

SELF-CONCEALMENT IN INDIVIDUALS WHO ENDURED TRAUMATIC EVENTS: WHY EMOTION REGULATION IS NECESSARY?

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Abstract: *Self-Concealment in Individuals Who Endured Traumatic Events: Why Emotion Regulation Is Necessary?* Traumatic experiences often have long-term effects on an individual's psychological well-being. When individuals choose to conceal or suppress information related to their trauma, it can worsen their mental health condition. This study aims to examine the relationship between self-concealment tendencies and emotion regulation abilities among individuals who have experienced traumatic events. A quantitative approach was employed using incidental sampling technique. The study involved 177 participants, with an additional 50 participants included for instrument try-out. The instruments used consisted of a self-concealment scale based on Larson's (1990) theory and an emotion regulation scale based on Gross's (2007) theory. Data were analyzed using Pearson's Product Moment correlation, yielding a correlation coefficient (r) of -0.164 , with a significance level of 0.029 ($p < 0.05$). The findings indicate a significant negative correlation between self-concealment and emotional regulation. In other words, individuals with better emotional regulation are more likely to engage less in self-concealment and vice versa. Adaptive emotional regulation strategies, such as emotional disclosure, are recommended to reduce tendencies toward self-concealment and enhance emotional well-being.

Keywords: *Self-Concealment, Emotion Regulation, Traumatic Experiences*

Abstrak: *Penyembunyian Diri pada Individu yang Mengalami Peristiwa Traumatis: Mengapa Pengaturan Emosi Diperlukan?* Pengalaman traumatis kerap menimbulkan dampak jangka panjang terhadap kesejahteraan psikologis seseorang. Ketika individu memilih untuk menyembunyikan atau menekan informasi yang terkait dengan trauma mereka, hal tersebut dapat memperburuk kondisi kesehatan mental yang mereka alami. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelaah hubungan antara kecenderungan menyembunyian diri dan kemampuan untuk

melakukan regulasi emosi pada individu yang pernah mengalami peristiwa traumatis. Pendekatan penelitian ini bersifat kuantitatif dengan teknik pengambilan sampel insidental. Penelitian ini melibatkan 177 partisipan, dan 50 partisipan lainnya digunakan untuk uji coba alat ukur. Instrumen yang digunakan meliputi skala penyembunyian diri berdasarkan teori Larson (1990) dan skala regulasi emosi berdasarkan teori Gross (2007). Data dianalisis menggunakan korelasi Product Moment Pearson dan didapatkan koefisien korelasi (r) sebesar $-0,164$, dengan tingkat signifikansi $0,029$ ($p < 0,05$). Temuan menunjukkan korelasi negatif yang signifikan antara penyembunyian diri dan regulasi emosi. Dengan kata lain, individu dengan regulasi emosi yang lebih baik cenderung lebih jarang menyembunyikan diri dan sebaliknya. Strategi regulasi emosi yang adaptif, seperti pengungkapan emosi, direkomendasikan untuk mengurangi kecenderungan menyembunyikan diri dan meningkatkan kesejahteraan emosional.

Kata Kunci: Penyembunyian Diri, Pengaturan Emosi, Pengalaman Traumatis

INTRODUCTION

Mental health issues in Indonesia are beginning to receive widespread attention; however, the country still faces several challenges, including social stigma, limited access to services, and poor public awareness standard. According to Reichert *et al.* (2021), vulnerability to mental health issues can be triggered by traumatic experiences that lead to changes in the brain's neurophysiological systems. Such experiences often result in long-term psychological distress, causing individuals to feel as though they are still reliving past events, which ultimately has a detrimental effect on their mental health and disrupts their daily activities (Rauch & Rothbaum, 2023). Examples of traumatic experiences include natural disasters, accidents, physical violence, sexual abuse

(Ardian, 2024), and the loss of a loved one, whether through divorce or death (Sinaga *et al.*, 2024; Nurriyana & Savira, 2021), and bullying (Setiani & Hidayah, 2024).

