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Freedom to feel: A self-determination theory account of emotion regulation

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Abstract

Self-determination theory (SDT) draws upon an organismic metatheory and suggests psychological growth occurs as an integrative process in which people assimilate and integrate experiences. As emotions play an important role in this process, researchers have recently espoused SDT as a basis for exploring emotion regulatory processes. This review summarizes this line of research and suggests how to integrate SDT with the dominant views of emotion regulation. Recent theory and research on emotion regulation situate this process within the domain of motivation research. As SDT has emerged as a prominent motivation theory, this review suggests SDT can provide important insights into emotion regulation research by highlighting the concept of autonomy. SDT is thus posited as a promising framework to study emotion regulation processes, as it explains how these processes enable people to grow psychologically and develop a coherent sense of self.

[Human passions] ...form the basis for man's interest in life, his enthusiasm, his excitement; they are the stuff from which not only his dreams are made but art, religion, myth, drama—all that makes life worth living (Fromm, 1973, p. 7).

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the above citation, Erich Fromm eloquently elucidates the crucial role of emotions in supporting psychological growth. In this view, emotions are central to what makes us human. They tell us what is truly important to us and are the source of our personal efforts to become ourselves. Yet people often try very hard to avoid experiencing emotions, especially negative ones. From this point of view, when emotions are consistently avoided and

compartmentalized, people alienate an important part of themselves, forming the basis for psychopathology and making psychological growth unlikely. Accordingly, many therapists insist on the expression and exploration of emotions. In Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy, for example, effective therapeutic relationships are those in which "emotions can be spontaneously expressed without first being carefully censored or bottled up; where deep experiences—disappointments and joys—can be shared; where new ways of behaving can be risked and tried out" (Rogers, 1971, pp. 10–11).

Modern research on how people respond to their emotional experiences often does so through the concept of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998b). Although research on emotion regulation is burgeoning (McRae & Gross, 2020), the more we know about this process, the more we realize how puzzling emotional experiences can be. The question of whether emotional experiences are essential to human experience has been disputed for years. Some (e.g., Dewey, 1895; Hebb, 1949; Mandler, 1984) have viewed emotions as debilitating and harmful to ongoing activity because they lack the logic and principled orderliness of reason. Others (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner & Lerner, 2010; Lazarus, 1994) suggest emotions serve an important adaptive function by helping people address or overcome problems and attain their goals.

A growing body of research has recently espoused self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) to explore emotion regulatory processes. SDT relies on an organismic metatheory (Ryan & Deci, 2001, 2017), whereby wellness and mental health are represented by integrated and harmonious functioning, and positive and negative experiences are merged to support people's innate growth tendencies. As such, the theory offers a unique view of emotion regulation, whereby all emotions foster psychological growth (Roth, Vansteenkiste, & Ryan, 2019; Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995; Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006).

SDT concurs with the view that all emotions, including negative ones, are useful. Yet it sees emotions as not only important for goal-related behavior but also crucial for psychological growth. In SDT, psychological growth is achieved during an integrative process in which individuals assimilate and synthesize experiences (Ryan, 1995). The SDT concept of an integrative process is similar to Rogers' (1964) *organismic valuing* concept, which describes the process by which experiences are evaluated: some are taken in to form a sense of self, while others remain compartmentalized and unintegrated.

Gross (2015) suggests emotions serve as a valuation system for changes in the environment, in a relatively quick good-for-me/bad-for-me discrimination. In this sense, emotions are crucial to people's evaluation and processing of significant events, the premises of organismic integration processes. When emotions, even unpleasant ones, signal an event can be approached, it can be evaluated as "good-for-me" despite its negative valence and become integrated with other aspects of the self. Yet when emotions consistently direct people to evaluate events as "bad-for-me," parts of the experience are avoided and compartmentalized, with no personal integration.

