Regulating emotions in young adulthood

Young adults with complex mental health needs often find it difficult to regulate their emotions and manage impulsive behaviour. Dr Kate Hall and her collaborators from Deakin University, Australia, have developed and evaluated an intervention that has applicability across diagnostic categories of mental health and substance use needs, and can be delivered alongside existing treatments. This intervention teaches young people how to manage their emotions and urges them to make good decisions in spite of emotional distress. The programme offers hope to vulnerable young people by helping them navigate the immense social and emotional demands of this critical life stage to achieve healthy developmental outcomes.

Services for assistance with mental health and substance use difficulties. Dr Kate Hall and Dr Elise Sloan at Deakin University, Australia, say that although young people who present for treatment at youth services commonly have multiple mental health needs across diagnostic categories, there currently are few evidence-informed approaches that target the needs of this vulnerable cohort. Reasons for presenting to services may include problemactic substance use or deliberate self-harm as well as various other mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, disordered eating, and traits of borderline personality disorder. Existing psychological treatment approaches rarely target more than one disorder and are not commonly developed with young people, for young people. These approaches often apply strategies to target symptoms of a specific mental health disorder, without focusing on the interactive complexity of processes that may underlie the presentation of mental health distress. Dr Hall and Dr Sloan have developed transdiagnostic approaches to address the complexity and transdiagnostic treatment needs of young people who are navigating the social and emotional challenges necessary for a healthy transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

A transdiagnostic model considers the common psychological processes that underpin mental health disorders across diagnostic categories of mental health and substance use needs, and can be delivered alongside existing treatments. This intervention teaches young people how to manage the complexity with which young people present for treatment by simultaneously targeting psychological processes that maintain distress across multiple disorders. Transdiagnostic approaches have significant empirical support, gathered over decades of research.

EMOTION REGULATION AND IMPULSE CONTROL (ERIC)

Dr Hall and Dr Sloan have collaborated on a six-year body of work, in partnership with youth services and their research team, to examine emotion dysregulation as a transdiagnostic target for the treatment of mental health and substance use conditions in vulnerable young people. Emotion regulation is a multidimensional concept which incorporates the processes and micro-skills involved in modulating and managing the expression and experience of emotions. It includes an awareness, understanding and acceptance of emotions, the ability to apply appropriate strategies or skills to manage emotions, and control the impulse to respond to emotions in unhealthy ways when experiencing negative emotions. The research team explains that difficulties with emotion regulation are a common underlying process evident in young people who have histories of trauma and experience mental health difficulties.

Dr Hall and Dr Sloan examined profiles of emotion regulation in treatment-seeking young people to highlight the impact that engagement in maladaptive emotion regulation strategies (i.e., rumination, avoidance, and suppression) had on the severity of their mental health symptoms. They also undertook a large systematic review of studies that measure changes in both emotion regulation and symptoms of psychopathology and found that the ability to effectively regulate emotions is something that can be taught through cognitive behavioural-based interventions. Consequently, the research team have determined that emotion regulation is an important treatment target in transdiagnostic models that aim to address the complex patterns of mental health, substance use, and psychosocial difficulties that are often present in this group of young people. Taken together, this research informed the development of an Emotion Regulation and Impulse Control (ERIC) intervention. ERIC is a transdiagnostic treatment model that builds on various theoretical models of emotion regulation and applies evidence-based strategies to promote healthy social and emotional development outcomes in young adults by helping them to build emotion regulation and impulse control skills. The intervention was developed as part of a three-year action research programme in Australia, involving youth services and vulnerable young people who were accessing services for assistance with multiple complex mental health needs. ERIC delivers emotion regulation micro-skills in a modular format, which means that it can be integrated and complemented already existing interventions delivered in the youth sector, including case management, youth outreach support, life skills training and anger management, amongst others.

ERIC integrates and draws on existing theories of emotion regulation to deliver in eight domains of emotion regulation and impulse control. Each of these domains has outcomes that represent healthy development. The skills and processes in each of these domains are delivered in a modular format and comprise practical exercises that include psychoeducation delivered through analogies or mind mapping, behavioural exercises, reflection, and practice schedules. The micro-skills cultivated across all eight domains ultimately teach young people to flexibly use appropriate emotion regulation strategies to modulate their emotional responses in order to meet situational demands, i.e., to develop healthy repertoires of emotion regulation skills.

The theoretical models that informed the ERIC intervention were developed with young people, for young people, by helping them to build emotion regulation and impulse control. The theoretical models that informed the ERIC programme included Gross’s 1998 Process Model of Emotion Regulation, which focuses on applying strategies for managing emotions both before the onset of the response and in response to an event.

