



**Utrecht University**

**Why dealing with emotions? Examining Gross' process  
model in light of self-determination theory**

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### **Abstract:**

This study examined the relationship between emotion regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive and experiential suppression) and mental well-being. It also examined if the motivation behind emotion regulation mediated the relationship between emotion regulation and mental well-being. A total of 103 individuals aged 18-55 ( $M_{age} = 25.35$ ;  $SD = 6.43$ ; 68% female) participated in this online cross-sectional study and responded to the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale, Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, motivation questionnaire developed based on Religious Internalization Index. Results indicated that cognitive reappraisal was positively related to ill-being, expressive suppression was negatively related to ill-being, and experiential suppression was unrelated to ill-being. We expected cognitive reappraisal to be relatively autonomous and both forms of suppression to be more controlled in its nature. Results showed no significant results, except experiential suppression. The mediation analysis showed that motivation does not mediate the relationship between emotion regulation and mental well-being. Due to lack of findings, no mediating effect was found, possibly because of research limitations in this current research. Current research findings implicate the importance of emotion regulation and recommend taking a closer view in treating psychopathologies in psychotherapies.

## **Introduction**

Mental well-being (MWB) is used interchangeably with the term positive mental health. The term is complex, it focuses on affect and psychological functioning and has two perspectives: the hedonic and eudaimonic (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Kahnemann and colleagues (1999) described the hedonic dimension, which considers MWB the subjective experience of happiness and life satisfaction. In addition, Waterman and colleagues (2010) write that the eudaimonic perspective focuses on psychological functioning and self-realisation or self-acceptance. According to World Health Organisation (WHO; 2018), MWB is defined as a background for effective functioning, when an individual can realise his/her abilities, cope with life stressors, be productive, contribute to the community and maintain healthy relationships. In other words, MWB is fundamental for humans' existence and ability to live a full-fledged life.

Studies show that MWB, over time, functions as a resilience resource, and research underlines the importance of MWB as a protective factor against psychopathologies, contributing to adaptive functioning (Kraiss et al., 2020; Trompetter et al., 2017). MWB is vital for recovery for individuals with various mental illnesses, for example, depression (Fava et al., 2007), eating disorders (de Vos et al., 2017), mood and anxiety disorders (Schotanus et al., 2019). Although for MWB to help prevent or recover from illness, we need to know sources that contribute to MWB itself. One of the sources is adaptive emotion regulation (ER) since it is a transdiagnostic process (Aldao et al., 2016). Also, from the SDT perspective, autonomous/controlled motivation has shown to be a significant predictor of adaptive, respectively maladaptive functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this research, we address ER and its underlying motivation as a possible contributor to MWB.

## ***Emotion regulation***

Based on theoretical frameworks, ER is an essential factor for MWB (Aldao et al., 2016; Kraiss et al., 2020). According to Roth and colleagues (2019), positive and negative emotions lead to personal growth and are helpful. According to theory by Gross (2015), emotions evaluate and process environment and experiences in a way “good for me” or “bad for me”. Even negative experiences can be integrated as “good for me.” If events are evaluated as “bad for me”, it interrupts experiences, and no personal integration appears (Benita, 2020). Nowadays, the way individuals deal with emotions is conceptualised as ER strategies (Gross, 1998). According to Gross (1998), ER is a process when individuals affect what emotions to have, when to have them and how to experience and express them. Gross (1998) defines two ER strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Cognitive reappraisal is defined as the attempt to reinterpret the situation to alter its meaning and changes its emotional impact. Expressive suppression is the attempt to hide, inhibit or reduce ongoing emotions as if one does not want to show these emotions. In addition, Beblo and colleagues (2012) define and operationalise another form of suppression- experiential suppression. It refers to attempts to reduce the entire emotional reaction, including psychological and psychophysiological characteristics. In other words, individuals do not want to feel emotion at all.

Research has shown that ER strategies can be adaptive, which is vital for healthy functioning, personal growth, and maladaptive, which can lead to ill-being (Werner & Gross, 2009). For example, cognitive reappraisal is an adaptive ER strategy associated with increased MWB and decreased negative affect (Gross, 2002); individuals experience more positive emotions, show superior life functioning (Gross & John, 2003). In contrast, suppression of emotions can lead to psychopathology since it acts as alienation, leading to self-image confusion and increasing chances of developing psychological disorders like anxiety or depression (Benita, 2020). Expressive suppression is associated with increased negative affect

and decreased positive affect (Aldao et al., 2010). Whereas experiential suppression is intended to provide temporary relief from stressors, constant use of this strategy is associated with increased distress over time and psychopathology (Goodman et al., 2020). Beblo and colleagues (2012) showed that suppressing emotions, both positive and negative, is associated with major depressive disorder (MDD).

However, the selection of ER strategies could depend on an individual's motivation. For ER strategy to be adaptive and healthy, it needs to occur volitionally (Roth et al., 2019). Although, even adaptive emotion regulation strategies, for example, cognitive reappraisal, could be expressed with a sense of pressure. In this sense, it could be possible that strategies considered to be maladaptive might be beneficial if they occur in an autonomous, volitional fashion. In contrast, adaptive ER strategies might be applied for controlled reasons, hence associated with ill-being.