SDT specifies several preconditions for an emotional experience to be integrated (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2013). First, individuals need to have a sense of *autonomy* about the experience. According to SDT, the concept of autonomy is critical to adaptive adjustment and effective self-regulation (Ryan et al., 2006; Ryan, Deci, & Vansteenkiste, 2016). When applied to emotions, autonomy connotes a sense of ownership, whereby emotions are experienced and expressed volitionally (Ryan et al., 2006). If people feel controlled by their emotions, they lack autonomy, are likely to be alienated from their emotions, and may not integrate emotion-laden experiences. The second aspect of the integrative process is *awareness*, refers to self-knowledge or open access to one's emotions. Lack of awareness means being out of touch with internal states, specifically emotions. Finally, the third aspect is *non-defensiveness*, refers to the ability to gain access to all kinds of emotional experiences, positive or negative. The opposite process, defensive processing, occurs when individuals constantly compartmentalize and avoid certain emotions.

Implied in the above description of the integrative process is the question of what people do with their emotions once they appear. This question is at the heart of the concept of emotion regulation, defined as the processes by which individuals influence what emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them (Gross, 1998b). The purpose of this article is to outline SDT's view of emotion regulation and review recent work. I propose that concepts driven by SDT should be merged within the current discussion on emotion regulation,

as they can enrich the understanding of affective processes and contribute to the ongoing debate about what constitutes adaptive emotion regulation.

2 | SDT AND EMOTION REGULATION

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) emerged as a motivation theory, with Deci's (1971, 1972) seminal studies on intrinsic motivation laying the foundations for the later organismic integration model (Ryan & Connell, 1989). This model emphasized the concept of *autonomous regulation*, referring to behaviors accompanied by feelings of choice and psychological freedom. Traditionally, then, SDT was not concerned with the regulation of emotion, but with the regulation of behavior, and its relations to personal integration and psychological growth (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 1999).

Recent work views emotion regulation as a motivated process (Tamir & Millgram, 2017; Tamir, Vishkin, & Gutentag, 2020). Yet despite the key role of the concept of autonomy in motivation research (Ryan et al., 2016), motivated accounts of emotion regulation have overlooked it. Accounts construing emotion regulation as a motivated phenomenon mostly build on expectancy-value models of motivation (Atkinson, 1957; Feather, 1982). These models suggest the motivation to perform an action depends on the expectation that it will lead to a reward with personal value. For example, research shows people are motivated to increase (up-regulate) negative emotions when they expect such feelings will be useful to them (Tamir, Bigman, Rhodes, Salerno, & Schreier, 2015; Tamir & Ford, 2012).

SDT shares the assumption that up-regulating negative emotions can be useful, even crucial. Yet given SDT's underlying organismic metatheory of motivation, its explanation of why experiencing all emotions is important is different. Within expectancy-value approaches, motivation is primarily conceptualized in terms of the intensity or strength of motivation to attain a goal. Thus, such models represent a *quantitative* view of motivation. Applied to emotion regulation, they suggest emotion regulation is a process instigated by an emotion goal (e.g., to feel better), and its attainment defines successful emotion regulation. SDT differentiates between *qualitatively* different kinds of motivation, leading to very different outcomes, independently of the strength of the motivation (Ryan & Connell, 1989). The quality of behavior is determined by its level of internalization, defined as the process of taking in values, beliefs, or behavioral regulation from external sources and transforming them into one's own (Ryan, Connell, & Deci, 1985).

Autonomous motivation represents full internalization, or high-quality motivation. Autonomously motivated people fully endorse their emotions and experience them as emanating from within. They have no preconceptions about whether emotions are good or bad and can volitionally choose whether to up- or down-regulate them. In contrast, controlled motivation represents partial internalization, or low-quality motivation. Those whose motivation is controlled feel alienated from their emotions and experience them as emanating from external sources. Controlled people view emotional experiences, especially negative ones, as debilitating. When these emotions appear, they experience a sense of compulsion to either down-regulate and suppress them, or to up-regulate them and experience them as overwhelming.

2.1 | SDT's taxonomy of emotion regulation styles

At the heart of SDT's conception of emotion regulation is a taxonomy of emotion regulation styles that vary in their quality or level of autonomy: *integrative emotion regulation*, *suppressive emotion regulation*, and *dysregulation* (Roth et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 1995, 2006). While contemporary motivated emotion regulation approaches emphasize the concept of emotion goals, or what people want to feel (e.g., Mauss & Tamir, 2014), SDT's view is somewhat different: the crucial question is not what people "want" to feel, but whether they are motivated to openly and nonjudgmentally explore their emotions once they arise. In SDT, open exploration can produce benefits, regardless of whether a person eventually attains an emotion goal or not.

