

Emotion Regulation Strategies and Academic Stress Among First-Year Psychology Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: First-year university students are vulnerable to academic stress because they must adapt to new learning demands, evaluations, and social environments. Emotion regulation is often considered a protective factor, yet findings remain inconsistent across contexts. **Objective:** This study examined the relationship between emotion regulation and academic stress among early-year students at the Faculty of Psychology, University X. **Method:** A quantitative correlational design was used with 320 students selected through cluster sampling. Data were collected using the Indonesian Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; 10 items; $\alpha = .752$) and the Indonesian Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA; 9 items; $\alpha = .795$). Because one variable was not normally distributed, data were analyzed using Spearman's rho with an aspect-level analysis. **Result:** Emotion regulation was positively related to academic stress, but the association was very weak ($\rho = .169$, $p = .002$). Cognitive reappraisal was not significantly related to academic stress ($\rho = .020$, $p = .724$), whereas expressive suppression was positively and significantly related to academic stress ($\rho = .232$, $p < .001$). **Conclusion:** A higher total ERQ score does not necessarily reflect more adaptive emotion regulation. Universities may consider implementing emotion regulation psychoeducation programs, cognitive reappraisal training, and accessible counseling services for first-year students to support adaptation and reduce academic stress.

Keywords: Emotion regulation, academic stress, first-year students, expressive suppression, psychology students

ABSTRAK

Latar Belakang: Mahasiswa tahun pertama rentan mengalami stres akademik karena harus menyesuaikan diri dengan tuntutan pembelajaran, evaluasi, dan lingkungan sosial yang baru. Regulasi emosi sering dianggap sebagai faktor protektif, tetapi temuan penelitian sebelumnya masih menunjukkan hasil yang tidak konsisten pada berbagai konteks. **Tujuan:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji hubungan antara regulasi emosi dan stres akademik pada mahasiswa awal Fakultas Psikologi Universitas X. **Metode:** Penelitian menggunakan desain kuantitatif korelasional dengan melibatkan 320 mahasiswa yang dipilih melalui teknik *cluster sampling*. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan *Emotion Regulation Questionnaire* versi Indonesia (ERQ; 10 aitem; $\alpha = 0,752$) dan *Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents* versi Indonesia (ESSA; 9 aitem; $\alpha = 0,795$). Karena salah satu variabel tidak berdistribusi normal, analisis data dilakukan menggunakan korelasi *Spearman's rho* disertai analisis tingkat aspek. **Hasil:** Regulasi emosi berhubungan positif dengan stres akademik, tetapi kekuatan hubungannya sangat lemah ($\rho = 0,169$; $p = 0,002$). *Cognitive reappraisal* tidak berhubungan signifikan dengan stres akademik ($\rho = 0,020$; $p = 0,724$), sedangkan *expressive suppression* berhubungan positif dan signifikan dengan stres akademik ($\rho = 0,232$; $p < 0,001$). **Kesimpulan:** Skor total ERQ yang lebih tinggi tidak selalu mencerminkan regulasi emosi yang lebih adaptif. Perguruan tinggi dapat mempertimbangkan penerapan program psikoedukasi regulasi emosi, pelatihan *cognitive reappraisal*, dan layanan konseling yang mudah diakses bagi mahasiswa tahun pertama untuk mendukung proses adaptasi dan mengurangi stres akademik.

Kata Kunci: Regulasi emosi, stres akademik, mahasiswa awal, expressive suppression, mahasiswa psikologi

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Introduction

First-year students are in a transitional phase toward higher education, marked by changes in academic, social, and emotional demands. During this phase, students are required to adapt to a more independent learning culture, a stricter evaluation schedule, and a new social environment. Consequently, the first year of college often becomes a period vulnerable to academic shock and academic stress (Erindana et al., 2021; Hidayati & Nurdin, 2022; Rahayu & Arianti, 2020).

Academic stress is a negative emotional response that occurs when students perceive academic demands to exceed their available resources. In the context of higher education, academic stress can manifest as pressure from coursework, heavy assignment loads, concerns about grades, self-expectations, and academic despair (Sun et al., 2011; Dewi et al., 2025). If not managed properly, this condition can reduce learning motivation, disrupt concentration, and increase psychological fatigue (Mahmudah & Prasetyo, 2022; Sarafino & Smith, 2011).

For psychology students, academic demands are not only related to assignments and evaluations but also to challenging coursework, the need for self-reflection, and the requirement for empathy toward the psychological material being studied. The researchers' preliminary study of 58 first-year students in the Faculty of Psychology at University X showed that 86.2% of respondents fell into the moderate to high academic stress category. These initial findings confirm that academic stress is a relevant issue in the early stages of university.

