

## Relationship between Attachment Styles and Self-Esteem- As mediated by Emotion Regulation

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### ABSTRACT

**Background-** Strategies to regulate emotions play an important role in many areas of daily life such as the type of attachment style a person will develop and the trajectory of self-esteem that will be taken up later.

**Aim-** To find out the mediating effect of two strategies of emotion regulation, namely, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression in the relationship between different attachment styles (secure, ambivalent insecure, and avoidant insecure) and self-esteem.

**Method-** Data was collected from 184 participants, within the age range 18-30 years (Mean age=22.19 years) across Delhi using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Three tools were used in the present study, Emotion Regulation Questionnaire; Measure of Attachment Style; and Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale.

**Result-** The findings suggest that expressive suppression mediates the relationship between secure attachment style and self-esteem. Apart from this, no other mediating effect of any of the emotion regulation strategies was observed.

**Conclusion-** Emotion Regulation mediates the relationship between some styles of attachment and self-esteem while being insignificant in others.

**Keywords-** Emotion regulation, attachment styles, self-esteem, and young adults

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### INTRODUCTION

Late adolescence and early adulthood are marked with a lot of changes in a person's life. It is during this stage that a child steps out from the secured and controlled environment of his home and school and steps into a university as a debutante into the world. It is within these twelve years where he is full of energy and agility with a desire to explore the world and towards the later years, he is beginning to settle down into a more comfortable and less thrill-seeking life.

#### Emotion Regulation

According to Gross [1], emotion regulation is the process through which an individual influences the what, when, and how of emotion; it entails manipulation of the emotion he experiences, the time at which it is experienced, and how it is expressed.

#### Gross' Process Model of Emotion Regulation

The process model of emotion regulation classifies the strategies of emotion regulation based on the time at which an emotional response is exhibited [1-2]. The basic claim of this model is the time at which the response occurs and has an impact on the process of emotion generation. A broad classification of emotion regulation strategies is:

**Antecedent-focused strategies:** These strategies are employed before full activation of emotion response tendencies, i.e., antecedent strategies come before any behavioral or physiological response.

**Response-focused strategies:** These strategies are put to use after the emotional response tendency has occurred.

**Cognitive Reappraisal:** This is an antecedent-focused strategy and focuses on the impact and emotional meaning of an event that elicits emotion [3].

**Expressive Suppression:** As opposed to cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression is a response-focused strategy and involves inhibiting the expression of emotion [1]. Owing to its late arrival in the emotion-generative process, this strategy influences the outcome of emotion rather than an emotional experience.

### Attachment Styles

The patterns of attachment differ according to the response of the caregiver to the child's needs [4]. For the present research, the following three styles of attachment are measured:

**Secure attachment:** Operationally it is defined as "the amount of faith an individual has in the responsiveness of the attachment figure and their flexibility in shifting from attachment behavior to exploratory behavior".

**Ambivalent-insecure attachment:** Operationally, this dimension can be defined as "an individual's inability to depend on the attachment figure as a secure base and distress in the presence as well as absence of the attachment figure, they would seek intense proximity with the caregiver but at the same time would constantly fear abandonment".

**Avoidant-insecure attachment:** Operationally, avoidant-insecure attachment is defined as "an individual's inability to seek help from the attachment figure and discomfort in maintaining proximity with the caregiver and depend on them".

### Adult Attachment

Attachment plays an important function in providing a sense of safety and security and this function is carried throughout one's lifetime. Even in adult romantic relationships, attachment is important along with caregiving and sexual mating.

### Global Self Esteem

Self-esteem, according to is an individual's overall self-evaluation in a positive light. He said that a person is said to have high self-esteem when he respects himself and considers himself worthy [5]. Global self-esteem is an amalgamation of an individual's self-esteem in various other domains [6]. It is believed to be a cognitive union of the domain-specific judgments that an individual makes about his/her competence spread across a variety of areas [7-8]. It is relatively stable and endures across situations and time. To explain the formation of global self-esteem, some researchers adopt the cognitive path and say that it is a decision made by people about their worth as a person [9-10]. On the other hand, some argue that global self-esteem is a feeling of affection for self that has no relation to judgmental, rational processes [11].