Many people conceal their traumatic experiences to avoid negative stigma, which only serves to increase their psychological distress (Adams & Riggs, 2008). According to Zerbe (2019), preserving secrets can have negative effects on both mental and physical health, as shame and guilt serves as a reinforcement for the trauma, leading many people to avoid sharing their experiences (Timblin & Hassija, 2022). Additionally, Wu *et al.* (2023) also state that trauma can cause people to suppress painful memories, which makes them reluctantly open themselves up about the pain they have experienced. This

act of concealing personal information that is perceived as negative is known as self-concealment.

Larson and Chastain (1990) define self-concealment as a tendency to deliberately withhold personal information that may be embarrassing or elicit negative judgements from others. They emphasize three core aspects of this construct; the motivation to hide oneself, the presence of secrets that generate emotional distress, and fear of others' reactions if those secrets are revealed. In a later study, Larson (2015) identified three core factors contributing to self-concealment behavior: insecure attachment, traumatic experiences that heighten fear of social judgement, and a fear of losing attention or acceptance. Together, these factors increase an individual's anxiety about negative evaluation, leading them to conceal aspects of themselves perceived as undesirable.

Hartman *et al.* (2015), describe self-concealment as the tendency to hide one's thoughts, emotions, or personal experiences that may cause embarrassment or discomfort from others. While this behavior is often adopted as a means to avoid emotional pain, it can paradoxically worsen psychological well-being because it is linked to maladaptive ways of managing emotions. Wismeijer

(2011) further noted that individuals who frequently engage in self-concealment often face difficulties in regulating their emotion adaptively. As a result, they become more vulnerable to emotional strain and may rely on ineffective coping strategies. These findings highlight that strong relationship between self-concealment and limited emotion regulation skills, which can negatively affect psychological health over time.

A number of studies lend support to these results. For instance, Harfush *et al.* (2023) found that people who often hide their personal experiences tend to have difficulty to expressing their emotions openly. In a similar way, Davis (2024) reported that those who score high on self-concealment usually dwell on their secrets and try to push those thoughts away when they appear, which makes them more likely to experience unpleasant emotions. This pattern matches what Slepian *et al.*'s (2020) discovered, which thinking about a secret repeatedly can intensify negative effect on psychological well-being. Therefore, it becomes important to help vulnerable groups learn healthy ways to manage their emotions so they can lessen the impact of self-concealment (Kapatais *et al.*, 2022).

Doménech *et al.* (2024) highlighted that effective emotions regulation diminishes the tendency to withdraw, as individuals who can manage their emotions feel more secure and comfortable expressing their feelings and disclosing personal experiences. For instance, adolescents who use adaptive emotion regulation strategies are less inclined to practice self-concealment because they are capable of processing their emotion in a healthy manner without suppressing them. Similarly, Masuda and Feinstein (2010) emphasized that well-developed emotion regulation abilities can buffer against the negative psychological outcome of self-concealment, including anxiety and depression. Furthermore, individuals with high emotional stability are more likely to employ constructive regulation strategies, which reduce their likelihood of concealing their emotions (Pocnet *et al.*, 2017). Conversely, those with low emotional stability often rely on self-concealment as a maladaptive coping mechanism, thereby intensifying their psychological distress (Wang *et al.*, 2014).

According to Gross (2007), emotion regulation refers to the intentional or unintentional application of various strategies aimed at sustaining, amplifying, or diminishing emotional responses. The

process encompasses emotions themselves, as well as related experiences, and behaviors. Gross (2007) further conceptualized emotion regulation as comprising three dimensions: the ability to manage both negative and positive emotions, the capacity to identify and consciously control emotions state; and the competence cope effectively with the pressures that arise from life's challenges.

Fitri and Ikhwanisifa (2016) suggest that in the process of emotional regulation, individuals learn to suppress or manage negative emotions while fostering or enhancing positive emotions. Consequently, this ability is crucial for helping individuals mitigate the emotional consequences of keeping secrets for extended periods. Pahalani (2015) further emphasizes that the development of emotional regulation is essential for individuals to respond appropriately to situations based on the context of time, place, and the conditions they encounter.

