Multidimensional Assessment of Emotion Regulation and Dysregulation: Development, Factor Structure, and Initial Validation of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale

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Accepted August 8, 2003

Given recent attention to emotion regulation as a potentially unifying function of diverse symptom presentations, there is a need for comprehensive measures that adequately assess difficulties in emotion regulation among adults. This paper (a) proposes an integrative conceptualization of emotion regulation as involving not just the modulation of emotional arousal, but also the awareness, understanding, and acceptance of emotions, and the ability to act in desired ways regardless of emotional state; and (b) begins to explore the factor structure and psychometric properties of a new measure, the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS). Two samples of undergraduate students completed questionnaire packets. Preliminary findings suggest that the DERS has high internal consistency, good test-retest reliability, and adequate construct and predictive validity.

KEY WORDS: emotion regulation; emotion dysregulation; assessment; experiential avoidance; deliberate self-harm.

Consistent with behavioral theories of psychopathology that highlight the importance of the function of problem behaviors rather than symptom picture (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follitte, & Strosahl, 1996), increasing attention has been paid to emotion regulation as a potentially unifying function of diverse symptom presentations and maladaptive behaviors (Gross & Munoz, 1995). Although there is some preliminary literature on the role of emotion regulation deficits in a range of clinical disorders, including substance abuse (Hayes et al., 1996), generalized anxiety disorder (Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, & Fresco, 2002), and complex posttraumatic stress disorder (Cloitre, 1998), the most comprehensive work highlighting the role of emotion dysregulation in a clinical disorder has been Linehan’s theoretical work (Linehan, 1993) on the development of borderline personality disorder. Linehan proposes that emotion dysregulation is one of the central features of borderline personality disorder and underlies many of the associated behaviors of this disorder, including deliberate self-harm (a behavior thought to serve an emotion-regulating function). Her conceptualization of self-harm as an emotion regulation strategy is supported by both empirical and theoretical literature on the function of this behavior (see Briere & Gil, 1998; Gratz, 2003). It has been similarly suggested that the perpetration of violence toward others (e.g., intimate partners) may function to regulate emotions (Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002)—consistent with findings from experimental studies that aggressive behavior can serve an affect regulatory function (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001).

Despite its clinical significance, however, the role of emotion regulation deficits in the development and maintenance of clinical difficulties has not been adequately researched in adults. Likely contributing to the lack of research in this area is the absence of both consistent, agreed-upon conceptualizations of emotion regulation and comprehensive measures that adequately assess the
complexity of this construct among adults. The purpose of the present study was to develop and validate a measure of clinically relevant difficulties in emotion regulation that is based on a comprehensive, integrative conceptualization of emotion regulation. This paper (a) reviews the extant literature on the conceptualization and measurement of emotion regulation (and dysregulation); (b) provides an integrative conceptualization of emotion regulation that may be used in future research in this area; and (c) begins to explore the factor structure and psychometric properties of a new measure of difficulties in emotion regulation, the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS).

Some conceptualizations of emotion regulation emphasize the control of emotional experience and expression (especially the expressive control of negative emotions) and the reduction of emotional arousal (see Cortez & Bugental, 1994; Garner & Spears, 2000; Kopp, 1989; Zeman & Garber, 1996). In contrast, others emphasize the functional nature of emotions in conceptualizing emotion regulation, suggesting that emotion regulation is not synonymous with emotional control and, as such, does not necessarily involve immediately diminishing negative affect (Cole, Michel, & Testi, 1994; Thompson, 1994). These latter approaches suggest that deficiencies in the capacity to experience (and differentiate) the full range of emotions and respond spontaneously may be just as maladaptive as deficiencies in the ability to attenuate and modulate strong negative emotions (Cole et al., 1994; Gross & Munn, 1995; Paivio & Greenberg, 1998). Similarly, some researchers have suggested that adaptive emotion regulation involves monitoring and evaluating emotional experience in addition to modifying it, highlighting the importance of the awareness and understanding of emotions (Thompson & Calkins, 1996).

The emphasis on the functionality of emotions is consistent with theory and research highlighting the potentially paradoxical, dysregulating effects of attempts to control emotional experience and expression (despite the fact that such emotional control has often been equated with emotion regulation, e.g., Garner & Spears, 2000; Zeman & Garber, 1996). Hayes et al. (1996) have suggested that efforts to avoid internal experiences (e.g., unwanted thoughts and feelings) underlie many psychological disorders—a theory with growing empirical support (see Stewart, Zvolensky, & Eifert, 2002). Further, both the general tendency to construct emotional expression and experiential instructions to conceal one’s emotional expressions have been associated with increased physiological arousal (Notariarus & Levenson, 1979; Gross & Levenson, 1997), suggesting that attempts to control emotional expression may increase risk for emotion dysregulation (given that high levels of arousal are more difficult to regulate; see Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Flett, Blankstein, & Obertynski, 1996). This literature suggests that an emphasis on the control, rather than the acceptance, of emotional responses may confound processes that undermine regulation with those that are regulatory. Therefore, some conceptualizations of emotion regulation emphasize the importance of accepting and valuing emotional responses (Cole et al., 1994; Linehan, 1993). Consistent with these approaches, researchers have suggested that the tendency to experience negative emotions in response to one’s own emotional reactions (indicative of a lack of emotional acceptance) is maladaptive, and associated with greater difficulties in emotion regulation (Cole et al., 1994; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999; Paivio & Greenberg, 1998). Researchers have suggested the necessity of considering the demands of the situation and goals of the individual when evaluating emotion regulation (Thompson, 1994; Thompson & Calkins, 1996), as emotion regulation can only be understood and evaluated within a specific context (Cole et al., 1994; Thompson, 1994). Knowledge of the specific emotion regulation strategies used by an individual, in the absence of information on the context in which they are used, may provide little information about the individual’s ability to regulate her or his emotions effectively. Adaptive emotion regulation instead involves flexibility in the use of emotion regulation strategies (Cole et al., 1994; Thompson, 1994).

Researchers have also suggested that adaptive emotion regulation involves altering the intensity or duration of an emotion rather than changing the discrete emotion that is experienced (Thompson, 1994; Thompson & Calkins, 1996). In other words, adaptive regulation involves modulating the experience of emotions rather than eliminating certain emotions. This modulation of arousal is thought to be in the service of reducing the urgency associated with the emotion so that the individual is able to control her or his behavior (as opposed to controlling emotions themselves). These conceptualizations of emotion regulation emphasize the ability to inhibit inappropriate or impulsive behaviors, and behave in accordance with desired goals, when experiencing negative emotions (see Linehan, 1993; Melnick & Hinshaw, 2000).

On the basis of the above conceptual and empirical work, emotion regulation may be conceptualized as involving the (a) awareness and understanding of emotions, (b) acceptance of emotions, (c) ability to control impulsive behaviors and behave in accordance with desired goals when experiencing negative emotions, and (d) ability to use situationally appropriate emotion regulation strategies flexibly to modulate emotional responses as desired in order to meet individual goals and