## METHODOLOGY

### Problem Statement

Strategies of emotion regulation, namely, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression play a significant mediating role in the relationship between three styles of attachment-secure, ambivalent-insecure, and avoidant-insecure- and self-esteem.

### Research Question

Do emotion regulation strategies play a mediating role in the relationship between attachment styles and self-esteem?

### Hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been formulated according to operational perspective:

**H1:** Cognitive reappraisal mediates the relationship between secure attachment style and self-esteem.

**H2:** Expressive suppression mediates the relationship between secure attachment style and self-esteem.

**H3:** Cognitive reappraisal mediates the relationship between ambivalent insecure attachment style and self-esteem.

**H4:** Expressive Suppression mediates the relationship between ambivalent insecure attachment style and self-esteem.

**H5:** Cognitive reappraisal mediates the relationship between avoidant insecure attachment style and self-esteem.

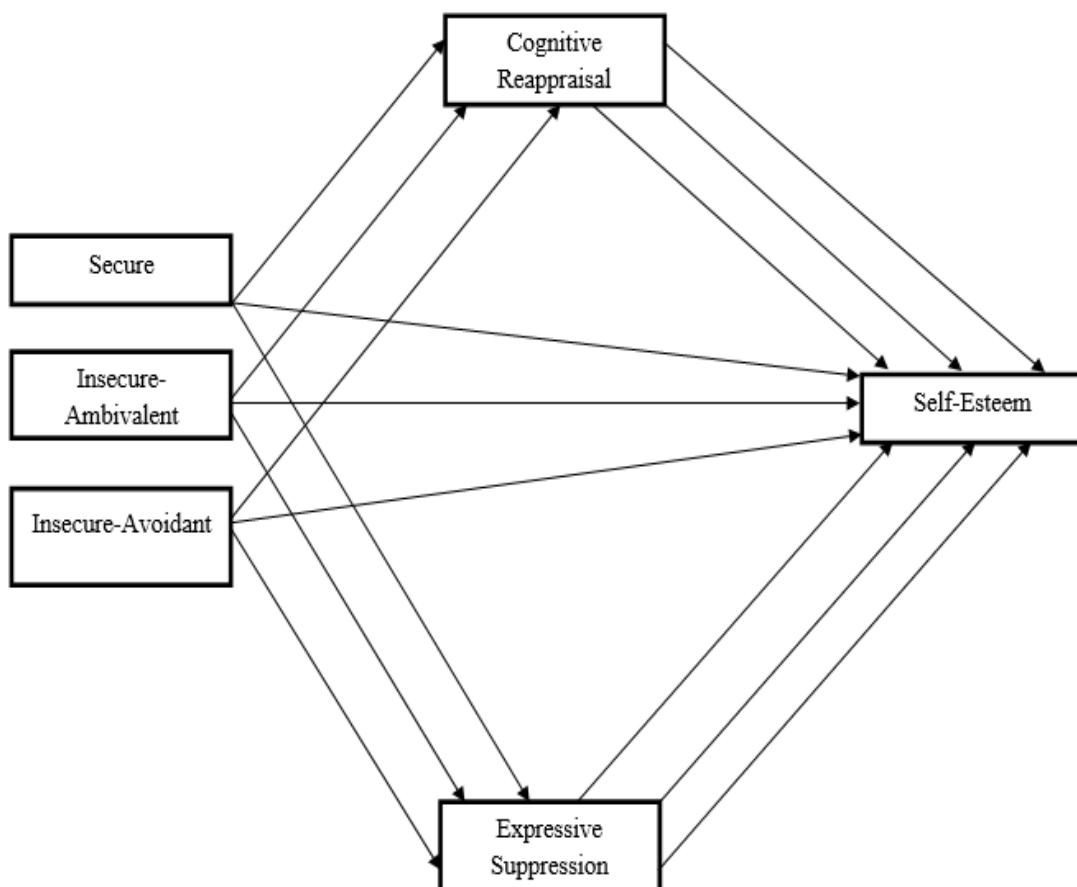
**H6:** Expressive Suppression mediates the relationship between avoidant insecure attachment style and self-esteem.

