ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUICIDAL IDEATION, EMOTIONAL REGULATION AND CURRENT LIFE STRESSORS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract
This study aimed to examine the relationship between suicidal ideation emotional regulation and current life stressors among university students. A sample of 200 university students completed measures on suicidal ideation emotional regulation and current life stressors. Pearson correlation analysis revealed that there is a positive relationship between suicidal ideation and current life stressors and there is a positive relationship between suicidal ideation and difficulties in emotional regulation and there is positive relationship between difficulties in emotional regulation and current life stressors. Difficulties in emotional regulation and current life stressors significantly predict suicidal ideation among university students. Regression analysis shows that gender differences are significant in difficulties in emotional regulation as females score higher on difficulties in emotional regulation. Age showed a significant relationship with suicidal ideation. The findings of the study highlight the role of emotional regulation and current life stressors in suicidal ideation among university students.

Keywords: *Current life stressors, Emotional regulation, Suicidal ideation, University students, psychological distress, Regression analysis, Stressful events.*

Introduction

Suicide is an international public health problem, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2012). Suicide is the third leading cause of mortality in people aged 15 to 44, and the second highest cause of death in people aged 15 to 19 years old (WHO, 2014). By 2020, it is expected that there will be about a million suicides worldwide, with one death and one or two suicide attempts occurring every 20 seconds in the west (Bertolote et al., 2002; Nock et al., 2008). The second leading cause of death is suicide in university populations alone in United States (Schwartz, 2006).

Suicide is not viewed as a series of events rather than single event that begin with suicide ideation, progress to the creation of a suicide plan, a suicide attempt, and eventually suicide accomplishment (Lewinsohn et al., 1996). These steps are all referred to as elements of suicidal conduct and identifying the risk factors that lead an individual to engage in Suicidal ideation and then proceed down the suicide road is critical to preventing suicide at an early stage. Suicidal thoughts are frequently caused by stressful life situations. Even among persons who have suicidal thoughts regularly, not all stressful events contribute to increased suicidal thinking (Franz et al., 2021). We investigate whether the way people regulate their emotions influences the link between stressful situations and suicidal ideation in this study.

University students today face increasingly complex psychological challenges as they transition into adulthood, often in high-pressure academic and social environments. This phase of life is marked by heightened vulnerability to mental health difficulties, particularly suicidal ideation,

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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

which encompasses thoughts about or planning for suicide (Mortier et al., 2018). Suicide is now recognized as one of the leading causes of death among individuals aged 15–29 globally (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021), and university students represent a demographic with distinct psychosocial risk factors requiring urgent attention.

Emotional regulation, defined as the ability to effectively manage and respond to emotional experiences (Gross, 2015), plays a pivotal role in mitigating or exacerbating suicidal thoughts. Students with poor emotional regulation skills are often more susceptible to internalizing stress, leading to greater psychological distress and suicidal ideation (Rajappa, Gallagher, & Miranda, 2012). Maladaptive strategies such as rumination, suppression, and avoidance have been linked to increased suicide risk (Pisani et al., 2013), while adaptive strategies like cognitive reappraisal serve as protective factors (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010).

Equally significant is the role of current life stressors. These include academic burden, interpersonal conflict, financial difficulties, and social isolation. Studies have shown that life stressors independently and interactively increase the risk of suicidal ideation among students (Li et al., 2021). The stress-diathesis model suggests that individuals under stress who lack effective emotional coping mechanisms are more likely to experience suicidal ideation (Hirsch, Conner, & Duberstein, 2007). A recent study by Piepiora et al. (2025) further highlighted the interaction between coping styles, emotional regulation, and mental health outcomes, including suicidal ideation, in academic populations.

Despite this growing body of research, there remains a gap in integrative studies examining the *triangular relationship* among suicidal ideation, emotional regulation, and current life stressors in university settings. Most existing studies have focused on dyadic relationships between two of the three variables, limiting our understanding of their interdependence. This study aims to bridge that gap by exploring how emotional regulation and life stressors together influence suicidal ideation among university students. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing targeted psychological interventions, campus-based mental health services, and suicide prevention programs.

Literature Review

Research over the past two decades has increasingly highlighted the vulnerability of university students to suicidal ideation due to various psychological, emotional, and environmental stressors. The university phase represents a transitional period often marked by identity crises, academic pressure, social expectations, and future uncertainties—all of which may serve as precursors to mental health deterioration (Mortier et al., 2018).

