



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Emotional dysregulation is part of ADHD. See how psychologists are helping

By understanding the science of ADHD and emotion dysregulation, psychologists can offer better support

By Kirsten Weir Date created: April 1, 2024
Vol. 55 No. 3

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/04/adhd-managing-emotion-dysregulation>





More and more teenagers and adults are turning to social media to share their experiences living with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Amid that flurry of digital content, one regular theme is the idea that people with ADHD feel emotions more intensely than others. Those big feelings, it turns out, are not just a TikTok phenomenon.

“In the last 15 years or so, we’ve come to realize that emotion dysregulation is a key component of ADHD,” said Paul Rosen, PhD, a clinical psychologist and ADHD researcher at Norton Children’s Behavioral and Mental Health, affiliated with the University of Louisville School of Medicine. ADHD is diagnosed as one of three subtypes: primarily hyperactive/impulsive, primarily inattentive, and a combined type. Research suggests that emotion dysregulation is present in all three subtypes, though people with the combined type appear to be at the greatest risk for emotional symptoms (Hirsch, O., et al., *Scientific Reports*, Vol. 9, No. 5639, 2019). “Not all people with ADHD have [emotional] difficulty, but it’s very common,” Rosen added.

There is increasing recognition of the emotional difficulties that often go along with an ADHD diagnosis, in both adults and children. In Europe, an updated 2019 consensus statement published by the European Psychiatric Association listed emotion dysregulation as one of six fundamental features of ADHD in adults (Kooij, J. J. S., et al., *European Psychiatry*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2019). In the United States, however, ADHD is still defined by its keystone features of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Although the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Fifth Edition) lists emotion

dysregulation as an “associated feature” that supports an ADHD diagnosis, the emotional symptoms still are not always appreciated by clinicians or researchers, said Sarah Karalunas, PhD, a professor of psychology at Purdue University. “There’s growing awareness of emotional dysregulation, but it’s still often overlooked,” she said.

Yet emotion dysregulation can lead to troubling consequences for people with ADHD. During the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, researchers reported an increase in average rates of depression, anxiety, inattention, and defiant symptoms among all adolescents. For most youth, those symptoms eased after lockdown orders were lifted. But youth with any subtype of ADHD who also had poor emotion regulation continued to experience significant negative mental health symptoms over time (Breux, R., et al., *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 62, No. 9, 2021).

“Emotion dysregulation in ADHD has a broad impact across a lot of areas of life,” said Elizabeth Bodalski, a fifth-year doctoral student in clinical community psychology at the University of South Carolina who studies emotion regulation difficulties associated with ADHD. She has found emotional difficulties help explain the presence of depressive symptoms and relationship impairments in adults with ADHD, and may also contribute to anxiety, poor friendship quality, and greater functional impairments overall (Bodalski, E.A., et al., *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2019).

Nearly 1 in 10 children in the United States has been diagnosed with ADHD, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Just knowing that the disorder can bring intense emotional challenges can be a relief to people who have been struggling with outsize emotions for a long time. By understanding the science of ADHD and emotion dysregulation, psychologists can better support both children and adults living with the disorder.

Bigger feelings

In adults, emotion dysregulation is correlated with the severity of other ADHD symptoms (Beheshti, A., et al., *BMC Psychiatry*, Vol. 20, No. 120, 2020). Yet prevalence estimates vary widely. One analysis of several studies concluded that 30% to 70% of adults with ADHD, and 25% to 45% of children with the

disorder, have significant emotion dysregulation (Shaw, P., et al., *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 171, No. 3, 2014). Even more might experience emotional difficulties that do not rise to the level of clinically significant dysregulation. “We consistently see that about 25% of kids with ADHD have normative emotional expression, while the remaining 75% have some type of emotion dysregulation,” said Karalunas, who is following children with ADHD and emotion dysregulation in longitudinal studies.

That dysregulation can look different from person to person. Karalunas’s work suggests there are two common presentations in children with ADHD. Kids in an “irritable” subtype have higher levels of anger, sadness, and fear. Those in the “surgent” subtype display a kind of emotional impulsivity and overexuberance (*Psychological Assessment*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2019). While children with combined ADHD are unsurprisingly more likely than those with inattentive ADHD to fall into the surgent group, all three subtypes are at increased risk of dysregulation, Karalunas said. “The irritable children have a short fuse. They get upset about small things, and take a long time to let it go,” she added. “Surgent children’s excitement can overwhelm their thinking and lead them to act without thinking about the consequences.”

