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## Childhood emotional invalidation and adult psychological distress: the mediating role of emotional inhibition

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### Abstract

**Objective:** To evaluate a model in which chronic emotional inhibition mediates the relationship between a history of childhood emotional invalidation or abuse and adult psychological distress.

**Method:** One hundred and twenty-seven participants completed a series of self-report questionnaires, and a subset of this group ( $n = 88$ ) completed an additional measure of current avoidant coping in response to a laboratory stressor. Structural equation modeling was used to evaluate and compare a full and partial mediational model.

**Results:** Findings strongly supported a model in which a history of childhood emotional invalidation (i.e., psychological abuse and parental punishment, minimization, and distress in response to negative emotion) was associated with chronic emotional inhibition in adulthood (i.e., ambivalence over emotional expression, thought suppression, and avoidant stress responses). In turn, emotional inhibition significantly predicted psychological distress, including depression and anxiety symptoms.

**Conclusion:** This study found support for a model in which the relation between recollected negative emotion socialization in childhood and adult psychological distress was fully mediated by a style of inhibiting emotional experience and expression. Although it is likely that childhood emotional inhibition is functional (e.g., reduces parental distress and rejection), results suggest that chronic emotional inhibition may have long-term negative consequences for the inhibitor.

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## Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the study of emotional inhibition, such as strategies used to suppress unwanted emotional thoughts, feelings, or expressions. Emotional inhibition has been implicated as an etiological and/or maintaining factor in a variety of psychological disorders (e.g., Purdon, 1999). As Wenzlaff and Eisenberg (1998) note, research in this area would benefit from integration with a developmental perspective. Childhood emotional invalidation and abuse appear to contribute to difficulties in emotional regulation during childhood, including an over-reliance on avoidant regulatory strategies (e.g., Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). The present study extends prior research by evaluating a mediational model in which a history of childhood emotional invalidation and/or abuse predicts chronic emotional inhibition in adulthood and in turn, psychological distress.

### *Emotional inhibition and psychological distress*

Emotional inhibition encompasses both the withholding of emotional expression and the attempted suppression of thoughts, feelings, urges, and/or sensations related to emotional experience. In contrast to emotional numbing (i.e., a sense of emotional detachment and limited range of affect; American Psychiatric Association, 1994), emotional inhibition refers to conscious attempts to suppress emotional experience on a chronic basis, including in response to stressful life events. Although inhibition strategies are generally employed as a means of escaping aversive emotional experiences and may be associated with periods of numbing, research indicates that they paradoxically tend to heighten negative thoughts (Becker, Rinck, Roth, & Margraf, 1998; Edwards & Bryan, 1997; McNally & Ricciardi, 1996; Roemer & Borkovec, 1994; Trinder & Salkovskis, 1994), emotions, physiological arousal (e.g., Gross & Levenson, 1993, 1997; Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987), and psychological distress (e.g., Lynch, Robins, Morse, & Krause, 2001). Indeed, chronic withholding of emotional expression has been correlated with negative affect, depression, obsessive/compulsive tendencies, phobic anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (e.g., Emmons & Colby, 1995; Katz & Campbell, 1994; King & Emmons, 1990; Roemer, Litz, Orsillo, & Wagner, 2001). Similarly, there is growing empirical support for a link between thought suppression and psychological problems (Purdon, 1999), including depressive, anxious, and obsessional symptoms (Wenzlaff & Bates, 1998), PTSD severity (Steil & Ehlers, 2000), and acute stress disorder (Harvey & Bryant, 1998).

Consistent with the above findings, the literature on stress and coping suggests that avoidant coping in response to stressful circumstances is associated with psychological difficulties. Avoidant coping, a response style in which the emotional impact of upsetting events is denied, often involves thought or emotional suppression. Research has shown that avoidant coping predicts psychological distress under stressful life circumstances (i.e., HIV/AIDS—Schmitz & Crystal, 2000; Homelessness—Nyamathi, Stein, & Bayley, 2000) and may increase vulnerability to PTSD (Steil & Ehlers, 2000).

### *Parental socialization of emotion*

Research on the socialization of emotion offers a valuable perspective on the possible origins of chronic suppression of emotions and thoughts (Wenzlaff & Eisenberg, 1998). The

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