

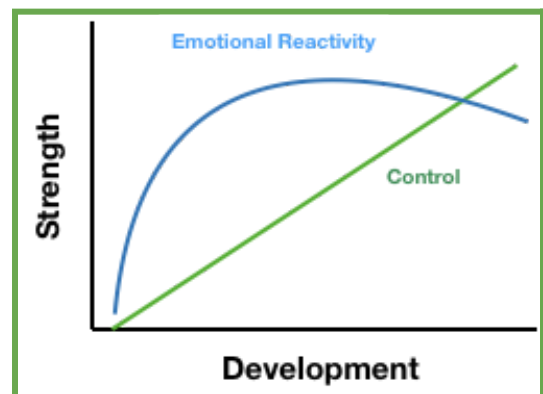
Stress Management, Emotion Regulation, and Coping

Childhood and adolescence are marked by physical, psychological, and environmental challenges that impact identity development, mental health and wellbeing, and **adjustment processes**. Adolescence, in particular, is a developmental period defined by change in both the child and their environment. Youth experience challenges managing increased stress, heightened emotions, and novel opportunities for independence. At the same time, their bodies and brains are developing at a rapid rate. This means that youth have windows of increased opportunity for positive action, and at the same time increased risk for **impulsive behavior** and pathology.



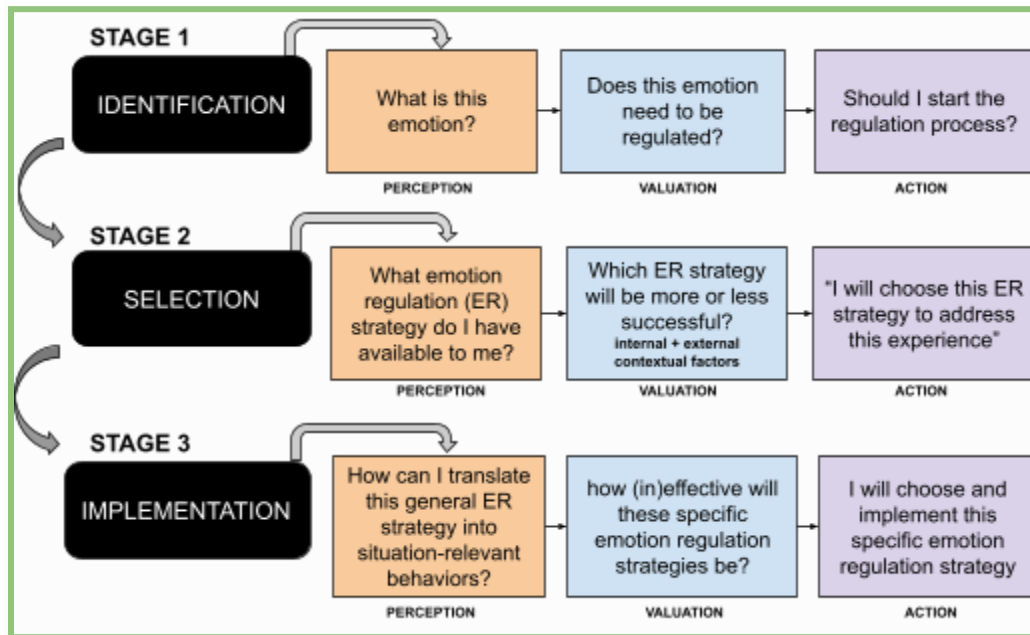
What Is Emotion Regulation?

Youth experience increased sensitivity to positive rewards and both positive and negative emotional information. This means that the highs are higher and the lows are lower. At the same time the ability to effectively regulate these highs and lows is still immature^{1,2}. Emotion regulation is an umbrella term for skills and processes used by people to **monitor, evaluate, and modify** their emotional reactions and responses^{2,3}. The schematic shows us that



the development of **emotional reactivity** peaks *before* the ability to have control over those feelings. Youth, in particular, might benefit from direction on how to intentionally regulate their emotions especially when challenged by stressors like those we all experienced during COVID-19.

Emotion regulation strategies are things people can do to intentionally and actively regulate their emotions^{2,4}. Here we lay out a framework to demonstrate some ways in which people can select emotion regulation strategies to cope with challenging emotional experiences^{5,6}.



Stage 1 of the infographic above involves identification of the emotion and assessment of its value. Selection of a regulation strategy comes next. When coping requires active emotional regulation, strategies are categorized as effective or not effective based on their overall impact on emotion, cognition, and behavior and their association with **psychopathology**.

Emotion regulation strategies are effective if they meet the following goals²:

- reduce negative **affective states**
- strengthen or maintain positive affective states
- restore **emotional balance**



For example, instead of fixating on an uncontrollable situation, an individual can use healthy **distractions** like art or exercise (see Table 1: “Short List” of Emotion Regulation Strategies). **Adaptive** emotion regulation strategies help people build an understanding of their experiences, take back control, and positively adapt to circumstances that may be difficult to change⁷. This is very important for children and adolescents because their ability to perceive control over stressors and unpleasant situations may be crucial for **self-efficacy**⁸.