Those categories track with Rosen’s clinical observations of children with ADHD. The emotionally impulsive children react very strongly to both positive and negative events. “Their emotions are turned up to 11. It’s either the greatest day of their life or the worst day of their life,” he said. “But typically, those emotions are not very long-lasting and don’t necessarily have significant impacts on their well-being.” Kids in the irritable group seem to experience longer-lasting reactions to minor setbacks. They appear to be more seriously dysregulated, Rosen added, and may be at the greatest risk for mental health problems like anxiety and depression.

Some of the risk of emotion dysregulation seems to be related to the underlying neurobiology of ADHD. “We know the brain networks that regulate things like attention, behavior, and impulse control are affected in kids with ADHD. Those networks probably play a role in emotion regulation as well,” Karalunas said.

Yet research suggests that is just one of the processes underlying emotional difficulties in children with ADHD. Such kids do experience deficits in regulatory control of their emotions, according to a meta-analysis of cognitive

functioning studies. But they may have even greater weaknesses in emotional reactivity, the analysis showed. Contrary to the more top-down process of emotion regulation, emotional reactivity is a more bottom-up process that drives when you feel an emotional response to a stimulus, the intensity of that response, and how long the feeling lasts. In other words, kids with ADHD may indeed feel bigger feelings than their peers (Graziano, P. A., & Garcia, A., *Clinical Psychology Review*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2016).

Neurobiology probably is not the only factor at play. Some of the emotional difficulties may be learned responses to living with ADHD in a world designed for neurotypical brains. For instance, many people with ADHD report having difficulty receiving negative feedback—a phenomenon sometimes called rejection sensitivity, or rejection-sensitive dysphoria. Rejection sensitivity is less well studied than other types of emotion dysregulation, but it is easy to imagine how it might develop. As a natural consequence of both hyperactive and inattentive behavior, kids with ADHD get a lot of negative attention from parents and teachers, Rosen noted. They are also more likely to face rejection from peers, perhaps because of habits like interrupting, making impulsive comments, or being lost in their own worlds. “When kids get all that negative attention, they respond with negative emotions, and it becomes a feedback loop,” Rosen said. “These are kids who are sensitive to criticism and things going badly because they get a lot of criticism and experience a lot of things going badly.”

Emotion dysregulation treatments

The good news is that these emotional difficulties are treatable. Many people with ADHD take stimulant medications to control inattention and hyperactivity, though stimulants’ role in treating emotional symptoms is less clear. Research has found that methylphenidate, used in brand-name medications such as Ritalin and Concerta, reduces emotional symptoms in adults with ADHD (Surman, C. B. H., et al., *Journal of Attention Disorders*, Vol. 26, No. 14, 2022). Research suggests that methylphenidate can also reduce the risk of irritability, anxiety, and euphoria in children with ADHD. By contrast, amphetamines such as the commonly prescribed Adderall worsened the risk of emotional lability in children (Pozzi, M., et al., *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Vol. 238, No. 4, 2018).

However, research shows that ADHD medication regimens are not well followed by patients. According to a recent study in which researchers analyzed the prescription data of more than 1.2 million patients who started ADHD medication in nine countries, including the United States, more than half of all teenagers, young adults, and adults who received ADHD medication had stopped taking it within the first year. At the 5-year follow-up, only 50% to 60% of children and 30% to 40% of adolescents and adults had continued taking their medication (Brikell, I., et al., *The Lancet Psychiatry*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2024).

“While there may be some benefit from medication, there is definitely room for improvement,” Bodalski said. “That’s where behavioral interventions could be really helpful.” In a review of factors associated with emotion dysregulation, she and her colleagues found that adults with ADHD were more likely to use maladaptive strategies such as suppressing or avoiding their emotions, and less apt to use adaptive strategies like reappraising the situation (*Journal of Attention Disorders*, Vol. 27, No. 13, 2023). That suggests there is room to help people learn better ways to cope with their feelings, Bodalski said.

Existing behavioral treatments for ADHD can be beneficial. A meta-analysis of nondrug interventions suggested that cognitive behavioral therapy, social skills training, and parent training programs can ease emotional symptoms in children with ADHD (Guo, C., et al., *Journal of Attention Disorders*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2022). While such therapies may be helpful, interventions that specifically address emotion dysregulation could go even further, Rosen said. He developed the Managing Frustration for Children with ADHD intervention to meet that need. The therapist-led program includes 11 weekly group sessions for children, plus one session for parents.