### ***Autonomous and controlled motivation of emotion regulation***

Based on a research tradition having its roots in the early seventies, SDT has a solid theoretical framework differentiating different types of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Ryan and Deci (2000) explored and widely studied intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation means doing something for its inherent satisfactions rather than doing something for separable outcomes. In comparison, a behaviour is extrinsically motivated when a separable outcome is expected or pursued. Extrinsic motivation differentiates from intrinsic motivation so that individual behaves in a certain way to enjoy the activity itself, rather than its instrumental value. Although, SDT proposes that extrinsic motivation can vary, and breaks down into four forms: external regulation (performed to satisfy external pressures, reach external rewards or avoid punishments), introjection (performed because of feelings of internal pressure to avoid guilt, anxiety, or to attain pride), identification (performed because of

personal importance, accepted its regulation as their own), integration (motivation fully integrated into the self, when a person internalises and assimilates the reasons behind an action).

Furthermore, SDT differentiates motivation in an autonomy-control continuum a person shows while regulating emotions (Roth et al., 2019). Autonomous motivation represents complete internalisation when a person experiences full volition to regulate emotions. According to Chirkov et al. (2003), autonomy is essential for optimal functioning and MWB so that behaviour is consistent with intrinsic goals and personal endorsement. Controlled motivation defines when an individual feels externally or internally pressured to regulate emotions specifically and represents partial internalisation. Constant pressure for a behaviour creates a sense of obligation to do something, which is viewed from SDT as need-thwarting, leading to ill-being (Hagger, 2010). Intrinsic motivation is considered fully autonomous, whereas extrinsic motivation is controlled (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SDT states that autonomy is essential for an adaptive way of dealing with emotions (Ryan et al., 2016). Cognitive reappraisal and both forms of suppression can be expressed volitionally or in a controlled manner (Roth et al., 2019). Cognitive reappraisal is considered an adaptive ER strategy, although according to SDT, it needs to be experienced volitionally to be adaptive. Autonomous cognitive reappraisal means exploring different perspectives on emotional experiences, understanding their full extent and authentically reinterpreting them. In contrast, a controlled cognitive reappraisal would mean a person trying to convince him- or herself “it is not that bad” in authentically interpreting and hence distorting the experience. “I have to look at it in another way” would be the adage of a controlled reappraisal.

Moreover, both forms of suppression are considered maladaptive ER. However, even suppression might be expressed either autonomously or controlled. Autonomous suppression means that a person volitionally chooses not to show or feel emotions. For example, a person

could suppress (the expression of) emotions because it feels inappropriate to do so (controlled) or because he or she authentically decides to take some time to reflect on and digest the emotional experience (autonomous).

## **Present study**

In sum, abundant research has shown that different ER strategies might be (mal)adaptive. However, the association between MWB and ER strategies could depend on the underlying motivation. The current research explores the role of the motivation behind ER strategies and its relationship with MWB. As such, we expect cognitive reappraisal will be positively and suppression negatively related to indices of MWB (hypothesis 1). In addition, following earlier findings regarding adaptive regulation, reappraisal is expected to be relatively autonomous in its motivation, while both forms of suppression are expected to be more controlled forms of motivation (hypothesis 2). Lastly, considering the research mentioned above, the relationship between ER strategies and indices of MWB is expected to be attributed to their underlying motivation. Hence, autonomous/controlled motivation will mediate the relationship between ER strategies and MWB. (hypothesis 3).

## **Method**

### ***Participants and procedure***

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences of Utrecht University, under the number 20-0303. Individuals were recruited by convenience sampling, i.e. contacted or reached by word of mouth or social media. All participants were provided with the information letter and informed consent form, which contained information regarding the current research's confidentiality, volunteering, and purpose. After signing the consent form, participants completed the cross-sectional survey,

which had four questionnaires. The survey was offered online through the researcher's social media channels (Facebook and Whatsapp) and SurveyTandem via Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2005). The order of the questionnaires was: demographic questions, mental distress scale, emotion regulation scale and motivation scale.

Participants were 103 individuals with various nationalities aged 18-55 ( $M_{age}=25.35$ ;  $SD=6.43$ ), of which 32% were males, and 68% were females. Regarding educational level, 51% of participants completed a bachelor's degree, 22% achieved a master's degree, 19% had completed high school, 5% had a doctoral degree, and 4% of respondents defined either as having no education or "other".

## ***Measures***

### ***Mental distress***

Participants' distress was measured by Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21; Parkitny & McAuley, 2010). DASS-21 contains 21-item, and measures distress along three axes of depression (e.g. "I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all"), anxiety (e.g. "I was aware of dryness of my mouth"), stress (e.g. "I found it hard to wind down") along a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Almost always). Cronbach's alpha for DASS-21 was 0.91.

### ***Emotion regulation***

The regulation of emotions was assessed with the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003) and an adapted version of the Emotion Regulation Inventory (ERI; Roth et al., 2009). ERQ 10-item scale defines two emotion regulation styles: Cognitive Reappraisal (6 items, e.g. "When I want to feel less negative emotion (such as sadness or anger), I change what I'm thinking about";  $\alpha=0.86$ ) and Expressive Suppression (4 items; e.g.