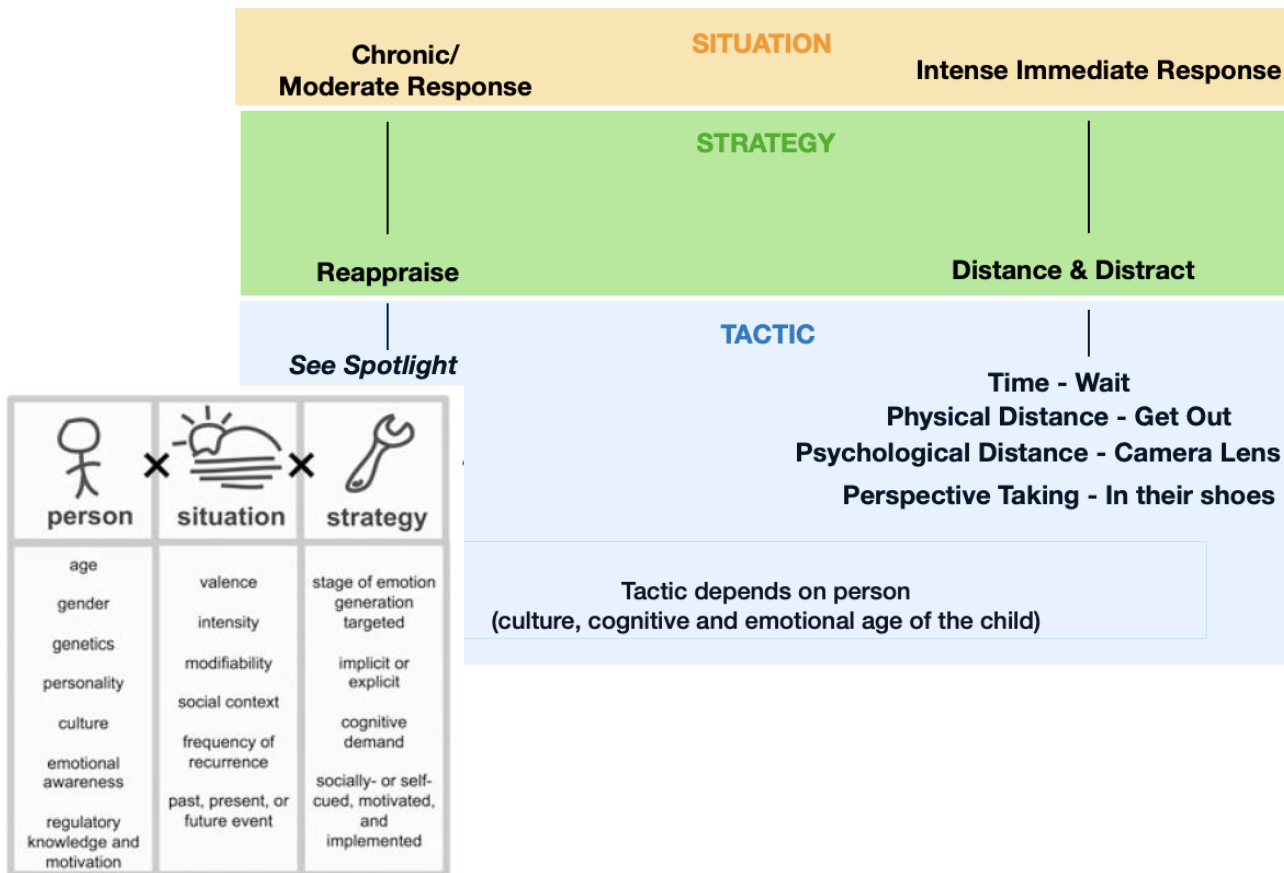
On the other hand, **maladaptive** emotion regulation strategies may work in the heat of the moment or for short-term relief, but ultimately lead to more stress and damage. This is because these strategies fail to reduce negative affective states and do not successfully maintain or increase positive affective states². For example, using aggression and venting to let out anger can work in the short-term, but can actually lead to more stress and frustration overtime. However, there are naturally situations in which maintaining an emotion (sad/angry) is indeed adaptive to someone’s well-being.

TABLE 1. “Short List” of Emotion Regulation Strategies^{2,9,10}:

Effective		Not Effective	
Emotional awareness	Identifying, explaining, and discerning one’s emotional experiences and that of others	Rumination	Repetitively and passively thinking about negative emotions, their causes and consequences
Acceptance	Experience the emotional situation, thoughts, and emotions without trying to avoid, control, or change anything	Expressive suppression	Limiting, hiding, and inhibiting behavioral displays of emotion
Cognitive Reappraisal	Rethinking and reframing the meaning of events to change emotional responses and their impact	Venting	Overt expressions of emotions
Problem Solving	Actively modifying the stressors that induce negative affect to change the associated emotions	Avoidance	Intentionally shifting attention away to an external stimulus to block out emotions as a way to ignore the root of an issue
Distraction (non-avoidant)	Intentionally shifting attention away from the emotion to an external stimulus to reduce negative self-thoughts and self-criticism		

Flexibility: Considering the Relationship between Person, Situation, and Strategy

Although we discussed maladaptive emotion strategies and adaptive strategies in an exclusive way, it is important that people learn to **choose** and **use** emotion regulation strategies flexibly. This is because the effectiveness varies based on situational differences, personal factors, and strategic features². Here we include an image showing different factors that can interact with each other and shape how individuals navigate emotional experiences¹¹.



