

EMOTION DYSREGULATION AS A CAUSE OF EATING DISORDER: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the relationship between emotion dysregulation as a cause of eating disorders based on research articles that have been collected. The method used was systematic review by collecting and analyzing various research articles relevant to the research objectives. Based on the results of the 18 articles analyzed, it can be concluded that difficulty regulating emotions plays an important role in the emergence and perpetuation of eating disorders, especially binge eating disorder (BED). Emotion dysregulation also serves as a mediator in relation to eating disorders. Thus, interventions that emphasize the development of emotion management skills may be an important strategy in preventing and managing eating disorders.

Keywords: Emotion dysregulation, Eating disorder, Causes of eating disorder

1 INTRODUCTION

Emotion regulation needs to be considered as one of the main concerns in daily life. Difficulties in emotion regulation can lead to bad or harmful behavior; one example that is often found in relation to emotion regulation difficulties is eating disorders. A significant increase in eating disorder cases occurred in the UK in 2023, data for children aged 11 to 16 years was reported at 2.6% while in 2017 it was only 0.5%. The data for ages 17 to 19 years has a rate of 12.5% or a considerable increase compared to 2017 which was 0.8% (Prevalence Rates and Demographic Disparities in Eating Disorders, 2025). The definition of emotional dysregulation refers to the dimensions of emotion regulation difficulties according to Gratz & Roemer (2004) include lack of awareness of emotional responses, lack of clarity of emotional responses, nonacceptance of emotional responses, limited access to emotion regulation strategies perceived as effective, and difficulties controlling impulses when experiencing in goal-directed behaviors when experiencing negative emotions. Research found that there is a significant direct effect on emotion regulation difficulties and eating disorder symptoms but not perfectionism (Mohorić et al., 2023). In addition, another study showed that in the context of possible involvement in eating disorder behaviors, emotion dysregulation was identified as having a unique positive relationship with participation in binge eating and purging in a community sample (Trompeter et al., 2022).

Previous studies have demonstrated the important role of emotional regulation difficulties in eating disorders. For example, Muir et al. (2024) found that difficulties in regulating positive emotions partially mediated the relationship between alexithymia and eating disorder symptoms in college students. Similarly, Forrer et al. (2024) demonstrated that emotional regulation difficulties predicted higher frequency of binge eating and greater severity of eating disorders in patients with BED. Although these findings consistently highlight the role of emotional dysregulation, there has been no study that integrates various research results to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between emotional dysregulation and eating disorders. As cases of eating disorders increase, this study aims to understand the relationship between emotional dysregulation and eating disorders and how emotional dysregulation can lead to eating disorders. The method used is a systematic review, which allows for the integration of previous findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this issue.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

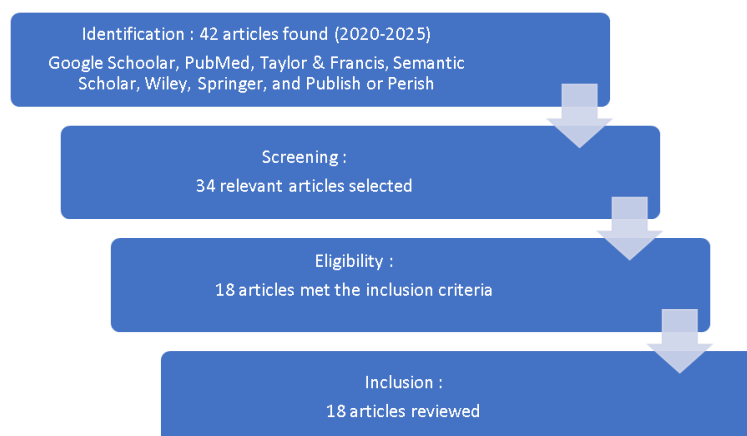
This study uses a systematic review method to obtain various sources that are relevant to the title to be discussed. In the article review process, the guidelines used are Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta Analysis (PRISMA). The steps in the process include identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During the identification stage, several criteria are established for analyzing articles. Some of the criteria used are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Article Criteria

No.	Inclusion Criteria
1	Year of publication between 2020 – 2025
2	Articles indexed in Sinta or Scopus
3	Articles are openly accessible
4	Having keywords such as “emotion regulation and eating disorder”, “emotion dysregulation and eating disorder”, and “emotion regulation difficulties and eating disorder”
5	Findings of articles relevant to the topic discussed.