The aim of this research was to investigate the relationship between self-concealment and emotion regulation on people who have experienced trauma. People who have traumatic experiences often struggle to manage their emotions healthily and frequently conceal their negative experiences or feelings from others. Through this

research, the authors aim to establish a causal relationship between the tendency to hide personal experiences and an individual's capacity to regulate emotions. Understanding this relationship is crucial, as both factors significantly influence the psychological recovery process following trauma. By identifying the correlation between self-concealment and emotion regulation, the researchers aim to establish a foundation for developing more effective psychological support programs that assist individuals in their emotional recovery.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs quantitative methods, analyzing data numerically. The population consists of individuals who have endured trauma. However, not all members of this population were included in the sample. Researchers specifically selected individuals who have never disclosed or shared their traumatic experiences with others. A total of 177 participants were included in the research sample, while the measuring instrument was previously tested on 50 participants. The sampling technique employed in this study was incidental sampling, which involves selecting research participants based on their availability and perceived suitability as data sources (Sugiyono, 2020).

Data collection was conducted through a questionnaire distributed both online and offline via Google Forms to individuals who had experienced trauma. The questionnaire included two psychological scales: the self-concealment scale, developed by the researcher following Larson's theory (1990), consisting of 24 items and yielding an alpha reliability coefficient (α) of 0.959. The emotion regulation scale was also created by the researcher, based on Gross's theory (2007), comprising 15 items and achieving an alpha reliability coefficient (α) of 0.879. Both scales employed a Likert model with four response categories: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD).

In this study, researchers employed correlation techniques to examine the relationship between the two variables under investigation. The specific correlation method utilized was Pearson's product-moment correlation. To analyze the data, the researchers used SPSS version 21.0 for Windows to determine whether a relationship exists between self-concealment and emotional regulation in individuals who have experienced traumatic events.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Researchers conducted a descriptive analysis of each variable to obtain an overview of the data distribution for this study. The results of

the descriptive analysis are presented in the following table:

Table 1. The Description of Descriptive Data

Var	Hypothetical Data				Empirical Data			
	Max	Min	M	SD	Max	Min	M	SD
SC	96	24	73.8	9.6	96	24	73.6	9.19
ER	60	15	43.2	6.7	60	15	43.2	6.50

Description :

Var : variable
 SC : Self-concealment
 ER : Emotion Regulation
 Min : Minimum total score
 Max : Maximum total score
 M : Mean
 SD : Standard Deviation

After obtaining the results of the descriptive analysis, the researcher grouped the participants into three categories based on their scores. This categorization aims to classify participants into specific levels according to the measured attributes (Azwar, 2020). In this study, the categories used are high, medium, and low. The results of the categorization revealed that self-concealment among the research participants fell into the moderate category, with 122 participants (68.9%). At the same time, emotional regulation also fell into the moderate category, with 128 participants (72.3%). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-SZ) test for the self-concealment variable produced a value of 1.010 with a significance value of

0.259 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the data for this variable follow a normal distribution. Similarly, the emotion regulation variable showed a K-SZ value of 1.347 with a significance of 0.053 ($p > 0.05$), confirming that it is also normally distributed. In contrast, the linearity test between the self-concealment and emotion regulation yielded a significance value of 0.027, which falls below the 0.05 threshold ($p < 0.05$). These results suggest the presence of a linear relationship between the two variables. Therefore, the relationship between the independent and the dependent variables in this study can be described as linear.

Table 2. The Description of Descriptive Data

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Sig	Remark
Self-concealment - Emotional Regulation	- 0.164	0.029	A significant relationship was found

The results of the hypothesis testing revealed a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The obtained significance value of 0.029 ($p < 0.05$) support the acceptance of the reasearch hypothesis. Acordingly, the findings indicate a significant negative relationship between self-concealment and emotional regulation among individuals who hasve experienced traumatic events.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate a significant negative relationship between self-concealment and emotional regulation. This finding aligns with the results of a study by Sease *et al.* (2021), which revealed that self-concealment is negatively correlated with emotional regulation and is considered a less adaptive emotion management strategy. Individuals who tend to keep their emotional or traumatic experiences to themselves often struggle to regulate their emotions healthily. This pattern of self-hiding is also associated with the tendency for automatic negative thoughts to emerge, serving as a link between painful past experiences and the inclination

to isolate oneself in the present. Furthermore, this inability to manage emotions exacerbates mental health issues, as it contributes to the development of psychological disorders (Yakin *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, self-concealment is associated with low emotional awareness and difficulties in emotion regulation. Kealy *et al.* (2021) explained that individuals with poor emotional awareness often struggle to express their feelings, which reinforces their tendency to hide their true selves. Research by Nam *et al.* (2021) indicates that the inclination to conceal traumatic experiences heightens the risk of suicidal thoughts compared to individuals who are more open about their experiences.

