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Emotion Regulation and Drug Abuse among Adolescents: A Theoretical Research

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Abstract

Emotions, which can be defined as a brief, involuntary patterned-full system response to internal and external stimuli, are helpful for humans to remain attuned with environment. But they can be harmful when they are not regulated well, and in an adaptive manner. Adolescence is the period when rapid physiological, psychological and social changes make this system of emotional experiences much more complex. Positive emotions (curiosity), as well as negative emotion (anxiety, anger, sadness, shame, boredom), must be regulated with adaptive strategies, like cognitive problem solving, problem oriented acting, exercise, relaxation, meditation, music, social interaction etc. But when drugs are used as to regulate the intensity and magnitude of negative emotions, a maladaptive picture of self-regulation is to be posed in form of physiological, psychological, social, economical disturbances and character deterioration. As children grow to the stage of adolescence, emotion regulation process becomes more complex, as the social context is taken into account.

The present paper was intended to analyze the review of literature to understand the emotion focused strategies of regulation triggered by external and internal environment, adopted by drug addicted adolescents and those at risk of to be victim of drug abuse. Systematic analysis of various studies demonstrate that maladaptive emotion regulation strategies or inability to regulate emotions effectively can play an important role as the causing factor, maintenance factor and may have implication in recovery also.

Keywords: *Emotion Regulation, drug abuse, adolescence*

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Introduction

At present time, drug addiction is the biggest challenge before the entire human civilization, as it is damaging the basic structure of society. Entire human society is suffering from health problems, relationship problems, corruption, violence and terrorism like big issues, and it's all because of drug/substance addiction. And when we think the problem of drug addiction as related with children and adolescents, it creates a terrific and dark picture of the future. The total cost of what we pay as the result of drug addiction in form of treatment efforts, criminal prosecutions, school drop-out, and lack of productivity, is difficult to assess.

Emotion Regulation

In our day to day life, we try to influence the emotions we have, and try to see how we experience and express these emotions. Such cognitive-behavioral strategy we use in this attempt is called as emotion regulation (Gross, 1998). Emotion regulation can be considered much more like as emotion focused coping, which is one of two coping strategies including problem focused coping. Considering this dimension of coping, emotion regulation can be said as the process which an individual use to manage his or her physiological arousal (Cicchetti et al., 1991), to handle the behaviors and internal feeling in order to reach one's goals (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002; Thompson, 1994) or to fulfill the situational demands.

Besides this generally accepted classification of coping strategies, i.e. problem focused and emotion focused, there is another dimension by the name of cognitive coping strategies versus behavioral coping strategies (Holahan, Moss & Schaeffer, 1996). A cognitive coping strategy can be exemplified as to make a plan. On other hand a behavioral coping strategy can be said as to take an immediate action. Furthermore, cognitive processes can further be classified as conscious and unconscious. Conscious cognitive processes involve self-blame, other-blame, rumination and catastrophizing, whereas unconscious cognitive processes involve projection, denial etc. People may have differences in their experience and expression of emotions, and therefore may differ in their use of emotion regulation strategies (Gross & John, 2003).

Adolescence:

As children grow to the stage of adolescence, a marked increase in spontaneous use of cognitive emotion regulation strategies can be noticed. For example, in expectation of a sympathetic response from significant others, adolescents tend to display more emotions (Zeman & Garber, 1996). Emotion regulation becomes more

complex during adolescence, as the social context is taken into account (Zeman et. al., 2006).

Drug Addiction and Emotional Regulation

Drug addiction refers to the excessive, out of control and compulsive use of drugs (Malenka, Nestler, & Hyman, 2009). According to the DSM-IV, substance dependence, without the occurrence of withdrawal symptoms can be defined as drug addiction. Emotional aspects have been found and demonstrated in various studies to be important in drug abuse (Khantzian, 1990, Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002). E*motional self-control* involves the ability to reduce excessive arousal so as to deal with negative emotions such as sadness or anger (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994). Strategies required for controlling emotions are believed to involve cognitive effort through focusing or shifting attention, monitoring level of arousal, and using active cognitive strategies to minimize unpleasant stimuli (Rothbart, Derryberry, & Evans, 2000, Southam-Gerow & Kendall, 2002).

In a study, relationship between loneliness and the difficulties in emotion regulation with drug abuse among students of University of Sistan and Baluchestan, southeastern of Iran, was investigated. The results of this study indicated a positive and significant relationship between loneliness and the difficulties in emotion regulation of students with drug abuse (Nikmanesh, Kazemi, Khosravi, 2015).

One study indicated that poor regulation such as impulsiveness is positively related to substance-use among both adolescents and adults (Bickel, Odum, & Madden, 1999, Petry, Bickel, & Arnett, 1998, Simons, Oliver, Gaher, Ebel, & Brummels, 2005).

Patock-Peckham, Cheon, Balhorn, and Nagoshi (2001) showed with a sample of college students that a composite measure representing good self-control was inversely related to an index of alcohol-related problems. These findings were subsequently replicated, in opposite direction, with a scale for impulsiveness (Patock-Peckham & Morgan Lopez, 2006).

Poor emotional regulation involves difficulty in recovering from interpersonal provocation or tendency to ruminate about sad experiences (Derryberry & Rothbart, 1997; Gillom et al., 2002).

A paper published by DARA Thailand viewed that dealing with emotions can be a test for people in recovery. When people fail to regulate their emotions, they tend to be at more risk of relapsing. The emotions, which can be dangerous for people in recovery, are: loneliness, anger, fear, disappointment, guilt, boredom and

excessive joy.

