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**EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL
DETERMINANT OF MENTAL HEALTH: A CLINICAL
PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence has emerged as an important psychological construct for understanding individual differences in mental health, interpersonal functioning, and psychological adaptation. It refers broadly to the ability to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions in oneself and others. From a clinical psychology perspective, emotional intelligence may influence how individuals respond to stress, interpersonal conflict, negative emotions, and challenging life circumstances. Individuals with stronger emotional competencies may be better able to identify emotional experiences, regulate distress, seek appropriate support, and develop adaptive coping strategies. Research has consistently indicated associations between emotional intelligence and mental health, although the strength and direction of these relationships may vary according to measurement approaches and contextual factors. This paper examines emotional intelligence as a psychological determinant of mental health, focusing on its relationship with psychological adjustment, stress and psychopathology, and clinical assessment and intervention. It argues that emotional intelligence can provide a valuable framework for understanding resilience and improving psychological well-being.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, mental health, clinical psychology, emotional regulation, psychological adjustment, resilience, psychopathology

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health is influenced by a complex interaction of biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors. Within clinical psychology, increasing attention has been given to psychological characteristics that help individuals manage emotional experiences and maintain adaptive functioning. Emotional intelligence is one such construct. It broadly concerns the capacity to recognize emotional information, understand its significance, regulate emotional responses, and use emotions constructively in decision-making and interpersonal situations. Although emotional intelligence has been conceptualized through different theoretical models, the common emphasis is on effective emotional processing and management. Its relevance to mental health arises from the fact that emotions influence cognition, behaviour, relationships, coping, and responses to stressful circumstances.

Individuals experience emotions continuously, but the ability to recognize and manage them differs considerably. A person may experience anxiety, anger, sadness, frustration, or disappointment without necessarily possessing the skills required to respond adaptively. Difficulties in identifying emotional states may lead to confusion, while difficulties in regulating emotions may contribute to impulsive reactions, avoidance, rumination, or interpersonal conflict. Conversely, emotional awareness can help individuals identify psychological needs and choose more appropriate coping responses. Evidence from meta-analytic research has found a positive association between emotional intelligence and mental health, supporting the possibility that emotional competencies are relevant to psychological functioning.

From a clinical perspective, emotional intelligence is particularly relevant because many psychological difficulties involve problematic emotional experiences. Anxiety disorders may involve excessive fear and worry, depressive conditions may involve persistent negative affect, and several other forms of psychopathology involve difficulties in understanding or regulating emotions. Contemporary clinical research increasingly considers emotion regulation a transdiagnostic process because emotion-regulation difficulties occur across different mental disorders. A large 2026 systematic review and multilevel meta-analysis found pronounced emotion-regulation difficulties among clinical participants compared with nonclinical controls. These findings strengthen the rationale for examining emotional competencies as part of psychological assessment and intervention.

However, emotional intelligence should not be regarded as a single or deterministic cause of mental health. Psychological well-being results from multiple interacting influences, including personality, social support, socioeconomic circumstances, trauma, physical health, cognition, and environmental stressors. Emotional intelligence may function as a protective or facilitating factor rather than an independent explanation for mental health outcomes. Therefore, a clinical psychology approach requires careful consideration of individual differences, cultural context, developmental experiences, and the specific psychological problems experienced by each person. The present paper examines the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health, its relevance to stress and psychopathology, and its potential application in clinical assessment and psychological intervention.

II. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Emotional intelligence can contribute to psychological adjustment by influencing how individuals interpret and respond to emotional experiences. Emotional awareness allows people to recognize whether they are experiencing sadness, frustration, fear, anger, or other emotional states. This recognition is important because effective coping begins with understanding what one is experiencing. Individuals who can accurately identify their emotions may be better positioned to select appropriate responses rather than reacting automatically. Emotional understanding may also help individuals distinguish between temporary emotional reactions and broader psychological concerns. Consequently, emotional intelligence can support adaptive psychological functioning by connecting emotional awareness with reflective decision-making.

The relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health has received considerable empirical attention. A meta-analysis of 44 effect sizes involving 7,898 participants found that higher emotional intelligence was associated with better mental health, with a weighted association of approximately .29. The same study reported that trait-based emotional intelligence showed a stronger relationship with mental health than ability-based measures. A later comprehensive meta-analysis involving 19,815 participants also found positive associations between emotional intelligence and health, including mental and psychosomatic health. These findings indicate that emotional competencies may be meaningfully related to psychological functioning, although they should not be interpreted as evidence of a simple causal relationship.

One mechanism through which emotional intelligence may influence psychological adjustment is coping. Stressful situations frequently generate strong emotional responses, and individuals differ in their ability to manage these responses. Emotional intelligence may enable people to recognize stress reactions, evaluate their causes, and employ constructive coping strategies. Instead of responding through impulsivity, avoidance, or persistent rumination, emotionally competent individuals may be more capable of problem-solving, seeking social support, reframing situations, or accepting difficult emotions. These processes can potentially reduce the psychological burden associated with everyday stressors. The ability to manage emotional experiences may therefore contribute to resilience, particularly when individuals encounter repeated challenges.

