotional changes which may pose threat to their mental well-being. Hence, it becomes increasingly important for adolescents to develop positive emotion regulation (ER) strategies, which promotes mental well-being in youth. The objectives of the present study were to investigate the relationship between emotional regulation and mental well-being among Indian adolescents and to explore the areas of difficulties in the emotion regulation. The study used a correlational design. A total sample of 296 adolescents (174 males and 122 female; age range 12–15 years) were recruited from a private school in Delhi NCR through purposive sampling and administered the scales of Difficulty in Emotion Regulation (DERS-18) and Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF). The obtained quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation. A significant negative relationship between the variables, viz. difficulties in emotion regulation and mental health and well-being was found. The implications and limitations of the study are discussed.

Key words: Emotional Regulation, Mental Well-being, Adolescents

Introduction

Adolescence is the period between 10–19 years of age (WHO, 2012; UNICEF, 2005). Human beings have different needs at different stages of life. They need to develop new skills in order to face the life's challenges and for individual growth. The period of adolescence is considered very crucial as it can be the period of opportunities and growth yet at the same time poses major challenges and puts them to numerous vulnerabilities. It is a transitional period of various changes like biological, mental, emotional and social development apart from school transitions. They may face challenges related to academic, personal or social area. They have to learn to make a balance between freedom and responsibility; accountability that is expected from them due to their growing age; develop

self-identity and also form peer relationships. This decisive developing phase sets the base for a healthy future life. They also have high level of curiosity and urge for experimenting with risky behaviours during their important transitional period of life. Not having the skills to regulate the emotional changes may pose threat to their mental well-being especially during any challenging times like COVID-19 pandemic or transitional times like making the transition from school to college life. If they are having good mental health and emotional regulation, they can deal any challenging or transitional time much more effectively than those who are having poor mental health and poor emotional regulation. India, having the largest adolescent population of approximate 250 million adolescents who contribute to 21% of the total population (Census of India, 2011), needs to focus on taking care of this important future resource.

Emotions have a very significant role in moving our lives, they can move in positive or negative direction. Emotions are affected internally by our cognitions and externally from situations (McRae, Misra, Prasad, Pereira, & Gross, 2012). Several mental health issues

¹Faculty, Dept. of Rehabilitation Psychology,
National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with
Intellectual Disabilities (NIEPID), Formerly known as
NIMH, DoPWD, Ministry of Social Justice &
Empowerment, Govt. of India, Manovikas Nagar,
Secunderabad- 500009. (Corresponding Author)
Email-sunitapourush@gmail.com

develops because of lack of skills in regulating overpowering effects of emotions. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how they affect our mental well-being and how we can learn to regulate these. Emotion regulation is defined as the “processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating and modifying emotional reactions” (Thompson, 1994 p.27) and this important skill of regulating emotions should be one of the major task during adolescence. Human beings have the capacity to learn different emotions and these can be conditioned by our environment as we interaction with others in our environment in life. Because of the evolving regulatory neural circuitry, emotion regulation skills can be improved significantly during adolescence.

Emotion regulation (ER) can be defined as “a goal-directed process which influence the intensity, duration, and type of emotion experienced” (Gross & Thompson, 2007). As adolescents get different exposure to emotional situations and encounters, their neural connections develop and their skills of emotion regulation develop considerably. The skill of emotion regulation is an important socio-emotional skill which helps the individual to understand the emotionally stimulating situations and act effectively. The ability of emotion regulation influence different areas of functioning like physical, psychological, social and academic performance (Mikolajczak & Desseilles, 2012).

Several research studies explored the relation between the disturbances in emotion regulation and the vulnerability for developing and maintaining different psychopathologies like anxiety and depression and the majority of people have onset of depression during the transition from middle to late adolescence (Barlow, Allen & Choate, 2004; Campbell-Sills, et. al. 2006; Kashdan & Steger, 2006; & Mennin, 2006). Similarly, it was found that due to lack of emotional regulation skills, adolescents manifest increased internalizing symptoms (Ahmed, Bittencourt-Hewitt, & Sebastian, 2015) and the onset of internalized symptoms found to be at the age of 14–15 years during adolescence (Ge, Conger, & Elder 2001; Horowitz & Garber, 2006; Kessler et al., 2005). Evidently, emotion regulation is found to be associated with the onset and maintenance of adolescents’ psychopathology (Mc Laughlin, et. al., 2011). Hence, the period of adolescence is significantly important to study in order to understand and develop emotion regulation.