One factor believed to be associated with academic stress is emotion regulation. Emotion regulation is the process of monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional responses to ensure they remain appropriate to the demands of the situation (Gross, 2014; Thompson, 1994). In the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, emotion regulation is operationalized through two main strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression (Gross & John, 2003; Radde et al., 2021). Cognitive reappraisal is generally considered more adaptive because it involves re-evaluating the situation, whereas expressive suppression places greater emphasis on suppressing emotional expression after the emotion arises and is often associated with less adaptive coping (Aldao et al., 2016).

Most previous studies have found that emotion regulation is negatively associated with academic stress. Students with better emotion regulation tend to exhibit lower academic stress (Apriani & Nurulita, 2022; Aprilia & Yoenanto, 2022; Rahmi et al., 2025). However, findings are not always consistent. Angela and Murti (2025), on the other hand, found a weak positive relationship among students working on their final theses. This inconsistency suggests that the relationship between emotional regulation and academic stress may vary depending on the academic context and the dominant emotional regulation strategies used by students.

Given these conditions, this study aims to analyze the relationship between emotion regulation and academic stress among first-year students in the Faculty of Psychology at University X. Additional analyses were also conducted to examine the relationship between each emotion regulation strategy—namely cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression—and academic stress. Difficulties in emotion regulation may increase vulnerability to psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, and other mental health problems among first-year students. Therefore, understanding emotion regulation in relation to academic stress is also relevant within the field of health psychology, particularly in promoting psychological well-being among university students.

Material and Method

Participants

This study employed a quantitative approach with a correlational design. The study participants consisted of 320 first-year students in the Faculty of Psychology at University X for the 2025/2026 academic year, enrolled in semesters 1–2. First-year psychology students were selected because they face unique academic adjustment demands, including intensive coursework, self-reflection processes, adaptation to university learning systems, and exposure to psychologically demanding materials. These characteristics

may increase vulnerability to academic stress and make this population relevant for examining emotion regulation processes. The participants' age range was 17–21 years. The sample was selected using cluster sampling because the population was divided into naturally formed classes. The minimum target sample size was 235 respondents, while the final number meeting the analysis criteria was 320 respondents.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted by randomly selecting a freshman class from the available population; questionnaires were then distributed to students in the selected class online via Google Forms. Data collection was conducted during January 2026 – February 2026 through online questionnaire distribution. This research design did not involve any treatment or manipulation of participants but focused on measuring the relationships between variables. Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire, and confidentiality of responses was maintained throughout the research process.

Data Collection

Emotion regulation was measured using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) developed by Gross and John (2003) and adapted into Indonesian by Radde et al. (2021). This instrument consists of 10 items on a 7-point Likert scale, covering two emotion regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal (6 items) and expressive suppression (4 items). In this study, the ERQ scale demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha reliability of 0.752. Academic stress was measured using the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA) developed by Sun et al. (2011) and adapted into Indonesian by Dewi et al. (2025). The version used consists of 9 items on a 5-point Likert scale, representing five dimensions: pressure from study, workload, worry about grades, self-expectation, and despondency. In this study, the ESSA scale showed a Cronbach's alpha reliability of 0.795.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted descriptively and inferentially using JASP. The Shapiro–Wilk normality test indicated that one variable was not normally distributed ($p = 0.047$), while a visual inspection of the residual plot confirmed that the linearity assumption was met. Therefore, the hypotheses were tested using Spearman's rho correlation. Additional analyses were also conducted to test the relationship between each aspect of emotional regulation—namely, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression—and academic stress

Result

In general, the study sample was dominated by female students, aged 19–20 years, and living in dormitories. The majority of respondents fell into the moderate category for both emotional regulation and academic stress. Correlation test results showed that emotional regulation was significantly associated with academic stress, but the strength of the relationship was very weak.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics & Descriptive Categories of Research Variables

Characteristics	Category	N (%)
Age	17-18 years	47 (15%)
Age	19-20 years	244 (76%)
Age	21 years	29 (9%)
Gender	Male	46 (14%)
Gender	Female	274 (86%)
Characteristics	Category	N (%)
Place of residence	Home	136 (43%)
Place of residence	Rent	175 (55%)
Place of residence	Dormitory	9 (3%)
Educational background	High school	307 (96%)
Educational background	Vocational High School	10 (3%)

Educational background	Islamic boarding School	3 (1%)
Variable	Category	N (%)
Emotional Regulation	Low	49 (15%)
Emotional Regulation	Moderate	226 (71%)
Emotional Regulation	High	45 (14%)
Academic Stress	Low	54 (17%)
Academic Stress	Moderate	216 (68%)
Academic Stress	High	50 (16%)

The majority of participants were aged 19–20 years (76%), female (86%), lived in a boarding house (55%), and had a high school educational background (96%). Most respondents fell into the moderate category for emotion regulation (71%) and academic stress (68%). These findings indicate that first-year students in the study sample tend to use emotion regulation strategies at a moderate level but still experience academic stress at a moderate level.