Emotional intelligence may also affect interpersonal functioning, which is closely connected with mental health. Human beings depend on social relationships for emotional support, belonging, and psychological security. The capacity to understand one's own emotions and recognize emotional signals in others can improve communication and reduce unnecessary interpersonal conflict. Individuals who can regulate anger, express concerns appropriately, and understand the perspectives of others may develop more stable relationships. Positive interpersonal relationships can in turn provide social resources during stressful circumstances. Thus, emotional intelligence may contribute to mental health both directly through emotional management and indirectly through improved social functioning.

Another important aspect is psychological resilience. Resilience refers to the capacity to adapt to adversity and recover from stressful or challenging experiences. Emotional intelligence may support resilience by helping individuals acknowledge difficult emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them. Emotional awareness can encourage realistic appraisal of problems, while emotional regulation can facilitate flexible responses. However, resilience should not be interpreted as simply suppressing negative emotions. Healthy psychological adjustment involves experiencing emotions while maintaining the ability to act according to personal goals and situational demands. In this sense, emotional intelligence may contribute to flexible emotional functioning rather than constant emotional positivity.

Overall, the evidence suggests that emotional intelligence is meaningfully associated with mental health and psychological adjustment. However, its role should be understood within a broader biopsychosocial framework. Emotional intelligence does not eliminate psychological distress, nor does low emotional intelligence automatically indicate mental illness. Instead,

emotional competencies may influence vulnerability, coping, interpersonal functioning, and resilience. Clinical psychologists can therefore consider emotional intelligence as one component of comprehensive psychological understanding. Its greatest value may lie in identifying emotional processes that can be strengthened through appropriate psychological interventions.

III. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, STRESS AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Stress represents one of the most important pathways through which emotional functioning can influence mental health. Everyday stressors may include academic pressure, occupational demands, relationship difficulties, financial problems, illness, and major life transitions. Emotional intelligence may influence how individuals interpret these stressors and regulate their emotional responses. People who recognize early signs of distress may be able to intervene before emotional reactions become overwhelming. Emotional understanding can also help individuals distinguish between controllable and uncontrollable aspects of stressful situations, allowing them to select more appropriate coping responses.

Emotional dysregulation is particularly relevant to psychopathology. Difficulties in managing emotions have been observed across numerous psychological conditions and are increasingly regarded as transdiagnostic rather than restricted to a single diagnostic category. Recent research indicates that individuals with mental disorders report substantially greater difficulties with emotion regulation than nonclinical controls. The 2026 multilevel meta-analysis by Clamor, Lincoln, and Schulze found large overall differences in emotion-regulation difficulties, alongside greater reliance on strategies such as rumination, avoidance, and suppression and lower use of acceptance, problem-solving, and reappraisal.

Anxiety provides one example of the relationship between emotional functioning and psychopathology. Anxiety involves heightened threat perception and physiological arousal, often accompanied by worry and anticipatory fear. Individuals who have difficulty understanding or regulating anxious emotions may respond through avoidance or repetitive worry. Such strategies can provide short-term relief but may maintain psychological distress over time. Emotional intelligence may support more adaptive responses by enabling individuals to identify anxiety accurately, evaluate its triggers, and use appropriate coping strategies. However, emotional intelligence should be considered alongside cognitive biases, environmental circumstances, learning history, and other factors involved in anxiety.

Depressive experiences also demonstrate the relevance of emotional functioning. Depression may involve persistent sadness, reduced motivation, negative self-evaluation, and difficulties in experiencing positive emotions. Emotional awareness can help individuals recognize patterns of negative affect, while effective regulation may reduce persistent rumination. Importantly, emotional regulation does not mean eliminating sadness or forcing positive emotions. Clinical intervention generally aims to increase flexibility in responding to emotions so that individuals can experience distress without becoming dominated by it. Contemporary clinical research emphasizes emotion regulation as a significant target across psychological interventions.

Interpersonal and personality-related difficulties further illustrate the importance of emotional competencies. Problems with intense anger, impulsivity, rejection sensitivity, or unstable interpersonal responses can create significant distress. Emotional intelligence may assist individuals in recognizing emotional triggers and considering alternative behavioural responses. Nevertheless, clinicians should avoid assuming that emotional difficulties are simply skills deficits. Emotional responses can emerge from trauma, attachment experiences, neurobiological factors, social environments, and learned patterns. Clinical formulation must therefore examine the broader context rather than reducing psychopathology to emotional intelligence scores.

The clinical significance of emotional intelligence lies in its potential to identify modifiable psychological processes. When assessment indicates difficulties with emotional awareness, understanding, or regulation, therapy may incorporate strategies that strengthen these capacities. Cognitive-behavioural approaches, acceptance-based interventions, mindfulness practices, and other emotion-focused methods can help individuals develop more adaptive relationships with their emotions. Research on clinical interventions indicates that improvements in emotion regulation can function as mechanisms through which treatment produces beneficial outcomes. Thus, emotional intelligence provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding how emotional processes may contribute to both psychological vulnerability and recovery.

