

Emotion Regulation Is Motivated

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Because emotion regulation is a motivated process, one must adopt a motivational perspective to understand it. We build on the distinction between goal setting (i.e., selecting end-states to achieve) and goal striving (i.e., engaging in behaviors to achieve desired end-states). First, we discuss how these concepts apply to regulation in the emotion domain. Second, we review existing research on setting emotion goals and striving for them. Third, we highlight how goal setting and goal striving can operate in tandem to shape emotion regulation. Finally, we highlight the importance of considering emotion regulation as a motivated process, and how doing so informs key topics explored in this special issue, including those pertaining to determinants (e.g., culture as setting emotion goals), consequences (e.g., monitoring emotion goal progress and mental health), and interventions (e.g., manipulating features of emotion goal setting and striving to promote adaptive emotion regulation).

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Emotion regulation is an instantiation of motivated regulation in the emotion domain. To understand it, it is essential to consider concepts and principles of regulation (Tamir & Millgram, 2017; Webb, Schweiger Gallo, Miles, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2012). Motivated regulation is a process in which action is directed to shift current states toward desired states (i.e., goals; Carver & Scheier, 2000). Accordingly, emotion regulation is a process in which action is directed to shift current emotions toward desired emotions (i.e., emotion goals). Self-regulation targets intrinsic states but can extend to social regulation when targeting extrinsic states. Accordingly, intrinsic emotion regulation occurs when people target their own emotions, whereas extrinsic emotion regulation occurs when people target emotions of others. All forms of emotion regulation are directed toward emotion goals. Therefore, knowledge about the nature of goals (e.g., Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007), organization of goal systems (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2002), and dynamics of goal pursuit (e.g., Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2001) should inform the regulation of emotion. This contribution highlights the importance of a motivational perspective for emotion regulation.


We focus on the distinction in motivation science between goal setting and goal striving (e.g., Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2001). *Goal setting* refers to choosing which goals to pursue, whereas *goal striving* refers to directing behavior toward goals. Research on goal setting typically focuses on goal content (i.e., what do

people want?) and on what leads people to prioritize certain goals over others, whereas research on goal striving typically focuses on the means (i.e., strategies and tactics) available for goal pursuit and their selection and implementation (see Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2001).

In emotion regulation, goal setting corresponds to the selection of emotion goals (i.e., desired emotions; Mauss & Tamir, 2014), whereas goal striving corresponds to the selection and implementation of behaviors directed toward achieving emotion goals (e.g., emotion regulation strategies; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). In Gross's extended process model (Gross, 2015), emotion goal setting overlaps with the identification stage, whereas emotion goal striving overlaps with the selection and implementation stages. Below, we discuss how the distinction between setting and striving for emotion goals advances research and practice in emotion regulation, pointing to novel questions and directions.

Setting Goals in Emotion Regulation

Goals refer to desired end-states (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007). A target goal (e.g., lose weight) can serve higher-order goals (e.g., be healthy) and be subserved by lower-order goals (e.g., exercise). Together, goals at different levels of abstraction comprise a goal system (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Higher-order goals are sometimes called “motives,” reflecting why people pursue the target goal. Lower-order goals are sometimes called “means,” reflecting how people pursue the target goal. In the emotion domain, *emotion goals* refer to desired emotions (Mauss & Tamir, 2014). They capture the identity (e.g., feel happy) or amount (e.g., feel very happy) of a desired emotion, or the direction of the desired change (e.g., feel happier). An emotion goal (e.g., feel happier) may serve higher-order goals (e.g., find meaning in life) and be subserved by lower-order goals (e.g., think positively). *Goal setting in emotion regulation* refers to the activation of emotion goals and not higher-order elements (i.e., motives) or lower-order elements (e.g., strat-

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egies) in the system. It is the activation of emotion goals, specifically, which defines emotion regulation and sets it apart from other forms of self-regulation (Gross, 2015).

When pursuing emotions, people typically want to feel good and avoid feeling bad (e.g., English, Lee, John, & Gross, 2017; Riediger, Schmiedek, Wagner, & Lindenberg, 2009). But this is not always the case. Researchers became interested in emotion goal setting, as evidence for variability in emotion goals across individuals and contexts gradually accumulated. First, focusing on the content of emotion goals, researchers discovered that people can be motivated to decrease and increase pleasant and unpleasant emotions (see Tamir, 2016). For example, people can pursue more or less happiness (e.g., Millgram, Joormann, Huppert, Lampert, & Tamir, 2018), anger (e.g., Tamir & Ford, 2012), or compassion (e.g., Cameron & Payne, 2011). Research demonstrated that emotion goals differ by context (e.g., Tamir & Ford, 2012), age (e.g., Riediger et al., 2009), personality (e.g., Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003), gender (e.g., Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 1998), and culture (e.g., Miyamoto & Ma, 2011).

