



Emotional Regulation and Spirituality in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Narrative Review of Mechanisms, Evidence, and Future Directions

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Abstract

Adolescents and emerging adults are still learning how to manage their emotions, and for most young people worldwide, faith and spiritual life are part of how that learning happens. Emotional regulation (ER) is usually defined as the set of processes people use to influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how those emotions get expressed. Spirituality and religiosity (R/S) are among the resources young people lean on most heavily to do this work, yet the two literatures — developmental ER research and the psychology of religion — have only recently started talking to each other. This review pulls that conversation together for readers interested in the roughly ages 10–29 window. Drawing on Gross’s process model of ER and Pargament’s theory of religious coping, four mechanisms are examined: meaning-making and cognitive reappraisal, religious and spiritual coping, attentional or self-regulatory training through contemplative practice, and relational processes built around a perceived sacred other. Across correlational, longitudinal, and intervention studies, R/S tends to correlate, modestly to moderately, with more reappraisal and less rumination or suppression, and ER often mediates the path from R/S to lower risk-taking, less depression and anxiety, and greater life satisfaction. None of this holds unconditionally, though: negative religious coping and spiritual struggle reliably predict worse outcomes, and the size and even direction of effects shift with developmental stage, culture, and religious tradition. The review ends by naming the field’s main methodological gaps — heavy reliance on cross-sectional designs, inconsistent measurement, and thin cultural representation — and suggesting where longitudinal, neurobiological, and intervention work could go next.

Keywords: emotion regulation, spirituality, religiosity, adolescence, emerging adulthood, religious coping, mindfulness
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Introduction

Adolescence and emerging adulthood bring more intense emotions, wider social and academic demands, and a brain that is still finishing the job of building self-control. It is also, for most of the world’s young people, the stretch of life when belief systems, values, and a sense of meaning start to take a durable shape — and religion or spirituality is usually

somewhere in that mix. Rather than treating emotional regulation and spirituality as unrelated domains, a growing body of work treats them as tangled together from the start: religious and spiritual frameworks hand young people narratives, practices, and relationships that shape how they read a stressful event, what they do about it, and whether what they do actually works.

The stakes here are not small. Poor ER in adolescence tracks closely with depression, anxiety, substance use, and risk-taking, while young people who regulate well tend to do better academically, socially, and psychologically well into adulthood. At the same time, outward religious practice tends to drop off across the transition into emerging adulthood even as the underlying hunger for meaning and purpose, if anything, sharpens. Figuring out when spiritual resources help — and when they backfire — matters for anyone working with young people: teachers, clinicians, coaches, campus ministries, all of it.

Three questions organize this review. How are emotional regulation and spirituality actually defined and measured in the developmental literature? Through what mechanisms might spirituality plausibly shape ER in adolescents and emerging adults? And what does the evidence say about the strength, direction, and limits of that relationship? The review closes by flagging where the literature falls short methodologically and where it might usefully go next.

Review Method and Scope

This is a narrative, integrative review, not a systematic review or meta-analysis. Literature was located through PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar using combinations of terms such as emotion regulation, self-regulation, spirituality, religiosity, religious coping, mindfulness, adolescence, and emerging/young adulthood. Priority went to peer-reviewed empirical studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses from roughly the last two decades, weighted toward samples in the adolescent (about 10–19) and emerging adult (about 18–29) range. A handful of foundational theoretical papers that fall outside that age bracket — Gross's original process model and Pargament's theory of religious coping among them — are included because the developmental work reviewed here is built on top of them. Rather than scoring studies for quality, findings are organized thematically around the mechanisms and outcomes that come up most consistently, which fits the aims of a narrative synthesis better than a formal appraisal would.

Conceptual Foundations

Defining Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation describes how people influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how those emotions get experienced and expressed. The field's dominant framework, Gross's process model, lays out five families of regulatory strategy that come into play at different points in the emotion-generative sequence: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. The first four are antecedent-focused — they act before an emotional response has fully formed — while response modulation is response-focused, working on an emotion that has already arrived.