“I keep my emotions to myself”;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). The two experiential suppression items were used from the original ERI and supplemented with two formulated ones (four items; e.g. “I try hard to avoid feeling negative emotions”;  $\alpha = 0.75$ ). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

### ***Motivation behind emotion regulation***

After presenting each original questionnaire, we asked participants to remember situations where they regulated emotions by cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, experiential suppression and describe it in a few sentences. Motivation for each emotion regulation style was measured by four items selected and adapted from existing self-regulation questionnaires such as the Religious Internalization Index (Neyrinck et al., 2006). Participants were asked why they regulated emotions in each specific way in the situation. What were the reasons behind this way of dealing with emotions. External regulation (e.g. “Because others expected me to do so), Introjected regulation (e.g. “I pushed myself to do so”), Identified regulation (e.g. “Because I found it personally important”), and Integrated regulation (e.g. “Because it corresponded well with how I approach other things in life”). Items were ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) was computed to measure the autonomy of motivations. RAI is a sum of participants’ scores of the motivation scales. RAI was weighted in the manner of  $+2 \times \text{integrated motivation} + 1 \times \text{identified motivation} - 1 \times \text{introjected motivation} - 2 \times \text{external motivation}$ .

### ***Plan of analyses***

The data will be analyzed with Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) Statistic version 27 (IBM Corp, 2020). Firstly, Pearson correlation and independent t-test will

examine the relationship between all the variables with background variables age, gender, education level. Hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2 will be analyzed by linear regression analysis. Hypothesis 1 examines the relationship between ER and MWB, predicting that cognitive reappraisal will be associated with increased MWB, and both forms of suppression will predict ill-being. Hypothesis 2 to examine the relationship between ER and level of autonomy: cognitive reappraisal is predicted to be more autonomous regulation, both forms of suppression- controlled motivation. Hypothesis 3 will be analyzed with a mediation analysis PROCESS model version 3.5 by Hayes (2017). To be more specific, it is expected that more autonomous motivation will serve as a mediator between cognitive reappraisal and MWB and that controlled motivation will mediate both forms of suppression and ill-being.

## **Results**

### ***Preliminary analysis***

Determining whether gender, age, and education level had a differential effect on the studied variables preliminary analysis were performed. Independent sample t-test showed that men compared to women, scored significantly lower on DASS ( $t(100) = -2.22, p = .03$ ),  $M_{\text{men}} = 9.96 (SD = 6.56)$  versus  $M_{\text{women}} = 12.97 (SD = 6.31)$ ; expressive suppression ( $t(99) = -4.03, p < .001$ ),  $M_{\text{men}} = 3.20 (SD = 1.09)$  versus  $M_{\text{women}} = 4.24 (SD = 1.24)$  experiential suppression ( $t(97) = -2.12, p = .04$ ),  $M_{\text{men}} = 2.49 (SD = .83)$  versus  $M_{\text{women}} = 2.87 (SD = .85)$ . In addition, nor education level nor age did not relate significantly with all measured variables. Based on these results, it was decided to control for gender in the main analyses. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlations between studied variables are summarised below for (Table 1).

Table 1

*Descriptive statistics and correlations between all the studied variables*

	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. DASS	11.99	6.51	-					
2. Cognitive reappraisal	2.56	.85	.27**	-				
3. RAI cognitive reappraisal	-3.64	3.71	.19	.18	-			
4. Expressive suppression	3.91	1.29	-.27**	-.13	-.27**	-		
5. RAI expressive suppression	-.71	4.28	.05	.29**	.04	-.05	-	
6. Experiential suppression	2.75	.86	.04	.28**	-.29**	.34**	.30**	-
7. RAI experiential suppression	-.85	3.54	-.02	.14	.03	-.03	.48**	.26*

*Note* \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

The correlation analyses showed that mental distress composite DASS related positively to cognitive reappraisal, negatively to expressive suppression, and unrelated to any of RAI and experiential suppression. Cognitive reappraisal was unrelated to expressive suppression and positively related to experiential suppression. Expressive suppression was positively related to experiential suppression. RAI measures did not relate to their respective emotion regulation strategies, except to experiential suppression. RAI did not intercorrelate, except for RAI of expressive and experiential suppression.

