

Parental Emotional Abuse and Psychological Well-Being: The Role of Expressive Suppression as a Mediator and Cognitive Reappraisal as a Moderator among Adolescents in Pakistan

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Abstract

There is substantial literature on the effects of abuse on adolescents' well-being but limited research on parental emotional abuse in Pakistan. This study aims to explore the impact of parental emotional abuse on psychological well-being, with cognitive reappraisal as moderator and expressive suppression as mediator, among adolescents in Pakistan. A cross-sectional correlational research design and purposive sampling were used to collect data from 384 adolescents (M 14.66, SD = 1.71). The study comprised three questionnaires, i.e., an emotional abuse questionnaire, a psychological well-being scale, and an emotional regulation questionnaire (to measure expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal). Results show a significant positive relationship between parental emotional abuse and expressive suppression, while parental emotional abuse was negatively and significantly associated with cognitive reappraisal and psychological well-being. A significant negative association was found between expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal. Additionally, Hayes Process 4.1, model 4, showed that expressive suppression significantly mediated the adverse effects of emotional abuse on psychological well-being. Furthermore, Hayes Process 4.1, Model 1 showed that cognitive reappraisal moderated significantly the negative impact of parental emotional abuse on psychological well-being. The study emphasizes the need for increased awareness among Pakistani parents about treating children kindly, promoting psychological help-seeking behavior in adolescents, introducing relaxation exercises, and encouraging cognitive reappraisal skills.

Keywords: Parental Emotional Abuse, Psychological Well-being, Adolescents.

Introduction

Parenting is a mechanism where parents support and promote the development of a child that constitutes its physical, psychological, and social development (Lanjekar et al., 2022). It has been evident that a child requires an environment that facilitates normal and healthy growth (Zvara et

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al., 2018). Good parenting comes with parents engaging themselves in parenting practices that adhere to the child's needs and keep them physically and psychologically healthy (Wang et al., 2017). If the parents cannot provide good enough parenting, it can often cause potential damage to the child's life as they can face a lack of confidence, difficulty making social relationships, and even academic difficulties (Lanjekar et al., 2022). We see family as an ultimate source of protection that can become a source of great stress and trauma when abuse from parents arises as it overall affects the growth of well-being (Kumar et al., 2023). Abusive parenting comes with actions from parents that pose potential harm to the child in any form let it be physical, psychological, and social (Hassan et al., 2023). The effects of parental abuse profoundly disturb the development and psychological growth of a child (Smith & Carlson 2020).

Emotionally abusive parenting has profound effects on victims during their adult life as they grow up (Rost et al., 2024) and remains a significant risk factor for poor mental health even if the physical and sexual abuse is controlled (Korolevskaia & Yampolskaya, 2023). Those who suffer from such type of adverse experiences, develop certain psychological problems that Rost et al. (2024) suggest can be justified as the victims of emotional abuse develop maladaptive schemas, unwanted cognitive personalities, disturbed interpersonal interaction patterns, and emotional dysregulation (Li et al., 2020), along with a decline in life satisfaction (Fang et al., 2021), social withdrawal related issues (Barber et al., 2005). Ryffe (1998) describes psychological well-being as a multidimensional construct that deals with emotional, cognitive, and social facets of psychological well-being that are linked with early childhood. Emotional regulation is a critical part of psychological well-being, allowing the person to stay vigilant and emotionally attentive (Tasneem & Panwar, 2022). Emotional regulation, as per Gross (2015), includes a wide spectrum of cognitive and behavioral styles causing a person to sustain, improve, or suppress emotions to attain desired goals so shares a significant role in mediating the relationship between parental abuse and psychological well-being (Ford et al., 2013). Williams et al., (2022) describe emotional regulation as not the factor that affects how an individual reacts to abuse but also allows the person to heal and recover from it. Emotional regulation mainly has two categories where it can be adaptive or maladaptive. Cognitive reappraisal; adaptive strategy Suppression; and maladaptive strategy, are profoundly utilized in our daily lives and have been studied majorly (McRae & Gross, 2020). The current study examines the effect of parental abuse on the psychological well-being of adolescents where cognitive reappraisal plays as moderator and expressive suppression as a mediator among adolescents.