Table 2. Correlation of Emotion Regulation and Academic Stress

Variable pairs	ρ	p
Total emotion regulation – academic stress	0.169	0.002
Cognitive reappraisal – academic stress	0.020	0.724
Expressive suppression – academic stress	0.232	<0.001

The findings indicate that although emotion regulation was significantly associated with academic stress, the relationship strength was very weak. This suggests that emotion regulation may contribute to academic stress, but other factors likely play a larger role. Further analysis showed that cognitive reappraisal was not significantly associated with academic stress, whereas expressive suppression showed a positive and significant association. This finding indicates that not all emotion regulation strategies contribute similarly to academic stress.

Discussion

This study indicates that emotion regulation is positively and significantly associated with academic stress among first-year students in the Faculty of Psychology at University X; however, the strength of this relationship is very weak. These findings do not support the initial hypothesis predicting a negative relationship between the two variables. Thus, emotion regulation in this study cannot be simply understood as a protective factor that directly reduces academic stress.

One of the most likely explanations is the method of measuring emotional regulation using the total ERQ score. This total score combines two strategies with different characteristics, namely cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression (Gross & John, 2003; Radde et al., 2021). Therefore, high ERQ scores do not always indicate more adaptive emotional regulation, but may also reflect the frequency of using less adaptive strategies, such as suppressing emotional expression.

Further analysis in this study clarifies this pattern. Cognitive reappraisal showed no significant association with academic stress, whereas expressive suppression was positively and significantly associated. These findings align with the view that suppressing emotional expression does not automatically reduce the experience of negative emotions themselves (Gross, 2014). Students may appear more externally controlled, but they still experience anxiety, pressure, or academic stress internally. In the short term, this strategy may help maintain one's self-image in social situations, but in the context of recurring academic demands, it may be associated with the accumulation of psychological stress (Aldao et al., 2016).

These findings align with those of Angela and Murti (2025), who also found a weak positive relationship between emotional regulation and academic stress. However, these results differ from several other studies reporting a negative relationship between the two variables (Apriani & Nurulita, 2022; Aprilia

& Yoenanto, 2022; Rahmi et al., 2025). This discrepancy suggests that the relationship between emotional regulation and academic stress is highly influenced by context. For first-year students, academic stress is not only related to the workload but also to the process of adjusting to new learning patterns, new social relationships, and personal expectations regarding academic performance (Erindana et al., 2021; Hidayati & Nurdin, 2022).

The very weak correlation also indicates that emotional regulation is not the only factor associated with academic stress. Academic stress among college students is likely also influenced by social support, academic self-efficacy, time management, and high academic demands (Lubis & Hanifah, 2020; Mahmudah & Prasetyo, 2022). This is consistent with the descriptive findings of the study that the majority of respondents fell into the moderate category for both emotional regulation and academic stress. In other words, students may exhibit moderate levels of emotional regulation but still experience significant academic pressure.

Practically, these results suggest that orientation programs for new students are insufficient if they merely encourage students to “control their emotions” in a general sense. Interventions would be more effective if directed toward developing more adaptive emotional regulation strategies, particularly cognitive reappraisal, as well as reducing excessive tendencies toward expressive suppression. Campus mental health interventions may include emotion regulation workshops focusing on cognitive reappraisal skills, preventive counseling services for first-year students, peer-support programs, and psychoeducation regarding adaptive coping strategies during academic adjustment. These findings may also support the development of freshman mentoring programs aimed at improving adaptive emotion regulation and helping students adjust more effectively to academic demands during their transition into university life.

This study has several limitations. First, all participants were from a single faculty and a single university, so the generalizability of the findings remains limited. Second, the sample composition was dominated by female students. Third, data were collected online using self-reports, so response bias cannot be entirely avoided.

Fourth, the use of the total ERQ score makes the relationship between emotion regulation and academic stress less specific. Future research is recommended to use a more heterogeneous sample, analyze each emotion regulation strategy separately, and include other relevant variables to make the explanatory model of academic stress more comprehensive.

Conclusion

This study indicates that emotional regulation is positively and significantly associated with academic stress among first-year students in the Faculty of Psychology at University X; however, the strength of this association is very weak. The findings regarding specific components reveal that cognitive reappraisal is not significantly associated with academic stress, whereas expressive suppression is positively and significantly associated. These results confirm that total emotional regulation scores do not always reflect adaptive emotional regulation. Therefore, universities should develop interventions emphasizing adaptive emotion regulation strategies, particularly cognitive reappraisal, alongside broader psychological and academic support. Practical initiatives may include psychoeducation programs, emotion regulation workshops, mentoring programs, and accessible counseling services for first-year students.

Author contribution statement

Gracia Defina Tumole contributed to the study design, data collection, statistical analysis, and manuscript preparation. Damajanti Kusuma Dewi contributed to the study design and manuscript preparation.

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