### ***Main analyses***

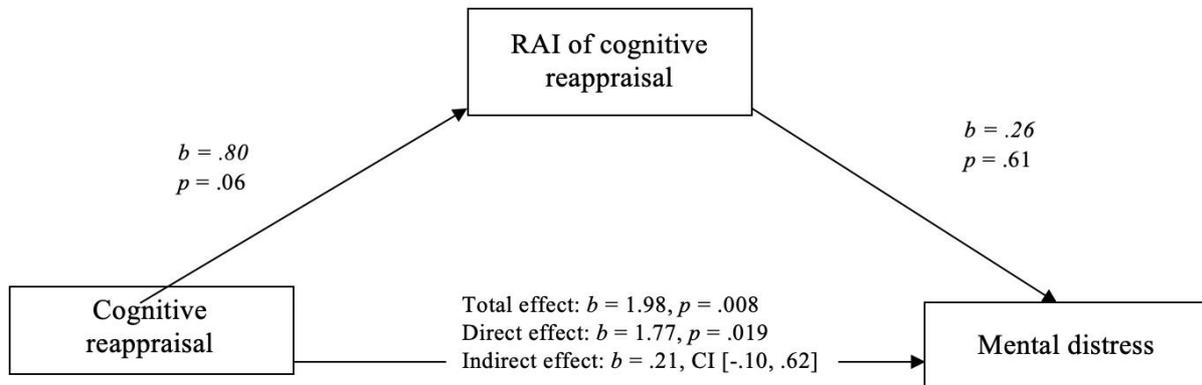
Hypothesis 1 examined the relationship between emotion regulation and mental distress. In contrast with hypothesis 1, a significant positive relationship was found between cognitive reappraisal and MWB,  $r = .27$ ,  $p = .006$ . The regression analysis controlling for gender indicated that cognitive reappraisal ( $\beta = .26$ ,  $p = .008$ ) is a significant predictor for MWB ( $F_{(2,99)} = 5.99$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $R^2 = .09$ ). Furthermore, in contrast with hypothesis 1, a significant negative relationship was found between expressive suppression and mental distress,  $r = -.27$ ,

$p = .007$ . The regression analysis indicated that expressive suppression ( $\beta = -.41, p < .001$ ) was a significant predictor for mental distress ( $F_{(2,100)} = 12.46, p < .001, R^2 = .19$ ). Finally, neither the correlation analysis ( $r = .04, p = .733$ ), nor regression analyses ( $\beta = -.02, p = .87$ ), showed a significant relationship between experiential suppression and MWB. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is rejected.

Hypothesis 2 examined the relationship between ER style and motivation behind it. Neither the correlation analyses,  $r = .18, p = .07$ , nor regression analyses ( $\beta = .19, p = .06$ ) found a significant relationship between cognitive reappraisal and RAI of cognitive reappraisal. The same insignificant results were for the correlation analyses,  $r = -.05, p = .64$ , and regression analyses ( $\beta = -.07, p = .52$ ) between expressive suppression and RAI of expressive suppression. Lastly, the correlation analysis found significant positive relationship between experiential suppression and RAI of experiential suppression,  $r = .26, p = .01$ , and regression analyses indicated that experiential suppression ( $\beta = .27, p = .01$ ) is a significant predictor for RAI of experiential suppression ( $F_{(2,94)} = 3.46, p = .04, R^2 = .05$ ). Results conclude that hypothesis 2 is partially rejected.

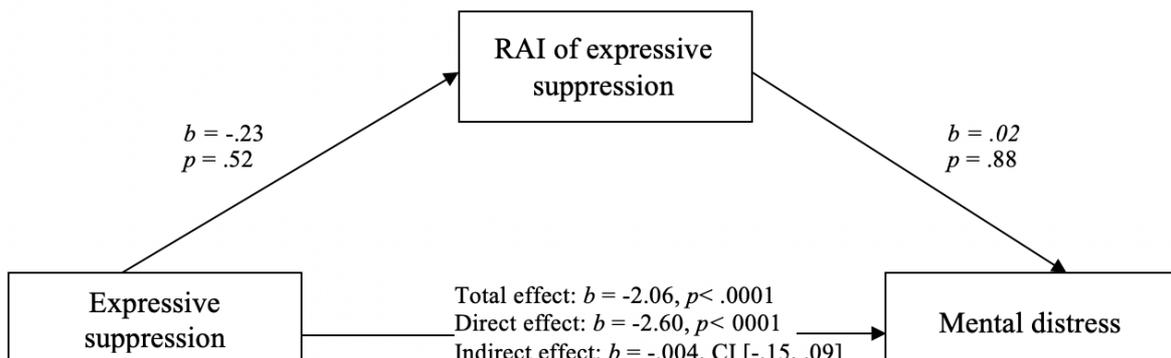
In order to examine the mediating effect of the motivation behind ER on the relationship between ER and mental distress, multiple hierarchical regression analyses were conducted, followed by bootstrap analysis (Hayes, 2017; Field, 2018). For hypothesis 3a with RAI of cognitive reappraisal as a mediator between cognitive reappraisal and mental distress, the total effect was significant  $b = 1.98, p = .008$ . The direct effect,  $b = 1.77, p = .019$ , reduced the size compared to the total effect after introducing RAI as a possible mediator. The indirect effect is not significant ( $b = .21, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.10, .62]$ ), hypothesis 3a is rejected. The outcomes are summarized below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Model of RAI of cognitive reappraisal as a mediator between cognitive reappraisal and mental distress.



