

# Keeping Emotions in Check May Not Always Benefit Psychological Health

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Being able to regulate your emotions is important for well-being, but new research suggests that a common emotion regulation strategy called “cognitive reappraisal” may actually be harmful when it comes to stressors that are under our control. The study is published in [\*Psychological Science\*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“Context is important,” says psychological scientist and lead researcher Allison Troy of Franklin & Marshall College. “Our research is among the first to suggest that cognitive reappraisal may actually have negative effects on psychological health in certain contexts.”

Previous research has shown that cognitive reappraisal — a strategy that involves reframing one’s thoughts about a given situation in order to change its emotional impact — is especially beneficial for the psychological health of people who are highly stressed. But, as Troy and colleagues discovered, the controllability of a given situation seems to be the key in determining whether cognitive reappraisal helps or hurts:

“For someone facing a stressful situation in which they have little control, such as a loved one’s illness, the ability to use reappraisal should be extremely helpful — changing emotions may be one of the only things that he or she can exert some control over to try to cope,” Troy notes.

“But for someone experiencing trouble at work because of poor performance, for example, reappraisal might not be so adaptive. Reframing the situation to make it seem less negative may make that person less inclined to attempt to change the situation.”

For their study, the researchers recruited a community sample of people who had recently experienced a stressful life event. The participants took an online survey aimed to measure their levels of depression and life stress. About one week later, they came to the lab to take part in a challenge designed to measure their cognitive reappraisal ability.

The participants first watched a neutral film clip intended to induce a neutral emotional baseline, and then watched three sad film clips. During these clips, they were randomly assigned to use cognitive reappraisal strategies to think about the situation they were watching “in a more positive light.”

The results showed that the ability to regulate sadness was associated with fewer reported symptoms of depression, but only for participants whose stress was uncontrollable — those with an ailing spouse, for instance. For participants with more controllable stress, being better at reappraisal was actually associated with *more* depressive symptoms.

“When stressors are controllable, it seems that cognitive reappraisal ability isn’t just less beneficial, it

may be harmful,” explains Troy.

These findings add a wrinkle to the existing research, which has consistently shown that reappraisal is linked with positive outcomes.

“These results suggest that no emotion regulation strategy is always adaptive,” says Troy. “Adaptive emotion regulation likely involves the ability to use a wide variety of strategies in different contexts, rather than relying on just one strategy in all contexts.”

These findings have implications for public health, given that stress and impairments in the ability to cope with it are important predictors of psychological health problems. The findings also have important implications for clinicians, given that many existing forms of therapy focus on using cognitive reappraisal as a way of strengthening emotion regulation:

“Our results suggest that therapeutic interventions that seek to improve emotion regulation ability and teach clients to use particular strategies in context appropriate ways would be particularly beneficial,” says Troy. “It may be, for instance, that more active strategies like problem-solving and seeking social support could be particularly beneficial in more controllable contexts.”

The researchers plan on expanding their person-by-situation approach to the study of other emotion regulation strategies like acceptance, distraction, and suppression.