

What is emotional regulation? A child psychologist explains

by Jessica Griffin, [The Conversation](#)



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If you've followed mental health topics on TikTok or Instagram lately, you have probably heard the term emotional regulation. But emotional regulation isn't just a trendy buzzword. It's a nuanced concept that psychologists like me have been [studying for decades](#).

At its core, emotional regulation is how well someone can manage their emotions—whether positive ones, like excitement and joy, or negative, more uncomfortable ones, like jealousy and anger.

I study emotional regulation—which scientists refer to as simply "emotion regulation"—within the context of relationships, including how children learn to regulate their own emotions. The goal of healthy emotional regulation is not to erase difficult feelings, but to manage those feelings more effectively so they do not become overwhelming.

Emotional regulation versus temperament

People often confuse emotional regulation with temperament, which is your natural, inborn style for how you approach or react to the world. Psychologists describe [three different types of temperament](#) that a person can have: easy and flexible; active, outgoing and excitable; or cautious and quiet. Temperament is genetically and biologically driven—in other words, it is something you are born with.

Emotional regulation, on the other hand, isn't something people either have or don't have. It is a [set of skills that develops over time](#), beginning in childhood as children learn from and interact with the people around them. And like other skills, [emotional regulation can be strengthened](#) with instruction and practice.

There are two types of emotional regulation: self-regulation, or managing your own emotions, and co-regulation, which involves helping others manage their emotions. Both are important in [romantic relationships](#), [at work](#) and [in parenting](#).

[Co-regulation is especially important](#) as a way to [help kids respond to intense feelings](#).

Taming emotional cycles

Emotions don't exist on their own. They are part of an ongoing [conversation between your mind, your body and your behavior](#). The way you think affects how your body responds, your body's reactions influence how you feel, and your feelings shape what you do.

For example, imagine someone cuts you off in traffic. Within moments, several things happen at once. You may feel a surge of rage as your heart starts racing, your palms begin to sweat, and thoughts like "What a #\$\$% jerk!" flash through your mind. Those reactions may lead you to respond by rolling your eyes, swearing at the steering wheel or flipping off the driver.

Each of these reactions influences the others, creating an emotional cycle that can escalate or de-escalate, depending on how you respond. Understanding this cycle is important because changing just one part of it can shift the entire emotional experience.

Responding instead of reacting

Everyone engages in emotional regulation throughout the day—whether consciously or not. Healthy emotional regulation allows people to use their emotions as valuable sources of information rather than letting them take over their lives or ruin their day.

Emotions can signal that something feels threatening, unfair, exciting, disappointing or important, prompting you to pause and consider what might have triggered the reaction.

In the traffic example above, anger may be a clue that you perceived the other driver's behavior as dangerous or disrespectful. Your emotion doesn't mean your interpretation is wrong or right, but it does provide useful information about how you are experiencing the situation, which can help you decide how to respond.

Many people use [emotional regulation strategies](#) intentionally throughout the day to deal with uncomfortable or intense emotions. These include taking a walk, venting to a friend or shooting hoops. They might also include less healthy options, such as doomscrolling, being irritable with loved ones or pouring that third glass of wine.

Multiple factors, such as [life stressors](#)—even [sleep quality](#)—can make it harder for people to [regulate or contain tough emotions](#), increasing the risk of less-than-healthy coping strategies.

When emotional regulation falls short

We psychologists can't talk about emotional regulation without talking about its opposite state—[emotional dysregulation](#). That's when you are unable to successfully use coping skills to deal with tough feelings, and those feelings then interfere with your ability to function.

Instead of using strategies that might serve as life rafts when the seas of daily life become difficult, the waves wash over you—which can feel like you are drowning in the intensity of these feelings.

Yet it isn't the emotion itself that's the problem. Rather, it's how you interpret the emotion, the story you tell yourself about it, and how you respond to it. When emotions become difficult to manage and begin interfering with how you think, act or function, that's emotion dysregulation.

Prolonged emotion dysregulation [has profound costs](#) that extend far beyond how you feel in the moment.

Emotional dysregulation can [affect a person's physical health](#), including heart and immune system functioning, [disrupt sleep](#), contribute to [mental health problems](#) and make it more difficult to be [present and responsive in your relationships](#). It can also impair your memory, concentration and performance in everyday activities—not to mention [your finances](#).

Research suggests that [learning to address emotional dysregulation early on](#) can reduce the risk of long-term consequences, [including serious mental health conditions](#) such as major mood disorders and borderline personality disorder.

Emotional regulation can be learned

Learning emotional regulation strategies begins with identifying your feelings and [building a vocabulary to describe them](#). You can't regulate what you can't name.

[Children learn emotional regulation](#) skills by [watching people around them](#). Parents and other caregivers can help their children by serving as an "emotional container," naming emotions and modeling how to express them in a healthy way.

In the moment, emotional regulation strategies can include breathing or mindfulness techniques that help calm the body's nervous system and turn down the intensity of emotions.

Long-term, skills from [cognitive-behavioral therapy](#), one of the most effective forms of talk therapy for anxiety and depression, can help. These skills include learning to view difficult experiences as opportunities for growth, [questioning unhelpful thoughts](#) instead of automatically believing them, and accepting emotions without letting them take over.

Rather than trying to avoid or eliminate difficult feelings, the goal is to notice them and recognize that your emotions are not always accurate reflections of reality—in other words, that feelings are not facts. Then you can choose how to respond.

[Talking through difficult emotions](#) with someone you trust can help you feel understood, gain perspective and make it easier to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively.

Taking care of your body also supports emotional regulation. [Getting enough sleep](#), eating a balanced diet and [moving your body regularly](#) help your brain function at its best, making it easier to manage stress, think clearly and respond thoughtfully.

For healthy, long-term emotional regulation, practice matters. Just like working out your biceps in the gym, if you use these skills consistently, your capacity for responding can grow.

Provided by [The Conversation](#)

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