



## Predictors of Satisfaction with Life Among Young Adults

### KEYWORDS

satisfaction with life, emotion regulation, coping with stress, predictors, young adults

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**ABSTRACT** *There has been a sudden surge in the researches in positive psychology. An individual's overall functioning is presumed to be linked with the way an individual regulates his/her emotional states and coping with stressors. Therefore, present study was undertaken to identify how satisfaction with life is predicted by emotion regulation and strategies of coping with stress among 300 young adults (150 males and 150 females) falling in the age range of 20-25 years. Results indicate significant gender differences on all three variables. Express emotion and problem avoidance were found to predict satisfaction with life among females. Among males cognitive reappraisal, cognitive restructuring and social support predicted the criterion variable.*

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there is a sudden spurt in researches in the area of positive psychology. Researches by Huebner et al. (2004), O' zdevocio (2003), Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith (1999), Hong & Giannakopoulos (1994), Shin & Johnson (1978) indicate that an individual's overall functioning is linked to how much satisfied the individual is with his/her life in general. Many researches indicate relationship between strategies used for coping, adaptive emotional functioning, well-being and satisfaction with life (Bjorling, 2009; Armstrong, Wittrock, Robinson, 2006; Davis, Holm, Myers, & Suda, 1998; Fanciullacci, Alessandri, & Fanciullacci, 1998). It can be said that major proportion of young adults development and growth center around their cognitive and emotional abilities. How a young adult modulates, modifies or changes his/her emotional experience is presumed to impact his/her satisfaction with life. After having successfully completed their adolescence, young adults are on the verge of entering adulthood where they will be facing many challenges and stressors. How do they deal with these will have an impact on their overall satisfaction with life.

There is no dearth of individual studies on variables like life satisfaction, emotional regulation, coping with stress etc. (Rude & McCarthy, 2003; Rozin, Haidt & McCauley, 2000; Ito & Cacioppo, 1999; Harre` & Parrott, 1996; Parkinson, 1995; Wierzbicka, 1994). The present study, therefore, is an attempt to find out how satisfaction with life is predicted by emotion regulation and strategies of coping with stress.

Ellison et al. (1989) said that "life satisfaction is a cognitive assessment of an underlying state thought to be relatively consistent and influenced by social factors". It has been perceived as an overall judgment of one's quality of life. Life satisfaction is defined "as a cognitive evaluation of one's life as a whole and/or of specific life domains" by Huebner et al. (2005) and Diener, et.al. (1999).

Emotion regulation deals with an individual's ability to recognize, monitor, evaluate and modify emotional reactions (Thompson, 1994). Fox (1994) states that the regulation of emotion is the ability to respond situations with a range of emotions in a socially acceptable manner. There are a number of emotion regulation strategies like, situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, dis-

engagement and distraction (Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999). In the present research two strategies have been studied, Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression (Gross & John, 1998).

Cognitive reappraisal involves altering the way an individual thinks about a potential emotion-eliciting situation in order to modify its emotional impact (Lazarus & Alfert, 1964); expressive suppression involves reducing emotion-expressive behavior once the individual is already in an emotional state (Gross, 1998; Levenson, 1994).

In the emotion generation process reappraisal occurs early and requires fewer additional cognitive resources to generate and execute interpersonal behavior. Cognitive reappraisal, decreases the extent to which emotion response tendencies are activated leading to lesser subjective, physiological and expressive signs of negative emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 1984; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). In the emotion-generative process suppression comes relatively late and modifies the behavioral aspect of the emotion response tendencies. Suppression does not reduce the experience of negative emotion. Thus, the experience of such emotions may continue to linger and accumulate unresolved. Because suppression comes late in the emotion-generative process, it requires the individual to effort fully manage emotion response tendencies as they arise continually. These repeated efforts consume cognitive resources which could otherwise be used for optimal performance in the social contexts in which the emotions arise (Higgins, 1987; Rogers, 1951).

Stress is a term which is widely used by layman as well as professionals to denote a variety of human experiences that act as a hindrance in normal day-to-day functioning. In an number of researches stress has been found to have detrimental effects on mental concentration, problem-solving and decision making, emotional functioning and well-being of people (Thompson, 2010; Barling, Kelloway, & Frone, 2004; Pelletier, 1992, 1995; Goleman & Gurin, 1993; Ornstein & Sobel, 1988)

In the present study, stress has been seen in the light of 'stress as a transaction'. This perspective was adopted by Lazarus (1966) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984). They conceptualized "stress as a 'rubric' for a complex series of subjective phenomena, including cognitive appraisals

(threat, harm, and challenge), stress emotions, coping responses, and reappraisals. Stress... is experienced when the demands of a situation tax or exceed a person's resources and some type of harm or loss is anticipated" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). They also conceptualized "coping as efforts to ameliorate the perceived threat or to manage stress emotions (emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping)..."