The above relationships that are hypothesized can be diagrammatically represented as:

#### The rationale of the study

During the period of lockdown, the researcher came across a lot of news revolving around increasing family conflicts and changes in the self-esteem of people around her, this motivated the researcher to undertake a study in this area, and emotion regulation was added when she observed that people have different reactions to the situation. Some of them were vocal about it while some claimed to have not been affected by this at all. Therefore, the researcher decided to investigate if the attachment styles that an individual develop and their self-esteem are related to each other and whether this relationship is mediated by emotion regulation.

The present research aimed to find out the mediating effect of emotion regulation (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) in the relationship between attachment styles (secure, ambivalent insecure, and avoidant insecure) and self-esteem.



**Figure 1:** Proposed model of Multi-mediation between antecedent and outcome. Fig. 1 is a representation of the proposed mediation model where it is hypothesized that the two strategies of emotion regulation-cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression-mediates the relationship between the categories of attachment styles-secure, insecure ambivalent, and insecure avoidant-and global self-esteem.

### Sample

Data was collected from 184 participants from different parts of Delhi through Purposive and Snowball Sampling Methods. Participants within 18-30 years (mean age-22.19years) living in Delhi for at least 10 years were included in the study. There were 65 males and 119 females, belonged to both, urban (197) and rural (37) areas and lived in joint (64) and nuclear (120) families.

### Tools

For this study, the following three questionnaires were utilized:

**Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ):** Emotion Regulation Questionnaire given by JJ Gross and OP John [12] is a scale that consists of 10 items. It is designed to measure the respondent's tendency of emotion regulation utilizing two strategies: Cognitive reappraisal and Expressive Suppression. Cronbach's alpha was calculated separately for the two sub-scales and was 0.65 for Cognitive Reappraisal and .67 for Expressive Suppression.

**Measure of Attachment Style (MOAS):** MOAS [13] was administered to the students of Aligarh and Delhi NCR. Cronbach alpha coefficients of the three sub-scales ranged between 0.80 to 0.81, which indicates a good Internal Consistency. The tool has good construct validity.

**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES):** Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [5] has 10 items and measures global self-worth. The items are answered on a 4-point Likert scale which ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.86.

### Procedure

The subjects were contacted on phones and at their homes. The researcher introduced herself and gave a brief description of the study. Then the subjects were asked if they were willing to participate in the research by filling in the questionnaire. They have ensured confidentiality and that their participation is completely voluntary, and the subjects are free to walk out any time they wish.

**Statistical Techniques Used:** SPSSv.20 was utilized for the analysis with an added macro-PROCESS v3.5.3<sup>14</sup>. Stem-and-Leaf Plot was used to identify the outliers in a data set and 18 outliers were identified and removed from the sheet, resulting in 184 responses.

The mediating effect of cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression on the relationship between attachment styles and self-esteem was estimated based on the Ordinary Least Squares Linear Regression model in PROCESS macro for SPSS [14]. It yielded a logistic regression path analysis of multiple parallel mediation effects model to estimate relative indirect and direct effects of the emotion regulation variables on the relationships between the antecedent, which is multi-categorical, attachment styles (secure, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant), and the continuous variable Self-esteem [15].

## RESULTS

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables**

Variable	n	M	SD						
Emotion Regulation									
Cognitive Reappraisal	184	30.52	6.75	-					
Expressive Suppression	184	17.80	5.31	0.194**	-				
Attachment Styles									
Secure	184	27.12	4.95	0.257**	-0.230*	-			
Insecure ambivalent	184	29.86	5.87	0.013	0.303**	-0.133	-		
Insecure avoidant	184	29.00	6.02	0.072	0.544**	-0.387**	0.251	-	
Self-esteem	184	15.03	2.16	0.068	0.119	0.010	0.233**	0.210**	-

*Note. \*\*. Correlation was significant at 0.01 level.*

To investigate "Do emotion regulation strategies play a mediating role in the relationship between attachment styles and self-esteem?" a simple mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS. The predictor variable was the different dimensions of attachment styles- secure, ambivalent insecure, and avoidant insecure and the outcome variable for this analysis was self-esteem. The relationship was mediated by two strategies of emotion regulation- cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.

According to table 1, strategies of emotion regulation were divided into two parts, cognitive reappraisal that had a maximum score of 42 and minimum was 10 ( $M=30.52, SD=6.75$ ), similarly, the maximum score of expressive suppression was 28, 6 was the minimum score ( $M= 0.52, SD=6.75$ ).

