
Living with Childhood Trauma: Emotion Regulation Experiences in Young Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Childhood trauma constitutes a major risk factor with long-term consequences for mental health and psychosocial functioning into young adulthood. This study aims to explore in depth the lived experiences of emotion regulation among young adults with histories of childhood trauma and their implications for psychological and social functioning. A qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with young adults aged 20–30 who had experienced childhood trauma and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that childhood trauma shapes maladaptive emotion regulation patterns characterized by difficulties in emotional awareness, predominant use of suppression, rumination, and avoidance, and limited cognitive reappraisal capacity. These emotion regulation impairments function as a central mechanism linking childhood trauma to increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety, relational dysfunction, and reduced quality of life in young adulthood. The study underscores the importance of strengthening emotion regulation capacities through targeted psychological interventions as a core strategy for supporting psychosocial recovery among young adult survivors of childhood trauma.

Keyword: *childhood trauma, emotion regulation, mental health, psychological trauma, young adulthood.*

INTRODUCTION

Childhood trauma has long been recognized as a key determinant in an individual's psychological development throughout the life span, with a widespread impact on emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral functioning in adulthood. Globally, epidemiological reports show that more than half of the adult population has experienced at least one form of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including emotional, physical, sexual abuse, neglect, and exposure to family dysfunction, with the highest prevalence found in developing countries and low-socioeconomic groups (Dagnino et al., 2025; Schweitzer et al., 2025). In Indonesia, various national surveys and clinical reports indicate high exposure to violence against children and adolescents, most of which go undetected or not systematically addressed until they enter the young adult phase, thus forming long-term psychological vulnerabilities that often arise in the form of emotional regulation disorders, depression, anxiety, and interpersonal relationship difficulties (Kumar Rita & A. S., 2023; Vashisht, 2025).

Young adulthood is a developmentally sensitive period that is highly sensitive to the impact of childhood trauma, as this phase is characterized by the demands of complex psychosocial transitions, including identity formation, emotional independence, romantic relationships, and adjustment of social roles. The individual's ability to manage, modulate, and express emotions adaptively—known as emotion regulation—is a major prerequisite for successful psychosocial adaptation in this phase. However, childhood trauma has been shown to significantly interfere with the development of emotion regulatory systems through neurobiological changes, cognitive schemas, and affective patterns that persist into adulthood (Liu et al., 2025; Tinajero et al., 2020). Emotion regulation disorders then function as a transdiagnostic mechanism that links traumatic experiences to various psychopathological manifestations in young adults (Rashid et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023).

The academic urgency of this study is further strengthened given the increasing number of mental health disorders in young adults globally, especially in the post-COVID-19 pandemic, where many individuals with a history of childhood trauma show a higher vulnerability to stress, depression, and anxiety disorders due to social stress and economic uncertainty (Gibson, 2024; Ejaz et al., 2025). Practically, the failure of the emotion regulation system in young adults has a direct impact on the quality of romantic relationships, social functioning, academic and employment performance, as well as the risk of self-harm behaviors and suicidal ideation, making it a serious public health issue and requiring targeted evidence-based interventions (Yuan et al., 2025; Qian et al., 2022).

A number of empirical studies have attempted to elucidate the relationship between childhood trauma and emotion regulation. Doba et al. (2022) in their study entitled Childhood trauma and posttraumatic stress symptoms in adolescents and young adults: The mediating role of mentalizing and emotion regulation strategies showed that childhood trauma predicted an increase in PTSD symptoms through impaired emotional regulation and low mentalization ability. Rashid et al. (2024) in their study The Mediating Role of Emotion Regulation and Basic Psychological Needs found that emotion regulation mediates the relationship between childhood trauma and young adult psychological function within the framework of Self-Determination Theory. Meanwhile, Li et al. (2023) in the study The role of self-esteem and emotion regulation in the associations between childhood trauma and mental health in adulthood showed that emotion regulation and self-esteem play a mediator and moderator role in the relationship between trauma and adult mental health.

Although these studies have made important contributions, there are a number of limitations that form a significant research gap. First, most previous studies have placed more emphasis on the quantitative relationship between trauma and psychopathological outcomes, while individuals' subjective experiences of regulating emotions after trauma—particularly in the young adult phase—have not been explored in depth through qualitative approaches (Doba et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2024). Second, the focus of previous research has generally been to measure emotion regulation as a global construct, without exploring the dynamics of emotion regulation experiences in the context of daily life, interpersonal relationships, and young adult identity formation (Li et al., 2023; Armbruster-Genç et al., 2025). Third, these studies were mostly conducted in the context of Western culture, so the understanding of the experience of post-traumatic emotion regulation in the Indonesian socio-cultural

context is still very limited and has not been systematically documented (Kumar Rita & A. S., 2023; Vashisht, 2025).