Integrative emotion regulation represents an autonomous emotion regulation style. It is defined as a differentiated and open awareness of one's emotional states (Roth et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 1995, 2006) and taking an authentic interest in them. As mentioned, Weinstein et al. (2013) claimed awareness is an inherent aspect of the integrative process. According to these researchers, awareness does not require constant consciousness of emotions; rather, it requires the ability to access self-knowledge if called upon, especially in emotionally arousing events. Thus, awareness can be an active process in which people explore their emotions once aroused and try to understand their meaning. In this emotion regulation style, emotions are experienced and expressed volitionally. Integrative emotion regulation is therefore the emotion regulation style that expresses the awareness and autonomy components of the integrative process (Weinstein et al., 2013) and is likely to predict autonomous self-regulated behavior and other positive outcomes (Ryan et al., 2006).

In contrast, suppressive emotion regulation and dysregulation are nonautonomous or controlled emotion regulation styles, antithetical to the integrative process (Ryan et al., 2006). Suppressive emotion regulation involves rigid and controlled attempts to ignore, avoid, and hide negative emotions because they are experienced as evaluative or even dangerous. Thus, in this emotion regulation style, the full meaning of the emotion is not fully accessed or brought to awareness; unlike integrative emotion regulation, little inner exploration takes place, and there is no sense of autonomy about emotional experience or expression. Importantly, the term "emotional suppression" is also used by other emotion regulation frameworks, including the influential process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2015). However, within Gross's model, this term denotes a response-modulation tactic, in which the person decreases emotionally expressive behavior already in progress (i.e., expressive suppression). The term suppressive emotion regulation signifies a broader tendency to consistently avoid the experience or expression of emotions using various tactics, including behavioral avoidance, emotional distancing (i.e., altering thoughts about emotions), and expressive suppression.

Dysregulation involves nonvolitional experience and expression of emotions (Cole & Hall, 2008; Thompson, 2019). Dysregulated individuals are forced into experiencing or expressing their emotions, even when this is unwarranted. They perceive emotions as overwhelming and/or disorganizing; hence, emotions are understood to interfere with effective functioning. Dysregulated people may have some access to emotions, yet unlike those high on integrative emotion regulation, they do not bring their emotions into focused, calm awareness. Several elements of integrative emotion regulation are missing, including open and receptive awareness, interested reflection, and a sense of choice concerning actions or coping (Ryan et al., 2006).

2.1.1 | Contribution of integrative emotion regulation to personal and interpersonal growth

A growing body of research has explored the outcomes of the emotion regulation styles anchored in SDT, employing both correlational and laboratory methodologies. Importantly, the benefits of integrative emotion regulation are not self-evident because taking an interest in emotions, especially negative ones, might elevate them in the short term. However, SDT researchers propose an "immunization hypothesis," whereby integrative emotion regulation inoculates people against the long-term adverse effects of stimuli arousing negative emotions, despite elevating them in the short term. For example, Roth et al. (2014, 2018) found participants in an integrative emotion regulation condition displayed greater reduction in experienced fear and physiological arousal during a second exposure to a fear-eliciting scene and recalled more details than participants in an expressive suppression condition (Roth et al., 2014) or an emotional distancing condition (Roth et al., 2018). Houle and Philippe (2020) recently showed that while participants high on integrative emotion regulation and those high on dysregulation both reported significant memories of a negative event, the former had higher acceptance of it, which, in turn, predicted increased well-being. In another study of well-being, Brenning, Soenens, Van Petegem, and Vansteenkiste (2015) found adolescents' integrative emotion regulation was positively related with self-esteem, while suppressive emotion regulation and dysregulation were negatively associated.