Two strategies within this framework have drawn the bulk of the research attention. Cognitive reappraisal, an antecedent-focused move, involves reinterpreting a situation's meaning to change its emotional charge; expressive suppression, by contrast, is response-focused and involves masking the outward signs of an emotion that has already been generated. Habitual reappraisers tend to report more positive affect, stronger relationships, and higher wellbeing; habitual suppressors tend to show the opposite pattern — less positive affect, more physiological arousal, worse social outcomes — largely because suppression demands constant self-monitoring without ever resolving the feeling underneath it. Rumination is the third construct worth naming here: a maladaptive, attention-heavy loop of repetitive, passive dwelling on distressing material that tends to deepen and prolong negative affect rather than work through it. Mindfulness, understood as open, non-judgmental attention to the present moment, is often proposed as the alternative: an attentional strategy that can interrupt rumination without relying on suppression.

Defining Spirituality and Religiosity

Spirituality and religiosity — shortened to R/S throughout this literature — are related but not identical. Religiosity usually refers to institutionally organized belief and practice: service attendance, denominational identity, adherence to doctrine. Spirituality is the broader, more personal search for the sacred, for meaning, for something transcendent, and it may or may not happen inside an organized religious structure. Both are multidimensional constructs with cognitive (beliefs), behavioral (prayer, meditation), social (community, congregational belonging), and affective (felt closeness to the sacred) components. In practice the two overlap heavily and are often measured together, even though emerging adults in particular seem increasingly willing to keep a personal spirituality while stepping back from institutional religious life.

Park's meaning-making model offers a useful bridge here. It frames religion and spirituality as comprehensive meaning systems — durable frameworks of belief, goals, and a sense of the sacred that people use to interpret and appraise what happens to them, especially under stress or ambiguity. Because appraisal is also exactly the mechanism cognitive reappraisal runs on in Gross's model, meaning-making theory gives spirituality and emotional regulation a natural point of contact.

Developmental Context: Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Emotional regulation shifts substantially across adolescence, tracking the slow maturation of prefrontal-limbic circuitry that does not really finish until the mid-twenties. Because subcortical, affect-generating systems mature earlier than the prefrontal systems meant to rein them in, adolescents live for years with a kind of developmental mismatch — which is part of why this period is marked by heightened reactivity and risk-taking, and why the strategies and outside supports a young person leans on during this window carry so much weight.

Religious and spiritual development runs on its own, related but separate, timeline. Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood describes the late teens through the twenties as an “age of possibilities,” a period of identity exploration across love, work, and worldview that includes religious and spiritual identity. Longitudinal work with college students shows that institutionally anchored religious behaviors — attendance, mainly — tend to decline across this transition, while the personal weight someone gives their beliefs often holds steady or gets reshaped into something more individualized and less tied to any institution. For many emerging adults this is a period of actively building a personal meaning system, with spiritual or religious beliefs frequently near its center, which makes this window especially interesting for anyone studying how spirituality intersects with a still-developing capacity for emotional regulation.

Theoretical Mechanisms Linking Spirituality and Emotional Regulation

At least four overlapping mechanisms have been proposed to explain why spirituality and religiosity might shape how young people regulate emotion.

Meaning-Making and Cognitive Reappraisal

The meaning-making model holds that religious and spiritual belief systems supply a ready-made interpretive frame — beliefs about deservedness, controllability, ultimate purpose — through which a distressing event can be reread in less threatening, sometimes even redemptive, terms. Because that reinterpretation looks a lot like cognitive reappraisal as Gross defines it, spirituality can be thought of as handing young people a set of pre-built appraisal templates (hardship as a test, a lesson, or part of a larger plan) that push them toward reappraisal-based regulation instead of suppression or rumination.