Attachment styles were divided into three categories- secure attachments, which had a minimum score of 14 and the maximum score was 39 ( $M=30.52, SD=6.75$ ); insecure ambivalent which had a minimum score of 15 and the maximum score was 42 ( $M=29.86, SD=5.87$ ); and insecure-avoidant which had a minimum score of 15 and the maximum score was 44 ( $M=29, SD=6.02$ ).

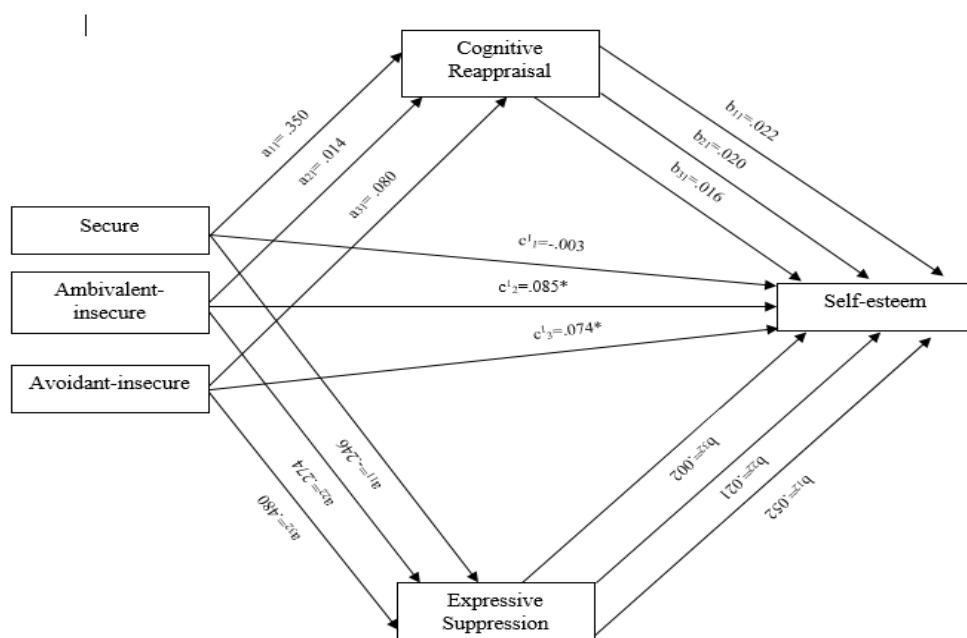
The maximum score of self-esteem was 21 and the minimum score was 10. Mean of self-esteem scores is  $M=15.03$  and  $SD=2.16$ .

According to table 1 it is clear that self-esteem is not significantly correlated with the attachment style secure ( $r(182)=.010, p=.89$ ). However, it was significantly correlated with the two other dimensions of attachment styles, ambivalent insecure ( $r(182)=.233, p=.001$ ) and avoidant insecure ( $r(182)=.210, p=.004$ ).

Apart from this, cognitive reappraisal strategy of emotion regulation was significantly correlated with secure attachment style ( $r(182)=.257, p<.01$ ). However, its correlation with ambivalent-insecure attachment style ( $r(182)=.013, p=.862$ ) and avoidant-insecure attachment ( $r(182)=.072, p=.332$ ) was not found to be significant. Cognitive reappraisal was not significantly correlated to self-esteem ( $r(182)=.068, p=.362$ ).

Second strategy of emotion regulation, expressive suppression had a negative significant correlation with secure attachment style ( $r(182)=-.230, p=.002$ ), significant positive correlation with ambivalent-insecure attachment style ( $r(182)=.303, p<0.01$ ) and a significant positive correlation with avoidant-insecure attachment style ( $r(182)=.544, p<.01$ ). Apart from this, expressive suppression did not have any significant correlation with self-esteem ( $r(182)=.119, p=.107$ ).

Therefore, the obtained correlations were sufficient for the researcher to run a mediation analysis according to Baron and Kenny [16].



**Figure 2:** Parallel multiple mediator model between multi-categorical antecedent and outcome

Figure 2 is a graphic representation of the obtained coefficients of the hypothesized model of parallel mediation. It represents the relationship between multi-categorical antecedent (attachment style-secure,

insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant) and global self-esteem as mediated by two mediators (Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression). Paths  $a_{11-31}$ ,  $b_{11-31}$ , and  $c'_{1-3}$  represent relative direct effects in terms of coefficients.