SDT argues that well-being is enhanced when people's behavioral regulations satisfy three basic needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Benita, Benish-Weisman, Matos, and Torres (2020) showed that across three countries (Israel, Peru, Brazil) college students' integrative emotion regulation and suppressive emotion regulation differentially predicted the satisfaction and frustration of the three needs, and basic need satisfaction and frustration mediated the relations between emotion regulation styles and psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989).

An indicator of the quality of the processing of emotional material is nondefensiveness (Weinstein et al., 2013). A well-validated way to measure defensiveness is Pennebaker and colleagues' word-category approach (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Roth et al. (2014, 2019) found both self-reported and lab-induced integrative emotion regulation predicted the use of word categories reflecting non-defensive emotional processing, while self-reported expressive suppression and dysregulation, and lab-induced emotional distancing displayed an opposite pattern.

The benefits of integrative emotion regulation are also evident in interpersonal processes. An important feature of adaptive interpersonal functioning is the experience of empathy (Zaki, 2020). Integrative emotion regulation is expected to increase empathy, because people using it generalize the interest-based stance they adopt to their own emotions, making them better attuned to what is emotionally salient for others. Roth, Shane, and Kanat-Maymon (2017) found adults with high integrative emotion regulation displayed greater empathy for the adversity of outgroup members, and this predicted support for conciliatory policies. Similarly, Benita, Levkovitz, and Roth (2017) found young adolescents high in integrative emotion regulation reported greater empathic ability, and this predicted greater self-reported prosocial behavior and higher teacher ratings of the student's concern for his/her classmates.

Another interpersonal outcome related to integrative emotion regulation is the quality of intimate relationships. Roth and Assor (2012) found individuals high on integrative emotion regulation were more likely to empathetically support a partner struggling with emotional problems than those high on suppressive emotion regulation. Shahar, Kalman-Halevi, and Roth (2018) had similar results in a lab experiment involving intimate partners. Lab-induced integrative emotion regulation of one partner (vs. expressive suppression and emotional distancing) led to both partners' perception of a discussion as more effective and to reduced physiological arousal of the partner not instructed to regulate emotions.

3 | SDT'S DIFFERENTIATION OF AUTONOMOUS AND CONTROLLED GOAL PURSUIT

As mentioned, recent research adopting a motivational framework of emotion regulation mostly asks what people's emotion goals are (what they want to feel; e.g., Mauss & Tamir, 2014). The concept of goals is central in the study of motivation, as goals give behavior its direction (Elliot & Fryer, 2008; Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007). SDT researchers highlight the role of autonomous reasons for goal pursuit (Koestner, 2008; Sheldon, 2014; Vansteenkiste, Lens, Elliot, Soenens, & Mouratidis, 2014). Goals endorsed for autonomous reasons are pursued with a sense of choice, volition, and psychological freedom. Those who autonomously pursue goals fully internalize them and perceive them as their own (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Internalized goals become integrated and constitute people's dynamic sense of self (Ryan et al., 1985). However, controlled reasons reflect nonoptimal internalization, and people perceive their behaviors as stemming from external sources. Those who endorse goals for controlled reasons do so because they want to comply with external demands or feel an internal compulsion to do so (e.g., to avoid shame or guilt).

Elliot and Thrash (2001) suggested goals and reasons play different roles in predicting motivated behavior. While goals serve as proximal determinants of behavior (e.g., I want to calm down), reasons play a distal role (e.g., I want to calm down *because* otherwise my parents will punish me). Thus, the same goal can be pursued for several different underlying reasons, forming a "goal-complex." Much SDT research has shown that pursuing goals for underlying autonomous reasons allows individuals to exert more effort, experience less conflict, and feel a greater sense of readiness to attain their goals than pursuing goals for underlying controlled reasons (e.g., Benita, Roth, & Deci, 2014; Michou, Vansteenkiste, Mouratidis, & Lens, 2014; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998).

3.1 | Autonomous versus controlled emotion goal pursuit

I suggest Elliot and Thrash's (2001) differentiation of proximal and distal determinants of goal pursuit applies to emotion goals. Although emotion goals serve as proximal determinants of emotion regulation strategy selection, they can be pursued for more distal autonomous or controlled reasons. These reasons are likely to determine the quality of emotion regulatory processes, beyond the actual choice to regulate emotions or not.

