

Why Beliefs About Emotion Matter: An Emotion-Regulation Perspective

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Abstract

The world is complicated, and we hold a large number of beliefs about how it works. These beliefs are important because they shape how we interact with the world. One particularly impactful set of beliefs centers on emotion, and a small but growing literature has begun to document the links between emotion beliefs and a wide range of emotional, interpersonal, and clinical outcomes. Here, we review the literature that has begun to examine beliefs about emotion, focusing on two fundamental beliefs, namely whether emotions are good or bad and whether emotions are controllable or uncontrollable. We then consider one underlying mechanism that we think may link these emotion beliefs with downstream outcomes, namely emotion regulation. Finally, we highlight the role of beliefs about emotion across various psychological disciplines and outline several promising directions for future research.

Keywords

emotion beliefs, implicit theories, mind-sets, emotion regulation, culture, development, well-being

For millennia, people have debated whether emotions are good (e.g., desirable, useful) or bad (e.g., unwanted, harmful) and whether emotions are controllable (e.g., modulated according to our will) or uncontrollable (e.g., arriving unbidden and departing of their own accord). Each individual must decide the “correct” answers to these questions, and these decisions form the basis of each individual’s beliefs about emotion.

Recent research has begun to reveal that emotion beliefs matter. A small but growing literature has shown that emotion beliefs are linked to a wide range of emotional, interpersonal, and clinical outcomes. In this article, we first present a framework for examining emotion beliefs. We then review the existing literature and consider one underlying mechanism that we think may link these beliefs with downstream outcomes: emotion regulation. Finally, we highlight the role of emotion beliefs across various psychological disciplines and outline several promising directions for future research on emotion beliefs.

A Framework for Examining Emotion Beliefs

To synthesize the growing literature on emotion beliefs, we first provide a conceptual mapping of two superordinate beliefs that are central to this domain: (a) beliefs

about whether emotions are good or bad and (b) beliefs about whether emotions are controllable or uncontrollable. Beliefs about goodness and controllability represent fundamental dimensions on which many constructs vary and which have a longstanding history in the debate about what emotions are. Although these two superordinate beliefs are not the only beliefs individuals hold about emotions, we focus on them because they are foundational to how people think about emotions (Mikulincer & Ben-Artzi, 1995), are conceptually orthogonal (Dweck, 2017), and have important downstream consequences (e.g., Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck, & Gross, 2014). Our conceptualization of these beliefs is intentionally inclusive, covering a range of related constructs (e.g., attitudes, expectancies, opinions, theories).

Emotion beliefs can be quite general (e.g., “I believe emotions are controllable”) but also can vary across a number of subordinate features (see Fig. 1). These subordinate features include (a) specific emotions or valence (e.g., anger, happiness; negative or positive affect); (b) specific emotion intensities (e.g., irritation

