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Repertoires of emotion regulation in young people accessing youth drug treatment in Australia

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Background: Individuals accessing services within the youth drug treatment sector represent a highly vulnerable population who present with complex patterns of substance use and mental health comorbidity. Deficits in emotion regulation (ER) have been identified as a core construct underlying both of these difficulties and represent a promising treatment target. However, ER is a broad construct, and little is known about the strategies in which young people are most likely to utilize to regulate their emotions, and what impact this has on their mental health and substance use.

Aim: The aim of this study was to examine the repertoires of ER strategies engaged in by highly vulnerable young people and their relationship to psychological symptoms in order to inform the development of effective psychological interventions for this cohort.

Method: Participants were young people (N=306, M=20.8 years) accessing youth mental health and drug treatment services in Victoria, Australia. They were assisted by members of the research team to complete an online survey which asked about their use of 14 ER strategies in response to a recalled emotionally-arousing event as well as symptoms of anxiety, depression, substance, eating and borderline personality disorders.

Results: Latent class analysis (LCA) was used and identified three distinct ER repertoires of ER strategies: maladaptive regulators (n=76) characterized by heightened engagement in rumination and avoidance, high regulators (n=81) characterized by increased use of adaptive strategies and moderate use of maladaptive and low regulators (n=129) characterized by low use of maladaptive and moderate use of adaptive. Overall, maladaptive regulators endorsed higher levels of symptoms across all domains of psychopathology, relative to high and low regulators.

Conclusions: Our findings identify the distinct patterns of ER responding in this population of young people, and the central role that rumination and avoidance have across all forms of psychopathology. Implications of the findings for the development of treatments that target ER in this cohort are discussed.

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