IV. CLINICAL ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION BASED ON EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Clinical assessment of emotional intelligence can provide information about how individuals

perceive and manage emotional experiences. Assessment may involve self-report questionnaires, performance-based measures, interviews, behavioural observations, and broader psychological assessment. Different approaches measure different aspects of emotional functioning, and clinicians should therefore avoid treating a single score as a complete representation of emotional capacity. A comprehensive assessment should consider emotional awareness, regulation, interpersonal functioning, coping, psychological symptoms, personality characteristics, and environmental factors. The interpretation should also take into account cultural and developmental differences.

The distinction between ability-based and trait-based emotional intelligence is particularly important. Ability-based approaches conceptualize emotional intelligence as a set of cognitive-emotional abilities that can be evaluated through performance tasks. Trait approaches focus more on self-perceived emotional characteristics and typical behavioural tendencies. Research suggests that these approaches can show different relationships with mental health outcomes. For example, meta-analytic findings indicate stronger mental-health associations for trait emotional intelligence than for some ability-based measures. Clinicians should therefore select assessment methods according to the purpose of evaluation rather than assuming that all emotional intelligence instruments measure exactly the same construct.

Intervention can focus on strengthening emotional awareness and emotional regulation when these processes are clinically relevant. Individuals may be taught to identify emotions, recognize physiological signals, understand emotional triggers, and distinguish thoughts from emotional reactions. Cognitive techniques can help clients reconsider unhelpful interpretations, while behavioural approaches can encourage adaptive responses to stressful situations. Mindfulness-based practices may help individuals observe emotional experiences without immediately reacting to them. Such interventions can be integrated into broader treatment rather than being presented as substitutes for established clinical care.

Clinical approaches may also focus on cognitive reappraisal, acceptance, problem-solving, and reduction of maladaptive emotional strategies. Research involving individuals with mental disorders indicates that emotion-regulation strategies are associated with well-being. A meta-analysis found positive relationships between well-being and acceptance and reappraisal, while avoidance and rumination were negatively related to well-being. Overall emotion-regulation deficits showed a moderate negative relationship with well-being. These findings suggest that intervention should not simply aim to increase emotional control but

should help clients develop flexible and contextually appropriate regulatory strategies.

The therapeutic relationship itself provides an important setting for emotional development. A clinician models emotional awareness, validation, reflective functioning, and appropriate communication. Clients can learn to observe emotional responses within a safe interpersonal environment and gradually develop greater confidence in managing them. Emotional intelligence may therefore be strengthened not only through explicit skills training but also through therapeutic experiences that encourage self-understanding and interpersonal awareness. The clinical process should remain individualized because strategies that are useful for one person may not be equally effective for another.

Ultimately, emotional intelligence should be integrated into clinical psychology as one component of comprehensive assessment and intervention. It should not be used as a diagnostic substitute or as a simplistic explanation for mental illness. Rather, emotional intelligence can help clinicians understand how individuals experience emotions, respond to stress, communicate with others, and manage psychological challenges. Contemporary evidence increasingly supports emotion regulation as an important clinical mechanism, including across different forms of psychopathology. A clinically informed approach can therefore use emotional intelligence concepts to support prevention, treatment planning, psychological skills development, and long-term resilience.

V. CONCLUSION

Emotional intelligence represents an important psychological construct for understanding mental health from a clinical psychology perspective. The ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions can influence coping, interpersonal functioning, psychological adjustment, and resilience. Existing research demonstrates meaningful associations between emotional intelligence and mental health, although these relationships vary according to conceptual definitions and measurement methods. Emotional intelligence should consequently be understood as one contributing factor within the broader network of biological, psychological, social, and environmental influences on mental health.

The clinical relevance of emotional intelligence becomes particularly clear when considering stress and psychopathology. Difficulties in emotional regulation are found across multiple forms of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and other mental disorders. Recent meta-analytic evidence demonstrates substantial emotion-regulation difficulties

among clinical populations and identifies differences in the use of adaptive and maladaptive regulation strategies. This supports the clinical value of examining emotional processes when developing psychological formulations and treatment plans.

Clinical interventions can incorporate emotional awareness, cognitive reappraisal, acceptance, mindfulness, problem-solving, and other strategies to improve emotional functioning. Evidence indicates that emotion regulation is not only related to psychopathology but also to broader psychological well-being. Nevertheless, emotional intelligence should never be treated as a simple measure of mental health or as an independent determinant of psychological outcomes. Assessment and intervention must remain individualized, culturally sensitive, and grounded in established clinical principles.

In conclusion, emotional intelligence provides a valuable framework for understanding how people respond to emotions and psychological challenges. Its strongest contribution to clinical psychology may be its capacity to connect emotional awareness with coping, interpersonal functioning, resilience, and therapeutic change. Future research should continue to clarify causal pathways, improve assessment methods, and examine culturally diverse populations. Integrating emotional intelligence with evidence-based clinical practice may contribute to more comprehensive approaches to prevention, psychological assessment, and mental health intervention.

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