The results obtained were then identified using the PRISMA method based on the following criteria:

During the identification stage, articles were searched for in various online databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, Taylor & Francis, Semantic Scholar, Wiley, Springer, and Publish or Perish using the keywords “emotion regulation and eating disorder,” “emotion dysregulation and eating disorder,” and “emotion regulation difficulties and eating disorder.” The search yielded 42 articles from 2020 to 2025. The screening stage was carried out by analyzing articles relevant to the research topic, resulting in 34 articles. In the eligibility stage, articles that passed the screening stage were then evaluated to obtain articles that met the inclusion criteria and eliminate articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria, resulting in 18 articles. In the inclusion stage, articles that had been tested for eligibility were then reviewed to obtain a summary of the results and conclusions, with a total of 18 articles.



The search for articles was conducted in various online databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, Taylor & Francis, Semantic Scholar, Wiley, Springer, and Publish or Perish using the keywords “emotion regulation and eating disorder,” “emotion dysregulation and eating disorder,” and “emotion regulation difficulties and eating disorder”. The author limited the article search to the period from 2020 to 2025 indexed by Sinta or Scopus. Articles that had undergone the screening process were then analyzed and tested for feasibility. After eligibility, articles that met the inclusion criteria were obtained, used, and reviewed.

3 RESULTS

Table 2. Literature Study

Research identity	Title	Method	Participants	Results
Xanthe Muir, David A. Preece & Rodrigo Becerra (2024)	Alexithymia and eating disorder symptoms: the mediating role of emotion regulation	Quantitative	255 psychology students aged 18 to 62	Difficulty regulating positive emotions was found to partially mediate the relationship between alexithymia and eating disorder symptoms.
Felicitas Marius, Forrer, Rubo, Andrea Wyssen, Andrea H. Meyer, & Simone Munsch (2024)	The predictive value of emotion regulation difficulties and negative mood on short and long-term treatment outcomes in an online guided self-help programme for adults with binge-eating disorder	Quantitative	63 adults with BED	Emotion regulation difficulties predicted more frequent binge eating and eating disorder severity at the end of the treatment process, even after taking into account gender and baseline values for each binge eating week outcome and eating disorder pathology.
Zehra Bekmezci & Safiye Elif Çağatay(2024)	Investigation of the role of difficulty in emotion regulation in the relationship between attachment styles and binge eating disorder	Quantitative	364 participants living in different provinces of Turkey	Emotion regulation difficulties play a mediating role in the relationship between binge eating disorder symptoms and anxious and avoidant attachment styles. The findings from this study also suggest that individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment styles and experiencing emotion regulation difficulties may have more BED symptoms.
Ruoyu Zhou, Lei Zhang, Ziqi Liu & Bing Cao (2025)	Emotion regulation difficulties and disordered eating in adolescents and young adults: a meta-analysis	Systematic literature search & meta analysis		The results of a meta-analysis of 23 international studies show that there is a moderate positive relationship in difficulty regulating emotions and disordered eating, where it is said that the more difficult it is to control emotions, the more likely disordered eating is to occur.

Marta Mirabella, Nicola Carone, Anna Franco, Michele Angelo Rugo, Anna Maria Speranza, Claudia Mazzeschi, Vittorio Lingiardi, & Laura Muzi (2024)	Emotional dysregulation and eating symptoms in gender dysphoria and eating disorders: the mediating role of body uneasiness	Quantitative	96 women (32 diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, 32 diagnosed with bulimia nervosa, and 32 diagnosed with gender dysphoria).	Compared to individuals diagnosed with gender dysphoria, bulimia nervosa patients showed higher emotion dysregulation. In addition, in patients with anorexia nervosa, there is an association between emotion dysregulation and ED symptoms.
Jenni Leppanen, Dalia Brown, Hannah McLinden, Steven Williams & Kate Tchanturia (2022)	The Role of Emotion Regulation in Eating Disorders: A Network Meta-Analysis Approach	Meta analysis & Correlation coefficients		A total of 104 studies were included in the meta-analysis and correlation coefficients representing the relationship between specific emotion regulation strategies and disordered eating symptoms were extracted. Difficulties in adaptive emotion regulation, specifically with receiving emotions, is another domain that is strongly associated with eating disorder psychopathology in this review.
Sara Iannattone, Silvia Cerea, Eleonora Carraro, Marta Ghisi & Gioia Bottesi (2022)	Broad and Narrow Transdiagnostic Risk Factors in Eating Disorders: A Preliminary Study on an Italian Clinical Sample	Quantitative	The overall sample consisted of 50 Italian female patients seeking treatment for ED; specifically, 29 (58%) were diagnosed with AN, 13 (26%) with BN, 3 (6%) with Binge Eating Disorder (BED), and 5 (10%) with Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorders (OSFED).	Emotional dysregulation is a significant predictor of psychological disorders in patients with eating disorders.
Shahrzad Ahmadkaraji, Hojjatollah Farahani, Koosha Orf, & Fahimeh Fathali Lavasani (2023)	Food addiction and binge eating disorder are linked to shared and unique deficits in emotion regulation among female seeking bariatric surgery	Quantitative & cross sectional	128 obese women aged 18 to 65 years who were undergoing psychological evaluation before bariatric surgery at Iran University of Medical Sciences.	Individuals with obesity and BED have greater emotion regulation dysfunction than other groups, especially in the limitation of emotion regulation strategies. This study revealed that patients in the BED group

