



Research Article

Trauma Exposure and Emotional Regulation as Predictors of Hypervigilance Among Young Adults

Pratishtha Verma ^{1*}, Dr Smriti Sethi ²

^{1,2} AIPS (Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences), Amity University Campus
Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author: *Pratishtha Verma

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Abstract

The study was conducted to examine the relationship between trauma exposure and levels of hypervigilance in young adults.

A quantitative correlational study involving a cross-sectional research design was used, and 150 young adults were studied on a quantitative basis by using a questionnaire on trauma exposure, emotion regulation skills, and hypervigilance. Using the JASP statistical software, descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation and multiple regression analysis were conducted. According to the results, there was a significant positive relationship between trauma exposure and hypervigilance and a negative relation between trauma exposure and emotion regulation skills and also a negative relation between emotion regulation skills and hypervigilance. Moreover, exposure to trauma and emotion regulation skills exhibited a significant predictive value of hypervigilance and explained a large percentage of the variance in hypervigilance in young adults, which states that exposure to a large number of traumatic events also increases hypervigilance, and a high level of emotion regulation has a shrinking impact on hypervigilance. The results underscore the relevance of emotion regulation skills as a protective psychological factor in trauma-related vigilance and propose that amplification of emotion regulation skills can be an element in enhancing the psychological adaptation of trauma-exposed young adults.

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KEYWORDS: trauma exposure, hypervigilance, emotion regulation skills, young adults, psychological adjustments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Background Young adulthood involves critical psychological, social, and occupational transitions, including academic pressures, shifting relationships, independence, and identity formation. These changes heighten vulnerability to stressors and trauma, which can profoundly impact emotional, cognitive, and behavioural functioning.

1.1 Trauma Exposure

Trauma involves experiences of actual or threatened death, injury, or integrity violation that overwhelm coping abilities. In young adults, common forms include interpersonal trauma (abuse, violence, bullying), accidental (accidents, injuries), and situational (disasters, loss, illness). Cumulative exposure is prevalent due to increased social activity and independence, exacerbating risks from academic, financial, and relational stressors. Trauma leads to intrusive memories, avoidance, arousal, anxiety, depression, and distorted emotional awareness, often manifesting as hypervigilance.

1.2 Hypervigilance

Hypervigilance is heightened sensory alertness, threat exaggeration, and constant environmental scanning, even in safe contexts. It features startle reflexes, poor concentration, irritability, insomnia, and biased threat processing rooted in maladaptive safety schemas. While adaptive post-trauma, chronic hypervigilance impairs attention, relationships, academics, and well-being. Its variability highlights individual emotional factors.

1.3 Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation encompasses monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional responses to meet goals and adapt to environments. It involves awareness, acceptance, cognitive reappraisal, problem-solving, and mindfulness (adaptive) versus suppression or rumination (maladaptive). Trauma disrupts these skills, fostering dysregulation and reliance on maladaptive strategies, increasing vulnerability to disorders like anxiety and PTSD.

1.4 Interrelationships and Study Aims

Theoretical models of emotion regulation as a mediator between trauma exposure and hypervigilance. Strong skills mitigate threat biases and hyperarousal by enabling emotional processing and reframing. Weaknesses amplify chronic vigilance. In young adults, enhancing regulation could promote recovery. This study examines correlations between trauma exposure and hypervigilance, and emotion regulation's role in this link, to inform interventions for trauma-exposed youth.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Cloitre, Miranda, Stovall-McClough and Han (2011)

They found that greater interpersonal trauma exposure in community and university adults was associated with more difficulties in emotional awareness, clarity and control, which strongly predicted hyperarousal symptoms such as constant

alertness and exaggerated startle, suggesting that emotion regulation deficits are a core mechanism linking trauma to symptomatology.

2. Ehring and Quack (2010)

In adult trauma survivors, maladaptive emotion regulation strategies (suppression, rumination, experiential avoidance) were positively related to hypervigilance and physiological reactivity, whereas adaptive strategies (especially cognitive reappraisal) were negatively related, showing that post-trauma regulation style is crucial for symptom severity.

3. Tull, Barrett, McMillan and Roemer (2011)

Among university young adults, higher trauma exposure related to greater emotional nonacceptance, lack of clarity and impulse-control difficulties under distress, and these regulation problems were closely tied to hyperarousal and heightened threat sensitivity, indicating that emotion dysregulation contributes to persistent hypervigilance.