Suicidal Ideation in University Students

Suicidal ideation, which includes thoughts of ending one's life, is considered a strong predictor of future suicide attempts (Klonsky, May, & Saffer, 2016). According to Mortier et al. (2018), nearly 20% of university students across multiple countries reported experiencing suicidal thoughts, emphasizing the urgency of identifying and addressing contributing factors. Cultural, environmental, and institutional variations influence prevalence, but emotional vulnerability and poor coping strategies are consistently noted as underlying risk factors.

Emotional Regulation and Suicide Risk

Emotional regulation is a core component of psychological well-being. Gross (2015) defined emotional regulation as a set of processes involved in managing emotional experiences and responses. Dysregulation in emotional control has been consistently linked to suicidal ideation. Aldao et al. (2010) found in a meta-analysis that maladaptive strategies—such as suppression and

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avoidance—significantly correlate with depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts. Rajappa, Gallagher, and Miranda (2012) suggested that deficits in emotional regulation mediate the relationship between negative affect and suicidal ideation, particularly in young adults under academic and social stress.

Moreover, emotion regulation difficulties are not only predictive of suicidal ideation but also play a moderating role. Pisani et al. (2013) showed that students with strong youth-adult relationships but poor emotional regulation were still at high risk for suicidal behaviors, indicating that interpersonal support cannot fully mitigate emotional vulnerability.

Role of Current Life Stressors

Life stressors, especially those related to academic workload, financial instability, family pressure, and interpersonal conflict, have a profound impact on student mental health. Li, Dorstyn, and Denson (2021) explored how cumulative stress contributes to suicidal ideation and identified coping style and emotional resilience as significant mediators. Their findings support the stress-diathesis model, where stress acts as a triggering mechanism in vulnerable individuals (Hirsch et al., 2007).

In another longitudinal study, Hirsch et al. (2019) found that chronic stress was associated with an increased likelihood of suicidal ideation over time, and that students who lacked effective stress regulation mechanisms were at the highest risk. Tavakoli et al. (2020) further emphasized that emotional regulation serves as a buffer against stress-induced suicidal ideation.

Integrated Models and Recent Evidence

Despite extensive research on the individual constructs, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies that integrate suicidal ideation, emotional regulation, and life stressors into a single predictive model. Piepiora et al. (2025), in a recent study published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, examined the interrelationships between coping styles, physical and emotional self-regulation, and suicidal thoughts among students. Their findings reaffirm that both emotional regulation and stress coping styles are essential components in predicting suicidal risk.

This growing body of literature demonstrates that while suicidal ideation among university students is multifaceted, emotional regulation and current life stressors consistently emerge as key predictors. However, more integrated, context-specific research is required to develop effective prevention and intervention programs tailored to the university setting.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 200 university students (100 males and 100 females) aged 18 to 30 years ($M = 21.79$, $SD = 2.62$), recruited from universities in Islamabad using purposive convenience sampling. Participants were from undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. Paper-and-pencil surveys were administered in person. Participants were informed about the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of the study, and provided written informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Psychological support and referrals were provided to participants with high suicidal ideation scores.

Measures

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS): Assesses six dimensions of emotion regulation difficulties including emotional awareness, impulse control, and access to regulation strategies (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Higher scores indicate greater dysregulation. Internal consistency in this sample: $\alpha = .92$.

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Modified Scale for Suicidal Ideation (MSSI): A self-report scale measuring the intensity and frequency of suicidal thoughts in the past 48 hours (Miller et al., 1986). Scores ≥21 indicate severe suicidal ideation. Internal consistency: α = .89.

List of Threatening Experiences Questionnaire (LTE-Q): Assesses exposure to 12 categories of recent life stressors (Brugha et al., 1990). Responses categorize stress exposure into low, moderate, or high levels. Internal consistency: α = .86.

Data Analysis

SPSS (v25) was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlations, t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and multiple regression analysis were conducted. Assumptions of normality and linearity were verified before hypothesis testing.