Study of Philip Clarke (2012) indicates a positive correlation between difficulties in emotion regulation and relapse. In another study it was found that negative emotion regulation strategies and intolerance of uncertainty have an impact on belief about craving for drugs due to traumatic experiences (Fizollahi, Abolghasemi, & Babazadeh, 2015).

Discussion

- **Drug Use as Emotion Regulation**

Study of Frances & Thomas (2012) indicates that people, who rely on using drugs and alcohol, to cope with negative emotions, are more likely to develop problems and to be victim of substance abuse. It means people when experience negative emotions can use drugs, alcohol or any other substance as a way of regulating their negative emotions. We see that drugs like alcohol, cocaine and marijuana etc. are often used to increase positive emotions (Jaffe and Jaffe, 1989) as well as to decrease negative emotions (Koob and Le Moal, 2008). It has been proposed by Kober, Turza and Hart (2009) that positive effect of drugs work like a positive reinforcement as well as negativity-reducing effect works like a negative reinforcement. And we know well that according to operant conditioning theory positive and negative reinforcement, both increase the likelihood of a response to be repeated in future. So it can be said that the likelihood of drug use will be increased when one finds drugs-use as to be helpful in altering one's current state of emotion. The statement "when I drink, I feel good" by a drug-user can be said as an example of positive reinforcement. In the same way negative reinforcement can be exemplify with a line of a song entitled "Mujhe Peene ka Shounk Nahi, Peeta Hoon Gam Bhoolane Ko". In other words an alcoholic person can argue that he drink because it makes him calm down and this is undoubtedly associated with increased alcohol/drug use (Jones et. al., 2001). Moreover drug-use tends to alleviate the experience of craving for a short time, which also can be said as reinforcing for drug-use (Childress et. al., 1993, Shiffman et. al., 2013).

- **Emotion Dysregulation as a Risk Factor**

People are motivated by hedonic principle. It means people wish to increase short-term pleasure and to decrease short-term pain (Gross, 2015). Perhaps, this is why they wish to regulate or have control over their emotions. People can learn to use various strategies (behavioral, cognitive, situation selection, situation modification and attentional deployment) of regulating their emotions in order to meet their short term goals. The problem of drug addiction seems to be related with emotion regulation

deficits. In condition of inability to develop appropriate emotion regulation strategy, drug use can be thought as to be developed as an alternate strategy to regulate emotion. Further the condition begins to grow more intense when craving follows a deficit regulation strategy and reinforced pattern of drug use.

A longitudinal study, conducted by Ivanov et al. demonstrated that childhood-disorders (such as ADHD and conduct disorders, which have been found clearly associated with poor emotion regulation) precede the drug use by adolescence or young adulthood (August et al. 2017). Emotion regulation seems to be as mediating factor here between early disruptive behavior and drug use in later life (Ivanov et. al., 2011). But it can be undoubtedly said that emotion dysregulation may contribute to drug use in two ways: first due to immature emotion regulation capacity which may lead to severe stress and negative emotion one can start drug use (Haney, Maccari, Le Moal, Simon, and Vincenzo Piazza, 1995), second due to self-regulation failure and impulsivity, adolescents may indulge in risk taking behaviors that may leads to drug use (Ivanov et. al., 2011). 82.4 % of first use of alcohol occur during the age of adolescence because adolescents are to be said more vulnerable to drug use due to poor ability of recruiting the necessary neurocircuitry to regulate emotions, according to Gross (2015).

- **Emotion Regulation and Craving**

Craving can be define as an intense and compulsive desire for drug use. According to O'Brien et al. (1998) craving is a key contributor to drug use. In condition of drug addiction not only regulation of negative emotion but also the regulation of craving is very crucial to break the cyclic chain of drug use. Regulation of craving can be said as a specific form of emotion regulation. One can use various strategies to regulate one's craving (Kober et. al., 2010, Westbrook et al., 2013) in order to reduce drug use (O'Connell et al., 2007). Then regulation of craving certainly has implication in treatment procedure of drug abuse. Emotional intelligence, which is defined as the ability to be aware of one's emotions, identifying others emotion correctly as well as interpret and regulate them effectively, moderates the association between negative emotion and craving for alcohol (Cordovil de Sousa Uva et al., 2010).

Conclusion

On the basis of results of studies, it can be said that ways we regulate our emotions can directly or indirectly influence the chance of falling in grasp of drug abuse. As we see that adolescence is the stage, when people tend to test various ways of regulating emotions. Due to poor ability of regulating emotions, adolescent

may choose option of drug-use in order to avoid negative unpleasant experience. Furthermore, emotional dysregulation seems to be significant in treatment and to reduce the chance of relapse. Sometime maladaptive emotion regulation strategies like rumination, can themselves lead to using drug as a way avoiding negative experience.

Following conclusion can be drawn in concise:

1. In condition of emotion regulation deficits adolescents may adopt drug-use either to down-regulate negative emotion or to up-regulate positive emotions.
2. Emotion dysregulation may contribute as a risk factor to drug addiction.
3. Emotion dysregulation may also contribute as a maintaining factor.
4. Emotion regulation may have implications in regulation of craving.
5. Because the age of adolescence is considered as the age of testing various strategies of coping, so it can be said that adolescents are at higher risk of to fall in grasp of drug use in condition of failure to develop appropriate emotion regulation strategies.

Implication and Limitation

As we see in the discussion that difficulties in emotion regulation strategies are the core features of drug abuse among adolescents. Difficulties in regulating negative emotions and craving are associated to drug use and relapse to drug use. Therefore it can be undoubtedly say that training for adaptive emotion regulation can be helpful in both reducing the risk and treatment of drug-addiction. It is very important to conduct empirical and deep research in this field.

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