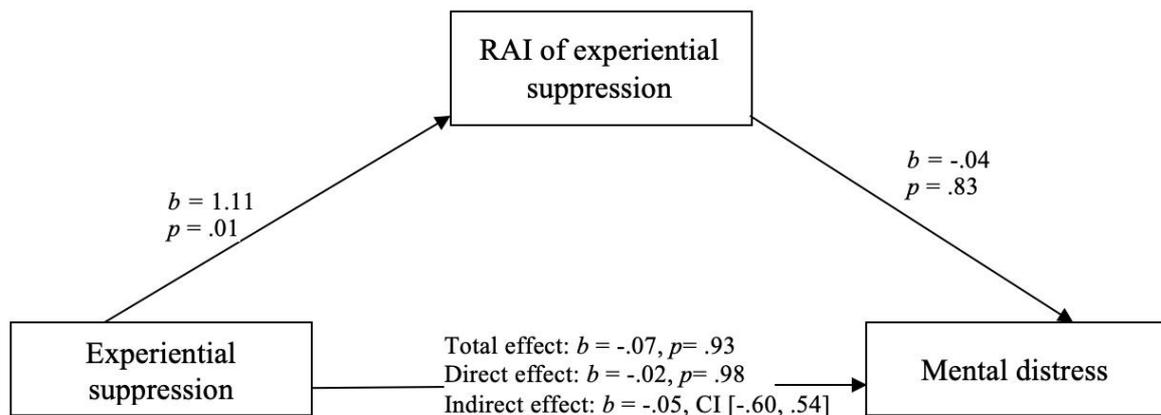
For hypothesis 3b, RAI of expressive suppression was investigated as a possible mediator in the relationship between expressive suppression and mental distress. The total effect was significant  $b = -2.06, p < .0001$ . The direct effect was significant  $b = -2.60, p < .0001$ , and increased the size compared to the total effect after introducing RAI as a possible mediator. However, the indirect effect was not significant ( $b = -.004, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.15, .09]$ ), rejecting hypothesis 3b. The outcomes are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Model of RAI of expressive suppression as a mediator between the expressive suppression and mental distress.



As for hypothesis 3c, investigating RAI of experiential suppression as a possible mediator on the relationship between experiential suppression and mental distress, the total effect, the direct and indirect effect was not significant ( $b = -.05$ , 95% CI [-.60, .54]). Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected. The outcomes are summarized bellowed in Figure 3. To sum up, hypothesis 3 is rejected.

Figure 3. Model of RAI of experiential suppression as a mediator between the experiential suppression and mental distress.



### Explorative analyses

Exploratory analyses were performed to examine the influence of gender on ER in terms of MWB. However, no interaction effect was found. Further analyses were performed based on participants' descriptions of experienced situations. In some situations, it was visible that cognitive reappraisal was more maladaptive than adaptive and suppression adaptive. For example, one participant scored low on mental well-being and described a situation of miscarriage where cognitive reappraisal was employed. This coping can serve as maladaptive. Another participant scored high on MWB and described hiding emotions from the people who do not have an emotional capacity to comprehend them (e.g. "I hide my negative emotions from the people who do not have the emotional capacity to take them in. For example, my

mum...”) (adaptive expressive suppression). In addition, another respondent reported using suppression (not showing anger towards colleagues) to maintain appropriate social and professional relationships, which might also be an adaptive way of ER.

Moreover, analysing participants’ experience descriptions showed that participants hardly differentiated between three ER strategies while describing highly emotional situations, especially cognitive reappraisal. For example, “Hating a family member for acting the way they do” was reported as cognitive reappraisal, which is not. Some of the participants reported not understanding how the strategy feels in real life (e.g. “I have no idea what you mean by “trying not to feel emotion”).

## **Discussion**

The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between emotion regulation and mental distress, measuring if the motivation behind emotion regulation serves a mediating role in the relationship. Gross’ (1998) model conceptualises that the particular emotion regulation strategy is associated with mental well-being. Lots of empirical research shows that, generally, an adaptive form of regulation such as cognitive reappraisal is positively associated with mental well-being, whereas suppression correlates consistently with ill-being (see Aldao et al., 2010 for an overview). Previous research helps us to note that there are exceptions, such as our findings. In addition, Roth et al. (2019) propose a motivation behind emotion regulation to be an essential factor predicting well-being. Our research question thus addressed the possibility that, regardless of the emotion regulation strategy at such, a more autonomously motivated strategy, that is, a strategy to be experienced as psychologically free, will relate to higher well-being.

Regarding the first part of this summary, current findings showed the opposite direction than expected of the relationship between mental well-being and cognitive reappraisal and both

forms of suppression. According to the results, the more individuals cognitively reappraised their emotions, the more they experienced ill-being. The more often they use expressive suppression, the higher their mental well-being. Experiential suppression was unrelated to ill-being. Trying to address this unexpected pattern of results, we looked at similar exceptions. Laboratory studies indicated that cognitive reappraisal might not be a helpful strategy for those who momentarily experience high and intense levels of negative experiences (Sheppes & Meiran, 2007). These studies explain that emotion regulation occurs after an emotion-triggering event (Gross, 1998b). Reappraisal involves attending that event, and new neutral thoughts need to override event-based already established thoughts. In this order, the effectiveness of reappraisal might depend on the strength of that event. On a cognitive level, reappraisal is like task switching from emotional thoughts to neutral interpretation. So that high and intense events can be harder to switch to new thoughts, as strong emotions can be well-established to the event, keep reminding it, hence making it hard to keep reappraised thoughts. When diving into our data, exploratory analyses indeed showed that cognitive reappraisal could be maladaptive, as it requires much effort and might not help in intense experiences. Also, if an individual uses cognitive reappraisal to reduce the negative state but fails to do so or believe it, emotion regulation becomes an avoidant coping, leading to psychopathology (Wolgast et al., 2011). Furthermore, cognitive reappraisal adaptiveness differs in its frequency. Research showed that cognitive reappraisal was associated with ill-being when suppression was employed more frequently than reappraisal (Aldao & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). That is, if suppression is used more frequently, it may override or prevent the benefits of employing cognitive reappraisal. Indeed, in our findings, we did find that reappraisal was associated with ill-being. Given that individuals can employ various emotion regulation strategies (Brockman et al., 2017), and the frequency impacts its adaptability, these analyses are largely exploratory,

