

Does Thought Suppression Mediate The Relationship Between Emotion Regulation and Burnout Among College Students

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Abstract—Burnout among college students has become a significant psychological concern in higher education settings. Emotional exhaustion, cynicism toward academic tasks, and diminished academic efficacy negatively influence students' well-being and performance. Emotion regulation plays a central role in determining how students cope with academic stress; however, not all regulatory strategies are adaptive. Thought suppression, defined as the deliberate attempt to avoid distressing thoughts, may paradoxically intensify stress and contribute to burnout. This article examines whether thought suppression mediates the relationship between emotion regulation and burnout among college students. Drawing upon established psychological theories and empirical findings, it argues that maladaptive emotion regulation strategies increase reliance on thought suppression, which in turn contributes to burnout. Scholarly quotations with citations are incorporated to substantiate theoretical and empirical claims.

Index Terms—Emotion Regulation, Thought Suppression, Academic Burnout, College Students.

I. INTRODUCTION

College students face academic pressure, social transitions, and future career uncertainty, all of which may contribute to chronic stress. When this stress remains unmanaged, it may develop into burnout. Burnout was originally conceptualized in occupational settings by Christina Maslach, who described it as “a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Although first

associated with professional environments, burnout has since been applied to academic contexts, where students experience similar patterns of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy.

Research demonstrates that academic burnout mirrors workplace burnout in structure and consequences. As Maslach and Leiter (2016) explain, “burnout is not simply about being tired; it reflects a crisis in the relationship people have with their work.” In the academic context, this “work” becomes coursework, examinations, and institutional expectations. Emotional exhaustion among students reflects depletion of psychological resources, cynicism reflects detachment from academic tasks, and reduced efficacy reflects diminished confidence in academic competence.

II. EMOTION REGULATION AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Emotion regulation significantly influences how students respond to stress. According to James Gross, emotion regulation refers to “the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998). This definition emphasizes that individuals actively shape their emotional experiences rather than passively experiencing them.

Gross (2002) further distinguishes between adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and maladaptive strategies such as expressive suppression. He notes that “reappraisal decreases negative emotion

experience and expression, whereas suppression decreases expressive behavior but fails to reduce the experience of negative emotion.” This distinction is critical in understanding why certain regulation strategies may protect against burnout while others may exacerbate it.

Students who engage in cognitive reappraisal reinterpret academic challenges in constructive ways, such as viewing exams as opportunities for growth. Conversely, students who rely on suppression attempt to inhibit emotional responses without addressing underlying stressors. This reliance on suppression may intensify internal stress despite outward composure.

Thought Suppression and the Ironic Process Theory
Thought suppression represents a specific form of maladaptive regulation. Daniel Wegner famously demonstrated the paradoxical effects of suppression in his “white bear” experiments. Wegner (1994) explains, “the attempt to suppress a thought may make it more likely to recur.” He further elaborates that “the processes that underlie the conscious control of mental states are themselves capable of producing ironic effects” (Wegner, 1994).

This phenomenon, known as ironic process theory, suggests that suppression involves two simultaneous processes: a conscious operating process that seeks distractions and an unconscious monitoring process that scans for the unwanted thought. The monitoring process keeps the thought cognitively accessible, increasing its likelihood of resurfacing. Wegner (1994) describes this paradox by stating, “when we try not to think of something, it becomes especially difficult to avoid.”

For college students, attempts to suppress thoughts about academic failure, peer comparison, or future uncertainty may lead to intrusive rumination. Rather than resolving anxiety, suppression may intensify it, contributing to cognitive fatigue and emotional exhaustion.

III. BURNOUT AS A CONSEQUENCE OF MALADAPTIVE REGULATION

The connection between chronic emotional strain and burnout is well documented. Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) note that “what started out as important, meaningful, and challenging work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling, and meaningless.” In academic settings, students may initially approach

studies with enthusiasm, but persistent stress combined with ineffective coping may erode engagement.

Emotional exhaustion, the core dimension of burnout, reflects depletion of emotional resources. According to Maslach and Leiter (2016), “energy turns into exhaustion, involvement turns into cynicism, and efficacy turns into ineffectiveness.” These transformations are particularly relevant to college students who experience sustained academic demands without adequate emotional coping strategies.

Empirical research indicates that maladaptive emotion regulation strategies correlate positively with burnout symptoms. Suppression, in particular, has been linked to increased physiological stress responses and decreased well-being. Gross and John (2003) found that individuals who habitually use suppression report “lower levels of positive emotion, greater levels of negative emotion, and poorer interpersonal functioning.” Such outcomes may contribute cumulatively to burnout over time.

IV. THOUGHT SUPPRESSION AS A MEDIATOR

A mediating variable explains the mechanism through which one factor influences another. In this case, emotion regulation strategies may influence burnout indirectly through thought suppression. Students who lack adaptive strategies such as reappraisal may rely on suppression to manage stress. However, as Wegner (1994) demonstrates, suppression can intensify unwanted thoughts, increasing psychological strain.

When students attempt to suppress academic anxieties, the resulting cognitive rebound may increase rumination and emotional exhaustion. Over time, this cycle may foster cynicism toward academic tasks and reduced confidence in academic ability. Thus, thought suppression may function as the psychological pathway through which maladaptive emotion regulation leads to burnout.

The mediating relationship can be conceptualized as follows: maladaptive emotion regulation increases reliance on thought suppression; thought suppression increases intrusive thoughts and emotional strain; chronic emotional strain contributes to burnout dimensions. This indirect pathway aligns with theoretical and empirical evidence linking regulation strategies to psychological outcomes.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

Understanding thought suppression as a mediator has significant implications for mental health interventions in higher education. If suppression intensifies burnout, then promoting adaptive emotion regulation strategies may reduce both suppression and burnout. Cognitive reappraisal training, mindfulness practices, and acceptance-based strategies may help students process rather than avoid distressing thoughts.

Mindfulness approaches, for example, emphasize acceptance rather than suppression. Instead of attempting to eliminate unwanted thoughts, students learn to observe them nonjudgmentally. This approach counteracts ironic processes and reduces cognitive rebound effects. As research in acceptance-based therapies suggests, allowing thoughts to arise without resistance may reduce their intensity and frequency. Universities may benefit from incorporating emotional skills training into student support services. Workshops on stress management, emotional awareness, and cognitive restructuring may strengthen adaptive regulation capacities. By reducing reliance on suppression, institutions may indirectly decrease burnout prevalence.

VI. CONCLUSION

The evidence suggests that thought suppression plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between emotion regulation and burnout among college students. Emotion regulation strategies significantly shape how students experience and respond to academic stress. When students rely on maladaptive strategies such as suppression, they may inadvertently intensify distress through ironic cognitive processes. Over time, this amplified stress may contribute to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced academic efficacy.

As Gross (1998) emphasizes, emotion regulation determines “which emotions we have and how we experience them.” When regulation strategies fail, students may turn to suppression, which Wegner (1994) warns can produce “ironic effects.” Combined with Maslach’s conceptualization of burnout as a response to chronic stress, these perspectives support the argument that thought suppression mediates the pathway from maladaptive regulation to burnout.

Future empirical research using structural equation modeling and longitudinal designs is necessary to confirm this mediating relationship in diverse college populations. Nonetheless, theoretical integration strongly indicates that reducing thought suppression and promoting adaptive emotion regulation may serve as protective factors against academic burnout.

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