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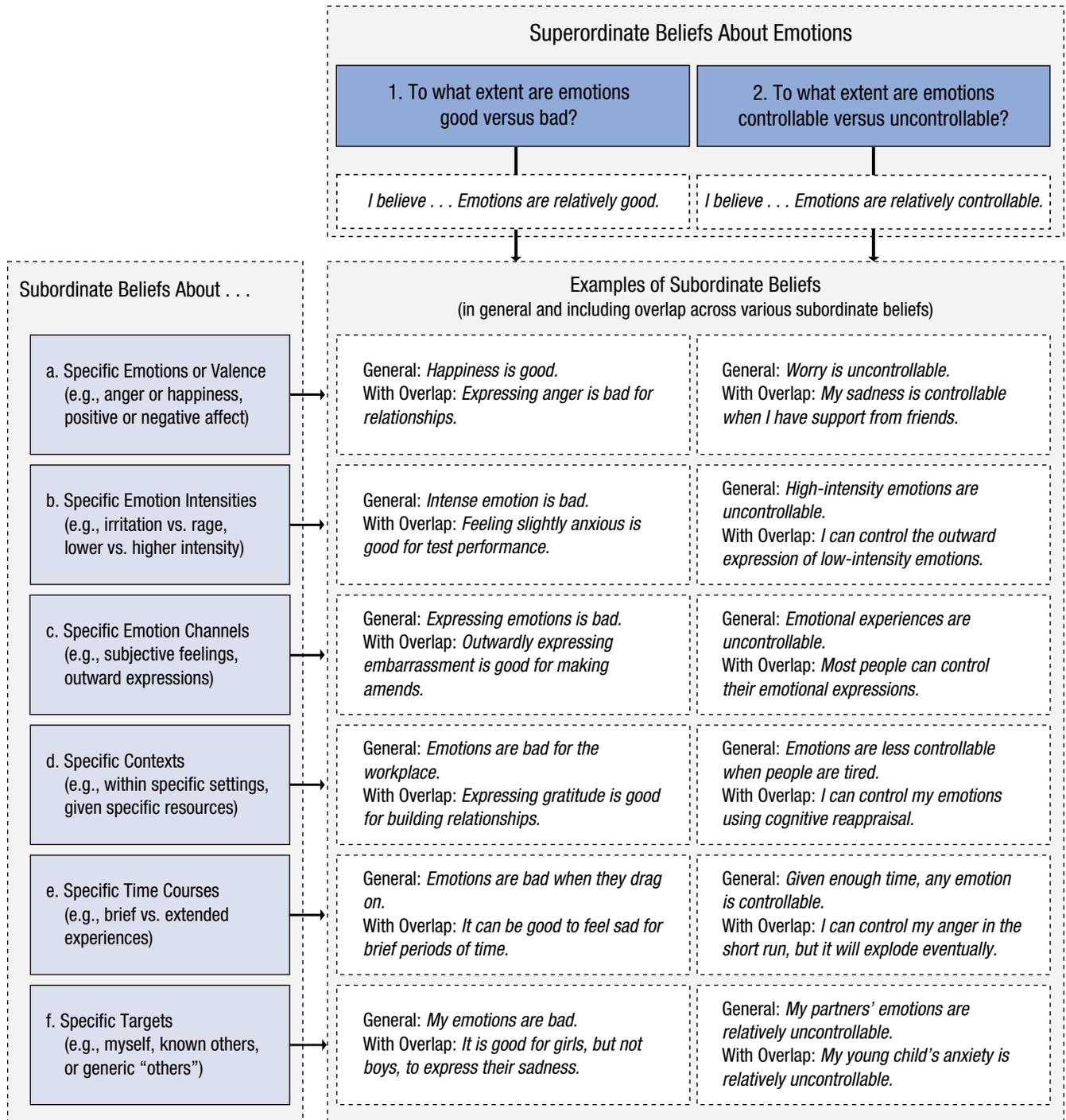


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework depicting two superordinate beliefs about emotion, as well as various subordinate beliefs. Examples of relatively general beliefs are provided, as well as examples of specific beliefs with overlap across multiple subordinate beliefs, providing a complex matrix of possible emotion beliefs. (Adapted from Ford & Gross, 2018.)

vs. rage; lower- vs. higher-intensity emotions); (c) specific emotion channels (e.g., subjective feelings, expressive behaviors, physiological concomitants); (d) specific contexts, such as particular settings (e.g., at home, at work), when pursuing particular goals (e.g., avoiding threats, pursuing rewards), or given certain self-regulatory resources (e.g., when fatigued or when using particular

regulation strategies); (e) specific time courses (e.g., a belief that applies to brief vs. lasting emotions); and (f) specific targets (e.g., a belief about the self, specific others, or generalized others).

Some of these subordinate features may be more influential than others; for example, valence—as a central feature of emotion—may be a particularly salient

dimension by which people organize their beliefs. The centrality of a given subordinate feature may also vary by person. For example, individuals with a more granular or differentiated understanding of emotions (e.g., Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004) may be more likely to have a nuanced and discrete (vs. valence-based) set of emotion beliefs. It also bears noting that these subordinate beliefs can overlap with each other in interesting ways, creating a rich matrix of possible emotion beliefs.