leading to the question if a person employs suppression frequently, will cognitive reappraisal predict more distress?

Moreover, some results suggest higher suppression to be a more adaptive strategy depending on the context and individual goals (Aldao & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Bargh et al., 2001). Again, exploratory analyses showed that some participants described suppressed experiences, which were the adaptive way of dealing with a stressor in that particular situation. It can be explained that if suppression is used in a situation where it seemed the healthiest way to react or is valuable for the current situation, it does not increase mental distress. However, if suppression is used as a habit, then it increases the chances to develop psychopathology. In addition, an experimental study by Evans and colleagues (2013) showed that adaptive expressive suppression in borderline personality disorder, when used infrequently, helps reduce negative affect. According to research and our results, it leads to the conclusion that suppression can be both adaptive and maladaptive, depending on the situational context.

Furthermore, this study measured whether individuals regulate their emotions in an autonomous or controlled fashion. The first paragraph of the discussion stated the importance of motivational factors in predicting mental well-being. It was assumed that the more autonomous motivation would mediate the relationship between emotion regulation and increased mental well-being, whereas more controlled emotion regulation to ill-being. However, contrary to the hypotheses, results showed no mediating effect. No mediating effect was found, possibly due to the lack of findings in this current research. One of the explanations for the lack of findings could be motivation questionnaires, which were framed that emotion regulation is a conscious process rather than unconscious, or both.

In research, conscious motivation is referred to as explicit and unconscious to implicit terms (McClelland et al., 1989). Gross (1998) defined emotion regulation dimensions as explicit and implicit. Most prior studies framed emotion regulation as an explicit process

(Gross, 2001). Later on, it was acknowledged that explicit emotion regulation might be a maladaptive strategy, as it requires cognitive resources and increases physiological activity (Bonanno et al., 2004). Other research found that emotion regulation is highly implicit (Mauss et al., 2007) and is associated with increased mental well-being (Mauss et al., 2007). Moreover, research shows that if individuals regulate emotions implicitly, they tend to employ that strategy more frequently, and it is autonomous regulation that increases mental well-being (Braunstein et al., 2017). Whereas, if a person is aware of emotion regulation strategies in a situation, it is an explicit process requiring additional resources and might be associated with ill-being. To sum up, the motivation behind emotion regulation can be implicit and explicit, which might further define its adaptability level. However, framing motivation only as an explicit process could indicate a possible lack of findings, which made the results inaccurate and showed no mediating effect on emotion regulation and mental distress.

### ***Clinical Implications***

Concerning the importance of emotion regulation in mental well-being, the current study has clinical implications. Emotion regulation is a transdiagnostic process (Aldao et al., 2016), meaning that psychological interventions which focus on emotion regulation affect psychological disorders (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2019). It is crucial to take a closer view of emotion regulation strategies in psychopathologies and their treatment.

Firstly, given current research findings, reappraisal can be maladaptive if it requires much effort, or an individual uses it to reduce the negative state but fails to do so or believe it, suppression can be adaptive if it is used according to context and personal goals as the healthiest way to react for that particular situation. Since adaptive emotion regulation strategies are an important treatment target for individuals who frequently engage in maladaptive emotion regulation (Conklin et al., 2015), additional psychotherapeutic work in exploring emotions and

its regulation is needed. Therefore, we would recommend frameworks, such as emotion-focused therapy, as its primary value is that emotional change is necessary for an individual's growth and well-being (Greenberg, 2011).

Secondly, considering Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), it mainly focuses on the reappraisal of negative automatic thoughts. To cognitively reappraise emotions consistently can be extremely challenging, energy-depleting and hence maladaptive. So, an increase in overall use of reappraisal may require additional help (Sheppes & Meiran, 2007).

Lastly, maladaptive strategies are not problematic if used infrequently. They are only if their use is habitual (Aldao et al., 2010; Evans et al., 2013). So, even though it can be challenging for individuals to use cognitive reappraisal constantly, it is still valuable to decrease suppression usage by increasing reappraisal. However, considering the maladaptive forms of reappraisal, treatment should take additional time to examine if cognitive reappraisal does not require too much cognitive effort. Otherwise, it can lead to poorer health (Sheppes & Meiran, 2007).

