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Research Paper

Exploring The Role of Difficulties in Emotional Regulation in Everyday Inattention, Impulsivity, and Cognitive Failure in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

We examined whether difficulties in emotion regulation predict everyday inattention, impulsivity, and cognitive failures in young adults. Using convenience sampling, we recruited 205 participants aged 18 to 28 years (M = 21.2, SD = 2.56). Participants completed the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ 2.0), the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS v1.1), and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-16). We analyzed data using Pearson correlations and linear regression. Results showed significant positive associations between emotion regulation difficulties and all three outcomes. Emotion regulation difficulties explained 52.6% of the variance in cognitive failures, 53.8% in inattention, and 63.4% in hyperactivity/impulsivity. These findings suggest that improving emotion regulation may reduce attentional lapses and cognitive errors in daily life.

Keywords: *Emotional Regulation, ADHD Symptoms, Inattention, Impulsivity, Cognitive Failures, Young Adult*

Everyday attention failures, impulsive actions, and cognitive slips are not merely occasional annoyances in the lives of young adults; they are pervasive experiences that accumulate into a profound sense of mental fragmentation, undermining academic achievement, workplace productivity, and psychological well-being. A university student stares at a textbook page for thirty minutes only to realise they have absorbed nothing. A young professional unlocks their smartphone to complete a critical task but cannot remember what they intended to do. A driver arrives home with no recollection of the journey. According to Cheyne et al. (2006) and Unsworth et al. (2012), more than 60% of young adults describe these experiences as frequent occurrences that interfere with day-to-day functioning. Developmental and clinical psychology have made it a top priority to understand why some people manage the attentional demands of modern life relatively easily while others consistently struggle.

Attention problems include the subjective perception of being easily distracted, having trouble maintaining focus, and having ideas unrelated to the task interfere with goal directed activities (Barkley, 1997). Impulsivity is the propensity to act without sufficient planning, to

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make snap decisions, and to find it difficult to suppress impulsive reactions in favour of longer-term objectives (Moeller et al., 2001). The term "cognitive failure" describes the common errors that capable people make when performing tasks that they should be able to perform, such as forgetting appointments, failing to notice signs, getting lost while reading, and inadvertently repeating the same action (Broadbent et al., 1982). According to Gross (1998, 2015), emotion regulation is the diverse range of procedures that people utilize to regulate the emotions they experience, the times they experience them, and the ways in which they exhibit them. According to the strength model of self-control, all self-regulation behaviors originate from a common pool of limited resources, which makes it more difficult to complete tasks requiring self-control in the future. Young people who consistently use avoidant or suppressive coping mechanisms may deplete their regulatory reserves, making them more susceptible to impulsive behaviour and subsequent attentional failures. From a content-specific standpoint, the intrusive thoughts and anxieties that accompany poor emotion regulation may directly compete with task-relevant information for working memory access, resulting in the objective consequence of cognitive failure and the subjective experience of mind-wandering (Klein & Boals, 2001). According to Tice et al. (2001) and Weiss et al. (2015), impulsivity itself may be a maladaptive type of emotion regulation—a tactic for avoiding or lessening negative affective states through quick action, even when such activities compromise longer-term objectives.

Wang et al. (2026) found that problematic TikTok use tendencies moderated the association between fear of missing out (FoMO) and greater self-reported cognitive failures in 412 young adults, suggesting that emotionally driven behaviours increase attentional lapses. Folivi et al. (2025) reported that the cognitive instability component of impulsivity predicted reduced error-related negativity amplitudes in 261 healthy young adults, indicating impaired cognitive control. Yeh et al. (2025) demonstrated that failure to regulate emotions enhanced attention toward emotional stimuli, disrupting attentional balance. Fornaro et al. (2024) showed that subclinical impulsivity in young adults was associated with less clustered and less efficient brain network organization in frontal, limbic, and striatal circuits. Mitchell et al. (2023) found that individuals with self-injury histories demonstrated increasing levels of rumination and catastrophizing over time. Xu et al. (2023) reported that impulsivity interferes with effective emotion regulation strategy selection in daily life. Hartanto et al. (2022) discovered that recurring cognitive failures had been anticipated by smartphone reviewing frequency rather than overall screen utilization. Elson, Malkoc, and Shiv (2017) showed that ineffective emotional responses to failure may contribute to repeated cognitive failures and poor self-regulation.