Emotion Beliefs Matter

Although many emotion beliefs have not yet been thoroughly examined empirically, preliminary research has begun to inform our understanding of key beliefs. This work highlights a connection between emotion beliefs and acute outcomes (e.g., emotional experiences), as well as more chronic, cumulative outcomes (e.g., well-being).

Beliefs about goodness

A belief about whether emotions are good or bad reflects one's fundamental attitude toward emotions (see Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Gable, 2011). When further contextualized, this belief can refer to whether emotions are desirable (vs. undesirable), useful (vs. useless), helpful (vs. harmful), and so forth. This more nuanced view challenges the notion that unpleasant emotions are always bad or that pleasant emotions are always good. Under certain circumstances, individuals believe unpleasant emotions are desirable (e.g., Tamir & Ford, 2012) and pleasant emotions are harmful (e.g., Joshanloo et al., 2013).

When considering acute outcomes, several lines of research suggest that beliefs about goodness can shape short-term responses to emotionally evocative situations. For example, research from the mindfulness and acceptance tradition has found that people who believe emotions are bad have heightened negative emotional responses to stressors (Ford, Lam, John, & Mauss, 2017). Research from the developmental literature has found that parents who believe that children's positive emotions are harmful respond more negatively to their children's positive emotions, whereas parents who believe that children's anger is valuable respond more positively to their children's negative emotions (Halberstadt et al., 2013). Experimental findings also support the view that emotion beliefs have short-term consequences—sometimes with counterproductive effects (see Ford & Mauss, 2014, for a review). For example, participants experimentally induced to believe happiness is highly valuable were less happy after a positive emotion induction, compared with control participants (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011). Our evaluative beliefs about

emotions shape the standards against which we weigh our experiences, and falling short of our standards can result in even worse mood.

Beliefs have also been linked with longer-term outcomes that reflect chronic or cumulative emotional experiences. For example, believing that emotions are bad in general predicts worse psychological health, including lower well-being and greater depressive and anxiety symptoms (Ford et al., 2017; Karnaze & Levine, 2017), perhaps because individuals with this belief are more likely to negatively evaluate any emotional experience they have. Beliefs about specific emotions have also been linked with corresponding chronic emotional experiences. For example, believing that anger is valuable is linked with elevated trait anger and aggression, and believing that sadness is valuable is linked with elevated depressive symptoms (Harmon-Jones et al., 2011), perhaps because individuals with these beliefs are more likely to effectively seek out these emotional experiences. Correlational findings such as these suggest that beliefs may influence chronic emotional experiences, but they are also consistent with chronic emotional experiences influencing beliefs. Indeed, these phenomena are likely reciprocally related in complex feedback loops. Importantly, initial longitudinal evidence suggests that beliefs can indeed play a lead role in predicting future psychological health (e.g., Ford et al., 2017; Ford, Mauss, & Gruber, 2015).

Beliefs about controllability

The extent to which emotions are controllable, as opposed to uncontrollable, represents a second fundamental belief that individuals naturally develop about emotions. Research on emotion-control beliefs has been strongly influenced by Dweck's sociocognitive model of implicit theories (Molden & Dweck, 2006), which has been foundational in establishing the downstream implications of control beliefs (often referred to as *implicit theories* or *mind-sets*). Building on this model, recent research has begun to assess emotion-control beliefs and establish their unique role in predicting emotion-related outcomes above and beyond other control beliefs (Howell, 2017; Romero et al., 2014; Tamir, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2007).

Although relatively few studies have examined the links between control beliefs and acute emotional outcomes, existing research suggests an interesting pattern. On one hand, people who believe that emotions are relatively uncontrollable experience greater emotional intensity when responding to negative emotion inductions (Kappes & Schikowski, 2013) and when assessed with questionnaires (Tamir et al., 2007). On the other hand, parents who believe that children's emotions are relatively uncontrollable report being more supportive

and less punishing in response to their children's negative feelings (Halberstadt et al., 2013), and people who believe that happiness is relatively uncontrollable report greater empathy toward a stranger struggling with depression (Tullett & Plaks, 2016). Taken together, these findings suggest that believing emotions are uncontrollable may exacerbate one's own distress but also enhance one's compassion toward others' distress.