Results

Table 1 shows mean and standard deviation values of the variables. Table 2 shows correlation coefficient of the variables. Table 3 illustrates hierarchical regression showing the effects of demographic variables (Age, Gender, Current Degree, Socio Economic Status), Emotional Regulation, and Current Life Stressors on Suicidal Ideation among University Students.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Alpha Coefficient of Scales (n=200)

					Range			
Measures	*K*	*a*	*M (SD)*	Actual		potential	Skew	Kurtosis
MSSI	18	.89	17.08 (9.54)	1-47		18-54	.64	-.28
LTE	12	.62	3.76(2.32)	0-10		12-24	.46	-.59
DERS	36	.80	108.98 (20.62)	49-177		36-180	-.04	.46
NAC	6	.68	19.48(5.95)	6-30		6-30	-.14	-.66
DEG	5	.71	17.80(4.26)	5-25		5-25	-.35	-.41
LEA	6	.65	14.60(4.49)	6-27		6-30	.39	-.05
LAE	8	.74	25.38(5.99)	10-40		8-40	-1.3	-.33
ICD	6	.72	19.16(5.52)	6-30		6-30	-.05	-.34
LEC	5	.69	13.34(4.41)	5-24		5-25	.13	-.37

Note. MSSI=Modified scale for suicidal ideation, LTE= Life threatening events scale, DERS= Difficulties in emotional regulation, NAC= Non acceptance of emotional responses, DEG= Difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior, LEA= Lack of emotional awareness, LAE= Limited access to emotion regulation strategies, ICD= Impulse control difficulties, LEC= Lack of emotional clarity.

Table 1 demonstrated the psychometric properties study scales. Alpha reliability of Modified scale for suicidal ideation (MSSI) is .89, alpha reliability of Difficulties in emotional regulation scale (DERS) is .80 and alpha reliability for list of threatening events scale (LTE) is .62 so the reliability of the scales is acceptable. Skewness and kurtosis of Modified scale for suicidal ideation (MSSI) is.64 and -.28, Skewness and kurtosis of Difficulties in emotional regulation scale (DERS) is-.04 and .46 and skewness and kurtosis for life threatening events scale is .46 and -.59.

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Table 2

Pearson Correlation between Suicidal Ideation, Current Life Stressors and Difficulties in emotional regulation (n=200)

Sr	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	MSSI	-	.779**	.836**	.172*	.318**	.217**	.426**	.353**	.326**
2	LTE	-	-	.693**	.157*	.310**	.121	.394**	.333**	.317**
3	DERS	-	-	-	.405**	.428**	.168*	.551**	.480*	.402**
4	NAC	-	-	-	-	.440**	-.237*	.608**	.517**	.300**
5	DEG	-	-	-	-	-	-.188*	.531**	.510**	.199**
6	LEA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.019	-.048	.426**
7	LAE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.657**	.365**
8	ICD	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.301**
9	LEC	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note. MSSI=Modified scale for suicidal ideation, LTE= Life threatening events scale, DERS=Difficulties in emotional regulation, NAC= Non acceptance of emotional responses, DEG= Difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior, LEA= Lack of emotional awareness, LAE= Limited access to emotion regulation strategies, ICD= Impulse control difficulties, LEC= Lack of emotional clarity. **p<.01

Table 2 shows that the relationship between suicidal ideation (MSSI) and current life stressors is positive and significant. This supports hypothesis 1 (there is a positive relationship between suicidal ideation and current life stressors). The relationship between suicidal ideation and difficulties in emotional regulation is positive and significant. This supports hypothesis 2 (there is a negative relationship between suicidal ideation and emotional regulation). It also shows that the relationship between current life stressors (LTE) and difficulties in emotional regulation is positive and significant. This supports hypothesis 3 (there is a negative relationship between current life stressors and emotional regulation).

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Showing the Effects of Demographic Variables (Age, Gender, Current Degree, Socio Economic Status), Emotional Regulation, and Current Life Stressors on Suicidal Ideation among University Students (N=200)

	Variables	B	*t*	*Sig*	R^2	ΔR^2	*F*	P
Model 1					.040	.040	4.51	.017
	Age	-1.87	-2.678	.008				
	Gender	.062	.890	.374				
Model 2					.782	.741	174.566	.000
	DER	.584	12.468	.000				
	CLS	.359	7.564	.000				

Note. ER=Difficulties in Emotional regulation, CLS=Current life stressors, β=Standardized regression coefficient. **p<.01

Table 3 shows hierarchical regression analysis showing the effects of demographic variables (age, gender), Difficulties in emotional regulation and life-threatening events on suicidal ideation. The overall model described 78% variance in predicting suicidal ideation among university students. In Model 1 demographic variables (age, gender) were entered and these

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demographic variables (F=4.510, p>.01) accounted for 40% variance in predicting suicidal ideation. The β value for age is significant and for gender is not significant. This suggest that demographic variable gender do not predict suicidal ideation among university students. However, age predict suicidal ideation.

