

A Study on the Effects of Emotional Regulation Strategies on Negative Emotions among College Students

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Keywords: Emotion regulation strategies; College students; Negative emotions; Cognitive reappraisal

Abstract: This research examines the relationship of emotion regulation strategies to negative emotions among college students, focusing on two commonly practiced regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive inhibition (sometimes referred to as suppression). This study included an integration of theorized models and empirical rationale to systematically identify the mechanisms by which each strategy influences the experience of negative emotion, and included consideration of implicit influences on regulatory effectiveness such as individual trait differences and strategic flexibility. The findings from this study provide clarity regarding the positive moderating role of cognitive reappraisal in relation to the experience of negative emotion among college students and indicate the potential negative moderating role of expressive inhibition. The findings also offer directions for implementing psychological well-being interventions for college students, providing both theoretical support and practical information for enhancing emotional management skills of college students and improving psychological service systems available on college campuses.

1. Introduction

The experience of college is a time of transition, where many factors can cause negative emotions and have an impact on both the physical and mental health of college students - this also affects their ability to effectively learn and live in their daily environments. There is a strong connection between the regulation of emotions and the psychological adjustment of college students because emotion regulation is the primary means by which students can regulate negative emotions. The academic literature on this topic has established an initial framework; however, future work will need to continue to study the adaptive properties of different types of emotion regulation to determine the best strategies to use by students to support mental health and success within the context of university. Thus, studying the differences and boundary conditions among the various types of emotion regulation will help to address the existing research gap, as well as provide the foundation for developing more effective means to provide targeted emotional support to college students.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Emotional Regulation Strategies and Negative Emotions in College Students

2.1 Core Theoretical Models of Emotional Regulation Strategies

The core theoretical model of emotion regulation strategy is supported by Gross' process model, which is different from the traditional pure classification theoretical perspective. This model is more in line with the actual emotional scenes of college students and divides emotion regulation into two stages: pre regulation before emotion generation and reaction regulation after emotion generation. The key focus of pre adjustment includes cognitive reappraisal, which is in line with the emotional triggering characteristics of college students when facing academic pressure and interpersonal conflicts. It is not simply a cognitive change, but guides college students to make reasonable attributions to events that trigger negative emotions, such as attributing exam failures to review methods rather than their own abilities. Reaction regulation includes expression inhibition, but this model does not simply define its advantages and disadvantages. Instead, it combines the psychological development characteristics of college students to point out the differences in the applicability of expression inhibition, breaking the traditional theory's single negative cognition of expression inhibition [1]. It focuses more on the adaptability of theory to the daily emotional management scenarios of college students, avoiding the rigid stacking of pure theory and making the model more practical and targeted.

2.2 Mechanisms of Negative Emotion Generation and the Mechanisms of Action of Emotional Regulation Strategies

The emergence of negative emotions among college students is not caused by a single factor, but rather by the interaction between their own cognitive biases and external pressure stimuli, such as academic setbacks, interpersonal friction, and other real-life scenarios, which can easily lead college students into irrational cognition and trigger negative emotions such as anxiety and depression. There are significant differences in the pathways of different emotion regulation strategies. Cognitive reappraisal focuses on intervening from the source of emotion generation, guiding college students to reconstruct event cognition, correct biased thoughts, and fundamentally reduce the generation of negative emotions. Unlike traditional methods of simply suppressing emotions, this pathway is more in line with the cognitive characteristics of college students and is easier to operate in daily life. Inhibition of expression focuses on external control after the generation of emotions. Although it can temporarily conceal the external manifestations of negative emotions, it cannot fundamentally alleviate emotional internal friction. Long term use can also lead to the accumulation of negative emotions. This pathway also explains why some college students experience heavier psychological burden as they suppress their emotions.

3. Key Empirical Findings on the Effects of Emotional Regulation Strategies on Negative Emotions in College Students

3.1 The Significant Alleviating Effects of Cognitive Reappraisal Strategies on Negative Emotions

The alleviation effect of cognitive reappraisal strategies on negative emotions among college students has been verified by multiple empirical studies, but its alleviation effect is not absolute and there are still specific issues that are easily overlooked. Its core advantage lies in not avoiding triggering events of negative emotions and guiding college students to actively adjust their cognitive interpretation of the event. However, many college students are prone to the

misconception of "superficial reassessment" in practical application, only changing their thoughts formally without truly accepting the event from the heart and correcting cognitive biases. Unlike traditional cognitive regulation that only focuses on changing thoughts, empirical research has found that when college students use cognitive reappraisal, they tend to adjust their attribution methods based on their own life scenarios. For example, when facing interpersonal conflicts, one does not simply blame others or oneself, but objectively looks at the reasons for the differences. However, this adjustment often lacks sustainability, and when encountering similar situations, one may still fall into the original cognitive misconceptions. This regulation method does not suppress the natural expression of emotions, allowing college students to gradually alleviate negative emotions such as anxiety and depression on the basis of reasonable cognition. However, it is difficult to cope with sudden and high-intensity negative emotions, such as extreme emotions caused by major setbacks. At this time, simple cognitive re evaluation is often ineffective. It is worth noting that this alleviation effect is not significantly affected by gender differences. The effect of using cognitive reappraisal to regulate negative emotions is basically the same for male and female college students. However, college students with low psychological qualities need more practice to exert the actual effect of the strategy, and are prone to weakening the reappraisal effect due to self doubt. This discovery also breaks the traditional cognition that there are gender differences in the effectiveness of cognitive reappraisal and reveals its specific limitations in practice [2].