According to figure 2, mediation path analysis to test the proposed parallel mediation model revealed that the mediation effects of emotion regulation strategies-cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression- in the relationship between categories of attachment style-secure, insecure ambivalent, and insecure avoidant- and global self-esteem were largely non-significant.

However, expressive suppression played a significant mediating role in the relationship between secure attachment style and global self-esteem [ $a_{12} = -.246$ , 95% C.I. (-.036, -.000),  $p < 0.05$ ].

Apart from the indirect effects, when these parallel mediation models were controlled, there was no significant direct effect of secure attachment style on self-esteem [.003, 95% C.I. (-.069, .062),  $p > .05$ ]. A significant direct effect on global self-esteem by insecure ambivalent attachment style [.085, 95% C.I. (.033, .138),  $p < .05$ ] and insecure avoidant attachment style [.075, 95% C.I. (.022, .125),  $p < 0.05$ ] was observed.

## DISCUSSION

The primary aim of the study was to find out the parallel mediating effect of two strategies of emotion regulation, namely cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression in the relationship between different styles of attachment (secure, insecure ambivalent, and insecure avoidant) and global self-esteem.

According to the results, expressive suppression plays a mediating role in the relationship between secure attachment style and global self-esteem. Apart from this, no other mediating effect was observed in any of the variables and their sub-categories. Therefore, according to the obtained results, hypotheses H1, H3, H4, H5, and H6 have not been supported statistically and stand rejected. However, H2 has been supported statistically and is accepted.

Emotion regulation plays a dual role in the development of attachment styles [17]. First, an infant regulates his/her emotions according to their experience with the caregiver. If the caregiver is rejecting the needs of the infant, he develops a tendency to minimize the negative effect to avoid the risk of rejection further. On the other hand, an infant with an unavailable or inconsistently available caregiver will maximize negative effects to attract the attention of a caregiver who is not responsive or is available inconsistently. Both these strategies of regulating emotions ensure that the caregiver remains near the infant [17].

Second, it helps in maintaining the attachment relationship with the caregiver by giving them the signal that the infant will help in cooperating and maintaining the caregivers' state of mind concerning attachment. For example, an avoidant infant sends a signal that he will not seek caregiving by minimizing negative affect, thus, he will not interfere with the dismissal of attachment by the caregiver. On the contrary, a heightened negative emotionality helps an ambivalent infant in sending a signal that he needs the caregiver and therefore, facilitates attachment by maintaining that state of mind [17].

Regulation of emotion plays an important role in a variety of psychological phenomenon. It is known to mediate the relationship between different psychological phenomena ranging from anxiety, psychopathology, and different attachment styles.

A study aimed to examine the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationship between attachment orientation and psychological well-being, along with this, they also aimed to explore if emotion regulation strategies mediated this relationship [18]. Employing a dyadic approach to analyze data, the authors were able to estimate actor and partner effects simultaneously. According to the results, the attachment orientation of both, actor and the partner affect the emotion regulation and well-being of both the partners. The authors found that there was no significant relationship between attachment anxiety and emotion suppression or emotion expression. For both the genders, male and female, attachment avoidance was negatively associated with the self-report of the number of emotions shared with the romantic partner; it was, however, found to be positively correlated with the general tendency for emotion suppression. The attachment orientation of one partner had a relationship with the emotion regulation strategies of both the partners. As for the mediational role of emotion regulation, there was a negative association between attachment avoidance and psychological well-being through a general tendency for emotion suppression.

In a study conducted to examine the mediating role of emotion regulation strategies and psychological distress in the impact of insecure attachment styles on romantic relationship satisfaction, it was found that psychological distress impacted relationship satisfaction negatively and this was mediated by emotion regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression). When these findings were differentiated into different attachment styles, it was found that avoidant attachment style impacts relationship satisfaction, directly as well as indirectly. Cognitive reappraisal had a negative correlation with psychological distress and a positive correlation with relationship satisfaction. In the case of expressive suppression, the case was reciprocal, i.e., it was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction and a positive relationship with psychological distress. As opposed to this, anxiety attachment had an only indirect impact on relationship satisfaction. Anxiety to be positively correlated with the use of emotion regulation strategies, cognitive reappraisal, and expressive suppression as well as psychological distress. In individuals who had anxiety attachment, cognitive reappraisal was negatively correlated with psychological distress and positively with relationship satisfaction. Along with this, expressive suppression had a negative correlation with relationship satisfaction and a positive correlation with psychological distress [19].

