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The Critical (and Neglected) Role of Effort in Emotion Regulation

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Abstract

When people feel bad, how much effort should they invest to make themselves feel better? Should they try harder, or might this even make matters worse? In other domains of self-regulation, effort contributes to goal-related behaviors and success. However, it is unclear whether, when, or for whom effort is beneficial, irrelevant, or harmful for emotion regulation success and psychological health. In this article, building on theories of motivation, we first discuss how and when effort determines success in emotion regulation and review relevant empirical evidence. We then provide an analysis of two key factors that might predict effort in emotion regulation. Finally, we highlight open questions and future directions.

Keywords

effort, emotion regulation, psychological health, motivation, well-being

> Try harder is the worse advice ever. . . . Working harder [to overcome depression] is consuming me and it's so exhausting. (Suspicious_Focus_268, 2024)

When your friend, Jack, feels sad, should you encourage him to try harder to change his feelings? The answer depends on whether effort facilitates success in emotion regulation, the process by which people influence emotions (Gross, 2015). Given that emotion regulation can shape psychological health, it is important to identify factors that render it more or less successful. To engage in emotion regulation, people must be motivated to change how they feel (Tamir, 2021). Such motivation involves setting emotion regulation goals (i.e., desired changes in emotion) and striving for them (see Gollwitzer, 1990). Striving for goals takes effort (Locke & Latham, 2019). Here, we suggest that effort plays an important, potentially unique, and largely understudied role in emotion regulation success.

First, we explain why studying effort in emotion regulation is "worth the effort." We discuss the potential role of effort in emotion regulation success and why it might differ from effort in other self-regulation domains. Then, to understand when people are likely to invest effort in emotion regulation, building on theories of motivation, we identify two key antecedents. Finally, we highlight open questions and future directions in understanding effort in emotion regulation and psychological health.

Why Study Effort in Emotion Regulation?

Although effort has been widely studied, there is no consensus regarding its definition (Thomson & Oppenheimer, 2022). We define effort as the investment of mental resources in pursuit of a goal (e.g., Gendolla & Wright, 2009). Such investment of resources is often informed by motivational intensity, namely how driven people are to attain the goal (e.g., Brehm & Self, 1989; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008). Because we focus on regulating emotions, which are context-dependent and temporally bound, we focus on momentary (or short-term) effort rather than effort invested over time.

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Effort has been of interest in the broader self-regulation literature because it can facilitate success (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2019; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). However, can effort also facilitate emotion regulation success specifically? Research on effort in emotion regulation is a relatively new addition. Whereas the broader self-regulation literature suggests that effort should generally be beneficial, some research indicates that effort might have downsides in emotion regulation. Studies examining the effort required to implement specific emotion regulation strategies have shown that people may avoid certain effective strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal, because they are effortful (Milyavsky et al., 2019). Other strategies and automatic forms of emotion regulation may be preferred precisely because they can be effective yet less effortful (Mauss et al., 2007). Some have explicitly argued that effort is undesirable in certain forms of emotion regulation and that, similar to thought suppression, the more effort people invest in suppressing unwanted emotions the less successful they will be (Gratz & Tull, 2010). Such research, however, does not necessarily address the role of effort per se because effects could be attributed to specific regulatory strategies. Given different competing hypotheses and the potential implications for psychological health, it is important to test whether, when, or for whom effort facilitates emotion regulation success.

How Does Effort Influence Emotion Regulation Success?

According to a cybernetic approach, effort in emotion regulation is similar in some ways to effort in other domains of self-regulation, but in other ways it may be unique (Tamir, 2021). Effort generally feels unpleasant (David et al., 2024). In other domains of self-regulation, effort is often predictive of success but is less predictive of success when tasks are difficult or regulators lack skill (e.g., Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). For instance, if Jill wants to succeed at solving a puzzle, she needs to exert effort. If the puzzle is not too hard and Jill is skilled at solving puzzles, investing more effort may lead to her success. However, if the puzzle is too hard or Jill is not skilled enough, Jill may fail despite her efforts. Although exerting effort or failing to solve the puzzle might make Jill feel bad, these feelings are independent of her success in solving the puzzle.

We propose that, as in other domains of self-regulation, effort in emotion regulation can facilitate success. However, in emotion regulation specifically, effort could also backfire under certain conditions. This is because emotion regulation often targets unpleasant emotions, and effort feels unpleasant. For instance, if Jack wants to decrease his sadness, he may need to exert effort. If Jack's sadness is not too intense or Jack is skilled at managing it, investing more effort may lead to his success in emotion regulation. However, if Jack's sadness is too intense or he is not skilled enough, Jack may fail to decrease his sadness despite his efforts. Exerting effort or failing to decrease sadness might make Jack feel bad. In this context, feeling bad is precisely what Jack tries to avoid, hindering his success in emotion regulation. Effort, therefore, may have unique consequences in emotion regulation compared with other domains of self-regulation.