Religious and Spiritual Coping

Pargament's theory of religious coping splits the construct into two camps. Positive religious coping — seeking spiritual support, benevolent religious reappraisal, collaborative problem-solving with a perceived divine other — is theorized to

support regulation by offering a sense of control, comfort, and relational security under stress. Negative religious coping — spiritual discontent, punitive reappraisal (reading hardship as divine punishment), interpersonal religious discord — is theorized to do the opposite, layering spiritual distress on top of whatever stressor triggered it.

Self-Regulatory and Attentional Training: Mindfulness and Contemplative Practice

A third mechanism runs through the attentional and self-control skills that contemplative practices — prayer, meditation, ritual observance — tend to build. From a self-regulation standpoint, regularly practicing sustained attention, delayed gratification, and behavioral restraint may function as a kind of training that carries over into non-religious situations, strengthening something like a general self-control “muscle.” Neuroscience on mindfulness meditation — a practice with contemplative religious roots that has since gone thoroughly secular — gives this idea a plausible biological footing: mindfulness training has been linked to reduced amygdala reactivity to emotional stimuli, stronger functional connectivity between the amygdala and regulatory prefrontal regions such as the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, and reduced amygdala connectivity with stress circuitry — all patterns consistent with better top-down emotional control.

Relational and Attachment Processes

A fourth mechanism borrows from attachment theory: a perceived relationship with a sacred figure — God, a higher power — may function as a psychological safe haven and secure base much like attachment to a caregiver does, offering comfort under threat and a stable platform from which to explore and take emotional risks. Work with college students fits this picture: felt closeness to God, and disruptions to that closeness during spiritual struggle, are meaningfully tied to wellbeing during major transitions such as the first year of college.

Empirical Evidence

Spirituality, Religiosity, and General Emotion Regulation Ability

A systematic review of quantitative studies on religion and emotion regulation found small-to-moderate associations between R/S and ER, with correlations running roughly .13 to .50 for cognitive reappraisal and $-.72$ to $.08$ for expressive suppression — in other words, more religious or spiritual people tend to reappraise more and suppress less (Brandão, 2025). Developmental research points the same direction: in a longitudinal study of adolescents, religiousness at one time point predicted better ER later on, with the organizational, attendance-based dimension of religiousness showing a notably weaker link than the others (Holmes et al., 2019). University students who are more involved in religious activities have likewise shown, longitudinally, fewer ER difficulties over time, though in that same sample spiritual attitudes and beliefs about the sacred did not relate significantly to ER (Semplonius et al., 2015, as cited in Brandão, 2025). And students higher in religiosity generally have been found to lean more on functional, cognitively based regulation strategies than their less religious peers (Singh, 2014, as cited in Brandão, 2025).

The picture is not uniformly rosy, though. Intrinsic religiosity — the internalized, personally held dimension of religious commitment — has also shown up positively associated with rumination in adult samples, which suggests religious meaning-making can sometimes prolong reflective dwelling on distress rather than resolve it (Park & Yoo, 2016, as cited in Brandão, 2025). The relationship between spirituality and ER, in other words, is not a simple straight line; it depends heavily on which dimension of religiousness and which regulatory strategy you are looking at.

Cognitive Reappraisal as a Culturally Moderated Pathway

Cross-cultural research by Vishkin and colleagues found that religiosity's link to life satisfaction runs substantially through cognitive reappraisal — but that this pathway shifts with religious and cultural context. Reappraisal mediated the religiosity–life satisfaction link among Christian samples, and suppression added a further mediating role only for the Christian participants, not the Jewish ones (Vishkin et al., 2019a, 2019b, as cited in Brandão, 2025). Different traditions, apparently, normalize different regulatory strategies, which is a good reason not to treat “religiosity” as one undifferentiated thing.

