



Levels of Emotional Regulation among College Students: The Role of Gender

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Article DOI: [10.55677/SSHRB/2026-3050-0109](https://doi.org/10.55677/SSHRB/2026-3050-0109)

KEYWORDS: emotional regulation, college students, well-being, higher education.

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Published: January 14, 2026

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ABSTRACT: College years are marked by academic demands, social changes, and challenges to autonomy, which, while offering growth opportunities, can also risk the well-being of students. The ability to regulate emotions becomes crucial at such times, supporting the development of students striving to make a mark in life. The present study investigated levels of emotional regulation among 179 college students (male = 86, female = 93) aged 18–25 years, and examined gender differences in emotional regulation. Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale by Gratz and Roemer (2004) was used as a measure, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test. Results showed that most participants reported moderate to high levels of emotional regulation, with no significant gender differences. Nonetheless, male participants expressed greater difficulties in emotional awareness and strategies for managing emotions, suggesting that they struggle not with the experience of emotion itself, but with its perceptive recognition and the knowledge of how to control it. Based on the findings, the study concludes that while emotional capacity may be adequate among college students, there is still a need for implementing proactive, gender-informed emotional literacy programs accessible to all on campus to foster the well-being of students in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Every experience during college years, whether success or setback, is filtered through emotions, making the ability to regulate them a central part of how students cope and thrive. Beyond visible markers such as academic performance or achievements, students often encounter less apparent but equally pressing challenges, including heightened demand for independence, shifting social relationships, financial strain, and the uncertainty of future prospects. These pressures amplify emotional experiences, increasing vulnerability to stress, anxiety, and self-doubt. Within this context, the capacity to manage emotions effectively becomes essential, positioning emotional regulation as a key factor in sustaining psychological well-being and overall adjustment during the college life.

Emotional regulation (ER), a fundamental self-regulatory skill, enables individuals to monitor, evaluate, and modify their emotional experiences to respond effectively to situational demands. It is essential to everyday functioning as it influences emotional experiences, thoughts, and behaviors in ways that lead to positive and socially acceptable outcomes, thus contributing to effective adjustment throughout life. To capture its complexity, ER is typically described as a set of interrelated processes rather than a single, uniform skill. Foundational models emphasize *emotional awareness*, or the ability to recognize and monitor internal states, as central to ER. Similarly, *emotional acceptance*, which reflects openness to experiencing emotions without avoidance or denial, also influences ER. Building on this, more recent scholars distinguish *emotional clarity*, the capacity to interpret and differentiate emotional experiences (Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017), and *impulse control*, or the ability to modulate behavioral responses under conditions of heightened arousal (Bardeen et al., 2016), as other factors contributing to ER. Evidence shows that emotional clarity and regulation processes act as protective factors for well-being in the younger population, buffering against depressive symptoms and other distressing emotions (Martínez-Libano et al., 2025). Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional framework for understanding how people navigate emotional experiences across academic, relational, and personal contexts.

Studies suggest that people employ a variety of ER strategies, some healthy and others less effective, in different situations to cope

with environmental demands. These strategies may be deliberate or automatic processes (or both) that shape the intensity, duration, and expression of emotions (Gross, 2015). For instance, Gross's Process Model (1998, 2015) provides a remarkable theoretical lens for understanding ER processes. The model distinguishes between *antecedent-focused strategies*, such as cognitive reappraisal, which enable individuals to reinterpret situations in ways that reduce negative affect and foster resilience, and *response-focused strategies*, such as suppression, which minimize outward expression of emotions but are often linked to heightened physiological arousal and weaker social functioning (Gross & John, 2003). Effective ER is contingent upon both the availability and flexible deployment of strategies where individuals may utilize cognitive techniques (e.g., reappraisal, problem solving), behavioral methods (e.g., relaxation, distraction, social support), physiological approaches (e.g., breathing exercises, mindfulness), interpersonal resources (e.g., emotional expression, validation), and acceptance-based practices (e.g., self-compassion, acknowledgment of emotions) to deal with challenging situations. Access to a broad regulatory repertoire, coupled with the capacity to adapt these strategies to situational demands, is associated with enhanced emotional well-being in all age groups (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Harel et al., 2025).