Despite these promising lines of inquiry, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, instead of modelling attention problems, impulsivity, or cognitive failure as connected outcomes that might have similar regulatory antecedents, the majority of previous research has looked at emotion regulation in isolation. No single study has simultaneously examined all three outcomes using well-validated measures within the same sample. Second, laboratory tasks typically assess attention over brief periods in distraction-free environments, whereas everyday attention must be sustained across extended periods amidst multiple competing demands. Cognitive failures questionnaires assess precisely the kinds of real-world lapses that matter most for daily functioning, yet they have been underutilised in emotion regulation research. Third, the specific regulatory strategies that confer risk or resilience remain inadequately characterised. It remains unclear whether reappraisal confers protective effects, whether suppression confers risk, or whether both strategies make

independent contributions. Fourth, much existing research relies on parametric statistical tests that assume normally distributed data and do not provide confidence intervals for effect sizes. The present study addresses these gaps by simultaneously examining emotion regulation, inattention, hyperactivity/impulsivity, and cognitive failures in a young adult sample, employing bootstrapped confidence intervals for correlation coefficients and using simultaneous multiple regression to assess each relationship robustly.

We predict that issues with controlling emotions will be significantly positively correlated with cognitive failures, inattention, and hyperactivity/impulsivity, and that emotion regulation problems will significantly predict each of these outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Problem

This study investigates the impact of emotional regulation on daily attention difficulties, impulsivity, and cognitive failures within a young adult population.

Research Objectives

1. To determine whether emotional control and cognitive impairments in young people are related.
2. To determine whether emotional control and symptoms of ADHD, particularly hyperactivity/impulsivity and inattention, are related. To ascertain the association between ADHD symptoms and cognitive failures.
3. To determine whether emotional regulation functions as a predictor of cognitive failures in young adults.
4. To evaluate whether inattention and impulsivity bridge the connection between cognitive deficits and issues with emotional regulation.

Hypotheses

1. Among young adults, emotional management and cognitive deficiencies are statistically significantly correlated.
2. There is a statistically significant correlation between young adults' symptoms of ADHD and emotional regulation.
3. Among young adults, ADHD symptoms and cognitive deficits are statistically significantly correlated.
4. Emotional regulation significantly predicts cognitive failures among young adults.
5. Inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity significantly mediate the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and cognitive failures.

Research Design

A comparative cross-sectional design was adopted for this investigation. This design facilitated the examination of relationships among emotional regulation, ADHD symptoms, and cognitive failures at a single time point. Standardized self-report instruments were administered to obtain data for each construct. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participant characteristics. Correlation analyses were performed to assess the interrelationships among the primary variables. Linear regression was employed to test whether difficulties in emotional regulation predicted cognitive failures, inattention, and hyperactivity/impulsivity. This analytical approach enabled the identification of emotional regulation as a significant predictor of cognitive and attentional functioning in young adults.

Sample

A total of 205 young adults constituted the sample for this study. Methods of convenient sampling were used to find participants. Male and female participants with a range of educational backgrounds were included in the sample. The sample plan was created to guarantee sufficient representation throughout the young adult age range. Before enrollment, each subject provided written informed permission. Every participant was guaranteed the secrecy of their answers and was made aware of their ability to withdraw at any moment.

Variables

1. **Independent variable:** Difficulties in emotion regulation
2. **Dependent variable:** Cognitive failures, ADHD symptoms (comprising inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity)

Tools

- **Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS v1.1)** The ASRS v1.1 (Kessler et al., 2005) was utilized to evaluate current ADHD-related symptomatology in adulthood. This 18item self-report measure is grounded in DSM-IV diagnostic criteria. A 6-item screening subscale is embedded within the instrument and has demonstrated efficacy in identifying adults who may require comprehensive clinical evaluation. Respondents used a five-point Likert scale to rate the regularity of symptoms they had experienced throughout the previous six months. The severity of ADHD symptoms is correlated with higher scores.
- **Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (CFQ 2.0) The CFQ 2.0** (Goodhew & Edwards, 2024; Broadbent et al., 1982) was administered to assess the frequency of everyday cognitive lapses. This 15-item self-report instrument measures failures across three domains: attention, memory, and motor coordination, occurring within the past six months. All responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where a score of 1 represented “never” and a score of 5 represented “very often.” Greater vulnerability to cognitive problems in daily life is indicated by higher overall scores
- **Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale – Short Form (DERS-16)** Emotion regulation capacities were assessed using the DERS-16 (Bjureberget al., 2016). This 16-item self-report scale captures five dimensions of emotion regulation: non-acceptance of emotional reactions, trouble controlling impulses, difficulty using goal-directed conduct when upset, lack of emotional clarity, and restricted access to efficient emotion management techniques. A 5-point Likert scale is used to rate the items. Higher scores indicate more severe emotional management issues