Second, researchers examined motives underlying emotion goal setting, discovering that people pursue emotion goals to fulfill hedonic or instrumental motives (i.e., behavioral, social, epistemic, eudaimonic; Tamir, 2016). For instance, people may want to increase happiness to feel good, to increase creativity, or to make friends. Laboratory studies confirmed the role of hedonic and instrumental motives in guiding emotion goal setting (e.g., Tamir & Ford, 2012), and daily diary studies confirmed such motives guide emotion regulation in daily life (e.g., English et al., 2017; Kalokerinos, Tamir, & Kuppens, 2017). Additional studies focused on other determinants of emotion goal setting, including evaluations of emotions (e.g., Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Gable, 2011; Netzer, Gutentag, Kim, Solak, & Tamir, 2018), beliefs about emotions (Ford & Gross, 2019), and emotion norms (Eid & Diener, 2001). Taken together, such research has begun to explain why certain emotion goals are more likely to be activated in some people in certain contexts. The activation of emotion goals initiates emotion regulation. Yet, to progress, people must shift from emotion goal setting to goal striving.

Striving for Goals in Emotion Regulation

Emotion goal striving refers to selecting and implementing emotion regulation strategies and tactics to shift current emotions into desired emotions. Most research on emotion regulation has targeted goal striving, focusing on identifying (e.g., Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999), modeling (e.g., Gross, 2015), and testing the efficacy (e.g., Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Webb, Miles, et al., 2012) of emotion regulation strategies. Other efforts have focused on studying what leads people to select strategies (e.g., Sheppes, Scheibe, Suri, & Gross, 2011). Discoveries regarding emotion regulation strategies are summarized in other contributions to this special issue.

We argue that to understand emotion regulation, it is necessary to distinguish between setting emotion goals and striving for them. Unfortunately, because they were not always manipulated independently, effects of emotion goal setting and striving may have been confounded in the literature. For instance, studies on cognitive reappraisal sometimes confound effects of implementing cognitive reappraisal with effects of activating prohedonic emotion

goals (Tamir, Halperin, Porat, Bigman, & Hasson, 2019). Although disentangling emotion goal setting from striving may be difficult, we believe it is possible in some contexts, and attempted to do this empirically (Tamir et al., 2019). We manipulated emotion goal setting by activating specific emotion goals (e.g., decrease negative feelings) and manipulated emotion goal striving by directing people to use specific emotion regulation strategies (i.e., cognitive reappraisal). We discovered that activating emotion goals can trigger desired shifts in emotions, potentially by activating accessible strategies. Instructing people to decrease negative feelings was as effective in doing so as were instructions to decrease negative feelings using cognitive reappraisal. In contrast, people who were instructed to use cognitive reappraisal without specifying emotion goals did not differ from those instructed to respond naturally. This is because some people used reappraisal to decrease negative feelings, whereas others used it to increase them. These findings suggest that some effects previously attributed to emotion regulation strategies should have perhaps been attributed to activating emotion goals.

Emotion goal setting and emotion goal striving may offer unique contributions to emotion regulation. Ultimately, however, they are two elements of one process. The next challenge, therefore, is understanding how emotion goal setting and striving operate in tandem to shape emotion regulation.

Integrating Goal Setting and Goal Striving in Emotion Regulation

Motivational theories consider goal setting and goal striving as interdependent (e.g., Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2001; Kruglanski et al., 2002). First, because goals and means are associated within a goal system, activating a goal automatically activates associated means, and vice versa (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003). As mentioned above, activating emotion goals automatically triggers the implementation of accessible emotion regulation strategies (Tamir et al., 2019). Similarly, implementing emotion regulation strategies can automatically activate accessible emotion goals. For instance, activating cognitive reappraisal outside of awareness led people to use it to decrease negative feelings, without being instructed to do so (Williams, Bargh, Nocera, & Gray, 2009). Therefore, there might be bidirectional associations between setting and striving for emotion goals.

Second, goal setting and goal striving often interact, such that what people do to pursue goals depends on the goals they pursue (Kruglanski et al., 2002). For example, students are more likely to study than to go party when they prioritize academic over social achievement. Emotion goal setting and emotion goal striving also interact, such that what people do to attain emotion goals may depend on the emotion goals they pursue. For instance, people are more likely to use rumination than distraction when they want to increase (vs. decrease) emotional intensity (Millgram, Sheppes, Kalokerinos, Kuppens, & Tamir, 2019). Similarly, which reappraisal tactic people select may depend on the discrete emotions they want to regulate (Vishkin, Hasson, Millgram, & Tamir, 2019).

What people do to attain emotion goals might also depend on the higher-order goals they pursue. For example, people are more likely to use expressive suppression when driven by social motives and more likely to use distraction and reappraisal when driven by hedonic motives (English et al., 2017). Emotion goals can influ-

ence the selection of means, yet means can also influence the activation of goals (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003). For instance, the emotion goals people select may be constrained by the emotion regulation strategies accessible to them. Such possibilities are yet to be tested.

