



# Socialization of emotion regulation strategies through friends



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of best friends' emotion regulation strategies (regarding the emotions anger, fear, and sadness) on the development of adolescents' emotion regulation strategies and subsequent depressive symptoms. Based on a two-wave longitudinal sample of 238 German adolescents, true change analyses showed positive effects of best friends' adaptive strategies (T1) on the change of adolescents' adaptive strategies (T2 – T1) for anger and fear. Best friends' adaptive strategies (T1) indirectly influence the development of maladaptive strategies (T2 – T1) through the change of adaptive strategies (T2 – T1) and, in turn, the development of depressive symptoms (T2 – T1; two-step mediation). Best friends' adaptive strategies for sadness did not have an effect on adolescents' adaptive strategies. In contrast to adaptive strategies, none of the friends' maladaptive strategies affected adolescents' maladaptive strategies. The results are discussed in terms of peer influences on the development of emotion regulation strategies and psychosocial adjustment.

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## Introduction

Acquiring the ability to handle negative emotional reactions – defined as changing the occurrence, intensity, duration, and expression of an emotion (Thompson, 1994) – is considered an important developmental task in adolescence, especially in terms of preventing the development of mental disorders. Previous research has emphasized the positive effects of handling emotions adaptively in regards to a downregulation of negative emotions and inversed effects of handling emotions maladaptively, which is linked to the development of depressive symptoms (Calkins, 2010; Cicchetti, Ackerman, & Izard, 1995; Cole & Deater-Deckard, 2009; Keenan, 2000). Against this backdrop, it is important to investigate predictors that can influence the development of emotion regulation strategies.

Although stabilizing during adolescence, research has provided evidence that emotion regulation strategies remain malleable (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2010; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). Explanations for the development of emotion regulation strategies can be found in adolescents' social environments. As compared to the well-known influences of parents (e.g., Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007), surprisingly little attention has been paid to adolescents' friends who were shown to be a very important socialization context during this developmental period in many domains (e.g., Brown & Larson, 2009). Thus, also friends may impact the development of social skills like emotion regulation strategies (Sullivan,

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1953). Therefore, we focus on the relationship between the emotion regulation strategies of friends and the development of adolescents' emotion regulation strategies and, in turn, how this is connected with depressive symptoms.

### *Emotions & emotion regulation strategies*

Based on previous theoretical frameworks (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007). Gross (2015) presented an extended model of emotion and emotion regulation. He argues that the process of an arising emotion and the choice of possible emotion regulation strategies are organized in cycles. In a first cycle, an emotion arises through “a person-situation transaction that compels attention, has particular meaning to an individual, and gives rise to a coordinated yet flexible multi-system response to the ongoing person-situation transaction.” (Gross & Thompson, 2007, p. 5). Thus, emotions always occur in combination with a specific situation and individual's situation-specific goals (cf., Frijda, 1988). With regard to situation specific goals, an emotion is always linked to evaluations of the individual (e.g., good or bad for me, Gross, 2015). These evaluations only take place if individuals experience a discrepancy between the actual situation and their goals. Thus, negative evaluations of emotions motivate the individual to select (second cycle) and implement (third cycle) regulation strategies with the goal of changing this evaluation. According to Gross (2015), potential regulation strategies are organized along the steps of an arising emotion (situation–attention–meaning–response). These strategies are situation modification (adjusting a situation through problem solving), attentional deployment (shifting the attention away from the situation), cognitive reappraisal (thinking about the situation in a different way), and response modulation (influencing the experiential, behavioral or physiological responses of the emotion). Due to possible up- or down-regulations of emotions the cycles can be repeated as often as necessary in order to regulate the emotion successfully applying different emotion regulation strategies.

There is growing empirical evidence that emotion regulation strategies are organized emotion specifically (Dixon-Gordon, Aldao, & De Los Reyes, 2015; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). For example, Zimmermann and Iwanski (2014) found that the usage of emotion regulation strategies differ between the emotions anger, fear and sadness. Anger was associated with less avoidance, fear was associated with more expressive suppression, whereas sadness was associated with more avoidance and passive emotion regulation. However, although there is growing evidence of applying emotion regulation strategies always with regard to a specific emotion, only few studies have investigated the underlying mechanisms or the contextual influences that provide the adolescent with emotion regulation strategies. Thus, we focused on the possible influence of friends in this study.

### *Emotion regulation & depressive symptoms*

Research showed that the ability to regulate emotions effectively is linked to the development of depressive symptoms (Gross & Munoz, 1995). Generally, strategies to handle emotions were distinguished in adaptive and maladaptive strategies. Adaptive strategies are associated with a downregulation of emotional responses (decreased distress) and leaves, in turn, individuals with sufficient cognitive capacities to reach their own aims in a certain situation (see also Campbell-Sills, Ellard, & Barlow, 2014; Gross & John, 2003). In contrast, the usage of maladaptive strategies increases the possibility of experiencing a negative unwanted emotion and the goal achievement is less likely. Due to the negative valence of negative emotions like anger, sadness, and anxiety in combination with unsuccessful regulation trials, the development of internal disorders becomes more likely (see also Campbell-Sills et al., 2014).

Regarding the strategies as described in Gross' Model (2015), adaptive strategies that are closely associated with a successful downregulation of negative emotions and subsequently with a lower probability of internal disorders such as depressive symptoms are problem solving (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; D'Zurilla, Chang, Nottingham, & Faccini, 1998), attentional deployment through distraction (Ferri, Schmidt, Hajcak, & Canli, 2013) or cognitive reappraisal (Aldao et al., 2010; Feinberg, Willer, Antonenko, & John, 2012; Gross & John, 2003). According to the dynamic model of Gross (2015), it is not the isolated application of single strategies that lead to a downregulation of negative emotions but a combination of these effective strategies. For instance, individuals sometimes have to distract from the situation at first, in order to free the cognitive capacities to solve the underlying problem or to think about the situation in a different way (for a review, Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2016). In contrast, maladaptive strategies that are closely related with an up-regulation of emotional responses and in turn depressive symptoms are an attentional deployment strategy like withdrawal (Kaminsky, Robertson, & Dewey, 2006; Littleton, Axsom, & Grills-Taquechel, 2011), or as more response-focused strategies aggressive behavior (Horwitz, Hill, & King, 2011) or giving up (Kaminsky et al., 2006). Previous research has also emphasized the negative effects of a combined usage of maladaptive strategies, which focus on handling only the emotion without any attempt to change the situation (Tolan, Gorman-Smith, Henry, Chung, & Hunt, 2002). Thus, strategies like withdrawal without any attempt to downregulate the emotional response (in contrast to distraction) combined with the feeling of helplessness and aggressive behavior may lead to a constant or even increasing emotional valence.<sup>1</sup>

Research also showed that the use of adaptive and maladaptive strategies are negatively correlated (Connor-Smith, Compas, Wadsworth, Thomsen, & Saltzman, 2000; Gross & John, 2003; Langrock, Compas, Keller, Merchant, & Copeland,

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the relationship between emotion regulation and depressive symptoms is reciprocal, i.e., students' emotion regulation strategies affect depressive symptoms and depressive symptoms also affect adolescents' emotion regulation strategies.

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