Emotional abuse by parents can be described as the intended verbal or symbolic act of a parent or a caregiver toward tier child that imposes immense emotional harm on the child (Herrmann et al., 2022). Emotional abuse as described by Rost et al., (2024), has two differentiated forms: one is an active form of abuse where parents show hostile and aggressive actions towards the child while the other form exhibits restraining oneself from showing emotions that develop healthy relationships (Herrman et at., 2022). Huang et al., (2022) provide evidence for the prevalence of parental abuse as one out of four children experience a certain form of adverse treatment.

Ryff (1989) describes psychological well-being as encompassing emotional, social, and cognitive aspects that reflect an individual's overall mental health and life satisfaction. Psychological well-being is significantly influenced by adverse childhood experiences, including parental abuse, which affects cognitive reappraisal within the dimensions of psychological well-being (Rivera et al., 2021). Children who experience parental emotional abuse or neglect often lose the ability to develop trust and maintain positive relationships, leading to attachment issues (Rothwell & Davoodi, 2024). Additionally, children exposed to negative parenting styles may struggle with

coping skills in adulthood, facing challenges in organizing, maintaining, and managing academic or professional responsibilities (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). According to Islam et al. (2023), individuals who grow up in such environments are at a higher risk of developing poor mental health outcomes, both in childhood and later in life.

The effects of child abuse by the parents are observable on the overall well-being of children (Kumar et al., 2023). Abuse tends to disable the formation of secure attachments between parents and children and other relationships as well which makes the child feel unloved and rejected by others (Bowlby, 1988). As described by Rivera et al., (2021) chronic exposure to stress and abuse disturbs neurological development more specifically the areas of the brain that are linked with emotional regulation and decision-making. Women who faced emotional parental abuse during their childhood; when became mothers, showed elevated levels of stress and stress reactivity during their daily routine (Buchheim et al. 2022) and declined ability to cope with the severe levels of stress in their lives (Köhler-Dauner et al., 2021). Such individuals as parents develop perceived stress that is linked with elevated expectancy of neglecting or abusing their children as per Brown et al. (2020). Many studies showed a negative relationship between the well-being of adolescents and parental psychological control and emotional abuse (Aydin & Özyürek, 2021; Kim & Lee, 2023).

Gross (2015) describes emotional regulation as a process that can be either conscious or unconscious, involving intrinsic or extrinsic mechanisms that monitor, evaluate, and shape emotional responses. Emotional regulation is a critical component of psychological resilience, enabling individuals to navigate stressful situations with ease and strategic control (Liu et al., 2023). Adolescents with better emotional regulation skills are more likely to develop adaptive coping strategies (Li et al., 2016). Cognitive reappraisal, an adaptive regulation mechanism, reduces the intensity of emotional reactions to negative scenarios by reframing the meaning of the situation, thereby fostering a more positive perspective and facilitating problem-solving (Deng et al., 2024; Yao & Duo, 2023). In contrast, expressive suppression, a maladaptive strategy, involves avoiding emotional expression and conflict, which can lead to emotional difficulties (Aldao et al., 2010; John & Gross, 2021). However, expressive suppression may be useful in situations where displaying emotions is unnecessary or counterproductive (Xiao et al., 2022).

According to Morris et al. (2007), the tripartite model of family influence highlights how parenting practices shape children's emotional regulation and adjustment. Emotional regulation serves as a central point of reference in understanding the relationship between parental psychological control and children's psychological well-being (Deng et al., 2024). Adolescents with strong emotional regulation skills can better manage their emotions, earn their parents' trust, and reduce parental psychological control over them (Deng et al., 2024; Li et al., 2019). Furthermore, Liu et al. (2023) suggest that emotional regulation, particularly through cognitive reappraisal, helps individuals who have experienced abuse to manage their emotions effectively. A meta-analysis by Williams et al. (2022) supports the effectiveness of emotional regulation in coping with trauma.