ER is not a fixed trait but a developmental capacity that evolves across childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood as individuals gain cognitive maturity and social experience (Herd et al., 2020). This development is shaped by the influence of multiple factors, including biological predispositions, such as neural maturation in the prefrontal cortex and amygdala (Ahmed et al., 2015; Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2019), alongside family dynamics, caregiver relationship, peer interactions, and cultural expectations, which collectively guide how emotions are recognized, interpreted, and managed in everyday life (Lin & Wang, 2024; Morris et al., 2017). Gender differences are also crucial to emotional processes, and empirical literature indicates that men and women differ both in the strategies they employ for ER and in the outcomes of emotional dysregulation. Biological and social factors jointly shape how men and women process and regulate emotions. Differences in brain structure and connectivity, particularly in the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, influence emotional responsiveness (Whittle et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021), while socialization encourages women to express emotions and seek support, and men to suppress vulnerability and sadness (Tamres et al., 2019). These influences contribute to distinct emotion regulation strategies, with women generally showing greater flexibility, using approaches such as cognitive reappraisal, emotional expression, and social support seeking, which promote well-being (Neubauer et al., 2020), whereas men may rely more on suppression and avoidance. Women also tend to engage more frequently in rumination, increasing susceptibility to internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression, whereas men are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors, including aggression and impulsivity, under conditions of poor regulation (García-Fernández et al., 2025; Cheng et al., 2024). These differences have practical implications for college students; for instance, women may benefit more from interventions targeting cognitive reframing or reducing rumination, while men may require strategies focused on impulse control and adaptive expression of emotions. Considering these gender-specific patterns enhances understanding of individual variation in ER and informs targeted support to promote resilience, mental health, and academic success during this formative stage of life.

ER is widely recognized as a cornerstone of psychological adjustment, enabling individuals to maintain balance, foster resilience, and adapt to daily demands. Well-developed regulation skills permit individuals to manage stress, sustain healthy relationships, and efficiently engage with pursuits of life (Gross, 2015; Morris et al., 2017). Conversely, impairments in these processes can have far-reaching consequences. Emotional dysregulation has been consistently associated with heightened reactivity to stress, poor coping mechanisms, and increased vulnerability to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders (Schäfer et al., 2017; Sjöblom et al., 2025). The impact of diminished ER extends beyond psychological functioning, where chronic dysregulation has been linked to physiological strain, disturbed sleep, weakened immune responses, and elevated biological stress markers (Compas et al., 2017; Rábago-Monzón et al., 2025). These outcomes collectively underscore the central role of ER in both psychological and physical well-being, especially during the college years, a transitional period marked by extensive academic responsibilities, evolving social connections, and ongoing identity development. Effective ER strategies have been found to support overall functioning in young students by assisting them in stress management, interpersonal relationships, and academic goals (Compas et al., 2017; Schäfer et al., 2017). Strong ER skills during college years are linked to healthier relational outcomes and effective coping strategies, while maladaptive patterns like rumination, suppression, or avoidance have been found to intensify negative emotions and increase vulnerability to dysfunctional outcomes (Kraft et al., 2023). Early life adversities, including trauma, neglect, or inconsistent caregiving, further compromise regulatory capacity, while ongoing stressors in the college environment such as peer conflict, lack of family support, or sustained academic pressure can exacerbate emotional difficulties and manifest in internalizing problems as well as externalizing behaviors such as impulsivity or risk-taking (Shields et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2023).

NEED FOR THE STUDY

While emotional regulation is central to well-being, research on this topic has been limited, particularly among college students who face unique challenges exclusive to this stage of life. Academic stress, shifting social networks, and identity exploration can cause significant distress, disturbing the individual's ability to manage and regulate emotions. Prior studies suggest gender may influence emotional regulation during early years of life, but findings remain inconsistent, highlighting the need for further investigation. There is, therefore, a need for studies that specifically examine levels of emotional regulation in college students while

also considering gender differences to generate contextually relevant evidence. Such research can inform tailored interventions that foster resilience, emotional balance, and well-being, addressing the distinct needs of male and female students and ultimately supporting their health, well-being, and academic success. The present study aims to fill the existing gaps in research on emotional regulation among college students, specifically highlighting gender differences in ER.

METHOD

Participants

Data was randomly collected from 179 students (male = 86, female = 93) aged 18 to 25 years, studying in various colleges across the city of Mysuru. Participants currently enrolled in Undergraduate (UG) or Postgraduate (PG) programs were selected for the study.

Materials

The Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale (DERS)

Developed by Gratz and Roemer (2004), was used to measure emotional regulation in the participant group. The scale comprises 36 items answered on a 5-point Likert scale. The DERS assesses challenges in emotion regulation across six domains: non-acceptance of emotions, struggles with goal-directed behavior, impulse control issues, limited emotional awareness, restricted access to effective regulation strategies, and unclear emotional understanding. Response options for the items are scored as 1 (almost never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), 5 (almost always), with some items being reverse-scored to balance response bias. The overall score is calculated by summing responses to all items, resulting in scores ranging from 36 to 180. The authors report good test-retest reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88, along with concurrent and criterion validity for the scale.