The research team reviewed empirical evidence extensively and incorporated evidence-based strategies into the theoretical constructs underpinning the model and the treatment literature. Empirical constructs informing the model included work on specific emotion regulation strategies such as rumination, suppression avoidance, reappraisal, mindfulness acceptance, problem-solving, and self-compassion. The skills taught in ERIC include distress tolerance, increasing

The ERIC programme helps young people to effectively regulate their emotions through cognitive behavioural-based interventions.
Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

Dr Hall and Dr Elise Sloan collaborated on a six-year body of research that underpinned the development of the Emotion Regulation Impulse Control (ERIC) intervention, aiming to improve the social and emotional outcomes of vulnerable young people.

Detail

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Bio
Dr Kate Hall is a Clinical Psychologist and Senior Lecturer at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Her research focuses on the role of emotion dysregulation as a transdiagnostic treatment target for vulnerable young people with complex mental health and substance use issues. She is the lead developer of the Emotion Regulation Impulse Control (ERIC) intervention. She conducts translational research in partnership with services to improve the dissemination of evidence-informed practices aimed at improving social and emotional outcomes for vulnerable young people.

Dr Elise Sloan is an early-career researcher and Clinical Psychologist. Dr Sloan has a track record in clinical research, with an interest in understanding the role that emotion dysregulation plays in vulnerable young people who present with complex mental health and substance use needs.

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Collaborators

References


Personal Response

Would ERIC have applicability for all adolescents as part of a Life Skills curriculum in the high school environment?

ERIC has captured the interest of parents, teachers and adults and is being applied in a community-wide dissemination as part of a ‘whole of community’ approach in Melbourne, Australia. This three-year programme of work has meant family and youth practitioners have undergone ‘train the trainer’ learning in order to disseminate ERIC throughout the community. Teachers at high school and primary schools, practitioners at primary health services, youth drop-in centres and outreach services for families across an inner city catchment are being trained in ERIC to contribute to a healthy community that cares for and supports young people.

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ERIC was designed to promote healthy social and emotional development outcomes for vulnerable young people.

• OPTIMISING HEALTH OUTCOMES
  - The eight domains the ERIC programme is organised into each pertain to important processes underpinning healthy Emotion Regulation and Impulse Control.
  - Firstly, Reducing Vulnerability is taught by helping people to create a sense of emotional safety and make good decisions in spite of vulnerability throughout their life span.
  - Secondly, Flexible Thinking aims to improve youth cognitive and behavioural flexibility.
  - Thirdly, the development of Identity and Values helps young people learn to make decisions and how they want to live their lives.
  - Developing strong Motivational drivers for goals and strengths helps young people to navigate the immense pressures they face.
  - Recommendations for social and emotional outcomes
• IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH
  - To evaluate the effectiveness of ERIC within a real-world setting, with young people who would not ordinarily participate in research trials, Drs Hall and Sloan and the research team undertook a number of research trials.
  - The results of these trials have been published in numerous scientific papers reporting on the effectiveness of ERIC in addressing the mental health needs of young people presenting with multiple complex health needs. One study, delivered as an adjunct to residential substance use treatment, found a 60% reduction of emotion dysregulation and reductions of 50-60% in depression and anxiety post-intervention. In another study with participants accessing youth mental health support services, research indicated clear associations between emotion regulation responses and symptoms of psychopathology when adaptive strategies were absent. Another twelve-week ERIC intervention programme for young people, alongside usual care, showed an improvement in emotion dysregulation and symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress.
  -Unlike the large majority of clinical trials in young people which are regularly criticised due to their lack of generalisability to treatment seeking populations, all of the ERIC studies have been undertaken in partnership with clinical services and therefore include samples of young people that are highly vulnerable and arguably more representative of actual service users.

HOPE FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

ERIC is an educationally based, evidence-informed therapeutic intervention that aims to address the mental health needs of vulnerable young people. It is developed in response to the high demand for new treatment options for youth with complex mental health needs. The programme is designed for use in secondary schools, youth venues, funding and non-funding organisations, and prisons. ERIC is effective for:• Young people with complex mental health and substance use issues
- Major depression
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Substance use issues
- Eating disorders

ERIC is a curriculum-linked, school-based intervention that is currently being taught in 50 schools across Victoria. ERIC is also being taught in prisons, youth drop-in centres and primary health services. ERIC can be delivered by a qualified mental health professional.

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www.researchoutreach.org

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