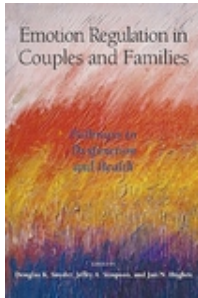


## Getting in Charge of Emotions: Troubles and Triumphs

A review of



**Emotion Regulation in Couples and Families: Pathways to Dysfunction and Health**  
by Douglas K. Snyder, Jeffrey A. Simpson, and Jan N. Hughes (Eds.)

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006. 332 pp. ISBN 1-59147-394-2.  
\$59.95

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Reviewed by

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☰ Many family crises and grave crimes occur in society when stresses and feelings (e.g., anger, disappointment, rage, and jealousy) are extreme and children or adults act on these emotions without regulating the nature and strength of their response. Emotional dysregulation can lead to horrendous acts that result in severe legal consequences. Of critical importance for the family is that parents guide children to become aware of, and to regulate effectively, the expression of their positive and negative emotions. Yet in many families, “emotional talk” is rare. Members may talk about sports practice schedules, homework assignments, assigned chores, TV shows, foods, and other such topics, but may lack understanding of the importance of talking about strong emotions, how to express them safely and acceptably, and what to do when feeling overwhelmed by them.

☰ Schools very rarely address the issue of teaching emotional awareness and regulation. Yet schools deal daily with the effects of such lacks. Bullying is endemic in many schools and can lead to traumatized children and to teacher burnout (Garbarino & DeLara, 2002).

☰ *Emotional Regulation in Couples and Families: Pathways to Dysfunction and Health*, edited by Douglas K. Snyder, Jeffrey A. Simpson, and Jan N. Hughes, provides thoughtful and sophisticated expositions of conceptual issues and theories, research, and clinical work focused on *emotional regulation*, conceptualized as involving “the initiation, maintenance, and expression of positive emotions as well as the avoidance, minimization, and masking of negative ones” (p. 5). The contributors to this volume clarify how specific parenting relationships and repetitive patterns of family interactions impact children’s abilities to manage strong emotions in personally and socially effective ways. It is gratifying that despite the disparate domains in which some of the contributors work, at the end of each chapter, each of the contributors suggests future directions for research and policy implications of their work.

☰ In the first chapter, Gross, Richards, and John discuss specific strategies—“the attempts individuals make to influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how these emotions are experienced and expressed” (p. 14). Their research technique required participants “to think of a time in the past week or two when you tried to alter your emotions” (p. 20). Responses revealed no gender or ethnicity differences but a greater tendency to regulate negative compared with positive emotions. Asian Americans seemed to be better able to regulate positive emotions (such as amusement or pride) compared with other ethnic groups.

☰ In their process model, they distinguish between antecedent-focused and response-focused emotional regulation strategies. For the former, the goal is cognitive reevaluation of the situation to alter the emotion felt (e.g., mom wasn’t being mean when she yelled, she was just scared I had swum too far out in the water). In the latter case, the individual tries strategies to manage the strong emotions,

such as responding with even voice tones when severely criticized by a spouse, even though feeling angry.

☰ In the second chapter, Grewal, Brackett, and Salovey note the impressive range of techniques persons use to manage their emotions, from “listening to music to drinking caffeinated beverages to withdrawing from social interaction” (p. 41), and note that some researchers cluster strategies into four categories: “avoidance, distraction, confrontation, and acceptance” (p. 41). To assess the difference between knowing about emotional regulation strategies and the ability to apply these judiciously in real-life situations, they propose use of the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test. This emotional intelligence test assesses ability to perceive, use, understand, and manage emotions. Recognizing the subtleties of these abilities, the authors note that some individuals may successfully manage particular emotions, such as anger, yet become unraveled by strong feelings of guilt or sadness.