Procedure

179 students aged 18 years and above, enrolled in UG or PG programs at various colleges across the city of Mysuru, were randomly selected for the study. The sample consisted of both male (n = 86) and female (n = 93) participants. The researcher introduced herself to the participants and briefly explained the nature and purpose of the study. Clear instructions were provided on how to complete the questionnaire. Participants were encouraged to clarify doubts before proceeding. It was made explicit that participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. The researcher emphasized the importance of honesty in responses, as accurate answers were crucial to the integrity of the study. Individuals with impairments, disabilities, or psychological disorders were not included in the sample. Similarly, students who were dropouts/repeaters or those who were already exposed to similar research were excluded from the study.

RESULTS

Table 1: showing the frequency distribution of the levels of emotional regulation among college students.

Levels of Emotional Regulation	Frequency	Percent
Low	2	1.1
Mild	47	26.3
Moderate	72	40.2
High to Very high	58	32.4

From the above table, it is evident that most participants reported moderate (40.2%) to high/very high (32.4%) levels of emotional regulation, while fewer reported mild (26.3%) and low (1.1%) levels of emotional regulation. The results indicated that the majority of individuals in the sample group managed their emotions relatively well.

Figure 1: showing the frequency distribution of levels of emotional regulation among college students.

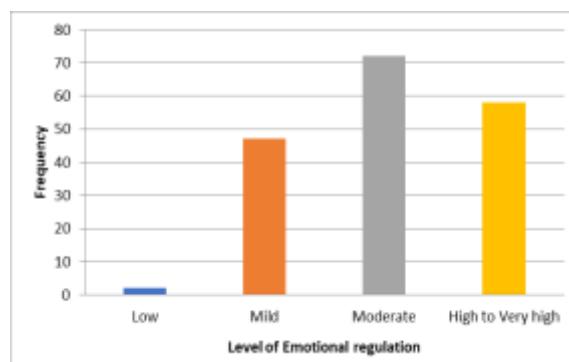


Table 2: showing the mean score on components of emotional regulation by gender distribution of college students, and the results of independent sample t-test.

s of Emotional Regulation	Gender	Mean	SD	Independent sample t-test
Non-acceptance of Emotion	Men	14.64	4.68	t = .142
	Women	14.54	4.88	p = .887
Difficulty engaging in Goal-directed Behavior	Men	13.37	3.39	t = .944
	Women	13.90	4.08	p = .346
Impulse Control Difficulties	Men	14.69	3.79	t = .003
	Women	14.69	4.52	p = .997
Lack of emotional awareness	Men	17.47	4.98	t = 2.784
	Women	15.66	3.66	p = .006
Limited access to regulation strategies	Men	19.83	5.20	t = 2.180
	Women	18.10	5.39	p = .031
Lack of emotional clarity	Men	12.28	3.81	t = .078
	Women	12.32	3.62	p = .938
Total Emotional Regulation	Men	92.07	14.60	t = 1.351
	Women	88.95	15.91	p = .178

From the above table, it can be observed that men ($M = 92.07$, $SD = 14.60$) obtained slightly higher overall emotional regulation scores than women ($M = 88.95$, $SD = 15.91$); however, this difference was not statistically significant ($t = 1.351$, $p = .178$), indicating that gender did not substantially influence total regulation levels in the sample. In contrast, significant gender differences emerged in specific dimensions, i.e., men reported a greater lack of emotional awareness ($M = 17.47$, $SD = 4.98$) than women ($M = 15.66$, $SD = 3.66$), indicated by a t score of 2.784 and a p value of .006. Men also reported limited access to regulation strategies ($M = 19.83$, $SD = 5.20$) compared to women ($M = 18.10$, $SD = 5.39$), indicated by a t score of 2.180, and a p value of .031. No significant differences were found between men and women in non-acceptance of emotion ($t = .142$, $p = .887$), difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior ($t = .944$, $p = .346$), impulse control difficulties ($t = .003$, $p = .997$), and lack of emotional clarity ($t = .078$, $p = .938$).