In summary, when task difficulty is lower and regulators are more skilled, effort may facilitate success in emotion regulation. However, when task difficulty is higher and regulators are less skilled, effort in emotion regulation may not help and could even hinder success. To test these predictions, it is necessary to directly measure effort in emotion regulation.

Measuring effort in emotion regulation

Various measures of effort have been proposed in the self-regulation literature (Thomson & Oppenheimer, 2022). Table 1 summarizes three types of possible measures of effort in emotion regulation and highlights their strengths and weaknesses. First, people can report on the effort they invest. For example, participants can indicate how much effort they invested to decrease unpleasant emotions (Kaspi et al., 2025). Self-reported effort has high face and external validity but is subject to social demand and requires accurate introspection (Thomson & Oppenheimer, 2022).

Second, effort may be captured by the intensity of goal-directed behaviors. For example, participants can report how intensely they used various emotion regulation strategies, and the sum of these reports could index the total effort invested (Hu, Zeira, et al., 2025). Another possibility is to assess the likelihood of engaging in specific goal-conducive behaviors (e.g., accessing emotion regulation tips; Gutentag & Tamir, 2022) or resources (e.g., intention to attend a workshop for medical students designed to increase empathy toward patients; Gutentag, Hasson, et al., 2024). Such measures are less prone to limitations of self-report. However, behaviors likely depend on multiple factors other than effort.

Third, effort may be captured by physiological indices (e.g., heart rate, corrugator activation, pupil dilation). Such measures are objective but may not necessarily reflect effort per se (Thomson & Oppenheimer, 2022). Furthermore, many physiological measures of effort also serve as indices of emotional valence or arousal. This confound is particularly problematic when studying effort in emotion regulation. Given the strengths and weaknesses of different measures, it is important to use

Table 1. Measures of Effort in Emotion Regulation

Measure	Example operationalizations	Strengths	Weaknesses
Self-report	"How much effort did you invest to decrease your unpleasant emotions?" (Kaspi et al., 2025)	High face and external validity	Subjective; subject to social desirability; relies on accurate introspection
Behavioral	Overall intensity of emotion regulation strategy use (Hu, Zeira, et al., 2025); attempts to access stimuli (e.g., images) that elicit desired emotions (Gutentag & Tamir, 2022); accessing regulatory resources (Gutentag, Hasson, et al., 2024)	Objective	May not necessarily reflect effort
Physiological	Corrugator activation (Kreibig & Gross, 2024); heart rate (Scheffel et al., 2021); pupil dilation (Scheffel et al., 2021)	Objective	May not necessarily reflect effort; confounded with emotions

multiple measures when studying effort in emotion regulation, as seen in much of the research discussed below.

What does the research show?

Our theoretical analysis leads to two key predictions. First, under some conditions, effort in emotion regulation should facilitate success. Recent studies in healthy samples support this prediction. In daily diary studies, effort spontaneously invested in everyday emotion regulation (as assessed by self-reports and behavioral measures) was positively linked to emotion regulation success (Gutentag, Hasson, et al., 2024; Gutentag, Kalokerinos, et al., 2024). Similar patterns were found in experiments (Gutentag & Tamir, 2022), highlighting the causal impact of effort on successful emotion regulation.

If effort can be beneficial in emotion regulation, can it lead to better psychological health? Indeed, on days when people exerted more effort to decrease their irritation, they felt less irritated and reported greater well-being (Study 2; Gutentag, Kalokerinos, et al., 2024). Moreover, supporting causal effects, encouraging individuals to invest effort in emotion regulation (vs. a control condition) led to greater regulatory success and improved psychological health in daily life (Study 3; Gutentag, Kalokerinos, et al., 2024). Although preliminary, these findings demonstrate that promoting effort can facilitate successful emotion regulation and better psychological health.