Parental abuse is seen differently in different cultures as Ahmed et al. (2023), found it a stigma in South Asian cultures to talk about parental abuse whereas in Scandinavian countries, the welfare system is proactive in dealing with the parental abuse with children. Due to such a matter, we found a scarcity of evidence-based research in Pakistan when it comes to the impact of parental abuse on the psychological well-being of adolescents which calls for more authentic and dedicated work regarding this pinning problem. Lee and Zafar (2021), suggested that children who belong to collectivistic societies adopt silence as their tool for emotional regulation; disturbing their well-being while reappraisal strategies are used by individualistic cultures which shape their emotional

regulation in a better way. There exist a few pieces of evidence that look into the impact of parental abuse on mental and psychological well-being, but still, there exists a lack of evidence addressing the mediating and moderating role of emotional regulation (Smith & Robert, 2023). It is also important to look into the problem at the adolescent level as abusive parenting can have problematic effects on their mental health that can lead to serious problems in adolescence (Khan & Iqbal, 2022). The current study aims to fill the gap in previous studies by investigating the effect of parental emotional abuse on psychological wellbeing on adolescents via mediator expressive suppression and moderator cognitive reappraisal. The current study aims to investigate the nuanced relationship between emotional abuse from parents, psychological well-being, cognitive reappraisal, and expressive suppression among adolescents in Pakistan. Moreover, the study aims to explore the moderating role of cognitive reappraisal and the mediating role of expressive suppression in the relationship between predictor parental emotional abuse and outcome psychological wellbeing among adolescents.

Hypotheses

1. There is likely to be a positive relationship between emotional abuse, and expressive suppression while emotional abuse would likely to negatively relate with psychological wellbeing and cognitive reappraisal among adolescents.
2. Expressive suppression is likely to positively mediate the negative impact of parental emotional abuse on psychological wellbeing among adolescents.
3. Cognitive reappraisal is likely to positively and significantly moderate the negative effect of parental emotional abuse on psychological wellbeing among adolescents.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design to explore the relationship between parental emotional abuse, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being among Pakistani adults. By using a cross-sectional approach, data was collected at a single point in time, which allowed for an efficient examination of the associations among these variables within the specified population.

Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants for this study. The sample consisted of 384 Pakistani participants, chosen to ensure that they represented the target population of school and college-going students aged 12 to 19.

Instruments

The study utilized three primary instruments to measure the key constructs.

Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995)

An 18-item scale that assesses various dimensions of psychological well-being. The scale uses a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1, meaning "most agreeable," to 7, meaning "too much agreeable." In its original validation, the scale demonstrated high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.87 to 0.93.

Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ)

The scale was developed by Momtaz et al. (2022), consists of 30 items designed to measure

emotional abuse. The items are rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater emotional abuse. The scale has shown excellent internal consistency, with a reported reliability coefficient of 0.94.

Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003)

ERQ is used to assess emotional regulation. This 10-item scale distinguishes between two strategies: emotional suppression and emotional reappraisal. Items 2, 4, 6, and 9 measure suppression, while the remaining six items assess reappraisal. Responses are provided on a 7-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was reported as 0.75, reflecting adequate reliability.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants in this study were selected based on specific inclusion criteria. They were Pakistani students between the ages of 12 and 19, attending schools or colleges. The study included both male and female participants, ensuring a diverse sample from the student population specifically those who were emotionally abused by parents.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by the APA 7th edition. Institutional permission was obtained before data collection began, and consent was also secured from the authors of the respective scales used in the study. Informed consent was provided to all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and procedures. For participants under the age of 18, written consent was additionally obtained from their parents or guardians. The participants were given a demographic questionnaire, followed by the emotional abuse questionnaire, psychological well-being scale, and emotional regulation questionnaire. The total time for completing the questionnaires was approximately 25 to 30 minutes. After the study, participants were thanked for their participation, ensuring that they felt appreciated for their involvement.

Results

Table 1: Participants' Characteristics (N=384)

Characteristics	Frequency	% age	Mean	St Deviation
Age			14.66	1.71
Gender				
Boys	298	78		
Girls	86	22		
Educational Status				
School Scholar	269	70		
College Scholar	115	30		

The above table depicts among 384 participants, mostly boys (298, 78%) participated while only 86, 22% were girls. The mean age of participants in this study is 14.66 and standard deviation is 1.71. The school scholars among participants are 269, 70% and only 115, 30% are college scholars.