Despite the apparent acute social benefits of believing that emotions are relatively uncontrollable, the picture is consistently grim when considering the longer-term cumulative outcomes of these beliefs. Numerous cross-sectional studies of adults and youths have found that believing emotions are relatively uncontrollable is correlated with worse psychological health, including lower well-being and greater depressive and anxiety symptoms (Catanzaro & Mearns, 1990; De Castella et al., 2013; Schroder, Dawood, Yalch, Donnellan, & Moser, 2015; Veilleux, Salomaa, Shaver, Zielinski, & Pollert, 2015). Longitudinal studies have also found that believing that emotions are uncontrollable predicts future depressive symptoms (e.g., Romero et al., 2014; Tamir et al., 2007), even when initial symptom levels are controlled for (Ford et al., 2017). In general, believing that emotions cannot be controlled appears to come at longer-term costs.

Why Do Emotion Beliefs Matter?

What mechanisms might account for the links between emotion beliefs and both shorter- and longer-term emotional outcomes? Multiple pathways are possible, but based on theoretical and empirical considerations, we propose that emotion regulation represents a particularly promising candidate mechanism (see also Kneeland, Dovidio, Joormann, & Clark, 2016).

Theoretically, beliefs about the goodness of emotion should guide the trajectory of emotion regulation (i.e., What do people want to feel?), and beliefs about the controllability of emotion should guide the occurrence of emotion regulation (i.e., Is regulation initiated in the first place?). More precise hypotheses are possible when considering that the emotion-regulation process unfolds over time as individuals move through various stages, each stage providing an opportunity for emotion beliefs to exert an influence. According to the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2015), individuals first identify a need to regulate, then select particular strategies, implement those strategies, and monitor their regulatory success. Beliefs about emotion goodness and controllability may influence whether and how individuals progress through each stage (see Table 1). Ultimately, these beliefs should influence emotion-regulation success and—as

Table 1. Hypotheses Regarding How Emotion Beliefs May Influence Each Stage of the Emotion-Regulation Process

Emotion-regulation stage and definition	Beliefs about whether emotions are good versus bad	Beliefs about whether emotions are controllable versus uncontrollable
Identification The individual detects the emotion, evaluates the emotion, and decides whether regulation is necessary.	Believing an emotion is bad may increase the likelihood that the emotion is identified as needing regulation.	Believing emotions are relatively uncontrollable may decrease the likelihood that a given emotion is identified as needing regulation.
Selection The individual considers different strategies, evaluates the costs and benefits of those strategies, and decides which strategy to use.	Individuals may be more likely to select strategies they believe will help them avoid emotions they believe are bad (and attain emotions they believe are good).	Individuals may consider fewer strategies and be less likely to select an effective strategy if they believe emotions are relatively uncontrollable.
Implementation The individual considers the various ways of implementing a strategy, evaluates the costs and benefits of those tactics, and then implements the chosen tactic.	Individuals may be more likely to select tactics they believe will help them avoid emotions they believe are bad (and attain emotions they believe are good).	Individuals may have less experience using effective regulation tactics and be less likely to effectively implement their chosen tactic if they believe emotions are relatively uncontrollable.
Monitoring The individual assesses the progress and outcome of regulation and decides whether to maintain, switch, or stop ongoing regulation efforts.	Believing an emotion is bad may increase the likelihood that individuals experience negative meta-emotions (emotions about emotions) in response to not meeting their regulation goals.	Believing emotions are uncontrollable may decrease an individual's regulation perseverance and increase the chances of stopping regulation or switching a strategy or tactic numerous times.

these successes and failures accumulate—longer-term outcomes such as psychological health.