For example, during a conflict, children with controlled motivation might want to down-regulate anger (i.e., pursue an emotion goal) because they are afraid of the consequences of getting into a fight (e.g., being punished, getting hit by the other child). Yet children with autonomous motivation might want to regulate anger because not behaving violently is part of an internalized value to solve conflicts peacefully. Whereas both types of children might pursue a goal to regulate emotions, those endorsing the goal for autonomous reasons are more likely to restrain themselves, even when external contingencies are absent (e.g., when the odds of getting punished are low), and try to resolve conflicts peacefully. For these children, an event which includes both emotional arousal and its subsequent regulation is likely to be integrated, constituting the child's developing identity.

Benita et al. (2019) recently explored similar questions in the lab context. They exposed participants to emotional stimuli and instructed them to pursue emotion goals using either *autonomy-supportive* or *controlling* instructions. According to SDT, autonomy-supportive environments facilitate autonomous reasons for behavior and are characterized by such practices as taking the target individual's perspective, encouraging choice and self-initiation, and providing meaningful rationales (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). In contrast, controlling environments undermine internalization. Controlling socializing agents use rewards, deadlines, threats, and pressuring language to socialize norms and goals (Deci et al., 1994). Benita et al. (2019) found participants in both conditions were equally likely to engage in emotion regulation when directly instructed to do so. However, when allowed to spontaneously choose whether to regulate emotions or not, those in the autonomy-supportive condition were more likely than those in the controlled one to independently pursue emotion goals. In short, autonomy-supportive instructions led to long-term persistence in emotion regulation, even when this was not expected.

Because people who pursue emotion goals for autonomous reasons do not feel controlled by the need to reduce negative emotions, they are likely to be less defensive and, despite experiencing some degree of negative emotions, will recall important parts of the emotional experience and understand their meaning. Benita et al. (2019) tested this assumption using Pennebaker and colleagues' word-category approach (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Participants instructed to regulate emotion in an autonomy-supportive manner showed a less defensive processing style than participants instructed in a controlling manner. Similarly, Weinstein and Hodgins (2009) found individuals high in trait autonomy or primed with autonomy presented a less defensive quality of writing and showed greater well-being than individuals low in trait autonomy or primed with controlled motivation.

Roth, Assor, Niemiec, Ryan, and Deci's (2009) correlational study on the effects of autonomy support and control on motivation to regulate emotions examined the outcomes of parental autonomy support and control on children's emotion expression. Parental autonomy support predicted the child's autonomous motivation to regulate emotions, which, in turn, predicted his/her integrative emotion regulation. Meanwhile, parental control predicted the child's controlled motivation to regulate emotions, which, in turn, predicted suppressive emotion regulation and dysregulation.

4 | HOW CAN SDT'S VIEW OF EMOTION REGULATION INFORM CONTEMPORARY EMOTION REGULATION RESEARCH?

4.1 | Gross's process model of emotion regulation: Core principles and recent developments

The most influential model to describe emotion regulation processes is Gross's *process model of emotion regulation* (Gross, 1998b, 2015). This model, initially presented in the late 1990s (Gross, 1998b), outlines specific regulatory

strategies called upon during an emotional response. An emotion begins when the individual attends to and evaluates emotional cues. A coordinated set of response tendencies is triggered but may be modulated over the course of the response. In the original model, different strategies for regulating emotions appear at different times during an emotional response, with antecedent- and response-focused strategies appearing, respectively, before full activation of the emotional response or when an emotion is already in progress. Antecedent-focused strategies aim at changing the context in which emotions arise (i.e., situation selection modification), changing the focus of attention (i.e., attentional deployment), or changing thoughts about the event (i.e., cognitive change). Response-focused strategies aim at changing ongoing emotional responses (i.e., response modulation).

Early research anchored in this model dealt with the consequences of different strategies (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012), with an emphasis on reappraisal and expressive suppression. Reappraisal is an antecedent-focused strategy referring to attempts to cognitively reframe emotion-eliciting situations so that the emotion does not become salient to begin with. Expressive suppression is a response-focused strategy, referring to attempts to decrease emotionally expressive behavior already in progress. Early research consistently showed reappraisal is a more adaptive strategy than expressive suppression (e.g., Gross, 1998a; Gross & John, 2003).