Numerous research studies have highlighted the importance of effective emotion regulation in improved

psychological health, recovering from psychological disorders or emotional problems (Aldao, et.al, 2014; DeSteno, Gross, & Kubzansky, 2013). Emotional intelligence play an important role in making individuals more resilient, improved their sense of self-efficacy and make them less anxious, less depressed, and less reactive which help them to cope and adjust to their environment more positively (Wapaño, 2021). Guerra-Bustamante, et. al. (2019) proposed by increasing the capacity of understanding and regulation of emotional intelligence, happiness can also be increased and adolescence period is to develop the emotional capacities that add greater happiness in life of the individuals. There are studies which indicate the relation between different emotional regulation strategies (such as reappraisal and suppression) and social adjustment that have important implications for social and psychological well-being. (Chervonsky & Hunt, 2019). Traits of emotional intelligence like self-awareness, social deftness, and the ability to delay gratification, to be optimistic in the face of adversity, to channelize strong emotions and be empathetic with others help adolescents to be more socially adjusted (Sasikumar, 2018). It has been also reported that there is a significant relationship between emotional maturity and general well-being of adolescents (Joy & Mathew, 2018).

Hence, it becomes all the time more important to focus on developing positive emotion regulation (ER) strategies, which promotes mental well-being in adolescents and youth.

Objectives

To study the emotional regulation and mental well-being of Indian adolescents.

To find the relationship between emotional regulation and mental well-being among Indian adolescents.

Hypotheses

There will be no significant difference between the emotional regulation and mental well-being of Indian adolescents with respect to their gender.

There will be no significant relationship between emotional regulation and mental well-being among Indian adolescents.

Method

Sample: The study used a correlational design. A total sample of 296 adolescents (174 males and 122

females; age range 12–15 years) were recruited from a private school in Delhi NCR through purposive sampling.

Tools

The Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) (Keyes et al., 2009) contains 14 items use a Likert scale of 6-point (Never, once or twice a month, about once a week, two or three times a week, almost every day, and every day) used for 12-18 years old. The scale comprised of three subscales: Emotional well-being Social Well-Being and Psychological Well-Being. If the individuals rate their feelings “every day’ or ‘almost every day’ for at least one statement/item out of three given for hedonic well-being, and minimum six out of eleven signs of positive functioning for the past month, the individual is considered to have flourishing mental health. People who rate their feelings, ‘never’ or ‘once or twice’ in the last one month, on minimum one statement/item of hedonic well-being and minimum six items of positive functioning are identified as languishing on mental health.

People who rate their feelings, ‘about once a week’, ‘two or three times a week’, are identified as having moderate mental health. The short form of the MHC has shown excellent internal consistency (> .80) and discriminant validity in adolescents (age range 12-18) and adults in the U.S.

Difficulty in Emotion Regulation Scale-18 (DERS-18: Victor & Klonsky, 2016) uses a Likert-like scale ranging from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always) is used for 11-18 years old. It is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure various aspects of emotional dysregulation. Higher the individuals scores on the measure, more the difficulties they face with emotion regulation. The measure displayed excellent reliability at the total scale level (a = .91).

Procedure

The researcher sought permission from the school authorities to collect the research data. Then researcher met with the students and briefed about the purpose and assured the confidentiality. After their consent for the participation in the study, the mental health continuum-short form and difficulty in emotion regulation scale-18 were administered. The obtained data was scored and analysed quantitatively, using descriptive statistics, independent samples ‘t’ test, and pearson’s correlation.

Results and Discussion

This study is a correlational research which examined whether emotional intelligence is related to

mental health or not. One of the main objective of the study was to find out the difficulty level of the emotional regulation and mental well-being of Indian adolescents. The total sample was 296 adolescents studying in class 8th and 9th in which 122 were female and 174 male.

Table 1
Showing the descriptive statistics (n=296)

	<i>DER</i>	<i>MHC</i>
Mean	46.58	42.91
Standard Error	0.59	0.61
Standard Deviation	10.18	10.43
Sample Variance	103.73	108.83
Confidence Level (95.0%)	1.17	1.19

Table 2
Level of difficulties of emotion regulation (in percentage)

Emotion Regulation	Poor	Moderate	Good
122 Female	25%	57%	19%
174 Male	23%	60%	17%
Total = 296	24%	58%	18%

Table 2 presents the level of difficulties of emotion regulation (in percentage). The data shows that only 18% adolescents are in emotion regulation where as a significant high number of adolescents are poor (24%) in regulating their emotions and 58% are moderate in emotion regulation. Various research studies have demonstrated the association between inappropriate or ineffective emotion regulation and depression and anxiety disorders and that lack of emotion regulation leads to the development and maintenance of these disorders (Barlow et al., 2004; Berking & Whitley, 2014; Campbell-Sills et al., 2006a; Campbell-Sills et al., 2006b; Kashdan & Steger, 2006; Kashdan et al. 2006; Mennin, 2006; Sumida, 2010). Several other research studies have supported the role of effective emotion regulation in enhancing psychological health and reducing psychological disorders or emotional problems (Aldao, et.al. 2014; DeSteno, et. al. 2013).