Empirically, the link between goodness beliefs and emotion regulation has been examined most often at the implementation phase (see Table 1), as individuals choose the precise regulation tactics that increase desired emotions (or decrease undesired emotions). For example, individuals who believe that particular emotions are relatively good (e.g., useful, familiar) are more likely to seek activities that will maintain or enhance those emotions, even when the emotions are unpleasant (Harmon-Jones et al., 2011; Tamir, Bigman, Rhodes, Salerno, & Schreier, 2015; Tamir & Ford, 2012; Wood, Heimpel, Manwell, & Whittington, 2009), and even when choosing activities for other people (López-Pérez, Howells, & Gummerum, 2017; Netzer, Van Kleef, & Tamir, 2015). The link between control beliefs and emotion regulation has been examined most often at the selection phase, as individuals choose specific strategies. For example, believing emotions are relatively controllable has consistently predicted greater cognitive reappraisal, a particularly effective strategy (De Castella et al., 2013; Ford et al., 2017; Kneeland, Nolen-Hoeksema, Dovidio, & Gruber, 2016; Tamir et al., 2007; Veilleux et al., 2015). Overall, the links between beliefs about emotion and emotion regulation carry significant implications for the eventual success of emotion regulation, as suggested by experimental manipulations of beliefs (e.g., Gutentag, Halperin, Porat, Bigman, & Tamir, 2017) and longitudinal assessments of beliefs (e.g., Tamir et al., 2007).

It bears noting that we have so far considered beliefs about goodness and controllability separately. However, if they are indeed orthogonal, these beliefs could also co-occur and interact, predicting change in key outcomes over time. For example, when an individual believes an emotion is bad, it may be particularly relevant for subsequent regulation attempts that the individual also believes it is possible to control this emotion. Little research has examined the intersection of these particular beliefs, but theory and related empirical work suggest that beliefs about goodness and control may indeed interact to predict downstream outcomes. For example, believing that events are relatively negative (bad) and not amenable to change (uncontrollable) puts individuals at risk for depression (Alloy et al., 1999), perhaps because this particular combination of beliefs promotes distressing meta-emotions that make individuals more likely to judge (but not efficaciously change) their “bad” emotions. To fully understand the nature and outcomes of these beliefs, it will be important for future research to consider them both separately and in interaction, as they unfold across time.

Directions for Future Research

Research on the pervasive role that emotion beliefs play in our day-to-day lives has implications for multiple subareas within psychology. Here, we highlight the role of emotion beliefs across four subareas, outlining promising directions for future research.

A cultural perspective

Cultures are defined, in part, by their prevalent beliefs. Examining emotion beliefs from a cultural perspective enables us to address key questions regarding how beliefs are shaped by cultural values and how culture may influence the outcomes of beliefs. For example, much prior work has demonstrated a link between culture and beliefs about emotion goodness, finding that these beliefs vary largely as a function of whether the emotions promote culturally supported norms (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Tamir & Gutentag, 2017; Tsai, 2007). Although little research has examined culture’s role in beliefs about emotion controllability, prior work examining culture’s role in emotion regulation strongly suggests that culture may influence control beliefs (see Ford & Mauss, 2015, for a review). Culture likely influences the development of particular emotion beliefs via many pathways. For example, in cultures in which emotions are considered to be relational (vs. individual) phenomena (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), emotional control may be considered a shared responsibility, shaping the likelihood, form, and outcomes of regulation. Indeed, indirect evidence has suggested that cultural differences in beliefs about emotion may even influence the downstream physical-health outcomes of experiencing particular emotions (Miyamoto et al., 2013), underscoring the potential for beliefs about emotion to have wide-ranging influence on our lives.