4. Weiss, Tull, Anestis and Gratz (2013)

In undergraduates, emotion regulation difficulties significantly predicted hyperarousal and vigilance symptoms over and above trauma severity, with poor access to effective strategies and low tolerance of emotional distress, especially linked to sustained alertness and emotional reactivity.

5. Powers, Cross, Fani and Bradley (2015)

Trauma-exposed adults showed faster and stronger attentional capture by threat stimuli and greater emotional instability, indicating that trauma alters attentional systems toward elevated vigilance and that emotional reactivity intensifies this threat monitoring.

6. Bardeen and Fergus (2014)

In college students, deficits in emotional awareness and regulation were strongly related to hyperarousal and vigilance and mediated the association between trauma exposure and hyperarousal, suggesting trauma affects vigilance indirectly via regulation problems.

7. Short, Boffa, King and Schmidt (2017)

University young adults with greater trauma exposure reported increased threat monitoring and hypervigilant behaviour, and poor emotion regulation skills strengthened the link between trauma and hypervigilance, emphasising emotional reactivity and regulation capacity in trauma-related vigilance.

8. Contractor, Caldas, Fletcher, Shea and Armour (2018)

Adults with trauma histories showed that emotion dysregulation had the strongest associations with hyperarousal symptoms, particularly exaggerated startle and chronic alertness, indicating that regulation deficits explain substantial variance in hypervigilance beyond trauma severity.

9. Dixon-Gordon, Aldao and De Los Reyes (2015)

In young adults exposed to stress and trauma, maladaptive strategies like suppression and rumination heightened physiological arousal and maintained attention to negative stimuli, whereas adaptive strategies reduced emotional reactivity, implying poor regulation sustains hyperarousal and threat focus.

10. Visted, Vollestad, Nielsen and Schanche (2018)

Adults with more emotion regulation difficulties displayed higher hyperarousal and vigilance, while those using more adaptive strategies were less reactive, underscoring regulation as central to trauma-related emotional adjustment.

11. Stevens, Jovanovic, Fani and Ressler (2013)

Trauma-exposed young adults had stronger attentional capture by threat and difficulty disengaging from threat cues, patterns closely related to self-reported hypervigilance and distress, suggesting altered threat processing maintains vigilance.

12. Huh, Kim, Lee and Chae (2014)

Among university students, greater trauma exposure was linked to poorer emotional control and more hyperarousal, with emotion regulation problems partially mediating the trauma–hypervigilance relationship, indicating emotional processes shape vigilance reactions.

13. Kaczurkin, Burton, Chazin and Lissek (2017)

Trauma-exposed adults showed heightened threat expectancy and persistent fear responses in safe contexts, reflecting learned threat biases that support chronic hypervigilance.

14. Seligowski, Lee, Bardeen and Orcutt (2015)

In young adults, difficulties in emotion regulation were strongly associated with hypervigilance and sleep disturbance, suggesting that poor regulation maintains heightened alertness after trauma.

15. Vujanovic, Bonn-Miller, Potter and McCauley (2013)

Trauma-exposed college students with hyperarousal and vigilance tended to use avoidant and suppressive coping, whereas acceptance-based strategies related to less emotional reactivity, highlighting adaptive regulation in trauma adjustment.

16. McLaughlin, Busso, Duys, Green and Alves (2014)

In adolescents and young adults, trauma exposure was associated with heightened emotional reactivity and persistent processing of threat cues, indicating disruptions in emotional and attentional systems that foster hypervigilance.

17. Michopoulos, Powers, Gillespie, Ressler and Jovanovic (2017)

Adults with poorer ability to regulate fear and distress exhibited higher physiological arousal and vigilance during threat tasks,

supporting emotion regulation as a contributor to exaggerated threat responses.

18. Olatunji, Cisler and Tolin (2010)

Trauma-exposed individuals showed greater vigilance to threat and difficulty disengaging from negative information, with weak emotional control linked to these vigilance effects.

19. Schafer, Naumann, Holmes, Tuschen-Caffier and Samson (2017)

Maladaptive strategies (suppression, rumination) were strongly associated with elevated arousal and hypervigilance, while reappraisal was related to lower symptom severity in adults with varying trauma exposure.

20. Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema and Schweizer (2010)

Their meta-analysis showed maladaptive strategies (rumination, avoidance, suppression) consistently related to higher anxiety and hyperarousal, supporting emotion regulation as a broad mechanism in trauma-related vigilance.

21. Irish, Fischer and Fallon (2011)

Difficulties regulating negative emotions were associated with continuous alertness, heightened fear and inability to relax after trauma, implicating regulation in hypervigilance.