					showed greater deficits in all domains of emotion regulation dysfunction compared to those in the OB group.
Farid Benzerouk, Zoubir Djerada and Arthur Kaladjian, Eric Bertin, Sarah Barrière, & Fabien Gierski (2020)	Contributions of Emotional Overload, Emotion Dysregulation, and Impulsivity to Eating Patterns in Obese Patients with Binge Eating Disorder and Seeking Bariatric Surgery	Quantitative	Participants were 79.3% female and aged between 19 and 58 years, with a mean age of 40.82 years.	The results of this study suggest that obese patients with BED undergoing bariatric surgery have limited global access to the use of flexible adaptive emotion regulation.	
Bernadette Kun, Robert Urbán, Attila Szabo, Anna Magi, Andrea Eisinger, & Zsolt Demetrovics (2021)	Emotion Dysregulation Mediates the Relationship Between Psychological Distress, Symptoms of Exercise Addiction and Eating Disorders: A Large-scale Survey Among Fitness Center Users	Cross-sectional study	1,790 people between the ages of 18 and 60 at various fitness centers.	Emotion regulation difficulties found to mediate the relationship between psychological symptoms and eating disorders among women	
Sarah Gerges, Souheil Hallit, Diana Malaeb, & Sahar Obeid (2022)	Maladaptive Cognitive Schemas as Predictors of Disordered Eating: Examining the Indirect Pathway through Emotion Regulation Difficulties	Observational study	982 young adults aged between 18 and 30 years old.	Indirectly, emotion regulation difficulties play a role in the relationship between maladaptive cognitive structures and eating disorder behaviors.	
Anna Walenda, Barbara Kostecka, Philip S. Santangelo & Katarzyna Kucharska (2021)	Examining emotion regulation in binge eating disorder	Quantitative	The study involved 76 women aged 22 to 60 years. Thirty-five women were outpatients diagnosed with binge eating disorder, who were assessed from January 2019 to April 2020.	The results showed that lower levels of acceptance of emotional reactions, lack of understanding of emotions, difficulty in performing goal-focused behaviors, difficulty in regulating impulses, and limitations in applying emotion regulation strategies were found in the BED group compared to healthy women.	
Reine Azzi, Serena Samaha, Diana Malaeb, Marwan	The association between mental health and Bulimia	Descriptive cross-sectional	Lebanese young adults with 353	Results showed that emotion regulation difficulties were	