Religious and Spiritual Coping as a Regulatory Resource

Consistent with Pargament's framework, positive religious coping has repeatedly tracked with more adaptive emotional regulation and better wellbeing, while negative religious coping predicts the reverse. Among young adults, positive religious coping — including positive reappraisal grounded in religious meaning — has been shown to support emotional regulation in ways that bolster mental wellbeing, with this pathway mattering particularly for young men during a period of acute collective stress (Fallahchai et al., as cited in the young-adult COVID-19 coping literature). University students studied on both positive and negative religious/spiritual coping show a similar split: positive strategies such as seeking spiritual support or benevolent religious reappraisal line up with more favorable regulatory and wellbeing profiles than negative strategies like spiritual discontent or punitive reappraisal (Graça & Brandão, 2024).

Among adolescents, religious coping has been described as building self-control, holding attention on goal-relevant regulation, and offering a broader interpretive frame that helps young people manage the distress that comes with academic pressure, bullying, or family conflict. But when adolescents feel spiritually disconnected, or interpret their suffering as divine punishment, distress seems to intensify rather than ease — largely because that interpretation cuts against their own broader cultural and religious meaning system.

Emotion Regulation as a Mediating Mechanism

A pattern that keeps showing up across this literature: ER is not just an outcome of spirituality but a mechanism through which religiousness and spirituality reach downstream psychological adjustment. In one longitudinal study, adolescents' emotion regulation mediated the link between earlier religiousness and later risk-taking, which implies religious involvement cuts risk-taking partly by building regulatory capacity, not just through direct behavioral prohibition (Holmes et al., 2019). Emotional intelligence — which includes regulating and using one's own emotions — has similarly mediated the association between religiousness and reduced cyberbullying among university students, though the ability to appraise others' emotions did not show the same effect (Yadav & Yadav, 2018, as cited in Brandão, 2025).

At the level of internalizing symptoms, a large systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal and intervention studies in young people aged 10 to 24 found that spiritual wellbeing protected against depression, while negative religious coping tracked with more depressive symptoms over time; the personal importance someone placed on religion, on its own, was not consistently tied to depressive outcomes (Aggarwal et al., 2023). That fits the broader theme running through this section: it is the quality of a young person's spiritual life — whether their religious coping leans benevolent or punitive — rather than religious identification itself, that predicts emotional outcomes. Related work on religiousness and spirituality as risk or protective factors for externalizing psychopathology in adolescence proposes that religious communities may support healthier adjustment partly by building emotion regulation and partly by supplying prosocial peer networks that reinforce self-control (Holmes & Kim-Spoon, 2016).

Contemplative Practice and Neurobiological Correlates

Because many spiritual traditions build in contemplative practices such as prayer and meditation, research on secularized mindfulness training offers indirect but convergent support for a neurobiological pathway linking spiritual practice to emotion regulation. Randomized trials of mindfulness-based stress reduction find that even short-term training reduces amygdala reactivity to emotionally evocative stimuli and increases functional connectivity between the amygdala and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, a region central to top-down emotion regulation (Kral et al., as cited in mindfulness-neuroscience literature). Related work shows intensive mindfulness training reduces resting-state connectivity between the amygdala and stress-related cortical regions — a plausible mechanism by which sustained contemplative practice, religious or secular, could support more adaptive stress and affect regulation in young people who practice it consistently.

Moderators and Boundary Conditions

The spirituality–ER relationship is shaped by several factors that push back against any simple, universally protective story.

Negative Religious Coping and Spiritual Struggle

Negative religious coping and spiritual struggle — feeling abandoned or punished by a higher power, conflict within a religious community — consistently track with worse emotional and mental health outcomes across studies, sometimes outweighing whatever benefit positive religious engagement provides. Spirituality, in this sense, cuts both ways: the same belief system that supports benevolent reappraisal can also manufacture new sources of distress when read punitively.

Cultural and Religious Tradition

Associations between religiosity and specific regulation strategies, reappraisal and suppression especially, differ across religious and cultural groups. The behavioral expression of religiously motivated regulation seems shaped by tradition-specific norms rather than being some uniform property of “religiousness” writ large.

Gender

Some evidence suggests the emotion-regulatory benefits of positive religious coping are more pronounced for young men than young women, though findings here are mixed and need more replication before anyone draws firm conclusions.

