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# Mediating effects of emotion regulation strategies in the relations between stressful life events and life satisfaction in a longitudinal sample of early adolescents

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## 1. Introduction

Calls have been made by leading public health institutions for an integrated and balanced focus on positive and negative functioning (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; World Health Organization, 2014). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013) construed mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” A critical implication of this definition is that optimal mental health encompasses both the absence of psychopathology and the presence of well-being (Greenspoon & Sasklofske, 2001). Researchers have examined different aspects of well-being, including physical, economic, subjective, social, and psychological well-being (Hird, 2003). This study focuses on subjective well-being, a higher-order multidimensional construct comprising frequent experiences of positive affect (e.g., joy, contentment), infrequent experiences of negative affect (e.g., anger, sadness), and high life satisfaction (Diener, 1984).

While the full spectrum of human functioning ranges from debilitating to languishing to flourishing, only about 17% of adults in the United States are deemed to be flourishing (Reeves et al., 2011). This suggests the scope of mental health services should include enhancing the potential of *all* individuals to create a life worth living, not just diagnosing and treating clinical populations (Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009). Life satisfaction is employed as an indicator of subjective well-being in this study as it extends beyond momentary affective experiences to include a reflective and evaluative perspective of life in its totality (Veenhoven, 2006). Life satisfaction is also of particular relevance due to its concurrent and long-term linkages to adaptive outcomes in adolescence, such as higher academic efficacy and performance (Diseth, Danielsen, & Samdal, 2012; Ng, Huebner, & Hills, 2015), positive sociometric status (You et al., 2008), reduced problem behavior (Sun & Shek, 2013), and increased student engagement (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011).

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### 1.1. Subjective well-being in the face of stressful life events

Research has shown that stressful life events can have short- and long-term effects on subjective well-being (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). Stressful life events are defined as discrete experiences that disrupt individuals' adaptive functioning (Folkman, 2013). Stressful life events precipitate the onset of psychopathology in adolescents, such as depression, anxiety, conduct problems, and substance use (Asselmann, Wittchen, Lieb, Höfler, & Beesdo-Baum, 2016; Low et al., 2012). Stressful life events are associated with long-term repercussions that persist into adulthood, including diminished educational outcomes, poor emotional health, and heightened risk-taking behaviors (Pine, Cohen, Johnson, & Brook, 2002; Skarbø, Rosenvinge, & Holte, 2004). In comparison to this research examining outcomes in adulthood, fewer studies have examined the association between stressful life events and life satisfaction in adolescent populations. Chappel, Suldo, and Ogg (2014) found that cumulative major life events were negatively associated with life satisfaction in a sample of middle school students. Similar findings were reported by Nevin, Carr, Shevlin, Dooley, and Breaden (2005) in a sample of Irish adolescents. McKnight, Huebner, and Suldo (2002) found an inverse relation between stressful life events and life satisfaction in a sample of middle and high school students, even when controlling for extraversion and neuroticism traits. Similar results were reported by Ho, Cheung, and Cheung (2008) in a sample of Hong Kong adolescents. Lyons, Huebner, and Hills (2016) explored the mediating effects of approach and avoidance coping behaviors on the relation between stressful life events and life satisfaction in a sample of early adolescents. They found a negative association between stressful life events and life satisfaction, but the relation was not mediated by approach or avoidance coping behaviors.

Lent (2004) presented a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals restore their well-being when beset by stressful life events. The restorative model of well-being posits that the process is jointly influenced by innate traits (e.g., affective dispositions, personality attributes; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; McCrae & Costa, 1991), environmental resources (e.g., therapy services, social support; Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2001), and acquired skills and attitudes (e.g., coping strategies, self-efficacy; Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 2002). As acquirable variables are amenable to self-control, they form the basis for interventions designed to promote well-being. There are two broad types of coping strategies: (1) problem-focused coping that acts directly on the stressor at hand and (2) emotion-focused coping that manages emotions triggered by the stressor (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 2002). Extant literature suggests that problem-focused coping is preferable when the stressor is amenable to personal control (e.g., trouble with friends, failing a grade), while emotion-focused coping is more useful under conditions of diminished control (e.g., parental separation, death of a family member; Forsythe & Compas, 1987; Lent, 2004). The capacity to successfully regulate emotional responses to stressful life events associated with an external locus of control (i.e., uncontrollable events) is more likely to foster positive adaptation to adversity.

The restorative model of well-being suggests that emotion-focused coping (or emotion regulation) mediates the relation between stressful life events and subjective well-being. To date, however, no studies to our knowledge have examined the potential mediating role of emotion-focused coping in the relation between stressful life events and subjective well-being. Based on the restorative model, this study examined emotion-focused coping (specifically cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) as a pathway underlying the relation between uncontrollable life events and life satisfaction in a sample of early adolescents. Given that emotion-focused coping is more useful under conditions of diminished control (as compared to problem-focused coping), uncontrollable life events were specifically examined (Forsythe & Compas, 1987).

### 1.2. Mediating role of emotion regulation strategies

Neuroscientific research revealed that the adolescent brain is particularly sensitive and reactive to emotional stimuli (Hare et al., 2008). The limbic system, which is involved in the bottom-up processing of emotions, matures earlier in life (Gogtay et al., 2004). On the other hand, the neocortex, which is responsible for top-down executive control, is not fully developed until early adulthood (Fjell et al., 2012). The differential functional maturity explains how adolescents may have close to adult levels of logic and reasoning yet tend to be “hijacked” by the immediate emotional impact of affective-laden situations (Powers & Casey, 2015). Concurrently, adolescents navigate a host of novel stressors that engender a myriad of affective-laden situations in which emotions must be successfully regulated to ensure adaptive functioning (Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003). These situations include stressful life events that occur unexpectedly and change one's circumstances, such as parental unemployment, breakup with a boyfriend/girlfriend, and serious illness/injury. Such experiences shape synaptic pathways by influencing which connections are reinforced or pruned during brain development (Hollenstein & Loughheed, 2013). The “hard-wiring” may convert often-practiced patterns of emotion regulation into habits which can profoundly influence developmental trajectories (Benningfield, Potter, & Bostic, 2015).

Emotion regulation may promote positive adaptation in the midst of adversity (Boyes, Hasking, & Martin, 2016; Flouri & Mavroveli, 2013). Accumulating evidence suggests that adaptive emotion regulation strategies are a cornerstone of well-being, academic achievement, and positive adjustment throughout the lifespan (Bazarotti, Biassoni, Villani, Prunas, & Velotti, 2016). Emotion regulation is part of the self-regulatory system by which adaptive control of emotion interacts with and influences cognition and behavior (Calkins & Marcovitch, 2010). It entails the ability to regulate the magnitude or duration of emotional arousal, which allows us to flexibly accommodate to situational demands and effectively communicate individual intentions (Gross & Thompson, 2007).

Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, two of the most common emotion regulation strategies in both research and practice (Gross, 1998), were examined in this study. Cognitive reappraisal is an antecedent-focused strategy involving the re-interpretation of the emotional salience of emotion-eliciting situations, such as Jack who construes his father's layoff as having more parent-child quality time. By contrast, expressive suppression is a response-focused strategy involving the conscious inhibition of

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