

A Study of Thought Control on Emotional Regulation and General Mental Health of Young Adults: A Gender Perspective

Ms. Zehra Azeem Fatima^{1*}, Ms. Reetika Pal²

ABSTRACT

An individual's psychological functioning and overall mental health is influenced by crucial cognitive and emotional processes like thought control and emotional regulation. Thought control pertains to the strategies individuals use to manage or suppress intrusive and unwanted thoughts. These may also interfere with our daily functioning. Emotional regulation encompasses the processes through which an individual evaluates, monitors and alters their emotional experiences and expressions. Previous studies suggest that adaptive techniques like cognitive reappraisal, distraction, and acceptance are associated with better well-being and psychological adjustment, whereas maladaptive techniques such as rumination, worry, and suppression are associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress. Furthermore, emotional regulation has also been recognized as a significant transdiagnostic element linked to several psychological disorders. General mental health reflects a person's overall psychological state that includes the ability to handle stress, maintain interpersonal relationships and achieve life satisfaction. Research further suggests that differences in gender exist in emotional expression and cognitive coping with males more likely favouring emotional suppression and females more likely to engage in rumination. Improved psychological well-being among young adults are contributed by understanding the interaction between thought control, emotional regulation and general mental health.

Keywords: *Thought Control, Emotional Regulation, General Mental Health, Gender Differences, Young Adults, Cognitive Coping Strategies*

Thought Control

The term "Thought control" refers to the processes that are used by individuals to regulate, suppress, or modify unpleasant and intrusive thoughts that interfere with their daily functioning (Wegner, 1994). According to the Ironic Process Theory, thought control can be both adaptive and maladaptive depending on the approach used, since attempts to suppress thoughts, specially under stressful situations, may paradoxically increase their occurrence because of the interplay between operating and monitoring processes (Wegner, 1994; Wang et al., 2020).

¹Student, Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, India.

²Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, India.

*Corresponding Author

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Distraction, cognitive reappraisal, social sharing, punishment and worry, are common thought control techniques. Adaptive techniques like reappraisal and distraction are related with better emotional adjustment, while worry and self-punishment, which are maladaptive techniques, are related with anxiety, depression and psychological distress (Feliu-Soler et al., 2019). As per Brosschot et al. (2010), thought control is affected by factors like stress levels, executive functioning, personality traits, and attitudes or beliefs about controllability.

Thought Control is usually measured using the Thought Control Questionnaire (Wells & Davies, 1994), and related scales which access cognitive coping strategies. Study has revealed that men may rely more on suppression due to societal norms regarding emotional expression, whereas women are more likely to ruminate and worry. (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). Emotional regulation and General mental health may get affected by these differences.

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to the methods by which individuals control their emotions, how they experience them and how they express them (Gross, 1998; Thompson, 1994). It plays an essential role in social functioning and psychological adjustment. Antecedent-focused tactics include cognitive reappraisal and response-focused strategies include expressive suppression, are distinguished by Gross's Process Model (Gross & Thompson, 2007).

Maladaptive Strategies such as rumination and suppression are associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms, on the other hand, adaptive strategies like reappraisal, acceptance, and problem-solving are related to resilience and well-being (Aldao et al., 2010). Emotional regulation is impacted by developmental, cognitive, biological and sociocultural factors, which also include early attachment and socialization patterns (Morris et al., 2007).

Measurement instruments include the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003) and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). There are gender differences in how individuals regulate their emotions, females often reporting greater emotional regulation patterns but higher levels of rumination, which makes them more vulnerable to internalizing disorders, according to the study by Chaplin & Aldao, 2013. Emotional regulation is regarded as a transdiagnostic feature underlying many psychological disorders and a significant predictor of mental health outcomes (Etkin et al., 2015).

General Mental Health

“Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to their community.” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018).

It incorporates both positive functioning such as resilience and life satisfaction and absence of mental illness (Keyes, 2005).

The biopsychosocial model by Engel, 1977, is the theoretical framework which is used to explain mental health. It also includes psychological processes, biological vulnerability and social influences. Poor mental health is related to interpersonal challenges, impaired academic performances and decreased quality of life (Prince et al., 2007). Differences in

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gender are visible, where females report higher internalizing symptoms level and males on the other hand, underreport their distress due to societal stigma (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012).

