



## Review

# Emotion regulation as a mediator in the relationship between attachment and depressive symptomatology: A systematic review



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Attachment theory has been conceptualised as an emotion regulation theory. Research attributes the occurrence of depressive symptoms to a dysfunction of emotion regulation. Anxious attachment and avoidant attachment, which are two dimensions of insecure attachment, are hypothesised to lead to the development of hyperactivating and deactivating emotion regulation strategies.

**Methods:** This systematic review examines the literature on the role of emotion regulation and its relationship with attachment and depressive symptomatology. Furthermore, we examined evidence for hyperactivating and deactivating strategies.

**Results:** Nineteen papers were identified. Adolescent studies demonstrated associations of varying strength and found unreliable and contradictory results for emotion regulation as a mediator. Conversely, adult studies provided strong evidence for emotion regulation as a mediator. The hypothesis that hyperactivating strategies mediate anxious attachment and depressive symptoms was consistently supported. Mixed evidence was provided for deactivating strategies as mediators to avoidant attachment and depressive symptomatology.

**Limitations:** Limitations of methodology and quality of studies are identified with particular attention drawn to problems with conceptual singularity and multicollinearity.

**Conclusions:** Despite mixed variable findings, this review indicates that emotion regulation is a mediator between attachment and depression. Hyperactivating strategies, in particular, have been consistently noted as mediators for anxious attachment and depressive symptomatology, whereas evidence for deactivating strategies as mediators between avoidant attachment and depressive symptoms has been mixed. Future research should test the mediators of attachment and symptoms and examine theoretically grounded models of psychopathology, such as metacognitive and cognitive models using clinical samples.

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## 1. Introduction

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1982) stipulates that an innate range of behaviours aim at establishing proximity to caregivers, which are considered attachment figures. These attachment behaviours are hypothesised to regulate affect, alleviate distress and protect from physical and emotional threats (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer et al., 2003). Attachment behaviours are part of an attachment behavioural system, which extends from initial primary caregivers to partners in adult relationships (Mikulincer et al., 2003).

Studies have shown that attachment is associated with depressive disorders (Besser and Priel, 2003; Carnelley et al., 1994; Roberts et al., 1996; Wei et al., 2003, 2004, 2006). As attachment theory has been frequently conceptualised as an emotion regulation theory (Feeney and Noller, 1996; Mikulincer et al., 2003), it is surprising that there are limited studies to test emotion regulation as mediator in the relationship between attachment and depression. Such research would have implications for the development of clinical interventions targeting mediators of psychological distress, as opposed to more resource intensive interventions aimed at altering attachment styles (Wei et al., 2003). Thus, a systematic review of the literature on the relationship between attachment, emotion regulation and depressive symptomatology is warranted. Furthermore, findings in this area may provide clinicians with further insight into the mediators to insecure attachment and depressive symptomatology, whilst also highlighting areas of future research in this area.

Whilst there is a review on emotion regulation as a mediator for attachment and anxiety (Esbjörn et al., 2012), the authors are not aware of any reviews on the associations between attachment, emotion regulation and depressive symptomatology. Thus, the aim of the current systematic review was to synthesise literature on the relationships between attachment, emotion regulation and

depressive symptomatology and to explore emotion regulation as mediator in the relationship between insecure attachment and depressive symptoms. Furthermore, the relationships between specific dimensions of insecure attachment and types of emotion regulation on depressive symptomatology were explored (see Fig. A1 for our hypothesised model of the theoretical links between attachment, emotion regulation and depressive symptoms). This review was aimed at aiding understanding of how attachment, emotion regulation and depressive symptomatology may be related and the reliability of such associations in order to provide a basis for linking attachment theory to psychopathology and to suggest directions for future research.

### 1.1. Attachment orientations

Insecure attachment is described using two dimensions, anxious attachment and avoidant attachment (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998). A securely attached individual will present as low on anxiety and low on avoidance.

An individual with anxious attachment is hypothesised to use hyperactivation strategies (Main, 1990; Collins et al., 2006) in response to an inconsistent caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Hyperactivation strategies involve demanding proximity and care from attachment figures (Mikulincer et al., 2003) including hyper-vigilance towards attachment cues, the use of worry, and rumination (Cassidy, 1994). These strategies often fail to regulate emotions and can amplify distress (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007).

Avoidant attachment is characterised by compulsive self-reliance and the use of deactivating strategies (Cassidy and Kobak, 1988), following an appraisal that proximity seeking behaviours are unfruitful. Such strategies involve creating an emotional distance from others (Mikulincer et al., 2003), which is hypothesised to extend to an inattention to personal vulnerabilities and threatening incidences. Other deactivating strategies

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