Neurodiversity and Population-Specific Considerations

Emerging work on religiosity and spirituality among autistic adolescents suggests this population engages with religious and spiritual life in ways shaped more by family, culture, and community support than by core social-cognitive differences alone — a reminder that the mechanisms reviewed here may operate differently, or need adapting, in neurodivergent populations (Cook et al., as cited in autism-spirituality literature).

Practical and Clinical Implications

A few implications follow for people who work with adolescents and emerging adults. Clinicians treating religious or spiritual clients would probably benefit from assessing the valence of a young person's religious coping — sorting benevolent, meaning-making engagement from punitive or discordant engagement — rather than treating religiosity as uniformly protective or uniformly risky. Spiritually integrated therapy, which folds a client's own belief system into cognitive reappraisal and coping-skills work, may fit especially well for young people whose spirituality is central to their identity. Schools, campus ministries, and youth organizations that run contemplative practices — guided reflection, meditation, prayer — may be building emotion-regulation skills alongside their explicitly spiritual goals, which suggests these programs could be evaluated, and refined, using emotion-regulation outcomes. And because spiritual struggle looks like a distinct risk marker in its own right, screening for spiritual distress — not just religious affiliation — could help identify young people who need extra emotional support during hard transitions like bereavement, illness, or the move to college.

Limitations of the Existing Literature

Several methodological limitations temper how much confidence to place in the causal direction and generalizability of these findings. Most studies are cross-sectional, which makes it hard to say whether spirituality shapes emotion regulation, whether well-regulated young people simply sustain religious engagement more easily, or whether both are driven by some shared third factor like family stability or socioeconomic context. Measurement is also a mess, frankly — studies define religiosity and spirituality in very different ways (attendance, intrinsic belief, felt closeness to the sacred) and assess different ER constructs, which makes direct comparison difficult and probably explains a good chunk of the wide range of effect sizes reported across syntheses. Much of the foundational work on reappraisal and suppression, in particular, comes from predominantly Christian, Western, college-educated samples, which limits how far it generalizes to other traditions, secular spiritual practices, and non-Western cultural contexts. And relatively few

studies have combined developmentally sensitive, longitudinal designs with neurobiological measures in adolescent or emerging adult samples specifically — most of the neuroscientific evidence connecting contemplative practice to emotion regulation has been extrapolated from adult mindfulness research rather than established directly in youth spiritual practice.

Future Research Directions

Longitudinal and experience-sampling designs would help disentangle the direction of effects between spirituality and emotion regulation across the move from adolescence into emerging adulthood. Greater attention to religious and cultural diversity — non-Christian, non-Western, and explicitly secular spiritual practices included — is needed to figure out which mechanisms generalize across traditions and which are tradition-specific. Intervention studies that directly compare spiritually integrated emotion-regulation programs against secular equivalents, standard mindfulness-based programs for instance, would help clarify whether explicitly spiritual framing adds anything beyond the attentional and cognitive skills the two approaches already share. And folding neuroimaging or psychophysiological measures into developmentally focused studies of religious and spiritual practice would help establish whether the neurobiological pathways found in adult mindfulness research actually extend to adolescents and emerging adults engaged in explicitly religious contemplative practices such as prayer.

Conclusion

Spirituality and religiosity are consistently, if modestly, tied to how well adolescents and emerging adults regulate emotion — through meaning-making and cognitive reappraisal, religious and spiritual coping, attentional and self-regulatory training, and relational security. Emotion regulation, in turn, looks like a key pathway through which spirituality confers its benefits for risk-taking, internalizing symptoms, and overall adjustment during this stretch of development. None of it is unconditional: negative religious coping and spiritual struggle can undercut emotional wellbeing, and the strength and shape of these associations shift across religious traditions, cultural contexts, and individual differences. Adolescence and emerging adulthood remain periods of both intense emotional development and active spiritual identity formation, which is exactly why continued longitudinal, culturally diverse research on this relationship holds real promise for developmentally and spiritually informed approaches to youth mental health.

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