### ***Limitations***

The current study had multiple limitations. First of all, the cross-sectional nature of our design makes it impossible to draw any conclusions about the causality and directionality of the results. Longitudinal research might be interesting to examine the directionality in frequency employing emotion regulation strategies and measuring if adaptive suppression stays adaptive in the long term. Secondly, the sample of this study was quite biased as the majority of the participants were young, highly educated women, and the sample size was relatively small, which might have generalised the findings. Another limitation might be associated with the questionnaires. As exploratory analyses indicated, some participants hardly differentiated between three emotion regulation strategies while describing highly emotional

situations, especially cognitive reappraisal. Moreover, motivation questionnaires focused only on explicit motivation, which can be the reason for the lack of findings in mediating relationships.

A starting point for future research would be to choose one emotion regulation strategy, to reduce the confusion by introducing three strategies to individuals who probably do not know about it. Secondly, motivation questionnaire items could be reframed to measure autonomy in regulating emotions. For example, participants could first be asked whether they know the possible reason for regulating emotions specific way or its frequency. Afterwards, present answers for possible reasons if known. Answers could be written by participants or present options similar to the ones used in this study, yet reframed to make it more straightforward (e.g. “Because it corresponded well with how I approach other things in life” reframed to “Because I act like this most of the time without having back thoughts”). Afterwards, ask for an additional detailed explanation of why they chose this specific answer. A detailed explanation would make it easier to evaluate the adaptiveness of emotion regulation and its autonomy level. Moreover, more qualitative research might be needed to have a clearer view of situational contexts. As another option, emotion regulation and consciousness could be tested by an experiment. Participants would be presented with an emotional situation, for example, public speaking. It would decrease the confusion of what is meant by “describe a situation where you tried to change the way you feel”. Emotional reactivity tested by physiological measures could check the level of consciousness for that emotion regulation strategy and then ask for the possible reason regulating emotions this way.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the relationship between emotion regulation and mental well-being with a mediator of the motivation behind emotion regulation. It can be concluded that

cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression are related to mental well-being, however, in the unexpected direction. Moreover, the mediation analyses showed that motivation does not mediate the relationship between any measured emotion regulation strategy and mental distress. Overall, our interpretations indicate that cognitive reappraisal, expressive and experiential suppression can be adaptive and maladaptive depending on the situational context, frequency and level of autonomy. These factors are essential to incorporate in emotion regulation aspects in treating psychopathologies.

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## **Appendices**

**Appendix 1-** Participants' information letter and informed consent form.

**Why dealing with emotions? Examining Gross' process model in light of self-determination theory**

I would like to invite you to take part in the research study examining the relationship between emotion regulation, motivation and mental well-being, as part of the MSc in Clinical Psychology for Utrecht University. Findings will help to understand whether motivation mediates the association between emotion regulation and mental well-being.

**Do I have to take part?**

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and if you do choose to take part, you can withdraw at any time. Even once the research has started, you may stop, for any reason, without having to explain, and without penalty or prejudice. However, once submitted answers and finished the survey, the removal of your responses will be no longer available. To be able to participate, you need to be 18+ age.

**If I do decide to take part what will I be asked to do?**

If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire. It includes questions about your demographic data (age, gender, education), mental well-being, emotion regulation, and motivation behind the emotion regulation. The questions will measure your levels of mental well-being, whether you experience depressed mood, anxiety or stress over the past week. Also, you will be introduced to three different emotion regulation strategies. You will be asked to remember three emotionally intense situations and describe it in a few sentences. Afterwards, answer the questions about the motivation behind this particular way of dealing with emotions about/in situation.

It will take approximately 15-20 minutes. You do not need to answer any questions if you do not want to, you can leave a blank space without an answer.

**What will happen to my data?**

The information you give may be used for a research report. All of the data and information collected during this research will be anonymous. No questions will be asked to identify your details (e.g. name and contact details). This survey is private, only the researcher and research team will be able to view collected data. Once your answers are submitted, the removal of your data from the study will not be longer possible. Research team will not be able to identify your answers due to anonymity. Once all data are collected, it will be added to a larger data set for analysis. Collected data may be used for further research that might have another purpose. Research is conducted from the Netherlands, and the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) protects your data privacy. Additionally, to prevent observations by strangers, we recommend to complete survey in a private zone (e.g. home).

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask now, or at any time throughout the study. My contact details are provided below.

Participation in this research does not represent any risks to you outside of those that you would typically experience in your everyday life.

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For the formal complaints about this study, please contact the complaints officer:

[Klachtenfunctionaris-fetcsocwet@uu.nl](mailto:Klachtenfunctionaris-fetcsocwet@uu.nl)

|

**If you decide to take part in this study, please tick the consent box below.**

I hereby declare that I am 18+ years old, have read the information letter about the “Why dealing with emotions? Examining Gross' process model in light of self-determination theory” study and my participation has been explained to my satisfaction. I agree participate in the study.