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the levels of emotional regulation among college students, with a particular focus on gender differences in ER. Results showed that Most students reported moderate (40.2%), high to very high (32.4%) emotional regulation, while a smaller proportion reported mild (26.3%) and low (1.1%) levels of emotional regulation, indicating that the majority of participants were able to manage their emotions fairly well. When comparing gender differences, there was no statistically significant difference ($t = 1.351$, $p = .178$) between the scores of male and female participants, suggesting that although some variation existed between men and women in their ability to regulate emotions, gender may not have had a meaningful impact on emotional regulation, particularly in this group. However, significant differences were observed in two domains of emotional regulation, where men reported higher levels of lack of emotional awareness compared to women ($t = 2.776$, $p = .006$), and also indicated more limited access to regulation strategies than women ($t = 2.168$, $p = .031$). No significant differences emerged for non-acceptance of emotion, difficulty in goal-directed behavior, impulse control difficulties, and lack of emotional clarity. These results indicate that while men experience greater challenges in emotional awareness and perceive fewer strategies for regulation, gender does not exert a significant influence on other aspects of emotional regulation. The finding suggests that male and female students may rely on similar strategies when managing their emotions during the college years, and gender differences may not be as pronounced in this context as has often been suggested in prior research (Xiao et al., 2025).

Previous studies have frequently emphasized gender as a significant determinant of emotional processes. For instance, women have often been reported to be more emotionally expressive and to use coping strategies such as seeking social support or verbalizing distress, whereas men have been described as more likely to suppress or internalize emotions (Schick et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2021). Furthermore, these gender differences may extend to patterns of emotional dysregulation and subsequent mental health outcomes (Weiss et al., 2023). However, the findings of the present study differ from such conclusions, as no significant gender differences were observed in the ER of male and female participants. One explanation for this discrepancy may be that cultural and social dynamics are changing, with increasing emphasis on mental health awareness and the acceptability of emotional openness across genders. In contemporary student populations, norms regarding masculinity and femininity may no longer dictate emotional

regulation strategies as strongly as in earlier generations (García-Fernández et al., 2024). The developmental stage of the participants may also explain the lack of gender differences. The college years represent a transitional period marked by exposure to diverse peer groups, expanded worldviews, and increased access to institutional and social resources. These influences may encourage both men and women to adopt overlapping coping strategies, diminishing traditional distinctions in ER (Casey et al., 2023). Additionally, access to university/college-based counseling services, peer support groups, and greater discourse around psychological well-being may create environments in which gender-based differences are less visible (Liu et al., 2024).

Although gender differences did not emerge as a significant factor in this study, ER remains a critical skill for adaptive functioning. Past research has consistently shown that difficulties with ER can contribute to heightened stress, reduced academic performance, and increased vulnerability to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Charbonnier et al., 2023; Sato et al., 2021). Therefore, interventions aimed at strengthening ER should be made broadly available to students, without limiting them to gender-specific needs. Programs focusing on mindfulness, resilience-building, cognitive reframing, and self-compassion may benefit all students, regardless of gender, by equipping them with effective strategies to manage stress and improve well-being (Xue et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). It is also important to recognize that ER is shaped by multiple intersecting factors beyond gender. Personality traits, family background, cultural influences, and prior experiences of stress or adversity may play stronger roles in determining how effectively students regulate their emotions. Future research should therefore expand its scope by examining these variables in conjunction with emotional regulation. A more intersectional approach would help to clarify emotion regulation processes and provide a deeper understanding of the factors that promote resilience among college students.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While informative, the findings of this study are limited by the small sample size and the restricted geographical scope, which may affect their generalizability. In addition, important factors such as personality traits, coping styles, socio-economic background, and past experiences were not considered, though they are likely to influence ER. Future research should address these variables with larger and more diverse samples to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ER operates in the student population.

CONCLUSION

College years represent a formative phase in which young adults encounter both opportunities for growth and challenges that can undermine their emotional well-being. The present study examined levels of ER among college students and considered the role of gender. Findings indicated that while students face common struggles in regulating emotions, gender did not have a significant influence on these patterns. This suggests that difficulties in ER may be shared experiences rather than gender-specific, highlighting the need for interventions that address the broader student population. At the same time, repeated academic or personal setbacks can foster feelings of helplessness that further strain ER, underscoring the importance of equipping students with effective coping strategies. Future research should continue to explore the interplay between ER and other contextual factors such as personality, social support, and socio-economic background. Such efforts will help develop comprehensive approaches that support resilience, psychological health, and academic success among college students.

Acknowledgements: The researcher acknowledges all the assistance received during the course of this research. A special thanks to all the students who participated in this study.

Conflict of Interest: Authors declare no conflict of interest in this research.

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