Spotlight: Cognitive Reappraisal

Common forms of adaptive emotion regulation strategies include: emotional awareness, acceptance, cognitive reappraisal, distraction, and problem solving (see Table 1: "Short List" of Emotion Regulation Strategies)². Adaptive emotion regulation is typically associated with better health outcomes overtime, especially for children and adolescents. Although all these strategies can be useful, cognitive reappraisal is one of the most flexible¹².

Cognitive reappraisal is defined as **rethinking** and **reframing** the meaning of events to change emotional responses and reduce an event's emotional impact⁹. When compared to other strategies, cognitive reappraisal has been shown to be more preferable for dealing with situations that require long-term change¹¹. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed children and families in chronic and high stress situations that put them at risk of experiencing long-lasting effects. Therefore, cognitive reappraisal, if actively and flexibly used, may be a more adaptive strategy for many children and adolescents, who are facing long-term stressors and circumstances that they cannot change.



Example: You walk into the homework room and see Mark, a 17-year-old boy, overwhelmed and close to tears. He is worried that he is not ready for the test in school and that his parents will be upset with him if he doesn't get a good grade.

Example: Two boys are teasing each other on the basketball courts, when one of them becomes upset and angry. You ask him to step away and talk to you and he says that the others have been making fun of his height for days. He is upset and had clearly had enough.

Step-By-Step Coaching¹³:

- (1) **Describe** the challenging emotional situation
- (2) **Analyze the Emotion** - Think of the same situation, but instead of focusing on the negative emotion, focus on thinking about only the facts. Avoid statements of emotion.
- (3) **Third-Party Perspective** - Now think about the same emotional situation but take a third-person's point of view. Assume they have the facts but don't know what you felt. What do they see?
- (4) **Perspective of Time** - Now think about the experience a year from now. What do you think about the experience a year after it happened?

This strategy has consistently been shown to be effective in decreasing adolescent's negative mood, when the level of arousal and intensity of negative emotions are mild to moderate¹². However, using cognitive reappraisal may be difficult during high stress situations because it requires more **cognitive effort**¹¹. Since children and adolescents are not fully able to regulate their emotions yet, they may rely on using automatic maladaptive strategies, like rumination and aggression, which increase risk of depression⁴.



Therefore, it is very important that children and adolescents are taught patiently how to become more familiar with emotional regulation strategies and to learn how to use them flexibly to cope with stressful situations.

Conclusion

Due to the persistent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, children and adolescents are adapting and adjusting to new and intensified living conditions and the stressors that come with it. With the appropriate strategies and community support, young people can be resilient against this new, high level of stress. Although we have noted well-documented **vulnerabilities** associated with adolescence, mental health problems and resilience co-existed in children and adolescents during the COVID-19 outbreak. Adolescence is both marked by vulnerabilities, but is also characterized by increased **cognitive and social flexibility**, which allows youth to adapt in challenging situations. *Every time there is risk, there is opportunity.* Collaboratively with BCNY staff, we hope to facilitate a space to empower young men to address their emotions while also addressing some of their vulnerabilities. Their brilliance and resilience provide the opportunity to support them as they make use of the internal resources that will foster their ability to thrive and be well.

DEFINITIONS

Adaptive - making appropriate responses that are needed for adjusting to one's environment

Affective states - longer lasting mood states that result from an accumulation of experiences

Cognitive Effort - mental resources that individuals allocate to task performance

Cognitive Flexibility - ability to modify behaviors and thoughts in response to the environment

Emotional balance - the ability of the mind and body to maintain flexibility in the face of challenge and change

Emotional Reactivity - how frequently and intensely one experiences emotional arousal

Evaluate - to think carefully before making a judgment or decision on the value or worth of something

Impulsive Behavior - to act quickly with no thought to the consequences

Maladaptive - not providing adequate or appropriate adjustment to the environment or situation

Monitor - observe and check the progress or quality of something over a period of time

Modify - make partial or minor changes to something to improve it or make it less extreme

Psychological Distress - range of symptoms and experiences of a person's internal life that are commonly held to be troubling, confusing or out of the ordinary.

Psychopathology - manifestation of behaviors and experiences that may be indicative of mental illness or psychological impairment.

Reframing - seeing an event or action from a different perspective by altering its

context (emotionally or conceptually)

Rethinking- think again about a course of action or events especially in order to make changes to it

Self-efficacy - an individual's subjective perception of their ability to perform in a given setting or to attain desired results

Social Flexibility - ability to adapt to different social situations

Stimulus - a thing or event that causes something else to happen, develop, or become more active

Vulnerabilities - susceptibility or increased exposure to a negative outcome

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