More recently, Gross (2015) offered an extended process model (see also Ford, Gross, & Gruber, 2019). In this model, emotion regulation represents a second-order valuation system, in which the person evaluates whether a first-order valuation system—the emotion—is good or bad. Whether a given emotion is perceived as bad and should be down-regulated or good and should be up-regulated depends on various factors, including contextual variables and people's broader goals in a given situation.

Figure 1 presents a schematic description of the extended process model. The process unfolds over time, in three consecutive stages: *identification* (of a goal to regulate emotion—an emotion goal), *selection* (of a strategy to regulate emotion), and *implementation* (of particular tactic to regulate emotions). Implementing a particular tactic results in a possible change to the original emotion, which may then be reevaluated for another regulation cycle. In the extended process model, the term “strategy” refers to a general regulatory approach and “tactic” refers to a more concrete regulatory action typifying a given strategic approach (Ford et al., 2019). Thus, the implementation stage involves translating the selected strategy or strategies into situation-specific tactics. For example, the strategy of cognitive change or reappraisal can be translated into several tactics, including distancing, meaning-making, and rumination.

Within the extended model, the question of which strategy is more beneficial becomes less relevant. First, a given strategy can give rise to different tactics, some more and some less adaptive, and these tactics often operate simultaneously (i.e., polyregulation; Ford et al., 2019). Second, the success of emotion regulatory efforts does not rest on their capacity to reduce emotions; it also includes their ability to produce desired outcomes (Tamir et al., 2020).

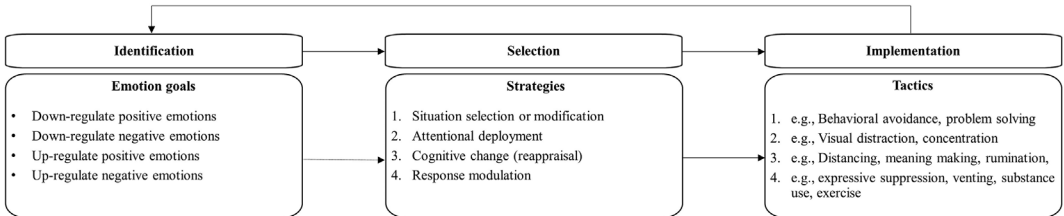


FIGURE 1 A schematic illustration of the extended process model of emotion regulation (Ford et al., 2019; Gross, 2015). Tactics with a given number belong to a family of strategies with the same number. The list of tactics is not exhaustive

4.2 | Integration with Gross's extended process model of emotion regulation

I suggest SDT's view of emotion regulation can and should inform the extended process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2015), as visualized in Figure 2. The figure aligns SDT's view of emotion regulation with the stages of Gross's model (identification, selection, implementation). I suggest SDT can expand the extended process model in three compatible ways: by considering the role of autonomy experiences within each stage; by considering the effect of autonomy experiences on the quality of the emotion regulatory process, beyond the question of whether the individual succeeds in emotion regulation; by considering the effect of autonomy experiences on the long-term effects of emotion regulation.

In the identification stage, SDT introduces the concept of autonomous versus controlled reasons to pursue emotion goals, or more broadly, the concept of goal-complexes (Elliot & Thrash, 2001). In this stage, people not only identify a goal to regulate emotions, they also identify an emotion goal-complex. Emotion goal-complexes are likely to affect the emotion regulatory process beyond the question of whether people adopt an emotion goal. Consideration of the concept of goal-complexes can shed light on important theoretical questions. As noted, the dominant views of motivated emotion regulation build on expectancy-value accounts of motivation (e.g., Tamir et al., 2015). As such, they construe emotion regulation as an instrumental process, motivated by the desire to produce certain benefits (Tamir, 2015). However, if research shows people can engage in emotion regulation even in the absence of contingencies or immediate benefits (e.g., Benita et al., 2019), this supports SDT's assumption that people's emotion regulatory efforts often serve a more general tendency to grow and become themselves. In other words, people can choose to regulate emotions not only because they wish to derive benefits from doing so but because it will support the integrative process.