22. Price, Kearns, Houry and Rothbaum (2014)

Early post-trauma emotional dysregulation predicted later hyperarousal and vigilance even after controlling for trauma severity, emphasising regulation as a prospective risk factor.

23. Tull, Weiss, Adams and Gratz (2012)

In emerging adults, hyperarousal and hypervigilance were strongly associated with problems accepting emotions and regulating reactivity, with regulation difficulties explaining substantial variance in trauma symptoms.

24. Klemanski, Curtiss, McLaughlin and Nolen-Hoeksema (2017)

Rumination and low regulation skills predicted heightened threat sensitivity and persistent vigilance in young adults with trauma histories, indicating that maladaptive processing maintains hypervigilance.

25. Sippel, Pietrzak, Charney, Mayes and Southwick (2015)

Trauma-exposed adults with stronger emotion regulation skills showed much lower hyperarousal and vigilance, identifying regulation as a key protective factor against trauma-related hypervigilance.

3. METHODOLOGY**3.1 AIM**

To examine the relationship between trauma exposure and hypervigilance among young adults and to explore the role of emotion regulation skills in this relationship.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the relationship between trauma exposure and hypervigilance among young adults.
2. To examine the relationship between trauma exposure and emotion regulation skills among young adults.
3. To examine the relationship between emotion regulation skills and hypervigilance among young adults.
4. To study trauma exposure and emotion regulation skills as predictors of hypervigilance among young adults.

3.3 HYPOTHESES

- H1.** There will be a significant relationship between trauma exposure and hypervigilance among young adults.
- H2.** There will be a significant relationship between trauma exposure and emotion regulation skills among young adults.
- H3.** There will be a significant relationship between emotion regulation skills and hypervigilance among young adults.
- H4.** Trauma exposure and emotion regulation skills will significantly predict hypervigilance among young adults.

3.4 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Trauma Exposure

Extent of psychologically distressing or potentially traumatic life events, measured by the total score on the trauma exposure questionnaire.

Hypervigilance

A heightened and persistent state of alertness and threat monitoring, indicated by total scores on the hypervigilance scale.

Emotion Regulation Skills

An individual's ability to understand, manage and modify emotional experiences adaptively, measured by the total score on the emotion regulation questionnaire.

Young Adults

Individuals in the age range specified in the study's inclusion criteria.

3.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design to examine relationships among trauma exposure, emotion regulation skills and hypervigilance, and to test the predictive role of trauma exposure and emotion regulation skills on hypervigilance. No variables were manipulated, and all data were collected at one time point.

3.6 VARIABLES

Independent Variable

- Trauma exposure

Independent / Predictor Variable

- Emotion regulation skills

Dependent Variable

- Hypervigilance

3.7 SAMPLE AND ITS SELECTION

The sample comprised 150 young adults selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected via an online questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

INCLUSION CRITERIA

- Young adults who provided informed consent.
- Participants within the specified young adult age range.
- Ability to read and understand English.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA

- Individuals who did not provide informed consent.
- Incomplete or partially filled responses.

3.8 TOOLS

Trauma Exposure Questionnaire

Self-report scale assessing exposure to a range of potentially traumatic events; higher total scores indicate greater trauma exposure.

Emotion Regulation Skills Questionnaire

Standardised self-report measure of understanding, accepting and adaptively regulating emotions, rated on a Likert scale; higher scores reflect better emotion regulation skills.

Hypervigilance Questionnaire

Standardised self-report scale assessing alertness, threat sensitivity and ongoing environmental monitoring; higher scores indicate greater hypervigilance.

3.9 PROCEDURE

An online questionnaire link was shared with young adults. The first page described the purpose of the study and contained the informed consent statement, confidentiality assurance and withdrawal rights. After consenting, participants completed demographic details followed by the trauma exposure, emotion regulation skills and hypervigilance questionnaires. Responses were automatically recorded and securely stored for analysis.

3.10 STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Data were analysed using JASP. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were computed for trauma exposure, emotion regulation skills and hypervigilance. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to examine associations among the three variables. Multiple linear regression was conducted to test whether trauma exposure and emotion regulation skills significantly predict hypervigilance among young adults. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

4. RESULTS

Table 4.1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Trauma Exposure, Emotion Regulation Skills, and Hypervigilance among young adults (N = 150)

Variable	Mean	SD
Trauma Exposure	50.16	10.68
Emotion Regulation Skills	56.06	9.49
Hypervigilance	37.72	10.46

Table 4.1 shows the mean and standard deviation of trauma exposure, emotion regulation skills and hypervigilance among young adults. The mean score for trauma exposure was found to be 50.16 (SD = 10.68). The mean score for emotion regulation skills was 56.06 (SD = 9.49). The mean score for hypervigilance was 37.72 (SD = 10.46).