The program starts with teaching kids to understand what they are feeling. “Kids with ADHD often have difficulty recognizing their own emotions. Partly that’s because their emotions can be so strong that they don’t recognize more mild emotions. Also, they often avoid their emotions, because they’ve learned that emotions lead to bad things,” Rosen said. During the intervention, children also work on considering consequences, reframing situations, developing healthy coping skills, and avoiding cognitive pitfalls that often go along with strong emotions, such as blaming others, exaggerating, or assuming the worst.

In an open trial with 44 9- to 11-year-olds, Rosen and colleagues found that kids who completed the program experienced significant reductions in internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, and emotion-regulation difficulties (*Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2019). He will share the intervention with any clinician interested in helping children and families struggling with the challenges of ADHD, he said. “A lot of these children feel like they’re really bad kids. It’s important to help them learn to work with their emotions instead of against them and to help parents learn how to help their kids.”

Meanwhile, Rosen said, ADHD is still underdiagnosed and undertreated—and its emotional symptoms are even less likely to be managed appropriately. While awareness of emotion dysregulation in ADHD is growing, there is far more work to be done. “Many clinicians were trained to consider comorbid diagnoses like depression or anxiety when people have problems regulating emotion, rather than thinking of them as part of ADHD. As a result, it’s often overlooked,” Karalunas said. By recognizing the challenges faced by people with ADHD, clinicians can guide them toward effective solutions, she added. “The environment is often challenging for these kids. They do sometimes have to work harder to fit in, but they can learn strategies to feel more in control.”

ADHD and emotion dysregulation: 5 takeaways

1. Emotion dysregulation is a common, though not universal, feature of ADHD in both children and adults. Emotional difficulties are seen in inattentive, hyperactive/impulsive, and combined subtypes of ADHD, and may lead to negative outcomes such as relationship impairments, poor friendship quality, risk of depression and anxiety, and greater functional impairments.
2. In people with ADHD, emotion dysregulation can present as irritability, having a short fuse, or being easily overexcited. Some people with ADHD may experience rejection sensitivity, in which they are particularly sensitive to criticism or perceived rejection.
3. Emotion dysregulation in ADHD is linked to multiple processes in the brain: “bottom-up” emotional reactivity, which can be thought of as the

threshold, intensity, and duration of an emotional response, and the “top-down” regulatory control of those emotional responses.

4. Stimulants may help control emotional symptoms in ADHD, though some evidence suggests amphetamines such as Adderall could increase emotional lability.
5. Cognitive behavioral therapy, social skills training, and parent training programs can improve emotional symptoms in children with ADHD. Behavioral interventions that specifically target emotional symptoms show promise, but more work is needed to develop and disseminate them.
- 6.

Further reading

Evidence of emotion dysregulation as a core symptom of adult ADHD: A systematic review

Soler-Gutiérrez, A.-M., et al., *PLOS ONE*, 2023

A scoping review of factors associated with emotional dysregulation in adults with ADHD

Bodalski, E. A., et al., *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 2023

Efficacy of psychosocial interventions for children with ADHD and emotion dysregulation: A systematic review

Vacher, C., et al., *Psychiatry Research*, 2020

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and children’s emotion dysregulation: A meta-analysis

Graziano, P. A., & Garcia, A., *Clinical Psychology Review*, 2016

Recommended Reading



Too Many Toucans



What to Do When You Worry Too Much

.....

<https://add.org/emotional-dysregulation-adhd/>





ADHD Emotional Dysregulation: Managing Intense Emotions

• JANUARY 29, 2024

Imagine if traffic lights skipped yellow and went straight from green to red without warning – driving under these conditions would be very stressful.

If you have ADHD, handling your emotions might feel a bit like this. You may be calm and happy one moment. Then, without any warning, a small trigger can flip your emotions from “green” to “red.”

Dealing with these unpredictable emotions is challenging, but they don’t make you a bad person. Understanding this will help you be more compassionate and patient with yourself.

Of course, it's still important to take responsibility for your actions and identify your [ADHD triggers](#). This is the key to healthier relationships and better mental wellbeing.

You can try the strategies below to regain control over your emotions. The techniques in this article can help you navigate complicated feelings and act in the best interest of yourself and those you love.

