

COVID-19-Related Stress Mediates the Relationship Between Emotional Regulation Difficulties and Disordered Eating in Emerging Female Adults

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Introduction

- COVID-19 has introduced considerable routine disruptions and increased social isolation, imposing heightened concern for maladaptive eating behaviors (Rodgers et al., 2020).
- Psychological distress during COVID-19 has been associated with disordered eating (DE; Simone et al., 2021).
- Eating disorder patients' perceived pandemic impact has been associated with emotional regulation difficulties and DE behavior (Machado et al., 2020).
- Emotional regulation difficulties have been associated with maladaptive eating behaviors in both clinical (e.g., Ruscitti et al., 2016) and non-clinical samples (e.g., LaFrance-Robinson et al., 2014), particularly in adolescent and emerging adult females.

The Current Study

- Emotional regulation difficulties and maladaptive eating behaviors have not been explored in relation to COVID-19-related stress.
- Emerging adulthood may be a particularly sensitive period for the development of DE (e.g., Suisman et al., 2014).
- Therefore, the current study examines the role of COVID-19-related stress in the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and DE in emerging female adults.

Method

Participants

- Three-hundred and seventy-eight female undergraduate students ($M_{Age}=19.52$, $SD_{Age}=2.35$; White/European=29.7%; Asian/Asian American=15.0%; Hispanic=12.4%; Latino/Latinx=10.9%; Black/African American=5.6%; Multiracial=3.0%; Biracial=2.0%; Pacific Islander=1.8%; Alaska Native=1.5%; Other=1.0%).

Materials

- Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (Gratz et al., 2004; $\alpha=.97$)
- COVID Stress Scales (Taylor et al., 2020; $\alpha=.95$)
- Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire (English version; Wardle, 1986; $\alpha=.92$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables						
Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Difficulties in Emotion Regulation	371	84.96	23.79	–		
2. COVID-19-Related Stress	373	30.20	21.81	.225**	–	
3. Disordered Eating	363	2.80	.60	.326**	.183**	–

** $p < 0.001$.

Results

- Correlations were significant among the key variables (see Table 1).
- Mediation analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) was used to analyze the potential mediating role of COVID-19-related stress on the association between emotional regulation difficulties and DE.
- Results indicated COVID-19-related stress mediated the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and DE ($B=.008$, $SE=.001$, $p<.001$).

Discussion

- Current findings suggest COVID-19-related stress may play an important role in the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and DE in emerging female adults.
- These findings may inform targeted support for emerging female adults that encourages healthy eating behaviors during adverse global events.
- However, additional influences relating to COVID-19 and maladaptive eating behaviors should be assessed.
- These variables should also be explored in emerging male and gender non-conforming adults.