When individuals utilize cognitively maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, this approach exacerbates their emotional burden (Qin *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, individuals with limited emotion regulation skills are at a higher risk of failure in this process, as they possess a restricted repertoire of tactics and may resort to inappropriate or even maladaptive strategies. Conversely, the ability to employ more

adaptive emotion regulation strategies can mitigate the negative impact of emotional experiences and enhance flexibility in emotion management, which is essential for maintaining mental health (Jones *et al.*, 2024).

On the other hand, Luoma and Chwyl (2020) stated that individuals who are more emotionally open are more likely to establish stronger social relationships and experience lower levels of psychological isolation. Furthermore, an individual's belief in their ability to manage emotions plays a crucial role in determining the intensity of effort exerted to regulate emotions, as well as in selecting the most appropriate regulation strategies (Jarrell & Lajoie, 2017).

Gross and John (2003) stated that insufficient emotion regulation often drives individuals to suppress or avoid expression of their emotions, thereby reinforcing patterns of self-concealment. The situational context in which emotional suppression occurs can also shape the individual's broader relationship with emotional regulation. For instance, in high-stress environments such as the workplace, individuals may feel socially obligated to restrain their emotional expression to align with prevailing expectations. Conversely, those with stronger emotion-regulation capacities tend to manage

such pressure more effectively, making them less inclined to conceal their emotions and are more capable of expressing them in a balanced and adaptive manner (Jung *et al.*, 2018).

This study has several limitations. Respondent coverage across Indonesian was uneven, which may restrict the extent to which the findings capture the country's culture, social and regional diversity. Moreover, offline data collection was carried out exclusively in selected cafes, meaning participants likely belong to particular social circles and may not be representative of the broader population of individuals who have experienced traumatic events.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that a relationship exists between self-concealment and emotional regulation in individuals who have experienced trauma. The tendency to conceal traumatic experiences may elevate the risk of suicidal thoughts, particularly when compared to individuals who are more open in addressing these experiences. Conversely, the ability to employ more adaptive emotional regulation strategies can mitigate negative emotional impacts and enhance flexibility in managing

emotions, which is crucial for maintaining mental health.

Therefore, this study suggests that individuals who have gone through traumatic experiences and choose to keep it in private may experience considerable emotional strain. While keeping such experiences to oneself is not necessarily wrong, it is important to manage emotions in a healthy way to prevent ongoing stress that can affect overall well-being. Positive coping strategies, such as writing, drawing, or engaging in physical activities, can help reduce psychological tension. Creating a safe and supportive environment is also vital for people who have lived through trauma. When the emotional impact of trauma continues over time, seeking professional help, such as counseling or therapy, becomes an important part of the recovery process.

Suggestion

A suggestion for future researchers interested in this topic is to ensure that the sample distribution is balanced by type of traumatic experience, including accidents, sexual violence, physical violence, natural disasters, the loss or death of a close person, and

bullying. This approach aims to guarantee equal representation of each type of trauma, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the research findings. Additionally, future studies should engage with relevant specialized communities to obtain a more detailed understanding of the characteristics associated with each type of traumatic event. Variations in respondents' backgrounds are also crucial to consider, including factors such as culture, occupation, and family structure, to ensure that the results of t-tests are diverse and insightful.

Furthermore, future research can be enhanced by incorporating additional variables such as self-acceptance, mindfulness, and mattering, particularly in the context of individuals who have experienced trauma. Since this study employed an incidental sampling technique, a significant portion of the data was unusable because many respondents did not meet the necessary criteria. For instance, individuals who no longer feel the effects of trauma should not participate in completing the questionnaire.

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