The present study takes into consideration the following strategies for coping with stress (Tobin & Reynolds, 1984)- problem solving (using cognitive and behavioral capabilities to deal with the stressor), cognitive restructuring (using cognitive abilities to modulate and modify stressful transactions to make it less threatening for the well-being of an individual), social support (reaching out to others and seeking their support to deal with the stressor), express emotions (releasing and expressing emotions), problem avoidance (denying problems and avoiding stressful thoughts), wishful thinking (inability or reluctance to modify or alter a stressful situation without one being instrumental to bring change), social withdrawal (individuals become self-critical for a stressful situation)

The present research is therefore, undertaken to search answers of the following questions:

1. Are there any significant gender differences on emotion regulation, coping with stress and satisfaction with life?
2. Does emotion regulation, coping with stress and satisfaction significantly related with each other?
3. Does any strategy of emotion regulation and coping with stress help in predicting satisfaction with life?

**METHOD**

**Participants and Method**

Three hundred young adults falling in the age range of 20- 25 years were incidentally selected to participate in the study. The mean age of males was 23.4 ( =2.18) and of females was 22.9 ( =1.98). The respondents belonged to Lucknow and were studying in Amity University, Lucknow Campus. The majority of the respondents (87.5% females and 89.9% males) belonged to high income families. On an average all the respondents had one elder sibling.

The data was collected individually and participants, on an average, took twenty minutes to respond to the questionnaires.

**Measures**

**Satisfaction with Life.** For measuring the level of satisfaction with life of the respondents, Satisfaction with Life given by Diener et.al. (1985) was employed in the current study. The tool comprises of five statements, to be rated on a seven point Likert rating scale. The reliability of the tool is 0.82.

**Emotion Regulation.** For ascertaining the strategies of emotion regulation employed by the respondents Emotion Regulation Questionnaire developed by Gross & John (1998) was used. The tool comprises of two subscales: Cognitive Reappraisal and Suppression. Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.79 and 0.73 for Reappraisal and Suppression, respectively. The respondents are asked to give their responses using a 5-point Likert rating scale.

**Coping with Stress.** For identifying the strategy used by respondents to cope with stress, Coping with Stress Ques-

tionnaire developed by Tobin, Holoryad and Reynolds (1984) was used. The tool has seven subscales: Problem solving, Cognitive Restructuring, Social Support, Express Emotions, Problem Avoidance, Wishful Thinking, and Social Withdrawal. The test-retest reliability of the scale ranged from 0.71 to 0.94. The respondents were asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert rating scale.

**RESULTS and DISCUSSION**

Table 1 depicts the obtained mean and standard deviations of the Satisfaction with Life. The results indicate that both males (mean= 29.32) and females (mean= 27.20) tend to be satisfied with their lives.

**Table 1: Group statistics and gender differences on satisfaction with life, emotion regulation and coping with stress**

**N= 300 (150 females and 150 males)**

Variables	Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	t	df	
Satisfaction with Life	Males	29.32	5.55	.65	1.94*	298	
	Females	27.20	5.08	.71			
Emotion Regulation	Cognitive Reappraisal	Males	22.16	3.90	.50	-2.80**	298
		Females	24.05	3.45	.44		
	Suppression	Males	14.30	2.58	.33	3.15**	298
		Females	12.55	3.43	.44		
Coping with Stress	Problem Solving	Males	29.20	6.69	.86	-20	298
		Females	29.43	5.70	.73		
	Cognitive Restructuring	Males	29.38	6.93	.89	-.91	298
		Females	30.43	5.50	.71		
	Express Emotions	Males	27.06	6.49	.83	-.88	298
		Females	28.10	6.27	.81		
	Social Support	Males	26.98	6.46	.83	-2.39**	298
		Females	29.68	5.89	.76		
	Problem Avoidance	Males	22.83	5.47	.70	-.82	298
		Females	23.66	5.61	.72		
	Wishful Thinking	Males	27.31	5.91	.76	.93	298
		Females	26.16	6.79	.87		
Self Criticism	Males	27.38	6.34	.81	1.45	298	
	Females	25.58	7.14	.92			
Social Withdrawal	Males	29.16	6.05	.78	3.23**	298	
	Females	25.58	6.09	.78			