**Appendix 2- Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21; Parkitny & McAuley, 2010)**

		N	S	O	AA
1	I found it hard to wind down	0	1	2	3
2	I was aware of dryness of my mouth	0	1	2	3
3	I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all	0	1	2	3
4	I experienced breathing difficulty (eg, excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion)	0	1	2	3
5	I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things	0	1	2	3
6	I tended to over-react to situations	0	1	2	3
7	I experienced trembling (eg, in the hands)	0	1	2	3
8	I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy	0	1	2	3
9	I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself	0	1	2	3
10	I felt that I had nothing to look forward to	0	1	2	3
11	I found myself getting agitated	0	1	2	3
12	I found it difficult to relax	0	1	2	3
13	I felt down-hearted and blue	0	1	2	3
14	I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing	0	1	2	3
15	I felt I was close to panic	0	1	2	3
16	I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything	0	1	2	3
17	I felt I wasn't worth much as a person	0	1	2	3
18	I felt that I was rather touchy	0	1	2	3
19	I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (eg, sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat)	0	1	2	3
20	I felt scared without any good reason	0	1	2	3
21	I felt that life was meaningless	0	1	2	3

**Appendix 3-** Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003) and Emotion Regulation Inventory (Roth et al., 2009).

We would like to ask you some questions about your regulation and management of emotions. The questions below involve two distinct aspects of your emotional life. One is your emotional experience, or what you feel like inside. The other is your emotional expression, or how you show your emotions in the way you talk, gesture, or behave. Please circle the right number how much the statement applies to you.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1. When I want to feel more positive emotions (such as joy or amusement), I change what I'm thinking about.	1	2	3	4	5
2. When I want to feel less negative emotion (such as sadness or anger), I change what I'm thinking about.	1	2	3	4	5
3. When I'm faced with a stressful situation, I make myself think about it in a way that helps me stay calm.	1	2	3	4	5
4. When I want to feel more positive emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I control my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I'm in.	1	2	3	4	5
6. When I want to feel less negative emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation.	1	2	3	4	5

Next, we would like to ask you again some questions about your regulation and management of emotions. The questions below involve your emotional expression, or how you show your emotions in the way you talk, gesture, or behave. Although some of the following questions may seem similar to one another, they differ in important ways. For each item, please answer using the following scale.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1. I keep my emotions to myself	1	2	3	4	5
2. When I am feeling positive emotions, I am careful not to express them	1	2	3	4	5
3. I control my emotions by not expressing them	1	2	3	4	5
4. When I am feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them	1	2	3	4	5

Lastly, the following questions represent a third emotion regulation strategy. Please, answer them by thinking what you feel like inside and how you deal with this in general. Although some of the following questions may seem similar to one another, they differ in important ways. For each item, please answer using the following scale.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1. I try to push away negative feelings	1	2	3	4	5
2. I try not to refer to negative feelings I sense in myself	1	2	3	4	5
3. Usually, I ignore my negative emotions	1	2	3	4	5
4. I try hard to avoid feeling negative emotions	1	2	3	4	5

**Appendix 4-** Motivation at Work Scale (Gagne et al., 2010) and Religious Internalization

Index (Neyrinck et al., 2006).

We just presented you a specific style of emotion regulation. In emotionally intense situations or episodes, people can typically try to feel better by changing their way of thinking (about the situation). For example, having a stressful argument with your partner, you try to re-evaluate the situation from the other’s point of view in order to decrease intense emotions.

1. We invite you to remember such a situation and describe it in a few sentences	Open ended question				
2. We now want to ask you why you changed your way of thinking about/in the situation. In other words, what are the reasons behind this way of dealing with emotions?					
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1. Because others expected me to do so	1	2	3	4	5
2. Because I pushed myself to do so	1	2	3	4	5
3. Because I found it personally important	1	2	3	4	5
4. Because it corresponded well with how I approach other things in life	1	2	3	4	5

We just presented you another specific style of emotion regulation. In emotionally intense situations or episodes, people can typically react by not showing their emotions (about the situation) to other people. For example, suppose your boss is openly criticising you during a meeting. You feel angry, but you keep a still face in order to hide your emotions.

1. Could you remember situation when you tried not to show your emotions, and describe it?	Open ended question				
2. Could your answer why you tried to not to show your emotions about/in that situation? In other words, what are the reasons of not showing emotions?					
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1. Because others expected me to do so	1	2	3	4	5
2. Because I pushed myself to do so	1	2	3	4	5
3. Because I found it personally important	1	2	3	4	5
4. Because it corresponded well with how I approach other things in life	1	2	3	4	5

1  
 You just answered to questions about another style of emotion regulation. In emotionally intense situations or episodes, people can typically react by trying not to feel what they are feeling (about the situation). For example, when an important deadline is approaching, but you are not prepared, you try to avoid these worries and try to pretend that everything is going well. As another example, when you are scared of darkness, you could close your eyes and try to not to feel this fear.

1. Could you to remember such a situation and describe it, when you tried not to feel your emotions?	Open ended question				
2. We now want to ask you why you tried to ignore what you were feeling about/in the situation. Using the scale from 1-5 below, please indicate your level of agreement with the proposed reasons for trying to ignore your emotions?					
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
1. Because others expected me to do so	1	2	3	4	5
2. Because I pushed myself to do so	1	2	3	4	5
3. Because I found it personally important	1	2	3	4	5
4. Because it corresponded well with how I approach other things in life	1	2	3	4	5