Table 3
Level of mental well-being (in percentage)

Mental well-being	Flourishing	Moderate	Languishing
122 Female	39.3%	53.3%	7.4%
174 Male	32%	62.1%	5.7%
Total = 296	35.1%	58.5%	6.4%

Table 3 shows that overall 6.4% of adolescents are languishing, 58.5 % are having moderate level of mental well-being and only 35.1 % adolescents are flourishing which is quite an alarming figure. On gender wise comparison, female adolescents found to be languishing

more (7.4%) than their counterparts (5.7%). This difference was also visible in level of flourishing where female adolescents found to have better flourishing mental health (39.3%) than the male adolescents (32%). Several previous studies have recognised the role of age and sex in the dimensions of psychological well-being (Keyes & Ryff, 1998; Marmot et al., 1998; Ryff & Singer, 1996). According to Ryff and Singer (1996) women valued themselves higher on positive relations with others and personal growth irrespective of their age whereas boys valued themselves higher on environmental mastery and self-acceptance than girls.

Table 4
Showing the Pearson’s correlation coefficient(r) between Emotion Regulation and Mental well-being.

<i>Variables</i>												
Difficulties in Emotion Regulation	- 0.22											
Mental Health Continuum												
*Significant at 0.01 level												
	A	C	G	I	N-A	S	DER	EWB	SWB	PWB	MHC	
Awareness	1											
Clarity	0.14	1										
Goals	-0.09	0.22	1									
Impulse	0.00	0.30	0.41	1								
Non- Acceptance	-0.15	0.21	0.31	0.17	1							
Strategies	-0.10	0.24	0.46	0.43	0.21	1						
Total DER Score	0.15	0.57	0.70	0.72	0.54	0.67	1					
Emotional Well Being	-0.12	-0.16	-0.17	-0.16	-0.06	-0.15	-0.24	1				
Social Well Being	-0.02	-0.14	-0.08	-0.12	0.03	-0.07	-0.12	0.35	1			
Psychological Well Being	-0.14	-0.12	-0.14	-0.12	-0.03	-0.12	-0.20	0.51	0.36	1		
Total MHC Score	-0.12	-0.17	-0.16	-0.16	-0.01	-0.14	-0.22	0.73	0.75	0.83	1	

Table 4 above reveals that there is a significant negative correlation between emotion regulation and mental well-being ($r = -0.28$), indicating “more the difficulty in emotion regulation less is the mental well-being”. Thus the null hypothesis Ho2 which states that, “there is no significant relationship between emotion regulation and mental well-being among Indian Adolescents” stands rejected. Many investigators have supports the result findings (Mulkey, 1999; Adewuyi, 2010; Nelson, 2010 & Yildirim, 2012). One of the study by Martinez-Pons (1997) reveals that individuals who

have higher level of emotional intelligence experience better mental health; Gohm and Clore (2002) also reported in their study the positive correlation between self-reported emotional intelligence is related to self-reported well-being. Research also shows that individuals with high emotional intelligence report fewer clinical symptoms, such as anxiety and depression (O’Connor & Little, 2003). Bar-On (2000) reported various measures of mental health are related with emotional intelligence. Gupta and Shusil (2010) have also found the positive correlation between emotional

intelligence and mental health among college students in their study. Evidence from the previous research is consistent with these results.

The current study was designed to see the relationship between emotion regulation and mental wellbeing among adolescents. The findings from this study, as hypothesized, revealed that adolescents who experiences low level of difficulties in emotion regulation have higher level of mental health and well-being and more the difficulty in emotion regulation less is the mental well-being.

The findings supported previous researches where it show that emotion regulation strategy use, mental health, and social outcomes all play important and interrelated roles in adolescent wellbeing (Chervonsky, & Hunt, 2019). There is a consistent body of evidence from self-report studies that disruptions to emotion regulation capacities are associated with greater likelihood of experiencing anxiety and depression in adolescence. There is also evidence suggesting that these disruptions to emotion regulation are predictive, rather than sequelae, of future psychopathology ((Aldao, et.al, 2014; Chervonsky, & Hunt, 2019; DeSteno, Gross, & Kubzansky, 2013).

Understanding difficulties faced by emotion regulation in adolescents is critical for developing and improving the existing programs for emotional regulation or developing emotional intelligence or

competence interventions for adolescents' mental health and wellbeing.

The findings of this study are relevant in that they reveal the high level of difficulties in regulating their emotions faced by adolescents and as a result negatively impact their mental health. It is very important to focus on building the emotional competence and emotion regulation of the adolescents as it can cost very high in terms of their mental health, academics success, relationships with significant people in their life and later in adult life their overall adjustment and happiness. Hence it is important that parents and schools start focusing on building the emotional intelligence and regulation as an urgent need of the hour. It is crucial to understand that to implement an emotional competency/intelligence program in schools, it should be based on solid theoretical framework. It should specify the program goals and strategies for the chosen emotional competency/intelligence program framework. Salovey et al. (1999) suggested that EI programs should be integrated in the academic program, and shouldnot just be an extra, separate seminar-workshop, or additional course. The idea is to complement regular academic subjects with lessons and practice on emotional competencies, such as how to handle stress, anxiety, and frustration in a statistics class.

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Received: 12 April 2023

Revision Received : 10 August 2023

Accepted : 13 August 2023