Akel, Vanessa Azzi, Souheil Hallit & Sahar Obeid (2023)	Nervosa among a sample of Lebanese young adults: the indirect effect of difficulties in emotion regulation	observational study	males and 822 females	associated with higher bulimia nervosa
Sabina Huseynbalayeva & Derya Durusu Emek Savas (2025)	Affective factors predicting Binge Eating Disorder: The role of emotion regulation, impulsivity, and cognitive distortions	Quantitative	460 female participants from different provinces of Turkey.	The results of parallel mediation analysis showed that emotion dysregulation, impulsivity, and cognitive distortions were significant predictors of binge eating disorder symptoms.
Elin Monell, David Clinton & Andreas Birgegård (2020)	Self-directed behaviors differentially explain associations between emotion dysregulation and eating disorder psychopathology in patients with or without objective binge-eating	Quantitative	999 female patients aged 16-72 years (M=24.8, SD=8.4) with restrictive AN subtype (AN-R; n=172), binge/purge AN subtype (AN-BP; n=64), BN (n=350), binge eating disorder (BED; n=40), and other defined eating disorder (OSFED; n=373).	Results suggest that emotion dysregulation is associated with ED psycho-pathology through specific self-directed behaviors.
Kelly A. Romano, Carol B. Peterson, Glen Forester, Joseph A. Wonderlich, Stephen A. Wonderlich, Scott E. Engel, & Ross D. Crosby (2025)	Momentary Meditational Associations Among Affect, Emotion Dysregulation, and Different Types of Loss of Control Eating Among Adults With Binge Eating Disorder	Quantitative	Participants included 112 adults aged 18-65 with DSM-5 BED	The results showed that greater emotion dysregulation mediated the relationship between greater negative affect and several dimensions of loss of control eating at the momentary level among adults with BED.
Sílvia Félix, Sónia Gonçalves, Rita Ramos, Ana Tavares, Ana Rita Vaz, Paulo P. P. Machado, & Eva Conceição (2025)	Emotion regulation as a transdiagnostic construct across the spectrum of disordered eating in adolescents: A systematic review	Systematic review		In adolescents with eating disorders, emotion regulation difficulties are associated with both restrictive eating disorder subtypes and bulimia
Xiao Li, Xiaowei Liu, Yu Wang, Lingfei Li, Linli Zheng, Yaya Liu, Jing Ma & Lan Zhang (2020)	Altered regional gray matter volume in Chinese female patients with bulimia nervosa	Quantitative	34 women diagnosed with bulimia nervosa. As controls, 34 women were recruited age-matched with BMI within the normal	This study showed decreased regional gray matter volume in several brain areas of women with bulimia nervosa. These structural changes may be associated with impaired inhibitory

range of 18.5-23.9 control, body
who reported no dissatisfaction, and
history of eating emotion dysregulation.
disorders or other
psychiatric
disorders.

Based on the results of the review, this study found that difficulties in regulating emotions play a role as a cause of eating disorders. Difficulties in regulating emotions are a cause of eating disorders, both directly and indirectly. Several studies state that emotional dysregulation causes eating disorders directly, including a study by Azzi et al. (2023) which states that emotional dysregulation is associated with higher bulimia nervosa, and Walenda et al. (2021) also revealed that when emotional reaction acceptance is lower, lack of understanding of emotions, difficulty performing goal-focused behaviors, difficulty controlling desires, and limited application of emotional regulation strategies were found in the binge eating disorder group compared to healthy women. Conversely, several studies reveal the role of emotional dysregulation indirectly related to eating disorders, such as the study by Muir et al. (2024) which found that difficulty regulating positive emotions acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between alexithymia and eating disorder symptoms and also Gerges et al. (2022) revealed that emotional dysregulation mediates the relationship between maladaptive cognitive structures and eating disorder behaviors.

4 DISCUSSIONS

Based on a review of the 18 articles analyzed, there were 6 articles that only involved female subjects. This study generally focused on patients with eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder, as well as women who were obese and undergoing bariatric evaluation. Meanwhile, the other 12 articles involved mixed subjects, both male and female, with subjects ranging in age from adolescents to adults. Several studies also highlighted adolescent and young adult groups, showing a significant correlation between difficulty managing emotions and eating disorder symptoms from an early age.

Another result found that people who were medically diagnosed with binge eating disorder (BED) had a lower ability to manage feelings than other groups. Some articles that support this finding include Forrer et al. (2024), Walenda et al. (2021), Ahmadkaraji et al. (2023), and Benzerouk et al. (2020). The results found included patients attending clinics as well as patients who were on medication such as DBT therapy. These findings suggest that people with a diagnosis of BED tend to have more severe emotion regulation problems, as seen from high scores on various aspects such as difficulty controlling impulses, difficulty accepting feelings, and limitations in using emotion regulation tools (Walenda et al. 2021). In fact, a study by Li et al. (2020) showed changes in brain structure in individuals with bulimia nervosa related to difficulties with self-control and emotion regulation, suggesting that emotion dysregulation also has a biological dimension. This can occur because there are parts of the brain structure that play a role in regulating emotions, such as the amygdala, which plays an important role in emotional responses, and the hippocampus, which plays an important role in regulating emotions (Chen et al., 2024).