In the selection stage, SDT introduces the concept of emotion regulation styles. The term "emotion regulation style" denotes a broader concept than "emotion regulation strategy." It reflects a more basic tendency to gain (or not) access to emotions once they arise and to understand their source, instead of merely asking "how" to regulate them. As in the identification stage, I suggest styles play a more distal role than strategies in predicting emotion regulatory outcomes. In other words, any given strategy in Gross's model can be considered as motivated either by habitual willingness to volitionally accept and explore emotions (i.e., integrative emotion regulation) or by habitual willingness to avoid them (i.e., suppressive emotion regulation, dysregulation). Those with an integrative style are likely to volitionally choose the most adaptive strategy for a given situation, one enabling flexible up- or down-

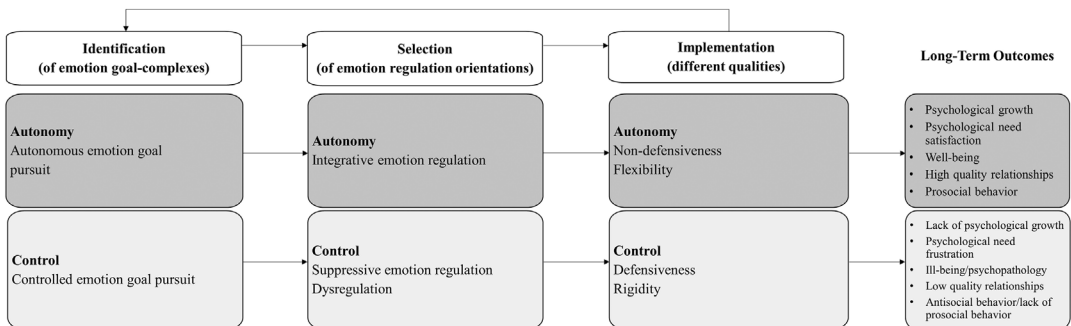


FIGURE 2 A conceptual model integrating SDT's view of emotion regulation (gray boxes) with the extended process model of emotion regulation (white boxes). Each stage in the extended process model can be considered as either autonomous (dark gray) or controlled (light gray). At the identification stage, SDT introduces the concept of autonomous versus controlled reasons, forming different goal-complexes. At the selection stage, SDT introduces the concept of emotion regulation styles, combining with strategies to form emotion regulation orientations. At the implementation stage, SDT introduces the concept of implementation quality, manifested by nondefensiveness (vs. defensiveness) and flexibility (vs. rigidity). SDT, self-determination theory

regulation of emotions (e.g., using cognitive change if they must attend an emotional event but switching to response modulation, if the emotion's response tendencies appear). Those with a suppressive style may feel forced to select a strategy to reduce negative emotions (e.g., consistently using situation selection to avoid emotional events). Finally, dysregulated individuals may skip haphazardly between strategies, not really knowing what their emotion goal is or how to attain it. They may lack commitment to select a strategy compatible with their situation and seem unmotivated to regulate emotions.

Thus, I suggest SDT's emotion regulation styles lay the infrastructure for emotion regulation strategies, which can be enacted by an accompanying sense of autonomy or control. The extended process model is silent as to whether certain strategies are more beneficial than others, but in my view, a strategy derives its quality from its underlying level of autonomy. In motivation research, the term "motivation orientation" refers to a network or integrated pattern of variables, including emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Senko & Tropiano, 2016). I propose the term *emotion regulation orientation* to denote this integrated pattern of styles and strategies. These orientations are both context-specific and relatively stable. For example, some people may be habitually inclined to use situation selection strategies, but in a specific context (e.g., they are already attending the emotional event), a different strategy might be more useful to attain their emotion goal (e.g., cognitive change). If an individual also has an integrative style, s/he is more likely to take into account broader aspects of the situation and flexibly switch to the more suitable strategy. However, if strategy selection is combined with a suppressive style, s/he might "get stuck" on a habitual strategy. Simply stated, I term this context-specific combination of styles and strategies "emotion regulation orientations" because they orient the individual toward different implementations.