Based on these gaps, this study offers a novelty in the form of an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences of emotion regulation in young adults living with childhood trauma through a qualitative approach, which allows a holistic understanding of how individuals interpret, manage, and negotiate their emotions in various post-traumatic life contexts. The aim of this study was to uncover the patterns of emotion regulation experiences of young adults with a history of childhood trauma and identify their implications for their psychosocial functioning.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological design to deeply understand the experience of emotion regulation in young adults who have a history of childhood trauma. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it focuses on the exploration of the subjective meaning of individual life experiences, particularly in the context of complex and personal emotional experiences such as psychological trauma and emotion regulation, which cannot be reduced to purely quantitative measurements (Doba et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2024). This study positions the experience of emotion regulation as a psychological construct formed through the interaction between traumatic memory, cognitive schema, relational dynamics, and the socio-cultural context that surrounds the individual, so an approach that allows participants to articulate these experiences in a reflective and narrative manner is needed (Hanetz-Gamliel & Dollberg, 2025; Armbruster-Genç et al., 2025).

The study participants were young adults aged 20–30 years who had a history of childhood trauma in the form of emotional, physical, neglect, or other forms of adversity before the age of 18. Participant recruitment was carried out through purposive sampling techniques with strictly set inclusion criteria, including willingness to participate in the entire series of interviews, the ability to reflect on emotional experiences verbally, and not being in a condition of acute psychological disorder that requires intensive clinical intervention. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting between 60–90 minutes per session, with interview guidelines developed based on the theoretical framework of emotion regulation and psychological trauma, covering dimensions of emotional experience, adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, the influence of trauma on interpersonal relationships, as well as psychosocial adaptation processes in young adult life (Li et al., 2023; Pereira et al., 2021). All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed systematically to ensure the depth and integrity of the qualitative data obtained (Gibson, 2024; Ejaz et al., 2025).

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis techniques with a gradual procedure that included data familiarization, open coding, grouping of codes into conceptual categories, and development of main themes that represent participants' patterns of emotion regulation experiences. The analysis process was carried out iteratively and reflectively to capture the nuances of meaning and complexity of emotional experiences arising from the participants' narratives, by involving discussions between researchers to minimize interpretation bias (Rashid et al., 2024; Dagnino et al., 2025). The validity of the analysis is maintained through source triangulation, member checking with participants, and trail audits that document the entire analytical decision-

making process, so that the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of research findings can be scientifically accounted for (Schweitzer et al., 2025; Yuan et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Childhood trauma has been shown to play a central role in shaping maladaptive patterns of emotional regulation until it enters the young adult phase, where early traumatic experiences intervene in the maturation process of an individual's affective and cognitive systems in a sustainable manner. Exposure to violence, neglect, and an unsafe emotional environment in childhood interferes with the development of internal mechanisms that are supposed to help individuals adaptively recognize, assess, and modulate emotions, so adult individuals with a history of trauma often exhibit difficulties in controlling intense emotional reactions, affective instability, and excessive stress responses in the face of the demands of daily life (Dagnino et al., 2025; Tinajero et al., 2020). This emotion regulation disorganization is one of the main pathways that links childhood trauma experiences with psychopathological vulnerability in young adults (Rashid et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023).

At the neurobiological level, childhood trauma has been shown to interfere with the development of the limbic system and prefrontal connectivity, which play an important role in emotional control and cognitive flexibility. Neuroimaging studies show that individuals with early trauma have higher amygdala activation and lower regulative function of the prefrontal cortex when faced with emotional stimuli, resulting in limited ability to perform cognitive reappraisal and impulse control (Liu et al., 2025; Tinajero et al., 2020). This neurofunctional imbalance contributes to a pattern of emotion regulation characterized by a tendency to suppress emotions, hypervigilance, and difficulty managing negative emotions constructively in young adults (Armbruster-Genç et al., 2025; Hanetz-Gamliel & Dollberg, 2025).

From a psychological developmental perspective, emotional regulation disorders due to childhood trauma inhibit the formation of stable emotional identities during young adulthood. Individuals who grow up in traumatic environments often lack a safe and consistent model of emotion regulation, thus internalizing maladaptive coping patterns such as emotional avoidance, dissociation, or affective aggressiveness as survival mechanisms (Doba et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2021). In the long run, these strategies not only fail to reduce emotional distress, but also reinforce chronic stress cycles and worsen the psychosocial functioning of young adults (Gibson, 2024; Qian et al., 2022).