What Is Emotional Dysregulation in ADHD?

Emotional dysregulation refers to difficulty in controlling and regulating emotions. [ADHD triggers](#) can be internal or external and may lead to intense or unpredictable emotions that seem blown out of proportion and even snowball into a complete [meltdown](#).

Having emotions is healthy and normal. However, people with ADHD may struggle to know how to react to their feelings.

According to research, emotional dysregulation is more often observed in people with ADHD than those without it. Researchers suggest that ADHD is the mental health disorder with the strongest link to it.^[1]

Examples of Emotional Dysregulation

If you have ADHD, your emotions might feel like they're all or nothing.

You might try [masking your ADHD](#) and holding back your feelings to fit in and steer clear of conflict. But when you do let yourself feel, even small things can trigger overwhelming emotions.

Here are some examples of what emotional dysregulation in ADHD might look like:

- Experiencing intense emotions, like anger outbursts or high anxiety
- Crying in response to a variety of feelings, even happiness
- Struggling to take your focus away from your emotions
- Having feelings that seem blown out of proportion
- Having mood swings and unpredictable emotions
- Having a low tolerance for frustrating situations
- Being unaware of the feelings of other people
- Difficulty soothing and calming yourself
- Focusing mainly on the negative
- Becoming overly excited

These symptoms often appear early on in childhood. They also usually persist into adulthood.^[2] Some research even suggests that challenges in regulating emotions affect around 34-70% of [adults with ADHD](#).^[3]



What Causes Emotional Dysregulation in ADHD?

Having ADHD can make it harder to regulate emotions. That's because the function and structure of the [ADHD brain](#) are different from a non-ADHD one.

In general, there are two main reasons why ADHD is often linked to intense feelings.

Firstly, the amygdala of the ADHD brain is thought to function differently. The amygdala is a small, almond-shaped structure inside your brain. It plays a role in regulating emotions like fear, anxiety, aggression, and anger.^[4]

Research suggests differences in the size and activation of the amygdala in the ADHD brain.^[5] As a result, you might experience stronger emotions and struggle to control impulses.

The second reason is a change in function of another part called the **frontal cortex**. This region plays a crucial role in interpreting, expressing, and regulating emotions. It also helps you sort through different reactions before you act on them.^[6] This part of the brain allows you to decide what you should and shouldn't say or do.

Researchers have also found that there's a decreased activation of the frontal cortex in the ADHD brain. It's less likely to inhibit big reactions like it's supposed to. So it can be difficult to respond to your feelings in a way that helps you achieve your goals.^[7]

To sum it up, the amygdala and frontal cortex of the ADHD brain function differently, causing many ADHDers to experience intense feelings. They may also struggle to control their responses and can react strongly.



How Can Emotional Dysregulation Impact Your Life?

Emotional dysregulation can affect different areas of your life.

The following are some possible impacts of emotional dysregulation:

- **Workplace difficulties:** The stress of meeting deadlines can be hard to deal with. Minor hiccups and inconveniences might lead to overwhelming anxiety or fear. Additionally, it can be tricky to build healthy relationships with colleagues and peers.
- **Study problems:** Emotional dysregulation can make concentrating, learning, and being productive harder due to intense stress. Having outbursts or displaying over-the-top emotions also makes it harder to form friendships with classmates, leading to isolation.
- **Relationship conflicts:** If you struggle to regulate your emotions, you may have more conflicts with family, friends, and romantic partners. You may often ruminate on these issues rather than focus on finding solutions. Minor disagreements or triggers may also become full-blown arguments, leading to hurt feelings and misunderstandings.
- **Mental health struggles:** It can be more difficult to deal with sadness, anger, and frustration. This may contribute to or worsen other mental health conditions. As an example, research suggests that depression and emotional dysregulation are closely linked.^[8]
- **A tendency for risky behaviors:** Research shows that people with trouble regulating emotions are more likely to participate in risky behaviors. These include substance misuse and dangerous driving practices.

Some people with ADHD may be unaware that the hurdles they face are due to emotional dysregulation. So, you can start by figuring out which challenges you're struggling with may be due to this.

Do you find it hard to resolve [conflicts with your partner](#)? Perhaps you lash out when your stress levels get too high. Maybe your frustration and fears often lead to [ADHD paralysis](#).