Table 4.2: Correlation between Trauma Exposure and Hypervigilance among young adults

Variables	Trauma Exposure	Hypervigilance
Trauma Exposure	1	.623**
Hypervigilance	.623**	1

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

From Table 4.2, a strong positive correlation was observed between trauma exposure and hypervigilance ($r = .623, p < .01$). This indicates that higher levels of trauma exposure are associated with higher levels of hypervigilance among young adults.

Table 4.3: Correlation between Trauma Exposure and Emotion Regulation Skills among young adults

Variables	Trauma Exposure	Emotion Regulation Skills
Trauma Exposure	1	-.321**
Emotion Regulation Skills	-.321**	1

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4.3 shows a moderate negative correlation between trauma exposure and emotion regulation skills ($r = -.321, p < .01$). This suggests that an increase in trauma exposure is associated with a decrease in emotion regulation skills among young adults.

Table 4.4: Correlation between Emotion Regulation Skills and Hypervigilance among young adults

Variables	Emotion Regulation Skills	Hypervigilance
Emotion Regulation Skills	1	-.525**
Hypervigilance	-.525**	1

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

From Table 4.4, a moderate negative correlation was found between emotion regulation skills and hypervigilance ($r = -.525, p < .01$). This indicates that young adults with better emotion regulation skills tend to show lower levels of hypervigilance.

Table 4.5: between Trauma Exposure, Emotion Regulation Skills and Hypervigilance among Regression young adults (N = 150)

Dependent Variable: Hypervigilance

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R-Square
1	.712	.506	.499

Predictors: Trauma Exposure, Emotion Regulation Skills

4.6 Regression coefficients

Predictor	B	t	Sig.
Trauma Exposure	0.496	8.27	.000
Emotion Regulation Skills	-0.399	-5.92	.000

The data in Table 4.5 demonstrate the findings of the multiple regression analysis aimed at discussing the hypothesis of using trauma exposure and emotion regulation skills as effective predictors of hypervigilance in young adults. The R value obtained is .712, and this shows that there is a strong relationship between the predictors and hypervigilance. The value of R² was .506, and it indicates that the combination of trauma exposure and the ability to regulate emotions accounts for 50.6% of the variance in hypervigilance. Exposure to trauma was discovered to be a great positive predictor of hypervigilance (B = 0.496, $p < .001$), and emotion regulation abilities were found to be a great negative predictor of hypervigilance (B = -0.399, $p < .001$). This means that the greater the trauma exposure, the higher the hypervigilance, and the lower the skills in the control of emotions among young adults, the lower the hypervigilance.

5. DISCUSSION

The current research was also conducted to analyse the connection between trauma exposure and hypervigilance levels among young adults, as well as the role of emotion regulation skills in the connection. The overall aims of the research were to know the relationship between exposure to trauma and hypervigilance, the relationship between exposure to trauma and emotion regulation skills, and the role of emotion regulation skills in predicting hypervigilance. The results discussion has been structured according to the hypotheses that were framed for the study, and the same structure is followed in the reference dissertation.

H1. The exposure to trauma will have a considerable correlation with hypervigilance in young adults. The findings of the current research indicated that there was a significant positive and statistically significant correlation between hypervigilance and trauma exposure ($r = .623, p = .01$). This observation is a clear indication that the levels of hypervigilance are higher among young adults who report having experienced a higher level of trauma exposure. This finding indicates that traumatic experiences can make an individual hypersensitive to possible danger stimuli within the environment. Memories about traumatic events and emotional reactions can increase the level of alertness and encourage

extensive searching around the environment in search of potential threats. Although such responses can be adaptive in the short run behaviour of the trauma victim, when the responses are sustained, the result is excessive arousal and the inability to experience a sense of safety.

The current observation goes along with the perception that hypervigilance is a key psychological response to traumatic experiences. Adverse or threatening experiences in young adults can result in the development of increased environmental monitoring and responsiveness to ambiguous or neutral stimuli. This state of alertness can disrupt concentration, emotional comfort and interpersonal functioning. Thus, the first hypothesis of the study is accepted.