Second, our theoretical analysis leads to the prediction that when task difficulty is high and regulators lack skills, effort in emotion regulation may be irrelevant or even counterproductive. Given that intense unpleasant emotions and poor emotion regulation skills are characteristics of depression (Joormann & Stanton, 2016), effort in emotion regulation may be less beneficial or even harmful in depression. To test this possibility, Hu, Zeira, et al. (2025) assessed links between effort and emotion regulation success in depressed and healthy individuals in daily life. Both of our predictions were supported: momentary effort in emotion regulation (as measured by self-reports and behavioral assessments) prospectively predicted greater emotion regulation success in healthy individuals but was either unrelated or negatively related to emotion regulation success in depressed individuals. To our knowledge, these findings are the first to show that effort in emotion regulation can be beneficial in some cases but harmful in others.

If depressed individuals invest considerable effort in emotion regulation, the implications of such effort may be profound. But do they? Although depressed individuals generally exert less effort in goal pursuit than healthy individuals (Brinkmann & Gendolla, 2008), this pattern does not apply to emotion regulation. This difference highlights another unique aspect of effort in emotion regulation. Contrary to the pattern in other self-regulation domains, depressed individuals invest *more* effort in regulating emotions than healthy individuals (Hu, Zeira, et al., 2025). They do so even when effort is less necessary, such as when their desired emotions are not that different from their actual emotions (Hu et al., 2024). Overall, compared with healthy individuals, depressed individuals appear to invest more effort in emotion regulation, but such effort may be counterproductive.

What Predicts Effort in Emotion Regulation?

Many theories of motivation examine determinants of effort allocation in goal pursuit (e.g., Brehm & Self, 1989; Gollwitzer, 1990; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008; Kruglanski et al., 2014). Although different theories emphasize different factors, many assume that people exert effort when expected rewards are sufficiently desirable and attainable (David et al., 2024). Therefore, as a first step in examining what determines effort

allocation in emotion regulation, it is useful to target the desirability (i.e., value attributed to the goal) and attainability (i.e., expectancy that the goal can be achieved) of emotion regulation goals.

Desirability of emotion regulation goals

How much effort people invest to regulate their emotions depends on the desirability of their emotion regulation goals. For example, health professionals who considered increasing empathy toward their patients as more desirable invested greater effort to enhance empathy, as evidenced by self-report and by a stronger willingness to participate in a workshop on effective empathy regulation (Gutentag, Hasson, et al., 2024).

The desirability of an emotion regulation goal could be informed by hedonic and instrumental considerations (Tamir, 2021). With respect to hedonic value, people often find unpleasant emotions less desirable and pleasant emotions more desirable. With respect to instrumental value, people consider potentially harmful emotions less desirable and useful emotions more desirable. For example, people who were led to believe calmness (but not excitement) would be useful in an upcoming task invested more effort to increase calmness before the task by increasing their exposure to calm (vs. exciting) images (Gutentag & Tamir, 2022). Thus, people may be willing to exert more effort in emotion regulation when they expect more desirable (i.e., pleasant or useful) outcomes.

The desirability of emotion regulation goals may also depend on broader contextual factors, including culture. For instance, unpleasant emotions are viewed as undesirable in Western cultures more than they are in some East Asian cultures (e.g., Japan), potentially because they are considered less instrumental (Miyamoto et al., 2017). Consistent with the possibility that desirability informs effort allocation, Kaspi et al. (2025) showed that Japanese (vs. American) participants were less motivated to decrease unpleasant emotions during COVID-19 and invested less effort in doing so. Thus, effort in emotion regulation may depend on desirability, which varies across individuals and contexts.

Attainability of emotion regulation goals

How much effort people invest to regulate emotions may also depend on the attainability of emotion regulation goals. For instance, people who believed they were more capable of increasing empathy were more likely to invest effort in doing so, independent of the desirability of increasing empathy (Gutentag, Hasson, et al., 2024). Goal attainability could be informed by many factors, including characteristics of the regulator and the situation (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008; Locke & Latham, 2019). In emotion regulation, two regulator characteristics that have been examined are beliefs about the controllability of emotions (i.e., can emotions be controlled?) and self-efficacy (i.e., can I control my emotions?). For example, people who believed emotions are more controllable were more likely to engage in effective emotion-regulatory behaviors (e.g., use more reappraisal; Gutentag et al., 2017). Similarly, health-care professionals who believed they could control their emotions were more likely to consider increasing empathy attainable and invested more effort to increase their empathy (Gutentag, Hasson, et al., 2024).

Do desirability and attainability operate independently of each other, or might they have interactive effects? In other domains of self-regulation, desirability becomes more influential at higher levels of attainability (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Preliminary evidence in emotion regulation points to similar interactive effects. How much effort people invested to decrease their unpleasant emotions varied as a function of both the desirability and attainability of the emotion regulation goal, but effects of desirability were stronger at higher levels of attainability (Hu, Nahari, et al., 2025). These patterns were found in a behavioral study and in an experience sampling study that assessed effort in decreasing unpleasant emotions in daily life. Thus, effort in emotion regulation may depend on the interactive effects of desirability and attainability.