\*p<.05 level of significance

\*\*p<.01 level of significance

Irrespective of their gender, young adults, have almost a high level of satisfaction with their lives because the young urban males and females tend to have a more healthy life style, equal opportunities to participate in social activities, exercise more freedom to choose the careers and life partners, and are involved in healthy relationship with significant others etc. The obtained results have been found in many of the previous researches done by Funk et al. (2006), Park and Huebner (2005), Huebner et al. (2004), Huebner et al. (2000), Huebner (1994).

The obtained results also show that young adult males have significantly higher mean than young adult females

( $t= 1.93$ ;  $p<.05$ ). This means that males appear to be more contented with their lives than females. Researches indicate significant gender differences in satisfaction with life (Goldbeck, Schmitz, Besier, Herschbach, & Henrich, 2007). Life satisfaction to a large extent is influenced by people's perception of what resources they have and what they want from their lives? With enhanced perception of resources at their disposal and utilizing the same for dealing with life circumstances, males exercise more freedom to chart their career paths, become more adept and receive more privileges than females. Therefore, they feel more contented and satisfied with their lives than females.

From Table 1 it can also be observed that significant gender differences are occurring on cognitive reappraisal ( $t=-2.80$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and suppression ( $t= -3.15$ ;  $p<.01$ ) dimensions of emotional regulation. Young adult females appear to use cognitive reappraisal ( $m=24.05$ ) more than males ( $m=22.16$ ) while males ( $m=14.30$ ) tend to suppress their emotions more than females ( $m= 12.55$ ). Several studies (Austin et.al., 2005; Fernandez-Berrocal et. al., 2005; Pandey & Tripathi, 2004; Salovey et. al., 1995) have previously reported that females are more proficient and adept at handling their own as well as other's emotions. The etiology of differences among males and females in regulating their emotional states could be traced back to their socialization patterns (Denham, 1998; Gasper & Clore, 2000). Since childhood, girls are reared in manner so as to make them more sensitive to their feeling states. They are encouraged to reappraise a situation before responding emotionally. As a result they grow up being more perceptive, emotionally expressive and with better interpersonal skills (Saarni, 1999; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Researches also indicate towards differences in brain circuitry of males and females for emotional information processing (Gur et.al., 2002). The brain portions for emotionality are much larger for females than males and therefore, significant gender differences emerged in emotional regulation.

Results of the present study indicate gender differences in the coping strategies (social support and social withdrawal). From the table it can be inferred that problem solving strategies used to manage stress is used approximately equally by both males and females. Results further show that females use a bit more of cognitive restructuring than males. This finding further substantiates with the finding that females use cognitive reappraisal to regulate their emotions more than males. Although both cognitive reappraisal and restructuring seems to be interrelated but there is fine difference between the two. Cognitive reappraisal specifically pertains to regulation of emotions while cognitive restructuring exhibits the manner in which stress emerging from any situation (emotional or otherwise) is managed.

The results indicate that females during stressful times seek support from others to manage their stress levels. Males are observed to have a tendency to withdraw from others in such situations. These results seem to corroborate each other, that is, females are more socially oriented in seeking support while males tend to withdraw in distressful times. The reasons for such gender difference can be attributed to gender-biased socialization. In other words, since childhood females are taught to share and express their feelings with their significant others which lowers their stress levels while men are encouraged to hide their feelings to handle stress.

**Table 2: Co-efficient of correlations among variables: FEMALES**

	Emotion regulation			Coping with stress							
	Cognitive Reappraisal	Suppression	Problem Solving	Cognitive Restructuring	Express Emotion	Social Support	Problem Avoidance	Worry Thinking	Social Withdrawal	Social Withdrawal	
Satisfaction with Life	.097	-.069	.154	.223	.306*	.044	.272*	.154	.006	-.211	
Emotion Regulation	Cognitive Reappraisal			.240	.321*	.398**	.528**	.187	.146	-.225	
	Suppression		.080	.010	-.066	-.074	-.181	-.003	-.071	.337	
Coping with stress	Problem Solving			.624**	.367**	.447**	.227	.373**	.474**	.571**	
	Cognitive Restructuring				.573**	.648**	.317	.232	.269*	.327*	
	Express Emotion					.672**	.407*	.294*	.081	.349**	
	Social Support						.495**	.394**	.247	.293*	
	Problem Avoidance							.379**	.370**	.418**	
	Worry Thinking								.621**	.509**	
	Social Withdrawal									.586**	
	Social Withdrawal										