Previous research findings also indicate that difficulty in emotion regulation is a major mediator between childhood trauma and various psychological disorders, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and self-harm behavior. Rashid et al. (2024) show that disruption of meeting basic psychological needs triggered by trauma only has a significant impact on psychological function when accompanied by a deficit in emotion regulation. These findings reinforce the argument that emotion regulation serves as a key mechanism that determines whether traumatic experiences develop into chronic psychological disorders or can be more healthily adapted into adulthood (Li et al., 2023; Schweitzer et al., 2025).

In the context of young adult interpersonal relationships, the disorganization of emotional regulation due to childhood trauma also affects the quality of romantic and social relationships. Individuals with impaired emotion regulation tend to have difficulty building secure attachments, exhibit high sensitivity to rejection, and have a

high tendency to relational conflict, which in turn exacerbates emotional distress and reinforces psychosocial isolation (Vashisht, 2025; Ejaz et al., 2025). This condition shows that childhood trauma not only has an intrapersonal impact, but also impairs the ability of young adult individuals to function adaptively within the broader social system (Hanetz-Gamliel & Dollberg, 2025; Dagnino et al., 2025).

Cumulatively, empirical evidence suggests that childhood trauma forms a fragile foundation for young adult emotional regulation systems through neurobiological, psychological, and relational mechanisms that interact with each other. As young adults face complex developmental demands, such disrupted emotion regulation systems become a major source of vulnerability to mental disorders and social dysfunction, thus confirming the importance of understanding the experience of post-traumatic emotion regulation as a primary focus of clinical and preventive interventions (Doba et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2024).

The emotion regulation experiences of young adults living with childhood trauma exhibit complex and heterogeneous patterns, reflecting the interaction between the ever-evolving history of emotional development, relational context, and coping capacity. Young adults with a history of trauma often describe intense, unstable, and unpredictable emotional experiences, accompanied by difficulty identifying and making sense of their own affective experiences. This pattern is consistent with the finding that childhood trauma interferes with the formation of emotional schemas and emotional awareness, resulting in individuals having difficulty in the process of emotional labeling and emotional clarity, which are fundamental components of adaptive emotion regulation (Doba et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2021).

Studies have shown that young adults with childhood trauma tend to rely on maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as suppression, rumination, avoidance, and emotional numbing, which, while providing temporary relief, actually reinforce emotional distress in the long run. Armbruster-Genç et al. (2025) found that individuals with childhood maltreatment experiences had higher suppression tendencies and lower reappraisal capacity, which contributed to increased symptoms of depression and anxiety. This pattern shows that the emotion regulation strategies studied in the context of trauma are often incapable of meeting complex emotional demands in the young adult phase (Hanetz-Gamliel & Dollberg, 2025; Dagnino et al., 2025).

Young adults' experience of emotion regulation is also strongly influenced by intrapersonal factors such as self-esteem, self-awareness, and mentalization abilities. Li et al. (2023) show that the regulation of emotion and self-esteem serves as a mediating mechanism that determines the strength of the relationship between childhood trauma and adult mental health. Young adults with better reflective capacity and more stable self-esteem show a more adaptive ability to manage negative emotions and navigate psychosocial distress, despite having a history of significant trauma (Rashid et al., 2024; Gibson, 2024).

In addition to intrapersonal factors, relational context plays a crucial role in shaping the post-traumatic experience of young adult emotion regulation. Social support, attachment quality, and safe relationship experiences serve as protective factors that strengthen emotion regulation capacity. Sadaf et al. (2025) found that perceived social support was able to reduce the impact of childhood trauma on depression through increased emotional regulation. Conversely, insecure attachment patterns and conflict-filled relational experiences exacerbate emotional regulation difficulties and increase young adult psychological vulnerability (Vashisht, 2025; Ejaz et al., 2025).