3.2 The Risk of Ineffectiveness or Exacerbation of Negative Emotions Associated with Expression Suppression Strategies

The expression inhibition strategy is often ineffective in regulating negative emotions among college students, and in some cases can exacerbate the accumulation of negative emotions. This conclusion has been supported by multiple empirical studies targeting college students, and there are significant contextual and individual differences in its risks, which is often overlooked in traditional research. Unlike cognitive reappraisal, which regulates emotions from the root, expressive inhibition only focuses on the external manifestation of hidden negative emotions. For example, college students deliberately conceal their feelings of loss and frustration after experiencing academic failure, without confiding in others or self guiding. This behavior not only fails to alleviate emotions, but also gradually exacerbates emotional conflicts. This regulation method may seem to temporarily maintain surface calmness, but in reality, it can suppress negative emotions in the heart and prevent them from being effectively released. Long term use can also lead to problems such as slow emotional perception and passive interpersonal communication among college students, especially in intimate relationships, roommate interactions, and other situations that require emotional expression. Expression inhibition can exacerbate interpersonal conflicts and trigger new negative emotions. College students who use expressive inhibition for a long time often experience increased emotional tension, and the brief low mood may gradually evolve into sustained anxiety, especially when facing multiple pressures. This risk is more pronounced. Empirical research has also found that the ineffectiveness of expression inhibition is more prominent among lower grade college students, whose psychological regulation ability is not yet mature. Forcefully suppressing emotions can actually break their own emotional balance and further amplify the impact of negative emotions. Some introverted college students, due to the lack of more suitable channels for emotional release, will passively rely on expression inhibition, forming a vicious cycle. This finding also supplements the cognitive gap in traditional research on the applicable groups and specific risks of expression inhibition.

3.3 The Moderating Roles of Strategic Flexibility and Situational Fit

The flexibility of strategies and the degree of situational matching are key factors that affect the effectiveness of emotion regulation. Empirical research has found that relying solely on a single regulation strategy is difficult to achieve good negative emotion regulation effects. The regulation effect of college students depends more on whether they can flexibly switch strategies according to specific situations. Many college students have misconceptions about regulation, habitually using cognitive reappraisal or expression inhibition mechanically, ignoring the impact of situational differences. For example, in interpersonal conflict situations where emotions need to be expressed in a timely manner, forcibly using expression inhibition can actually exacerbate emotional conflicts. The degree of situational matching directly determines the adaptability of the strategy. The same strategy has significant differences in effectiveness in different scenarios. Cognitive reappraisal is more suitable for controllable situations such as academic pressure and goal setbacks, while expressive inhibition only has short-term applicability in special situations such as temporary social situations. Strategic flexibility is not about blindly switching strategies, but about college students choosing appropriate adjustment methods based on their own emotional state and scene characteristics. This flexible adaptation ability is more effective in controlling negative emotions than simply mastering a certain strategy. This discovery also breaks through the limitations of traditional research that focuses on the effectiveness of a single strategy and is more in line with the diverse daily emotional scenes of college students.

3.4 The Moderating Role of Individual Differences on Effectiveness

Individual differences are important variables in the effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies. Empirical studies have shown that gender, grade level, and personality traits can affect the regulation effect of strategies on negative emotions in college students to varying degrees, and this influence is not simply a matter of distinguishing advantages and disadvantages, but presents significant differences in adaptability. The impact of gender differences is different from traditional cognition. It is not that there is a significant difference in the effectiveness of strategy use between male and female college students, but rather that the two prefer different types of strategies. Female students tend to use cognitive reappraisal to regulate emotions, while male students occasionally rely on expression inhibition. This preference difference directly affects the regulatory effect. The impact of grade differences is more prominent. Lower grade college students have weaker psychological regulation abilities, and no matter which strategy is used, the effect is relatively limited. Higher grade college students can flexibly apply strategies based on their own experiences, and the regulation effect is more stable. The influence of personality traits is targeted. College students with outgoing personalities are more likely to quickly adjust their cognition when using cognitive reappraisal, while introverted and sensitive college students are more likely to weaken the effectiveness of strategies due to overthinking [3]. This differentiated expression also breaks the traditional cognition that individual differences only affect strategy selection and is more in line with the true psychological state of college students.