Statistical Analysis

To summarize participant demographics and the main study variables, descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values were computed. Before conducting additional analysis, the data's normality was evaluated. Parametric and non-parametric statistical techniques were applied conditionally based on normality test results. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed for variables meeting normality assumptions, whereas Spearman's rho was employed for variables violating normality assumptions. Linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictive relationships among emotional regulation difficulties, inattention, hyperactivity/impulsivity, and cognitive failures.

RESULTS

Table Descriptives

	DER _Non - acceptance	DER_ Goals	DER_ Impulse	DER_ Strategies	DER_ Clarity	Emotion regulation difficulty	Cognitive failure	Age	Inattention	Hyperactivity/ Impulsivity
Mean	10.2	10.6	9.99	16.9	6.82	54.4	33.6	21.2	20.0	40.7
Std. error mean	0.232	0.206	0.240	0.354	0.159	1.06	0.9 18	0.178	0.3 73	0.729
Median	11	11	11	17	7	55	33	21	21	41
Standard deviation	3.32	2.95	3.44	5.07	2.28	15.2	13.2	2.56	5.33	10.4
Minimum	3	3	3	5	2	16	0	1 8	6	12
Maximum	15	15	15	25	10	80	60	2 8	30	60

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for 205 young adults (M = 21.2, SD = 2.56). Participants showed moderate emotion regulation difficulties (M = 54.4, SD = 15.2), highest in limited strategies. Cognitive failures were moderate (M = 33.6, SD = 13.2). ADHD symptoms indicated moderate inattention and higher hyperactivity/impulsivity.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix

	Emotion regulation difficulty	Cognitive failure	Inattention	Hyperactivity/ Impulsivity
Emotion regulation difficulty	—			
Cognitive failure	0.726***	—		
Inattention	0.734***	0.705***	—	
Hyperactivity/Impulsivity	0.796***	0.697***	0.811***	—

*Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001*

The coefficients of Pearson correlation between emotional control issues, cognitive deficiencies, inattention, and hyperactivity/impulsivity are shown in Table 2. At the p <.001 level, every correlation was statistically significant and positive. Hyperactivity/impulsivity and emotion management issues were strongly positively correlated (r =.796, p <.001), followed by inattention (r =.734, p <.001) and cognitive failures (r =.726, p <.001). Furthermore, there was a strong correlation found between cognitive failures and hyperactivity/impulsivity (r =.697, p <.001) and inattention (r =.705, p <.001

Linear Regression

Table 3 Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p
1	0.726	0.526	0.524	226	1	203	<.001

Table 4 Model Coefficients - Cognitive failure

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Stand. Estimate
Intercept	-0.708	2.3675	-0.299		0.765
Emotion Regulation Difficulty	0.630	0.0419	15.021	<.001	0.796

Table 3 and 4 presents regression with Emotion regulation difficulty as a predictor of Cognitive failure. Regression 1: Emotion Regulation Difficulties Predicting Cognitive Failures, F(1, 203) = 226, p <.001, indicated that the model was statistically significant.

52.6% of the variance in cognitive failures was explained by difficulties regulating emotions (R^2 =.526, adjusted R^2 =.524). The unstandardized coefficient indicated that for each one-unit increase in emotion regulation difficulties, cognitive failure scores increased by 0.630 units (SE = 0.042, t = 15.02, p < .001). The standardized coefficient (β = .726) represented a large effect.