A social perspective

One’s emotion beliefs likely influence not only regulation applied to one’s own emotions (*intrinsic emotion regulation*) but also regulation applied to others’ emotions (*extrinsic emotion regulation*). Little research has examined these social processes, but initial studies indicate that beliefs indeed play a role in how one approaches others’ emotions. For example, individuals who believe that a given emotion will be good (i.e., useful) for a social partner to feel are more likely to try to increase that emotion in an interaction partner, even if the emotion is unpleasant (Netzer et al., 2015). Additionally, individuals who believe that emotions are relatively controllable are less empathic and compassionate

when responding to others' suffering (Tullett & Plaks, 2016). This finding underscores a possible downside of believing that emotions are controllable: unreasonable expectations for others' (and perhaps one's own) emotions. This work provides a promising but preliminary glimpse of the complex interconnections between emotion beliefs and social processes.

A developmental perspective

One intriguing question is how individuals' emotion beliefs arise. In addition to cultural influences, beliefs are likely the products of top-down and bottom-up learning across the lifespan. For example, children with parents who believed that emotions are dangerous were more likely than other children to engage in coping mechanisms centered on avoiding emotions (Halberstadt, Thompson, Parker, & Dunsmore, 2008). Additionally, youths' beliefs that emotions are controllable decline from childhood to adolescence (but remain relatively stable after puberty into adulthood), perhaps because of the biological, psychological, and social challenges that specifically characterize adolescence (Ford, Lwi, Hankin, Gentzler, & Mauss, 2018). These results suggest that it may be particularly fruitful to focus on young children's beliefs: If younger (vs. older) children are more optimistic about the controllability of emotions, it may be beneficial to prevent a normative decline in beliefs about controllability (vs. trying to change beliefs after the decline). Furthermore, longitudinal data indicate that youths who believe that emotions are relatively uncontrollable are less likely to engage in cognitive reappraisal a year and a half later (Ford et al., 2018), suggesting that these beliefs may interfere with valuable opportunities for youths to practice and gain skill in effective emotion-regulation strategies. Examining changes in emotion beliefs and their outcomes in individuals across the life span—including into older age (Urry & Gross, 2010)—will help us further understand the origins and implications of these beliefs.

A clinical perspective

Emotion beliefs are an attractive target for clinical intervention because these beliefs are malleable (Molden & Dweck, 2006). Beliefs about emotion controllability are known to be mechanisms of symptom change within clinical interventions (De Castella et al., 2015), can predict who is likely to seek treatment in the first place (Schroder et al., 2015), and are a prime target for intervention themselves (Kneeland, Dovidio, et al., 2016; Westra, Dozois, & Marcus, 2007). Research manipulating emotion beliefs is limited, but preliminary findings are promising. Short-term interventions have influenced

beliefs about goodness (e.g., whether emotions are useful; Tamir et al., 2015) and controllability (Bigman, Mauss, Gross, & Tamir, 2016; Goldin et al., 2012; Kneeland, Nolen-Hoeksema, et al., 2016). These findings highlight the utility of targeting beliefs about emotion: If a relatively early stage in the risk cascade is influenced, changing beliefs could promote the development of a healthier emotion-regulation repertoire and its associated benefits for psychological health. This research will benefit from a nuanced perspective on the costs and benefits of particular beliefs; even beliefs that are considered relatively adaptive (e.g., believing that emotions are controllable) can be problematic when the belief is extreme, rigidly held, or inaccurate (e.g., based on faulty emotion understanding).

Concluding Comment

Theoretically, emotion beliefs should exert a pervasive influence on the emotion-regulation process and, in turn, shape not only our acute emotional responses but also our longer-term health and well-being. As empirical research examining these beliefs is currently sparse, this article presents a framework to synthesize and extend the growing literature on emotion beliefs and thus enhance our understanding of this fundamental psychological phenomenon.

Recommended Reading

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- Gross, J. J. (2015). (See References). A review of the process model of emotion regulation outlining different stages of emotion regulation where emotion beliefs may play a role.
- Kneeland, E. T., Dovidio, J. F., Joormann, J., & Clark, M. S. (2016). (See References). A review summarizing the clinical implications of beliefs about emotion controllability.
- Tamir, M., John, O. P., Srivastava, S., & Gross, J. J. (2007). (See References). An empirical examination of the link between beliefs about emotion controllability and both psychological and social functioning.

Action Editor

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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