H2. Among the young adults, there will be a high correlation between exposure to trauma and the skills to regulate emotions. The findings also indicated that there was a strong moderate negative correlation between trauma exposure and emotion-regulating skills ($r = -.321, p < .01$). This means that the more a person is exposed to trauma, the worse the ability to control emotions is in young adults.

This observation means that the frequent or excessive exposure to stressful and traumatic events in life can lead to the disruption of the development and proper utilisation of emotional management strategies. Traumatic experiences are said to arouse a lot of emotions like fear, helplessness, anger and shame. Having been subjected to such intense emotional conditions repeatedly, people might experience a hard time interpreting, accepting and controlling their feelings effectively. The young adults with greater levels of trauma might thus depend more on maladaptive emotion regulation styles like avoidance, emotional suppression and disengagement. Such measures can help in the short-term alleviate distress, but do not aid emotional processing and long-term adaptation. As a result, the ability to regulate emotions adaptively and flexibly may be damaged because of exposure to trauma.

The second hypothesis of the study is therefore accepted.

H3. Hypervigilance and emotional regulation skills will be associated with a strong correlation among young adults.

The results of the current research have shown a moderate negative correlation that is significant between emotion regulation skills and hypervigilance ($r = -.525, p < .01$). This shows that the young adults who report less hypervigilance have more skills of emotion regulation.

This finding indicates that being better able to interpret their affective experiences, distress tolerant and able to employ adaptive regulation strategies enables individuals to be less likely to be maintained in a prolonged threat monitoring state. Adequate control of emotions could allow the victims to cope with traumatic feelings in a healthier way, diminish emotional activity and avoid overreaction in terms of fear.

It is possible that young adults with greater emotion regulation capabilities can make more differentiation between real and perceived threat and are more emotionally flexible to stressor

encounters. Consequently, they can have fewer hyperarousal symptoms and become less vigilant in daily scenarios.

The current result emphasises emotion control as a defensive psychological factor in the results of trauma.

The third study hypothesis is therefore accepted.

H4. Young adults will be greatly affected in terms of hypervigilance by exposure to trauma and their level of emotion regulation.

The analysis involved the use of multiple regression analysis, which investigated the extent to which hypervigilance can be predicted by exposure to trauma and emotion regulation skills. The results showed that the regression model was statistically significant with a value of R of .712 and the value of $R^2 = .506$. It demonstrates that both exposure to trauma and the ability to regulate emotions jointly predicted 50.6 per cent of the hypervigilance in young adults.

Exposure to trauma was found to be a significant positive predictor of hypervigilance ($B = 0.496, p < .001$) and emotion regulation skills were found to be significant negative predictors of hypervigilance ($B = -0.399, p < .001$). This means that the higher the exposure to trauma, the higher the hypervigilance and the higher the skills of emotion regulation, the lower the hypervigilance.

The predictive model strength shows that emotional and experiential attributes are influential in the determination of vigilance-related responses in young adults. Exposure to trauma is directly related to increased threat sensitivity, whereas emotion regulation skills are linked to decreased levels of emotional reactivity and enhanced emotional control.

The results indicate that hypervigilance is also an important risk factor associated with exposure to trauma, but that the intensity and the endurance of the symptoms related to vigilance are dependent on the level of emotion regulation. Young adults with the ability to suppress their emotional reactions seem to be less vulnerable to trauma-related arousal.

Therefore, the fourth hypothesis of the study is accepted.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of the current research point to the fact that exposure to trauma is linked considerably with heightened hypervigilance in young adults. Participants who reported a greater rate of exposure to traumas were observed to have a higher rate of threat monitoring and alertness in their daily living.

The findings also indicate that emotion regulation skills have a negative relationship with trait exposure to trauma. Young adults who have undergone greater degrees of trauma are more likely to exhibit greater challenges in understanding, controlling, and regulating their emotional reactions.

The skill to control emotions was also identified as a great protective factor with regard to hypervigilance. Individuals with better emotion regulation showed reduced hypervigilance in young adults. In addition, the skills of emotion regulation, as well as exposure to trauma, were important predictors of

hypervigilance, which confirms the relevance of emotional functioning to the psychological consequences of trauma. Overall, the study concludes that while trauma exposure increases vulnerability to hypervigilance, effective emotion regulation skills can reduce the intensity of trauma-related vigilance responses. Strengthening emotion regulation capacities among young adults may therefore be an important psychological target for trauma-informed interventions and preventive mental health programmes.

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About the corresponding author

Pratishtha Verma is associated with the Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences (AIPS), Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India. Her academic interests include psychology, mental health, and behavioral sciences, with a focus on research exploring human behaviour and psychological well-being.