4. Implications for Interventions Targeting Negative Emotions in College Students Based on Optimized Emotional Regulation Strategies

4.1 Psychoeducation and Skill Training to Enhance Cognitive Reappraisal Abilities

The psychological education and skill training for cognitive reappraisal ability in universities should focus on the daily emotional pain points of college students, abandon the drawbacks of

traditional psychological education that emphasizes theory over application, and adopt a practical and scenario based approach. Based on the frequent academic pressure and interpersonal friction encountered by college students, training does not require complex theoretical groundwork, but rather takes specific cases as the starting point to allow students to learn and adjust cognitive methods in real situations. For example, when facing exam failures, guide students to objectively analyze the reasons for the failure, distinguish between temporary mistakes and insufficient abilities, and gradually develop the habit of reasonable attribution. Training does not need to pursue a uniform pace, but rather progresses in layers based on the differences in students' psychological qualities. For students with weaker adjustment abilities, one-on-one scenario simulation guidance is provided to help them master the skills through repeated practice. This training method that is close to students' lives does not involve formal processes, but focuses on making cognitive reappraisal a practical tool for students to cope with negative emotions, rather than theoretical knowledge that remains on notes.

4.2 Behavioral Substitution and Expressive Reconstruction to Reduce Habitual Expressive Inhibition

Guiding college students to reduce habitual expression inhibition should follow the principle of gradual progress and following the trend, and should not forcefully change students' inherent emotional habits. Many students are accustomed to suppressing their emotions, not deliberately resisting expression, but lacking appropriate channels of expression and correct cognitive expression, and even mistakenly believing that expressing emotions is weakness. In response to this reality, universities do not need to force students to express themselves boldly. Instead, they should first design gentle and low threshold behavior alternatives, such as allowing students to release their inner pressure by writing diaries and recording emotional feelings when they are feeling down. These methods do not require interaction with others and can effectively reduce the expression concerns of introverted students. On this basis, gradually guide students to reconstruct their emotional expression cognition, and through relaxed scenarios such as dormitory sharing and group communication, let students gradually realize that expressing emotions reasonably is a normal psychological need. The entire intervention process respects the psychological characteristics of students, does not rush to achieve results, avoids causing student resistance due to excessive intervention, and allows students to reduce expression inhibition unconsciously, learning to express emotions gently and reasonably.

4.3 Design of Comprehensive Intervention Programs Integrating Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation

Design a comprehensive intervention plan that integrates mindfulness and emotional regulation, primarily addressing the pain points of traditional interventions being monotonous and not in line with students' daily routines, allowing interventions to naturally integrate into college students' daily learning and life without adding extra burden to students. Unlike the abstract explanation of traditional mindfulness training, this program focuses on simplicity and ease of operation. The designed mindfulness exercises are mostly fragmented content within 10 minutes, such as breathing awareness during breaks and emotional sorting before bedtime. Students do not need to specifically set aside time and can complete them using their free time. The core innovation of the plan is to deeply integrate mindfulness awareness with emotion regulation strategies. It does not simply require students to practice mindfulness, but guides them to actively use cognitive reappraisal, behavioral substitution, and other methods to regulate their negative emotions, forming a complete chain of awareness regulation consolidation. At the same time, adjust the details of the plan

according to the different situations of students, simplify the practice process for students with high academic pressure, and appropriately extend the adaptation period for students with severe emotional conflicts, so that the plan can truly meet the needs of each student [4].

4.4 Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms for the Effectiveness of Strategy Application in University Mental Health Services

In the psychological health services of universities, the evaluation and feedback mechanism for the effectiveness of strategy application needs to abandon the limitations of traditional one size fits all and result oriented evaluations, and highlight the core orientation of de formalization and emphasis on effectiveness. Assessment does not require the use of complex tools and cumbersome processes, but focuses on the actual application of emotion regulation strategies by students in real life. Through simple methods such as daily observations by counselors, brief one-on-one interviews, and feedback from student emotion logs, it captures the true regulatory effects of students. The feedback process rejects vague good and bad evaluations, but instead provides actionable suggestions based on students' specific performance. For example, if students have attribution bias when using cognitive reappraisal, specific guidance should be given on how to objectively analyze the event, rather than simply informing them to attribute correctly. At the same time, establish a dynamic tracking and feedback mechanism to regularly understand the improvement of student strategy application, adjust intervention plans in a timely manner based on feedback results, form a closed loop of evaluation, feedback, and intervention, truly play the guiding role of evaluation and feedback, make college mental health services more targeted, and effectively help students improve their emotional regulation ability [5].

5. Conclusion

College students vary significantly in how they respond to negative emotions, which can be attributed to either their individual differences, or to their use of different emotion regulation strategies. Cognitive reappraisal is an emotion regulation strategy that acts on a cognitive level and, therefore, works at the source of a negative experience to alleviate its negative effects. Conversely, expressing one's emotional state through inhibition is less helpful because it stops emotional expression and perpetuates psychological internal conflict. The analysis of these relationships has led to the construction of a multi-tier and multi-faceted intervention plan, utilizing individual level characteristics with the intention of providing a comprehensive service system involving skill development, behavioral modification, and assessment of performance outcomes. This plan is intended to enhance the accuracy and quality of psychological support services in universities and facilitate the development of stable and mature emotional management strategies among college-aged people, thereby satisfying their basic needs for the physical and psychological development over the long term.

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