Articles by Félix et al. (2025), Zhou et al. (2025), Azzi et al. (2023), Gerges et al. (2022), and Muir et al. (2024) all showed that adolescents and young adults tend to have a significant association between poor emotional control and eating disorders, including binge eating disorder. In these studies, low emotion control scores in the younger age group were positively and significantly associated with eating disorder symptoms experienced.

Ahmadkaraji et al. (2023) and Benzerouk et al. (2020) obtained similar results, where participants who were obese, eating disorders (BED), and were in the preparation stage of bariatric surgery showed higher uncontrollable emotion scores than other groups. In both studies, the BED group was compared with an obese group that did not have an eating disorder, and it was found that the BED group had significantly greater difficulty managing emotions. These results suggest that the combination of obesity, eating disorders, and medical conditions such as surgery preparation led to a significant increase in uncontrollable emotions scores in this group.

A review of 18 studies showed that there is a fairly close relationship between emotion dysregulation and eating disorders but it was also found that emotion dysregulation can also act as an intermediary or indirect link in the eating disorder relationship. Results of research by Muir et al. (2024) showed that difficulty regulating positive emotions can mediate the relationship between alexithymia and eating disorder symptoms, this can occur when individuals who have high eating disorder attitudes and behaviors may have difficulty controlling positive emotions especially if the basis of emotional

awareness is poor. Individuals with alexithymia and eating disorders may also find it difficult to resist the urge to engage in eating disorders such as binge eating and purging when there is an increase in positive emotions (Muir et al., 2024). Emotion dysregulation also mediates the relationship between psychological symptoms and eating disorders among women (Kun et al., 2021), plays an indirect role in the relationship between maladaptive cognitive structures and disordered eating behaviors (Gerges et al., 2022), is related to eating disorder psychopathology through pathology specific self directed behaviors (Monell et al., 2020), mediator of the relationship between greater negative affect and some dimensions of momentary loss of control eating among adults with BED (Romano et al., 2025), as well as an intermediary in the relationship between binge eating disorder symptoms and anxious and avoidant attachment styles and individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment styles also experience emotion regulation difficulties may have more BED symptoms (Bekmezci & Çağatay 2024).

Individuals who have difficulty recognizing, understanding, and managing their feelings often use eating as a way to cope. For example, overeating usually occurs when a person feels depressed, afraid, or angry, or when positive feelings that are too strong are difficult to control (Muir et al., 2024; Romano et al., 2025). Research also shows that the inability to manage emotional feelings is associated with an increase in overeating habits and symptoms of eating disorders in adolescents and adults (Zhou et al., 2025; Félix et al., 2025). In addition, the inability to regulate emotions is also a factor that links things such as anxiety in relationships, unhealthy thoughts, and negative feelings with unhealthy eating habits (Bekmezci & Çağatay, 2024; Gerges et al., 2022). Therefore, the more difficult it is for someone to regulate their emotions, the more likely they are to experience emotional eating and develop eating disorders, as eating is seen as a quick way to reduce emotional tension that cannot be addressed in a healthy manner.

This study also has strengths. Using a systematic review approach, this study organized and integrated the relevant literature on emotion dysregulation and eating disorders to provide supportive findings that emotion dysregulation causes eating disorders based on relevant articles. However, this study has some limitations. As a review study, this research did not involve primary data collection, so variations in study quality and measurement instruments may affect the conclusions.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research results from the 18 articles analyzed, it can be concluded that difficulties in regulating emotions play an important role in the emergence and perpetuation of eating disorders, especially binge eating disorder (BED). Most studies show that people who have difficulty in recognizing, understanding and managing both positive and negative emotions tend to experience more severe eating disorder symptoms. Difficulty regulating emotions is not only a direct predictor of eating disorder symptoms, but also acts as a connector in various other psychological relationships, such as the relationship with alexithymia, psychological stress levels, and emotional attachment patterns. Consistent results were also found among women, adolescents, as well as individuals with medical conditions such as obesity or patients undergoing pre-bariatric surgery screening, where these groups tended to have higher emotion regulation difficulty scores than the control group. In addition, this review found that the impact of emotion dysregulation applies to different types of eating disorders, meaning that these mechanisms not only affect one specific type of eating disorder such as bulimia or BED but also influence the emergence of various other types of eating disorders.

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