In the implementation stage, SDT can inform the process model through the concept of *quality of implementation*. I suggest quality of implementation can be manifested as both nondefensiveness (vs. defensiveness) and flexibility (vs. rigidity). As explained above, nondefensiveness is an important outcome of the experience of autonomy to regulate emotions. It reflects the ability to openly reflect on emotional experiences. *Emotion regulation flexibility* was defined by Aldao, Sheppes, and Gross (2015) as the use of multiple emotion regulation strategies selected to correspond to changes across emotional episodes. I define flexibility as a broader term, including the capacity to rethink the emotional experience and volitionally adjust regulatory efforts. This ability goes hand-in-hand with nondefensiveness. Thus, in flexible and nondefensive implementation, during implementation or after it, a person can go back in the process and reconsider his/her emotion goals, strategies, and tactics.

In sum, I suggest SDT informs the extended process model by outlining two qualitatively distinct paths of emotion regulation, an autonomous path and a controlled path. The former goes from autonomous goal-complexes to integrated emotion regulation orientation and high-quality implementation. The latter goes from controlled goal-complexes to suppressive and dysregulated emotion regulation orientations and low-quality implementation. While both paths can reach the emotion goal triggering the process, they have divergent long-term consequences. The autonomous path supports the integrative process and predicts positive outcomes, including psychological growth, psychological need satisfaction, well-being, optimal relationships, and prosocial behavior. The controlled path undermines the integrative process and predicts negative outcomes, including lack of growth, psychopathology, poor relationships, and poor social behavior.

5 | FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the consistent findings linking autonomy with adaptive emotion regulation outcomes, research is in its infancy, with many possibilities for development. Critical parts of the integrated model proposed in the previous section remain conceptual and are not supported by empirical evidence. The following suggestions should trigger research interest but are by no means exhaustive.

One intriguing line of research is the exploration of emotion goal-complexes. This research currently relies on lab experiments (Benita et al., 2019). Work is needed in more ecological contexts, such as parent-child relationships.

Goal-complexes can be explored by probing interactions of different goal-reasons combinations (e.g., Benita et al., 2014) or by developing measures uniquely assessing goal-complexes (e.g., Sommet & Elliot, 2017). In addition, this research has focused on negative emotions. Tamir and Ford (2012) found seeking positive emotions when they are incongruent with the situation might impede well-being. An SDT account of this effect might suggest that if people strive to experience positive emotions for autonomous reasons, their well-being is less likely to be impeded, despite the incongruence with the situation.

There are some lacunae in the research on integrative emotion regulation. Researchers need to construe the components of integrative emotion regulation more clearly and differentiate it from similar constructs, such as mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and acceptance (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004; see Roth et al., 2019). There is also a dearth of longitudinal examinations of the antecedents and outcomes of integrative emotion regulation. Finally, researchers should explore whether different combinations of styles and strategies (i.e., emotion regulation orientations) yield the outcomes expected in the integrated model. Such work could focus on interactions between styles and strategies or explore whether different emotion regulation styles differentially affect sensitivity to context in strategy selection.

More research is needed to establish the concept of quality of implementation as comprising flexibility and non-defensiveness. Researchers could use more advanced methodologies, such as diary and experience sampling methods, to explore whether fine-grained changes in emotion regulation tactics correspond to daily or even momentary changes in well-being and basic need satisfaction. Finally, research should include more contexts, such as psychotherapy, the workplace, and school.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this article, I have reviewed SDT's (Ryan & Deci, 2017) framework of emotion regulation. My review of the theory and the literature indicates SDT can yield important insights for contemporary emotion regulation research. SDT suggests emotions and emotion regulation play a key role within a dynamic integrative process in which people have (or not) the psychological freedom to become themselves. The introduction of the concept of autonomy to mainstream emotion regulation research might be both illuminative and necessary because of its ability to shed light on both the short- and long-term effects of emotion regulatory efforts.

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How to cite this article: Benita M. Freedom to feel: A self-determination theory account of emotion regulation. *Soc Personal Psychol Compass*. 2020;e12563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12563>