To clarify the relationship between phenomena, a synthesis of relevant national research findings is formulated in the following conceptual model:

Dimension	Adaptive Regulation Characteristics	Maladaptive Regulation Characteristics	Psychological Outcomes
Emotional Awareness	Clear identification of feelings	Confusion, emotional numbness	Depression, anxiety
Regulation Strategy	Cognitive reappraisal, mindfulness	Suppression, rumination, avoidance	PTSD symptoms, stress vulnerability
Interpersonal Context	Secure attachment, social support	Insecure attachment, relational conflict	Relationship dissatisfaction
Self-Concept	Stable self-esteem, self-compassion	Negative self-schema, self-blame	Low well-being, self-harm risk

Table 1. Patterns of Emotion Regulation in Young Adults with Childhood Trauma

The table above shows that the experience of emotion regulation of young adults with childhood trauma falls into two main spectrums, namely adaptive and maladaptive regulation, each of which has very different psychological implications. Individuals who are able to develop clear emotional awareness and use adaptive regulatory strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and mindfulness tend to show higher levels of psychological well-being as well as resilience to stress. In contrast, the dominance of maladaptive regulatory strategies such as suppression, rumination, and avoidance is associated with an increased incidence of PTSD symptoms, depression, anxiety, and the risk of self-harm behavior, which confirms the crucial role of emotion regulation as a primary mediator between childhood trauma and young adult psychological outcomes (Li et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2025).

The experience of young adult emotion regulation shaped by childhood trauma has far-reaching implications for the psychosocial functioning of individuals in various domains of life. Young adults with impaired emotion regulation capacity tend to exhibit higher levels of chronic stress, difficulty adapting to social and academic demands, and an increased risk of psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. These findings are consistent with the results of studies that suggest that difficulty in emotion regulation plays a key mechanism explaining the relationship between early traumatic experiences and psychopathological susceptibility in young adults (Rashid et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023). In this context, the regulation of emotions does not simply function as an individual psychological skill, but as a structural foundation that determines the quality of psychosocial adaptation throughout early adulthood.

From a cognitive and behavioral function perspective, emotional regulation disorders due to childhood trauma have a significant impact on decision-making abilities, impulse control, and cognitive flexibility. Individuals with a history of trauma often exhibit a tendency to high emotional reactivity that interferes with the rational evaluation process and narrows the capacity to consider alternative solutions adaptively in the face of daily life problems. This condition exacerbates unhealthy coping patterns, such as avoidance, substance abuse, or self-harm behavior, which further strengthens

the cycle of emotional and psychosocial dysfunction (Tinajero et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2025).

The implications of emotion regulation are also evident in the relational domains of young adults, particularly in romantic relationships and intimate friendships. Difficulties in managing negative emotions, expressing emotional needs in a healthy manner, and maintaining affective stability lead to increased relational conflicts, relationship dissatisfaction, and vulnerability to insecure attachment patterns. Vashisht (2025) shows that childhood trauma is associated with decreased relationship satisfaction in couples through impaired emotional regulation, indicating that the quality of emotion regulation is an important determinant in the sustainability of young adult interpersonal relationships. These findings confirm that childhood trauma has a transgenerational impact on individuals' relational dynamics and emotional well-being in their social lives.

In academic and professional contexts, disturbances in young adult emotional regulation also have an impact on performance and productivity. Individuals with low emotion regulation capacity often experience difficulty concentrating, emotional exhaustion, as well as decreased intrinsic motivation, which ultimately hinders the achievement of academic and career goals. Rashid et al. (2024) emphasized that the fulfillment of basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and connectedness can only be optimally realized when individuals have an adaptive functioning emotion regulation system. Thus, emotion regulation plays a fundamental prerequisite for the optimal functioning of young adults in various life contexts.

More broadly, these findings underscore the importance of psychological interventions that focus on strengthening the capacity for emotion regulation for young adults with a history of childhood trauma. Mindfulness-based interventions, cognitive-behavioral therapies, and mentalization-based approaches have been shown to be effective in improving emotional awareness, cognitive flexibility, and reappraisal ability, thereby helping individuals reconstruct their relationships with traumatic emotional experiences more adaptively (Gibson, 2024; Hanetz-Gamliel & Dollberg, 2025). These approaches not only reduce psychopathological symptoms, but also strengthen the psychosocial resilience and quality of life of young adults in the long term.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that childhood trauma has a profound and sustained impact on young adults' experiences of emotion regulation, serving as a key mechanism that bridges early traumatic experiences with various forms of psychosocial dysfunction in adulthood. Emotion regulation disorders not only increase susceptibility to psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD, but also affect the quality of interpersonal relationships, academic and professional performance, and overall emotional well-being.

Theoretically, these findings strengthen the understanding that emotion regulation is a transdiagnostic construct that has a central role in the development of post-traumatic psychopathology, while affirming the need to integrate developmental, neurobiological, and psychosocial perspectives in understanding the long-term impact of childhood trauma. Practically, the results of this study confirm the urgency of developing psychological prevention and intervention programs based on emotion regulation that

are directed at young adults with a history of trauma, especially in mental health services, higher education, and social welfare policies.

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