### Attachment and Emotional Regulation

☰ Several chapters address issues of the relationship between emotional regulation abilities and attachment. Chapter 3, “Adult Attachment Theory and Affective Reactivity and Regulation,” presents a fine and clearly described overview of the main tenets of Bowlby's theory of the importance of close, enduring bonds between infants and caregivers. Secure emotional attachment permits an infant to seek out an attachment figure for solace when stressed. Bowlby taught that these early interactions lead to unconscious mental representations (internal working models) about whether attachment figures will or will not be available and responsive. Research in this chapter examined men and women's attachments and cardiovascular reactivity to tease out differential patterns in male and female adult romantic partners.

☰ A chapter is included that addresses how early attachment patterns influence emotional responses when a person undergoes trauma. In response to trauma, patients with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) usually re-experience the traumatic event mentally and experience shock, numbness, nightmares, and hyper-arousal. Attachment security, as gained in the earliest years, should provide protection against posttraumatic stress disorder. The data presented reflect a strong relationship between avoidant-insecure attachment styles and more severe PTSD responses, including higher somatization and hostility in Gulf War veterans. In-depth analyses of the relationship between severity of war-related emotional symptoms and types of insecure attachment in Israel and in the United States are provided in this chapter. The emphasis is on the importance of positive nurturing social bonds to decrease war- and terrorism-related emotional suffering.

☰ In Chapter 5, Arsenio explores the puzzling phenomenon of young children who display gleeful emotions during aggressive interactions. The author speculates that when mothers do not show contingent responsiveness to young children's needs, this weakens the insecurely attached child's understanding of a victim's emotions. The aggressive child fails to empathize with a peer's distress. The author notes that the condition of being empathically unaware “is associated with reactive aggression,” whereas the behavior of the child who is empathically unconcerned “is linked to proactive aggression” (p.113). Children who are reactively aggressive misperceive hostile intentions in peers. These subtle distinctions lead the author to propose anger management and other social-cognitive interventions that attempt to “alter underlying deficits in their social reasoning” (p. 117).

### Parents as Socializers of Child Emotions

☰ Several of the authors directly address the role of parents as helpers so that children can learn to recognize, monitor, evaluate, and modify their own emotions in the face of emotionally arousing situations and interactions. Valiente and Eisenberg discuss four ways in which parents socialize their child's emotions: through reactions to the child's emotions, through discussion of emotions, through parental expressions of emotions, and through their modification of situations. They discuss research that reveals “children who are viewed as well regulated typically are low in externalizing problems and internalizing problems and high in social competence, prosocial behaviors, compliance, and sympathetic responses” (p. 129). Citing cross-cultural data, they report that “children high in effortful control are able to avoid becoming overaroused when exposed to intense negative (or positive) emotion, and they are able to learn from these experiences” (p. 136).

☞ The authors suggest the importance of parent education. It is important to note, however, that unfortunately nationally there is a paucity of parent education programs that can educate families on how to avoid overcontrol and how to model judicious restraint and appropriate emotional responses to family stress situations, such as when a preschooler has a messy toileting accident, a toddler throws food across the room, or a teenager defies a parent's curfew request with sarcasm. Fortunately, there are books describing research programs and also resources specifying positive discipline techniques that parents can use with infants, toddlers, and very young children that the authors could have helpfully added as an appendix to their chapter (Honig, 1996; Honig & Wittmer, 1992, 1996; Shure, 1994). There are also excellent resources to assist teachers in creating more prosocial classrooms and specific resources with emphasis on positive emotional regulation (Crary, 2002; Kobak, 1979; Kreidler, 1984).

☞ Parke and colleagues particularly emphasize findings that parental controlling emotional displays (rather than accepting and exploring emotions and emotional coaching) is consistently linked with poorer child emotional regulation: "When fathers adopted a negative controlling style, children were more likely to use avoidance as a mechanism for managing negative affect" (p. 156).

### Marital Discord and Child Emotional Regulation

☞ Cummings and Keller build a case, based on research using diary reports as well as videotaped vignettes, that destructive marital conflict has long-term negative outcomes on children's social, emotional, and behavioral problems:

When disagreements are perceived as threatening, children may react with fear, anger, or sadness... . Emotionally insecure children may perceive even positive interactions between their parents as threatening, believe that conflict between their parents is unlikely to be resolved and may lead to divorce, expect parents who are angry at each other to take it out on the children, or view themselves as partially entirely responsible for the discord. (pp. 164-165)

The authors are astute in recognizing that insecurities not only create maladaptive emotional response patterns but also take away from children their ability to attend to developmentally appropriate activities, such as schoolwork. As a clinician working with parents in custody battles, I have observed this deficit in children's attentiveness to life tasks, as well as the increased anxiety and depression that overwhelm some children in the face of severe marital disharmony.