Particularly, two strategies of emotion, namely, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression have been found to play a major role in the personality development of an individual and are related to specific personality traits which in turn, contribute to the attachment style a person develops. Self-esteem and emotion regulation go way back and are related to each other statistically with the former leading to changes in the latter.

Attachment styles develop as a result of the parent-child relationship and the experience an individual has with the primary caregiver. This forms the base for the future development of the child and the type of attachment he has in his romantic relationship. Along with attachment styles, strategies that are employed by an individual also significantly determine the quality of romantic relationships that they'll develop.

Self-esteem and attachment styles have been found to have a high correlation and this has been established by literature and secure attachment style is known to facilitate high self-esteem whereas an individual with insecure attachment is more likely to have lower self-esteem.

A study was conducted among adolescents (10-13 years) in Delhi, and it was found that adolescents who have higher self-esteem were more securely attached as compared to the ones who had fearful and preoccupied attachment styles. Along with this, it was also found that low levels of self-esteem in the areas of general, global, and home parents were associated with high loneliness levels [20].

Strategies of emotion regulation that are driven cognitively have been found to mediate the relationship between problems of emotional nature and attachment styles. Although the obtained results mostly contradict the theoretical framework on which the research question was based but they point out very crucial points such as –

First, the theory was based on the work of an American researcher and mainly followed the population in the west with little inclusion of the eastern or Asian population. Therefore, cultural differences play a role and might be indicative of the fact that western culture differs in a lot of ways from what is seen in the east as common trends. This cultural difference can be used as an explanation to understand the reason for contradictory results.

Second, the theory was formulated almost a decade ago and hasn't been updated or reviewed after that. In such a long-time gap, the mindset of people is bound to alter, and especially, when the world is facing a global pandemic, a dynamic shift has been observed in family relationships, indicative of the need for a new theory and updated research work.

Third, the present research targeted specifically two strategies of emotion regulation, namely, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression and addresses their mediation effect in the relationship between three types of attachment (secure, ambivalent-insecure, and avoidant-insecure) and self-esteem making it specific and concise.

Fourth, the method of inquiry adopted in the present research is the survey method as opposed to interviews that are mainly conducted in the previous research.

To sum it up, the results obtained in the present research bring out important cultural, time-related, and other factors that play a role in determining the phenomenon addressed here. Therefore, some strategies of

emotion regulation can mediate the relationship between attachment styles and self-esteem and should be explored further.

## CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to explore whether the two strategies of emotion regulation, namely, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression play a mediating role in the relationship between the different styles of attachment- secure, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-avoidant- and global self-esteem. Findings suggest that expressive suppression plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between secure attachment style and global self-esteem. Apart from this, no other mediating effect was found. Theoretically, a model has been proposed which has been supported in some respects but not in others.

The model proposed in the present study can be used to enhance the strategies to regulate emotions for the individual to be able to form meaningful relationships and have healthy self-esteem. Along with this, it can also empower parents to identify and understand the unhealthy patterns to regulate emotions and look for the underlying maladaptive patterns of attachment that they might be exhibiting in their homes with their infants and take corrective measures to develop a secure attachment style and enable the infant to develop into a healthy individual with adaptive strategies to regulate their emotions and have high self-esteem.

### Limitations and recommendations

When the present study was undertaken, the movement of the public was restricted and therefore, the researcher could not collect data in person and most of the data was collected online. The situation of COVID-19 introduced a lot of situational barriers and added uncertainty to almost every area of life, therefore adding stress and anxiety about the future in the minds of the respondents. The questionnaires that were used were not adapted to the Indian population and could give biased results. And apart from this, the sample to population ratio in the study was also not equal.

Further research in this area can be taken up using more strategies of regulating emotions and ensuring that data collection is done in person with a larger sample size and using the questionnaires that are adapted to the Indian population. It should be ensured that the situational barriers are minimized.

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