What drives associations between setting and striving for emotion goals? People may select strategies that are more effective in attaining their emotion goals. For instance, people selected distraction to decrease emotional intensity because it was more effective than rumination in doing so (Millgram et al., 2018). People may also select strategies they expect to be more effective, whether or not they actually are. For instance, people selected reappraisal tactics they expected to be effective for regulating specific emotions, even though, in actuality, this was not always the case (Vishkin et al., 2019).

If emotion goal setting and emotion goal striving influence each other, future research should identify factors that shape such interactions. For instance, the emotion regulation strategies we select may depend on our beliefs about links between strategies and goals. Such beliefs could be learned, in part, from our social environment. For example, members of different cultures may select different means to strive for the same emotion goal. Supporting this idea, members of more (vs. less) collectivistic cultures are more likely to implement socially engaging strategies to increase happiness (Ford et al., 2015). Culture may also shape beliefs about relations between emotion goals and higher-order motives. In individualistic (vs. collectivistic) cultures, for example, positive emotions are considered more likely to satisfy social motives (e.g., Miyamoto & Ma, 2011), whereas in collectivistic (vs. individualistic) cultures, guilt and shame are considered more likely to satisfy social motives (De Leersnyder, Boiger, & Mesquita, 2013). Future research can explore how individual and social experiences shape emotion goal setting, emotion goal striving, and their relations.

Motivation Informs Key Topics in Emotion Regulation

A motivational perspective informs key topics in emotion regulation, including those examined in this special issue. First, motivation informs research on mechanisms of emotion regulation, including their neural underpinnings. Some models (e.g., Etkin, Büchel, & Gross, 2015) indicate that brain regions associated with emotion regulation (e.g., amygdala, dPFC, vPFC) reflect processes of valuation and action-selection. Future research could test whether brain regions involved in emotion regulation are differentially implicated in setting emotion goals and striving for them.

Second, consequences of emotion regulation depend on goal setting, goal striving, or their interaction. As discussed above, changes in emotions can result from activating emotion goals (e.g., Tamir et al., 2019) or strategies (e.g., Williams et al., 2009). Successful emotion regulation may also depend on matching strategies to goals. For instance, using rumination to decrease emotional intensity may be counterproductive (Millgram et al., 2018). Setting and striving for emotion goals shape immediate, but also later, emotional consequences. Both may contribute to effects of emotion regulation on mental health, well-being, and social relationships.

Regarding mental health, dysfunctional emotion regulation may result from deficits in goal setting. Depressed (vs. nondepressed)

individuals, for example, are less motivated to feel happy and more motivated to feel sad (Millgram, Joormann, Huppert, & Tamir, 2015). How motivated depressed people were to feel happy prospectively predicted their clinical symptoms during stressful times (Millgram, Joormann, Huppert, Lampert, & Tamir, 2018). Dysfunctional emotion regulation may also result from deficits in goal striving. Depressed (vs. nondepressed) individuals, for example, use maladaptive emotion regulation strategies more and adaptive strategies less (Aldao et al., 2010). Understanding how emotion goal setting and striving contribute, separately and together, to emotional dysfunction is an important challenge.

Emotion goal setting and striving may also influence well-being. People report greater well-being when they experience emotions they desire or desire emotions they experience (Ford, Lam, John, & Mauss, 2018; Tamir, Schwartz, Oishi, & Kim, 2017). Consistent with predictions of motivational theories (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 2000), these findings indicate that people are more satisfied with life when there is a match between their actual and desired emotions. Links between emotion regulation and well-being may be complex, because emotions serve as desired end-states and as signals of goal progress, and the two inputs are not always aligned (e.g., Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011). Future research could reveal how emotion goal setting and striving jointly contribute to adaptive functioning.

Distinguishing between emotion goal setting and striving can also inform the social consequences of emotion regulation. Regarding goal setting, activating adaptive emotion goals can contribute to desired social outcomes. For example, motivating people to decrease anger toward outgroup members led to positive social consequences (Porat, Halperin, & Tamir, 2016). Future research could test whether social outcomes depend on emotion goals of individual members within the social unit, and on whether these goals are consistent or conflict across members of the unit. Regarding goal striving, training people to use adaptive tools to regulate emotions in social contexts can facilitate desired social outcomes. For example, training people to use cognitive reappraisal decreased anger toward outgroups and decreased support for aggressive action (Halperin, Porat, Tamir, & Gross, 2013). Future research could also test whether and how people use other people to strive for emotion goals.

Finally, a motivational perspective points to novel interventions. We propose that to promote mental health and well-being, people could be motivated to set adaptive and feasible emotion goals. They can be taught to persistently strive for these goals, and select strategies suited to pursue them. Because regulating emotions is effortful, one potential intervention might involve motivating people to desire emotions they already experience (as in certain forms of mindfulness), thereby minimizing frustration that accompanies failure in goal pursuit. These ideas await future testing but reflect the promise of differentiating between setting and striving for emotion goals. More generally, they demonstrate the utility of adopting a motivational perspective to understand emotion regulation. For recommendations for further readings, please see the [online supplementary material](#).

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