Linear Regression

Table 5 Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p
1	0.734	0.538	0.536	**237**	**1**	**203**	**<.001**

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=205

Table 6 Model Coefficients - Inattention

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Stand. Estimate
Intercept	5.981	0.9481	6.31	<.001	
Emotion Regulation Difficulty	0.258	0.0168	15.39	<.001	0.734

Table 5 and 6 presents regression with Emotion regulation difficulty as a predictor of Inattention.The model was statistically significant, F(1, 203) = 237, p < .001. Emotion regulation difficulties explained 53.8% of the inattention score dispersion (R2 =.538, adjusted R2 =.536). The standardized coefficient was β =.734, and a coefficient that is not was 0.258 (SE = 0.017, t = 15.39, p <.001).

Linear Regression

Table 7 Model Fit Measures

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Overall Model Test			
				F	df1	df2	p
1	0.796	0.634	0.632	**351**	**1**	**203**	**<.001**

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=205

Table 8 Model Coefficients - Hyperactivity/Impulsivity

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Stand. Estimate
Intercept	10.826	1.6522	6.55	<.001	
Emotion Regulation Difficulty	0.548	0.0293	18.74	<.001	0.796

Table 7 and 8 presents regression with Emotion regulation difficulty as a predictor of Hyperactivity/Impulsivity. The model was statistically significant, F(1, 203) = 351, p < .001.

Emotion regulation difficulties accounted for 63.4% of the variance in hyperactivity/ impulsivity scores (R^2 = .634, adjusted R^2 = .632). It was informal value 0.548 (SE = 0.029, t = 18.74, p < .001), with a standardized coefficient of β = .796.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationships among emotion regulation difficulties, ADHD symptoms (inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity), and cognitive failures in young adults aged 18 to 28 years. Four main hypotheses were tested, and all received strong empirical support. As noted by previous researchers (Cheyne et al., 2006; Unsworth et al., 2012), more

than 60 percent of young adults describe everyday attentional lapses as frequent occurrences that interfere with daily functioning. The current findings extend this literature by demonstrating that emotion regulation difficulties are robustly associated with these everyday cognitive problems.

Consistent with the first hypothesis, a substantial positive correlation emerged between cognitive failures and emotion regulation difficulties ($r = .726$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis further revealed that difficulties in 52.6 percent of the variation in cognitive failure rates was explained by emotional regulation. According to theoretical perspectives on self-control (Gross, 1998, 2015), inadequate emotional control places significant strain on cognitive capacities. Attentional control, working memory, and executive monitoring may become impaired when individuals cannot manage their emotional arousal, particularly during negative affective states. This interpretation aligns with earlier empirical work showing that impulse control difficulties during emotionally charged situations predict higher levels of self-reported cognitive failures. Experience-sampling studies have similarly demonstrated that periods of elevated negative emotion are accompanied by more frequent attentional lapses. As noted by Klein and Boals (2001), intrusive thoughts accompanying poor emotion regulation may directly compete with task-relevant information for working memory access, resulting in both objective cognitive failures and subjective mind-wandering.

The second hypothesis predicted a strong connection between ADHD symptoms and emotion regulation difficulties. This proposal was strongly supported. Emotion regulation difficulties showed strong positive correlations with both inattention ($r = .734$, $p < .001$) and hyperactivity/impulsivity ($r = .796$, $p < .001$). Regression analyses indicated that emotion regulation difficulties explained 53.8 percent of the variance in inattention and 63.4 percent of the variance in hyperactivity/impulsivity. According to Barkley (1997), attention problems include the subjective perception of being easily distracted and having trouble maintaining focus. The current findings suggest that these attentional difficulties are closely tied to how well individuals regulate their emotions. As argued by Moeller et al. (2001), impulsivity involves the propensity to act without sufficient planning and to find it difficult to suppress impulsive reactions. The particularly strong correlation with hyperactivity/ impulsivity observed here aligns with research on negative urgency (Cyders et al., 2014), which has frequently linked emotion control difficulties with impulsive behavior. Studies using ecological momentary assessment (Xu et al., 2023) have shown that during moments of increased impulsivity, individuals tend to deprioritize adaptive emotion regulation strategies, resulting in lower regulatory success. Neurobiological investigations (Fornaro et al., 2024) have demonstrated that emotional dysregulation and impulsivity share common brain circuits involving frontal, limbic, and striatal networks.