☞ The authors remark that children become more reactive to conflict as it goes on, following the sensitization hypothesis. These researches note that Bandura's modeling theory does not fit their data. Rather, they suggest that children do not try to copy the parental aggressive acts but will try to act so that they reduce the threat posed by parental conflict.

### Emotional Risks, Emotional Coping

☞ Other chapters in the volume deal with risk-taking behaviors, such as drinking and unprotected sex among adolescents. High impulsivity and high levels of negative emotions predicted higher levels of risk taking behaviors among 14-year-olds in research reported in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 focuses on management of disease-related pain through partner-assisted coping skills. Clinical descriptions are provided for the behavioral rehearsal method used to train a partner through role playing to be able to provide such assistance.

### Couple Conflicts

☞ Chapter 11 turns the spotlight on the physiological effects of lack of emotional closeness. Loneliness has been linked to heart disease. The emotion-focused couples therapy proposed in this chapter views the therapist as an emotion coach. The authors explain that to avoid feeling primary shame when there are threats to one's identity or status, people respond with anger, here considered as a "secondary protective or assertive emotional response that both regulates and obscures the vulnerable emotional response to identity threats" (p. 235). The therapist helps the client recognize and express underlying emotions, such as "sadness in relation to loss, anger in response to violation, and fear in response to threat" (p. 235), to engender more empathic and compassionate responses in the partner. This chapter emphasizes concerns with both overregulation of emotions (in highly constricted persons) and underregulation of emotions.

The primary goal of the therapist is to free partners to reflect, share, and integrate their emotions and to develop new narratives for their lives. Revealing hurt and expressing pain are the first steps toward resolution of emotional anguish.

Chapter 12 provides further insights into interventions with couples to treat emotional dysregulation. Specific details on vulnerability to negative emotions include poor awareness of emotions and difficulty in tolerating emotions such as guilt or disappointment so that persons rather “escape” into anger. Clinicians will find the detailed examination of emotional dysregulation dissected, as it were by Fruzzetti and Iverson, to provide clinically precious insights into the emotional dysregulation of some of their clients.

### Family Routines

Fiese describes research focused on family rituals, such as mealtimes. These routines can serve as a source of data for understanding how family members handle emotional regulation. For example, she reports that mealtime researchers have found that when families have meals together, there is “less cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use and fewer depressive symptoms” (p. 271). Fiese shows children pictures of organized and disorganized family kitchen scenes. Children's comments reveal that they perceive that orderliness is associated with predictability in social relationships in the family. She distinguishes between routine practices and ritual meanings across a variety of family settings, such as dinnertime, vacations, special celebrations, religious holidays, and cultural events. Fiese suggests that clinicians can encourage family routines, such as sharing mealtimes more frequently to encourage more emotional family closeness and regulation.

The contributions of each of these chapters are excellent! The volume can be used in an upper level undergraduate or graduate course on emotional development as a rich resource to help students understand the complexities and subtle interconnections between and among family members that result in regulation or dysregulation of emotions. But this book is valuable not only as a teaching tool, it is also valuable for clinicians who work with vulnerable parents and who can use the data and insights from these researches and clinical findings to deepen their wisdom in helping clients move toward more awareness, acceptance, sharing, and empathy for each family member's emotional feelings.

The contributors show an admirable sensitivity to the complexity of family functioning. They make clear how much research requires attention to the dynamics of parent-child and couple functioning, rather than a focus only on individual behaviors. It is hoped that some researchers reading this book may become motivated to widen their interests toward application. In this way, they may become galvanized to create programs to assist youngsters, parents, and teachers to acquire insights and skills that further emotional self-regulation in homes and classrooms.

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**1554-0138**

November 1, 2006 Vol. 51 (44), Article 2

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