\* $p<.05$   
\*\* $p<.01$

From Table 2 it is clearly evident that there exists a significant positive correlation among satisfaction with life and express emotions ( $r=.306$ ;  $p<.05$ ) and satisfaction with life and problem avoidance ( $r=.272$ ;  $p<.05$ ). It is also evident from the table that there exists a significant positive correlation between cognitive reappraisal and express emotion ( $r=.321$ ;  $p<.05$ ), cognitive reappraisal and social support ( $r=.398$ ;  $p<.01$ ), cognitive reappraisal and problem avoidance ( $r=.528$ ;  $p<.01$ ).

Reappraisal implies that an individual is instrumental in changing or modifying an emotional state by re-construing a situation in a manner which does not act as a hindrance in adaptive functioning. The positive correlation between reappraisal and expressed emotion indicate that when individual re-assess a situation they figure out that it is better to vent out their emotions instead of suppressing them as it is required for healthy and adaptive functioning.

Significant positive correlation between cognitive reappraisal and social support further manifests that when female young adults reappraise a situation, knowing their limitations in handling a stressful situation, they tend to seek support of their significant others. Seeking support from others is not detrimental but at times required to gain a clear perspective of the situation and also for assessing the capabilities one is having for dealing with situational demands.

Cognitive reappraisal involves changing the way the individual thinks about a potentially emotion-eliciting situation in order to modify its emotional impact (Lazarus & Alfert, 1964). This means that female young adults adopt problem avoidance as a strategy of managing stress after reviewing the impact of such situations.

Table 3 shows the correlation coefficients among variables for young adult males.

Table 3: Co-efficient of correlations among variables: MALES

	Emotion regulation		Coping with stress							
	Cognitive Reappraisal	Suppression	Problem Solving	Cognitive Restructuring	Express Emotion	Social Support	Problem Avoidance	Worry Thinking	Self Criticism	Social Withdrawal
Satisfaction with Life	.271*	.016	.091	.277*	.162	.295*	.037	-.168	.086	-.084
Emotion Regulation	Cognitive Reappraisal	.160	.111	.371**	-.351**	.376**	.182	-.067	-.031	-.125
	Suppression		.010	.047	.059	.094	.371**	-.251	.107	-.026
Coping with stress	Problem Solving			.575**	-.399**	.237	.268*	.090	.191	.419**
	Cognitive Restructuring				.625**	.351**	.304*	-.110	.091	.043
	Express Emotion					.563**	.398**	.160	.086	.158
	Social Support						.348**	-.101	-.008	.018
	Problem Avoidance							.604**	.245	.171
	Worry Thinking								.377**	.270*
	Self Criticism									.528**
	Social Withdrawal									

\*p<.05

\*\*p<.01

From Table 3 it can be observed that among young adult males significant positive correlation exists between satisfaction with life and cognitive restructuring (r=.277; p<.05) and satisfaction with life and cognitive reappraisal (r= .271; p<.05) and also between satisfaction with life and social support (r=.295; p<.05). Similarly a significant positive correlation exists between cognitive reappraisal and cognitive restructuring (r=.371; p<.01), cognitive reappraisal and social support (r=.376; p<.01) whereas cognitive reappraisal is found to be significantly negatively correlated with express emotion (r= -.351; p<.01). Suppression among young adult males is found to be significantly positively correlated with problem avoidance (r=.371; p<.01).

A significant positive correlation between cognitive reappraisal and cognitive restructuring was expected based on the previous studies done by Gross & John (2003). Both the processes are involved with changing the meaning of stressful or emotionally arousing situation and to make it less threatening. Therefore, the results imply that males when reappraise a situation then they have a tendency to reconstruct a stressful transaction and try to find out positivity hidden in such upheavals.

One very interesting finding is that among males cognitive restructuring is found to be positively correlated with social support. Although males do not express their emotions yet when they re-assess a stressful situation they do not hesitate to seek support from their significant others. The reason behind such tendencies could be because of the socialization process where they are encouraged not to manifest emotions while at the same time are encouraged to seek support from others.