Open Questions and Future Directions

Research on effort in emotion regulation is in its early stages. Below, we highlight key methodological, theoretical, and applied directions for future research.

Methodological directions

As research on effort in emotion regulation advances, it will be important to further develop measures of effort. For example, it may be useful to develop additional measures, such as using patterns of neural activation as indices of effortful emotion regulation (e.g., Müller et al., 2021). In addition, given that effort is a multifaceted construct (Thomson & Oppenheimer, 2022), research may benefit from combining different measures to capitalize on their complementary strengths. Future research could also test the validity of tracking subjective experiences, objective behaviors, and physiological or neural responses and determine whether different measures lead to similar conclusions. For instance, is self-reported effort as predictive of emotion regulation success as behavioral or physiological indices of effort?

Theoretical directions

First, to understand when and why effort is beneficial or harmful, it is necessary to move beyond the main effects of desirability and attainability and identify potential moderators and mediators. Research in self-regulation has identified several factors that moderate or mediate effects of effort on goal attainment, including person variables (e.g., skills), task variables (e.g., difficulty or complexity), situational variables (e.g., additional help), and more (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2019). Targeting such variables can uncover the mechanisms of effort in emotion regulation. For instance, how does effort translate into regulation success or failure? What renders effort less effective in emotion regulation in depression? Might greater effort lead to different regulatory behaviors in different people? Effort may differentially determine how people use strategies in different situations (Hu & Tamir, 2024), or which strategies people select. For example, effort may lead some people to use fewer, more effective strategies (e.g., reappraisal) and others to use any strategy, whether effective or ineffective (e.g., distraction or suppression). Understanding how effort leads to emotion regulation success in different individuals or contexts is an important future direction.

Second, it is important to identify other antecedents of effort in emotion regulation beyond desirability and attainability. Goal commitment theory suggests that people exert more effort when their goals are clearly defined (Locke & Latham, 2019). Cognitive energetics theory proposes that people exert more effort when opportunities (vs. obstacles) align with their goals (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Although task difficulty may serve as a moderator, motivational intensity theory (Brehm & Self, 1989) conceptualizes it as a determinant of effort. Future research should integrate different motivational accounts to test what predicts effort in emotion regulation.

Third, although this article focuses on momentary effort in emotion regulation, it is possible that people regulate their feelings over longer periods of time, targeting recurring emotions or when regulating mood states (Meyers & Tamir, 2024). Long-term effort may take on different forms and characteristics because it requires sustained commitment, the ability to overcome setbacks, and the capacity to monitor progress and adjust accordingly (Kurtzban et al., 2013). Future research could examine long-term effort (e.g., grit, persistence) in emotion regulation.

Applied directions

Studying effort in emotion regulation can help guide interventions for both healthy and clinical populations. In healthy populations, it may be useful to encourage effort allocation. In unhealthy populations, it may be useful to discourage effort allocation and instead encourage using strategies that are less effortful. For instance, there may be benefits in interventions that emphasize accepting rather than regulating emotions (Ford et al., 2018). Given that effort could be harmful for emotion regulation success, it will also be important to test the effects of effort in psychological disorders other than depression (e.g., bipolar disorder; Gruber et al., 2012).

Conclusions

Should your sad friend, Jack, invest more effort to decrease his sadness? We described theory and research that explain why effort can sometimes be useful and other times harmful. If Jack is healthy and his sadness is mild, trying harder to control emotions may be effective. However, if Jack is clinically depressed, trying harder might make things worse. Studying effort in emotion regulation offers new insights that may promote successful emotion regulation and facilitate psychological health.

Recommended Reading

Gutentag, T., Kalokerinos, E. K., Millgram, Y., Garrett, P., Sobel, R., & Tamir, M. (2024). (See References). Demonstrates that effort in emotion regulation (a) reflects more intense motivation to regulate, (b) leads to more successful regulation, and (c) improves psychological health.

Gutentag, T., & Tamir, M. (2022). (See References). Shows that manipulating the desirability of an emotion-regulation goal increases effort in emotion regulation, resulting in more successful regulation.

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Tamir, M. (2021). (See References). Presents a cybernetic approach to effortful emotion regulation that distinguishes between emotion goals, emotion-regulation goals, and effort in emotion regulation and proposes that some aspects of effort in emotion regulation may be unique.

Transparency

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