In Model 2, difficulties in emotional regulation and current life stressors were added as predictor of suicidal ideation. This model explains an additional variance of 78% (F=174.5, p<.01). The β value for difficulties in emotional regulation and current life stressors is significant. This suggest that difficulties in emotional regulation and current life stressors predict suicidal ideation.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between suicidal ideation, emotional regulation, and current life stressors among university students. Additionally, the study investigated whether demographic variables such as age and gender play a significant role in these psychological constructs. Standardized tools including the Modified Scale for Suicidal Ideation (MSSI; Miller et al., 1986), the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004), and the List of Threatening Experiences Questionnaire (LTE; Brugha & Cragg, 1990) were used to assess the variables. Hypotheses were tested using Pearson correlation, hierarchical regression, and independent sample t-tests in SPSS.

In support of the first hypothesis, a strong positive correlation was found between suicidal ideation and current life stressors (r = .779). This indicates that as the number or severity of life stressors increases, so does the likelihood of experiencing suicidal thoughts. This finding is consistent with previous studies, which have established that stressful life events are significant predictors of suicidal ideation and behavior (Campos et al., 2016; Kang et al., 2014; Woodhead et al., 2014). University students often face academic pressure, interpersonal challenges, and financial burdens, all of which contribute to elevated stress levels and subsequent mental health difficulties.

The second hypothesis proposed a negative relationship between emotional regulation and suicidal ideation. This was supported by the results, which showed a strong positive correlation between suicidal ideation and difficulties in emotion regulation (r = .836). These findings suggest that individuals with poor emotional regulation are more likely to experience suicidal thoughts. The results are in agreement with previous research by Klonsky et al. (2015), who emphasized that suicidal ideation is often fueled by emotional pain, hopelessness, and a disrupted sense of connectedness. When individuals are unable to manage or process intense negative emotions, suicidal ideation may emerge as a perceived escape from psychological distress.

The third hypothesis examined the relationship between emotional regulation and current life stressors. The analysis revealed a positive correlation between current life stressors and difficulties in emotional regulation (r = .693), indicating that as stress increases, individuals may struggle more with managing their emotional responses. This supports the hypothesis that life stress impairs emotional regulation and is consistent with previous findings that suggest exposure to stress may compromise emotional resilience (Keltner et al., 1999). Emotion regulation is a key factor in adapting to adversity, and its impairment may leave individuals more vulnerable to negative emotional states and mental health risks.

The fourth hypothesis addressed gender differences in suicidal ideation. Contrary to expectations, the results indicated no statistically significant difference between males and females in suicidal ideation. This finding does not align with earlier research which showed that females, particularly adolescents, are more likely to report suicidal thoughts than males (Park, 2013). The lack of

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significant gender difference in this study may reflect changing social dynamics, increased mental health awareness among male students, or cultural factors influencing reporting behaviors.

The fifth hypothesis explored gender differences in emotional regulation. While no statistically significant difference was found, females scored higher on difficulties in emotional regulation than males, supporting the hypothesis that men may demonstrate better emotional regulation skills. This result aligns with findings in the literature indicating that women have a higher prevalence of emotional disorders and may be more emotionally reactive (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Although not statistically significant, the trend suggests the need for gender-sensitive interventions focusing on emotional skills training.

Overall, the findings underscore the interconnected nature of stress, emotional regulation, and suicidal ideation. The results suggest that emotional dysregulation not only contributes directly to suicidal ideation but may also exacerbate the effects of life stress. These insights have important implications for mental health programming in university settings. Interventions that aim to enhance emotional regulation and coping skills, along with proactive stress management strategies, could be highly effective in reducing suicide risk among students.

Conclusion

The study was aimed to investigate the relationship between suicidal ideation, emotional regulation and current life stressors. The relationship of demographic variables (gender and age) with suicidal ideation and emotional regulation was also explored. The results showed significant positive relationship between suicidal ideation and current life stressors, significant positive relationship between suicidal ideation and difficulties in emotional regulation and significant positive relationship between current life stressors and difficulties in emotional regulation. Difficulties in emotional regulation and current life stressors predict suicidal ideation. Results also showed non-significant gender differences in emotional regulation.

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