Although considerable research has been conducted, numerous conceptual and methodological gaps are still evident in the existing literature. The majority of studies have relied on cross-sectional self-report frameworks, which restricted the ability to make casual conclusions. Longitudinal studies assessing changes over time remain scarce. Moreover, among the young adult population of 18–30 years, gender differences have not been adequately examined leaving a gap in comparative gender-based analyses in this specific age range. Furthermore, thought control, emotional regulation, and general mental health have often been researched as distinct constructs, and relatively few studies have examined these variables within an integrated structural framework, particularly evaluating the mediating role of emotional regulation in the relationship between thought control and general mental health.

Recent studies suggest that thought control plays a crucial role in psychological functioning, yielding both beneficial and detrimental outcomes based on the techniques employed. Evidence from experiments and meta-analyses indicates that proactive and structured thought control methods may diminish intrusive thoughts and psychological distress in specific situations, whereas ineffective or cognitively demanding suppression strategies may lead to rebound effects and heightened emotional distress. Similar findings in the field of emotional regulation emphasize that repetitive negative thinking, rumination and worry are closely linked to symptoms of anxiety and depression, and these processes frequently function as mediating mechanisms connecting cognitive control difficulties to adverse mental health consequences.

As a result, the current study intends to address these gaps by analyzing the impact of thought control on emotional regulation and general mental health within young adults, specifically focusing on the gender differences.

Relationships Between Thought Control, Emotional Regulation and General Mental Health (Gender Perspective)

Thought Control and Emotional Regulation are strongly related to cognitive-emotional processes that have a huge impact on the general mental health. Concern and suppression are considered examples of maladaptive thought control strategies, these can disrupt the emotional regulation and lead to heightened distress and susceptibility to anxiety and depression (Aldao et al., 2010). While, adaptive techniques such as reappraisal support enhanced psychological well-being and effective emotional regulation.

From a gender perspective, the differences in mental health outcomes may be attributed to the differences in cognitive coping and emotional expression. The tendency for rumination in females may increase emotional distress, whereas the tendency to suppress in males may reduce emotional expression but raise internal stress. Few studies have examined these factors and within one framework, have combined the effects, particularly in the context of among young adults, despite they being the subject of independent research.

Thus, creating focused mental health interventions and measures to prevent requires an understanding of the gender based integrated relationship between thought control, emotional regulation and general mental health.

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The following are a few studies that examine the relationship between thought control, emotional regulation and general mental health

Thought Control

Thought control refers to an individual's perceived or actual capacity to suppress, manage, or regulate the unwanted intrusive thoughts. Intrusive thoughts are automatic, involuntary thoughts that may be unpleasant, repetitive, or resistant to suppression. The construct of thought control includes both an individual's perceived ability to manage unwanted thoughts and the cognitive strategies they employ to regulate them.

The emerging experimental findings suggested its adaptive potential. Ather and Shamas (2025) conducted a study on 65 Pakistani young adults aged 18-25, using a repeated-measures experimental study, in which the effectiveness of suppression was found to be significantly increased due to proactive thought control when compared to control groups, thus supporting its external validity within normative samples. Similarly, a review was conducted by Niczyporuk (2025), comparing the white bear and think/no-think paradigms and concluded that thought suppression can sometimes be both adaptive and effective in populations that are healthy and contingent upon individual and contextual factors. Genuchi et al. (2025), utilizing self-report survey methodology, examined the experiences of 785 U.S. men (mean age = 37.78) and observed that thought suppression mediated the relationship between externalizing depressive symptoms and traditional masculinity ideology, particularly through punishment and worry strategies. Harrington et al. (2018) revealed that sleep deprived participants experienced diminished emotional benefits from suppression and experienced significantly increased intrusive thoughts, using an experimental sleep-deprivation design, , thereby indicating the existence of biological moderators impacting thought control. Through a meta-analysis of 31 studies, Wang et al. (2020), demonstrated the presence of rebound effects after suppression of thoughts but also noted immediate enhancement effects observed specifically under conditions of cognitive load, suggesting that support to the ironic process theory. In a systematic review of 17 studies, Feliu-Soler et al. (2019), reported high reliability and significant correlations between perceived thought control ability and anxiety, depression and obsessive-compulsive symptoms across heterogenous populations, on the Thought Control Ability Questionnaire (TCAQ).