In the present study cognitive reappraisal has been found to be negatively correlating with express emotion. The findings are corroborated by the researches done by Butler et al. (2003), Richards & Gross (2000) and Gross (1998). This indicates that young adult males have a tendency to hold back the expression of emotions ensuing from stressful situations because when they re-assess a threatening

situation they tend to look at it in a positive manner. Males consider a threatening situation to be an opportunity to showcase their capacities in dealing successfully with it. Moreover, because of gender based socialization, they are at times encouraged not to express their emotions frequently.

The results indicate a significant positive correlation between suppression and problem avoidance. This means that males when hold back the behavioral expression of emotions then they show an inclination of avoiding the problem situation either by denying the problem or by avoiding the negative thoughts associated with it. This tendency in males is a way to maintaining a healthy and adaptive way of emotional functioning.

Table 4 depicts the significant predictors that emerged for satisfaction with life among young adult females and males. It can be observed from the table male prediction model accounted for greater variance in satisfaction with life scores than the female model (72% vs. 69%).

Table 4: Stepwise Regression Analysis Predicting Satisfaction with Life for both genders.

Criterion Variables	Predictor Variables	Beta	t	Significance
Females	Express emotion	.398	2.70	.05
	Problem avoidance	.298	2.69	.05
Males	Cognitive reappraisal	.270	2.81	.05
	Cognitive restructuring	.239	2.54	.05
	Social support	.218	2.51	.05

It can clearly be seen that express emotions and problem avoidance (R=.359, SE=3.552, F=6.773, p<.01) emerged as significant predictor of satisfaction with life for females. Express emotions account for approximately 40% of the variance while problem avoidance accounted for almost 30% of the variance in the criterion variable.

The relationship between satisfaction with life and express emotion is found to be positive indicating that female young adults are more pleased with their lives when they express their emotions during stressful situations. Satisfaction with life is a necessary constituent for well-being, it is also manifested as an individual's emotional response and approach towards life. The moment an emotional side is attached to life satisfaction, how well one expresses his/her emotion is directly related with the level of Satisfaction with Life. In other words, if one does not withhold negative emotions within, contentment with life increases automatically.

The female young adults appear to be more positively satisfied with their lives when they use problem avoidance as a way of coping with stress. This means that females have a tendency to avoid the negative thoughts associated with situations which they perceive as stressful in order to maintain their satisfaction with life.

As can be seen from the Table 4, cognitive reappraisal, cognitive restructuring and social support (R=.307, SE=3.84, F= 5.04, p<.01) emerged as significant predictors of satisfaction with life among males and these carry beta

weights of .270, .239 and .218 respectively.

The results of the present study indicate that among males satisfaction with life is positively significantly correlated with the way one construes any stressful situation. According to Huebner et. al. (2005) life satisfaction is construed as an assessment of daily experiences of an individual as everyday problems and stressors contribute significantly to how anyone rates his/her satisfaction with life. This clearly indicates how well one alters the repercussions of a stressful situations significantly relates with one's level of life satisfaction.

In previous researches also coping strategies used to deal with stress have been predicting life satisfaction (Chung, et al., 2006; Matheny et al., 2002; Makhnack et al., 1999). Social Support is the perceived availability of significant others during distressing times. The feeling that there is social support also acts as a buffer at times of stress (Curlette, Aycock, Matheny, Pugh, & Taylor, 2006, 1992). In researches by Matheny et al (2002), Solberg & Villarreal (1997) social support has been found to lessen stress and improve life satisfaction among college students.

The obtained results of the present study are corroborated by the results of a study conducted by Matheny et.al (2002). In that study also prediction models for genders included different strategies of coping with stress. Therefore, it can be said that satisfaction with life can be largely regressed on the way an individual copes with stressors.

#### IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study bring to fore the important role of coping with stress in predicting life satisfaction. As young adults are prone to face difficult and challenging situations in their life they experience escalated levels of stress. Using appropriate stress managing strategies like, cognitive restructuring, seeking social support, expressing pent-up emotions, and avoiding problem situations, help young adults to achieve higher and better satisfaction with life. The problem arises when an individual feels handicapped to use apt methods of dealing with stressors. At this juncture, the results of the study can be implicated by mental health professionals for improving the well-being and satisfaction with life by training and imparting the knowledge of appropriate stress management techniques. Skillfully guiding young adults to focus more on resources at their disposal may reduce stress by bridging the gap between perceived hassles and perceived assets.



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