Once you've pinpointed which challenges are linked to it, you can apply the strategies below in these areas to manage your feelings better.



How to Deal With Emotional Dysregulation

You can't completely change the way your brain functions.

But there are steps you can take that work in favor of how your brain is naturally wired – not against it.

Step 1: Pause and Breathe

When you get caught in a bad situation, pause for a few seconds. Try to stop yourself from reacting right away. If you need to walk away, go ahead. Use some [ADHD calming techniques](#) to find your balance. As you wait, slow your breathing. You can practice “7-11 breathing:”

- Breathe in for the count of 7
- Hold for 7
- Breathe out for 11
- Continue until you can think calmly again

Step 2: Acknowledge Your Feelings

Having ADHD doesn't mean your emotions shouldn't be acknowledged. Your feelings are real and valid – what might not be an issue for others may be a big deal for you, and that's okay.

Remind yourself that your big emotions are all part of being human. Accepting them as they are gives you space to think and process them properly.

At the same time, you don't have to indulge or act upon them.

Do something that helps you calm down, like reading or taking a hot shower. You can also direct your emotions elsewhere. Try writing them down in a journal or diary; it might help you make sense of them.

Step 3: Reframe Your Self-Talk

When you can think calmly again, consider what you're telling yourself. Is there any other possibility or alternative to the "story" in your head?

What was said or done may have a different meaning than you think. The situation may not be as bad as it seems, and positive solutions exist.

Thinking things are worse than they are fuels your anger, frustration, or sadness. Reframing how you think can make those thoughts less powerful and help you see situations in a better light.



Step 4: Reflect and Learn Your Triggers

Whenever you experience intense emotions, reflect on why it happened. What caused you to feel that way?

You can list out possible triggers in a diary or journal. Knowing your triggers can help you avoid or minimize them in the future.

Though, certain triggers are non-avoidable. Like getting anxious before a work meeting or stressing out as the due date for an important project nears.

In these cases, you can prepare yourself emotionally beforehand. Try giving yourself additional prep time for a meeting to journal, cry, or use another way to express what you're feeling. That way, you're less likely to have an emotional outburst at inconvenient times, like during the meeting.

When your triggers don't have any advanced warning, like a family member crossing your boundaries unknowingly, take a moment. Then,

when you're calm, think about what you can productively do to prevent it from happening again.

Bonus Method 1: Try the R.A.I.N Method

You can use this method as a meditation and mindfulness practice or when you feel overwhelmed. It goes like this:

- **Recognize what's happening.** Recognize the thoughts and emotions that you're feeling. Name and label them – “anger,” “disappointment,” or “stress.”
- **Allow thoughts and feelings to exist.** Allow your thoughts and emotions to be present without suppressing or dismissing them. You don't have to enjoy all your feelings, and you don't have to act on them.
- **Investigate with care.** Dig deeper with curiosity. Ask yourself why you're feeling this way, how it started, and how you can manage it. These questions shouldn't be self-judgemental. Instead, you're collecting data about your emotions to understand yourself better.
- **Non-identification.** When you experience intense feelings, you might feel like you are those feelings. Try to detach your identity from your emotions and let yourself experience them without allowing them to control you.

This mindfulness technique helps you understand your emotions better without letting them define you as a person.



Bonus Method 2: Practice the F.O.U.L Method

This technique can help you manage your feelings when dealing with difficult situations or people. It works as follows:

- **Fact-Check.** Step back and try to differentiate between facts and assumptions. Sometimes, facts may fuel your emotions, like in times of danger when you need to react quickly. At others, assumptions might be pushing you to act rashly.
- **Opposite Urge.** If your emotions are based on assumptions, carrying out the opposite action may be helpful. If you feel like someone is criticizing you, instead of responding with a snarky comment, ask them to explain instead.
- **Leave.** When your anger, frustration, or annoyance gets too high, remove yourself from the situation. Just walk away and allow yourself to calm down.

This practical method can make taking the best course of action easier when your judgment seems clouded by emotions.

Support for ADHD and Emotional Dysregulation

You don't have to struggle with ADHD or emotional dysregulation alone. Various [ADHD therapies](#) can help.

One example is dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). This therapy teaches you how emotions work and helps you learn skills to manage your feelings instead of being controlled by them.

You can also seek help from others who know what you're going through. [ADDA+](#) is a resource hub that gives you access to a community of supportive ADHDers who have experienced a similar journey to yours.

•