Emotional Regulation

Emotional Regulation encompasses the strategies which the individuals use to handle their emotional experiences, like through rumination, worry and beliefs regarding controlling of emotions.

In a comprehensive meta-analysis of 223 studies (N = 50,987), it was revealed to Lopez et al. (2025) that reduced self-control serves as a predictor of anxiety and depressive symptoms, which in turn resulted in perseverative negative thinking. This finding suggests that deficits in emotional regulation may precede the emergence of repetitive negative cognition. A study was conducted, involving 197 young adults aged 19-35 years with a history of anxiety disorders, by Fratea et al. (2024), in which it was revealed that rumination, sadness and physical symptoms serially mediated the relationship between anxious thoughts and well-being. A structural equation modeling was done on 159 adolescents, by Espinosa et al. (2022) and it was found that rumination and worry (as forms of repetitive negative thinking) explained differences between genders in anxiety and depression, in which the female participants displayed higher vulnerability. Through qualitative interviews with 48

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young adults (aged 18-24), Yun et al. (2022) found that thematic patterns of loneliness-related rumination had influenced their well-being. In a cross-sectional study involving 310 undergraduates and employing latent class analysis, Yapan and Turkcapar (2022) discovered that both thought suppression and rumination acted as transdiagnostic factors across anxiety and depression. Zetsche et al. (2018), conducted a meta-analysis involved 94 studies, in which a connection was established between repetitive negative thinking and deficits in discarding information which was irrelevant from working memory thus, it linked emotional regulation to cognitive control processes.

General Mental Health

General mental health includes symptoms of anxiety, depression, psychological distress and overall well-being. It reflects a person's cognitive, emotional and social functioning, showing how effectively they manage stress and daily challenges.

A study on experimental online training was conducted by Mamat and Anderson (2023) where 120 adults across 16 countries were taken, in which it was found that training aimed at suppressing fearful thoughts contributed to reduced anxiety, depression, and negative affect, with effects persisting for up to three months. Genuchi et al. (2025) further elucidated that thought suppression strategies mediated the externalization of depressive symptoms in men, thereby highlighting the gendered mental health expressions. In a clinical outpatient sample (N = 68), Ragan et al. (2016), found that distraction and social thought-control strategies correlated with lower psychological distress, whereas worry and punishment strategies predicted higher distress levels. Zetsche et al. (2018) and Lopez et al. (2025) both provided meta-analytic evidence showing that repetitive negative thinking and diminished executive control significantly contribute to anxiety and depressive symptoms.

CONCLUSION

The literature review highlighted the crucial importance of thought control and emotional regulation in influencing an individual's overall mental health and psychological functioning. Thought control indicates the cognitive processes which are used to manage intrusive or unwanted thoughts. The research suggests that the efficacy of these methods majorly depends on the strategies employed. Adaptive techniques like cognitive reappraisal, distraction, and social sharing have been linked to better psychological adjustment and reduced levels of distress, whereas maladaptive strategies which include worry, rumination, and self-punishment are often related to heightened anxiety, depression, and psychological distress.

Similarly, managing emotions is very important in shaping how individuals experience, perceive and express emotions. From previous studies it is evident that adaptive emotional regulation strategies contribute to improved psychological well-being, resilience, and are also effective in coping with stress. Contrarily, maladaptive regulation patterns especially repetitive negative thinking and rumination, are highly linked to several mental health difficulties.

General mental health is shaped by a combination of cognitive, emotional, and social factors, as emphasized by the existing research. In this context, thought control and emotional regulation serves as an important cognitive-emotional processes that influence how individuals respond to stressful situations and maintain psychological balance.

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In conclusion, the reviewed literature demonstrates that thought control, emotional regulation, and general mental health are strongly interconnected constructs that altogether affect psychological well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

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