The third hypothesis predicted significant positive relationships between ADHD symptom dimensions and cognitive failures. Inattention showed strong positive correlations with cognitive failures. According to Broadbent et al. (1982), cognitive failures refer to common errors that capable people make when performing tasks they should be able to perform, such as forgetting appointments or failing to notice signs. Research on mind wandering (Klein & Boals, 2001) has shown that attentional disengagement is linked to poorer comprehension and task performance. As noted by Wallace and Vodanovich (2003), self-reported cognitive failures predict real-world outcomes such as workplace injuries and driving errors. The

present findings support the ecological validity of ADHD symptom dimensions by demonstrating their strong associations with real-world cognitive functioning.

The fourth hypothesis stated that emotion regulation difficulties would strongly predict cognitive deficits in young people. This hypothesis was strongly confirmed. Emotion regulation difficulties significantly predicted cognitive failures ($\beta = .726$, $p < .001$), inattention ($\beta = .734$, $p < .001$), and hyperactivity/impulsivity ($\beta = .796$, $p < .001$). The substantial percentages of explained variance, ranging from 52.6 percent to 63.4 percent, suggest that emotion regulation may operate as a transdiagnostic mechanism (Aldao et al., 2015). According to Gross (2015), emotion control is neither intrinsically adaptive nor maladaptive; rather, the outcomes of regulatory efforts depend on the strategies employed and the contexts in which they are used. The findings of this study lend support to the hypothesis that many forms of cognitive and behavioral control may be underpinned by emotional dysregulation. Impulse control, in instance, can sometimes function as a maladaptive kind of emotion regulation—a strategy employed to avoid or mitigate unpleasant emotional states by acting quickly, even when doing so goes against long-term goals.

The present findings carry several practical implications. First, they emphasize the functional importance of emotion regulation for young adults' daily cognitive performance, even in non-clinical populations. Second, they suggest that interventions targeting emotion regulation skills (Elzohairy et al., 2024) may improve attentional control and reduce everyday cognitive errors. Third, the particularly strong correlation with hyperactivity/ impulsivity indicates the importance of assessing emotional processes in individuals displaying impulsive behavioral patterns. As recommended by Mitchell et al. (2012), early detection of emotion regulation difficulties in young adults could serve as a useful preventive focus in educational, therapeutic, and workplace settings. Furthermore, the strong link between emotion regulation difficulties and hyperactivity/impulsivity underscores the need to systematically incorporate emotional assessment into evaluations for ADHD, consistent with recommendations from McLaughlin et al. (2011).

CONCLUSION

The current analysis provides important knowledge to the comprehending of emotion regulation and self-regulation in young adults. The results clearly demonstrate that everyday cognitive difficulties and ADHD-related symptoms are substantially and consistently connected to emotion regulation problems. The size of the observed correlations was large, suggesting that emotional regulation may be a key mechanism underlying attentional lapses, impulsive behavior, and common cognitive mistakes in daily life. Notably, emotion regulation difficulties emerged as a strong predictor of every outcome examined, with explained variance ranging from 52.6 percent to 63.4 percent. These findings are consistent with modern transdiagnostic frameworks (Aldao et al., 2015; Gross, 2015), which view emotion control as a fundamental self-regulatory ability that cuts across traditional diagnostic boundaries.

There are a few restrictions to be aware of. According to earlier researchers, the cross-sectional design makes it impossible to determine the causal direction (Mitchell et al., 2023). To elucidate chronology and possible bidirectional effects, longitudinal investigations are required. Response bias and associated method variance are increased when self-report parameters are the only ones used (Könen & Karbach, 2018). Future studies should use a

variety of techniques, such as ecological momentary evaluation, source reports, and behavioral tasks (Hartanto et al., 2022). The use of convenience sampling limits generalisability, and future studies should employ random sampling techniques with more diverse demographic groups.

In spite of these drawbacks, the current work adds significantly to the body of knowledge regarding young adults' emotional control and self-regulation. The findings support transdiagnostic approaches that view emotion regulation as a fundamental self-regulatory system and a promising target for intervention in educational, therapeutic, and professional contexts. Early identification of emotion regulation problems in young adults could allow timely support before difficulties become more entrenched. Overall, this research supports the idea that helping young people develop better emotion regulation skills could have widespread benefits for their attention, impulse control, and everyday cognitive functioning.

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Conflict of Interest

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