

Emotion Regulation as a Transdiagnostic Treatment Target in Adults with Histories of Trauma: Clinical Implications for Assessment and Intervention



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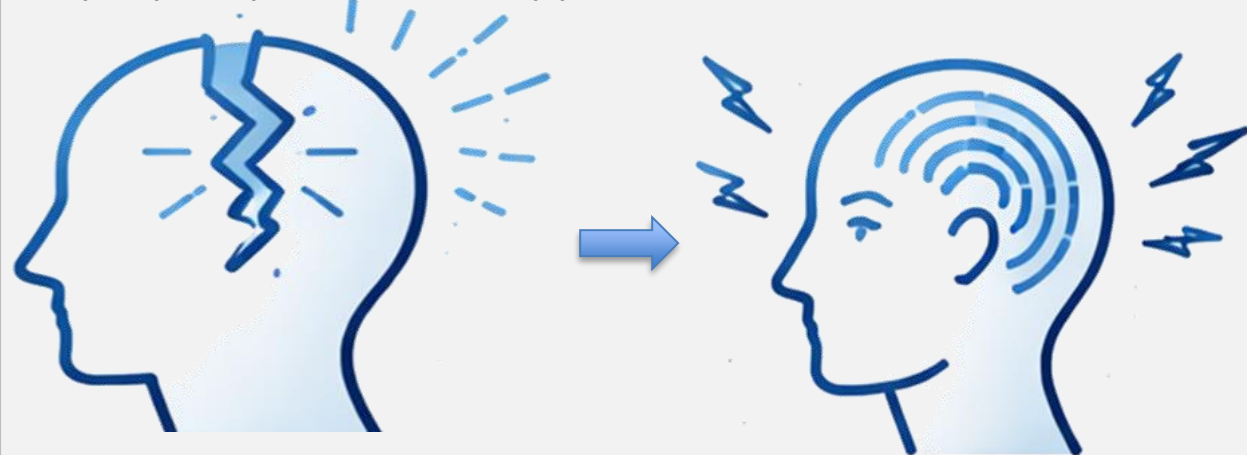
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Introduction / Background

After trauma, emotions can feel stronger, faster, and harder to control. Neuroscience research shows that trauma can increase sensitivity to threat while reducing the brain's ability to calm emotional reactions. In therapy, this may look like:

- Emotional overwhelm
- Avoidance
- Shutting down or dissociation
- Difficulty tolerating distress

When trauma happens early in life, these difficulties may last longer. This supports the need for developmentally informed, step-by-step treatment approaches.



Many adults who have experienced trauma develop PTSD, depression, anxiety or other emotional difficulties. Even though these diagnoses are different, many people share one major challenge: managing strong emotions. Research suggests that difficulty regulating emotions may be one of the main links between trauma and mental health problems. Focusing on emotion regulation may help clinicians treat the underlying issue rather than just the diagnosis.

Objectives

1. Explain how trauma affects emotion regulation
2. Describe what happens in the brain after trauma
3. Review practical ways to assess emotion regulation
4. Discuss how treatments can target regulation skills

Clinical Vignette



A 34 year old adult with childhood trauma presents with PTSD and major depression. Sessions are marked by emotional flooding and withdrawal when discussing trauma memories. Initial focus on distress tolerance and emotion identification skills increases stability and engagement, allowing later trauma focused work to proceed more effectively.

Methods

This poster reviews research and clinical literature on:

- Emotion regulation and trauma
- Brain systems involved in emotional control
- Assessment tools used in clinical practice
- Evidence-based trauma treatments that teach regulation skills

Results / Discussion

Trauma and Emotional Reactions:

- Stronger emotional responses
- Harder time calming down
- Increased avoidance of difficult feelings

Brain Changes After Trauma

- Increased threat sensitivity
- Emotions activate quickly
- Decreased ability to calm emotional responses



Clinical Assessment

Clinicians can assess:

- How clients respond to strong emotions
- Their ability to tolerate distress
- Patterns of avoidance or shutdown
- Use of emotion regulation questionnaires

Treatment Implications

Many trauma-informed therapies already include emotion regulation skills, such as:

- Distress tolerance
- Emotional awareness
- Cognitive restructuring
- Gradual exposure

Future Direction

Rather than focusing only on diagnosis, clinicians should assess how well a person can manage strong emotions, since emotion regulation may be a key driver of treatment response and more personalized trauma-informed care. This means integrating emotion regulation into routine trauma assessment, strengthening clinician training in mechanism-focused care, and using transdiagnostic approaches in high-stress service settings. Together, these shifts can improve the flexibility, relevance, and overall effectiveness of care.