Table 2: Correlation among Study Variables (N=384)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1.Parental Emotional Abuse	-	-.47**	.99**	-.80**
2.Cognitive Reappraisal		-	-.48**	.48**
3.Expressive Suppression			-	-.80**
4.Psychological Wellbeing				-

Note: ** $p < .01$

The above table depicts parental emotional abuse is significantly and positively associated with expressive suppression and negatively as well as significantly associated with cognitive reappraisal and psychological wellbeing. Moreover, the association of cognitive reappraisal is positively significant with psychological wellbeing and negatively significant with expressive suppression. Furthermore, the findings also depicts expressive suppression is significantly and negatively related with psychological wellbeing.

Table 3: Regression Coefficients for Study Variables among 384 Participants

	Consequences							
	Expressive Suppression (M)			Psychological Wellbeing (Y)				
Antecedents	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>		
PEA (X)	.14	.000	.000	c'	.46	.43	.27	
Expressive Suppression (M)	-			b	-6.01	3	.04	
Constant	<i>I</i>	-.89	.02	.000	<i>I</i>	112.1	3.14	.000
	$R^2 = .99$			$R^2 = .64$				
	$F(1,382) = 314960.10$			$F(2,381) = 345.67$				
	$p < .001$			$p < .001$				

Note: * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$, PEA= Parental Emotional Abuse

According to the table above, there is a positive significant direct effect of parental emotional abuse on expressive suppression ($\beta = .14^{***}$, $SE = .000$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, direct effect of parental emotional abuse on psychological wellbeing is not significant ($\beta = .46$, $SE = .43$, $p > .05$). However, the effect of expressive suppression on psychological wellbeing is negatively significant ($\beta = -6.01^*$, $SE = 3$, $p < .05$).

Table 4: Indirect Effect

Indirect Path	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	LLCI	ULCI
Expressive Suppression	-.86	.86	-3.45	-.11

Indirect effect depicts expressive suppression negatively and significantly mediates the relationship of predictor parental emotional abuse and outcome psychological wellbeing.

Table 5: Coefficients of Regression for Study Variables in 384 Participants

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>P</i>	R^2	<i>F</i>	LLCI	ULCI
					.66	246.35		
PEA	-.47	.04	-.10	.000			-.57	-.38
CR	-.004	.20	-.01	.98			-.41	.40
PEA X CR	.004	.001	2.61	.000			.001	.007

Note: *** $p < .001$, PEA= Parental Emotional Abuse, CR= Cognitive Reappraisal

Hayes' Process Model 1 was employed to examine the moderating role of cognitive reappraisal in the relationship between parental emotional abuse and psychological well-being among adolescents. As shown in the table above, there is a direct, negative, and significant effect of parental emotional abuse on psychological well-being ($\beta = -.47^{***}$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$). However, the results indicate that the direct effect of cognitive reappraisal on psychological well-being is not significant ($\beta = -.004$, $SE = .20$, $p > .05$). The combined effect of parental emotional abuse and cognitive reappraisal on psychological well-being is significant ($\beta = .004^{**}$, $SE = .001$, $p < .01$), suggesting that cognitive reappraisal positively moderates the negative impact of parental emotional abuse on psychological well-being.

Discussion

There is substantial literature on childhood abuse; however, limited research exists on parental emotional abuse and its impact on psychological well-being, particularly through the moderating role of cognitive reappraisal and the mediating role of expressive suppression among adolescents in Pakistan. The current study aims to fill this gap by investigating the moderating role of cognitive reappraisal and the mediating role of expressive suppression between parental emotional abuse and psychological well-being among adolescents. The study seeks to provide implications for abusive parents and abused adolescents while contributing to academic literature.

The first hypothesis of the study posits that parental emotional abuse is likely to be significantly positively related to expressive suppression and negatively related to cognitive reappraisal and psychological well-being among adolescents in Pakistan. The correlational analysis supports this hypothesis, indicating that emotional abuse is positively and significantly related to expressive suppression, while it has a negative and significant relationship with psychological well-being and cognitive reappraisal among Pakistani adolescents. This aligns with previous literature, which suggests that adolescents who experience emotional abuse or maltreatment from their parents often struggle to employ adaptive and effective emotional regulation techniques. Instead, they tend to focus on avoidance and suppression, which negatively impacts their mental well-being (Lonigro et al., 2022). Such experiences can lead to low self-esteem, interpersonal sensitivity, emotional expression difficulties, and feelings of loneliness and abandonment (Shi et al., 2024). Kwan and Kwok (2021) found that emotional maltreatment during childhood has long-lasting adverse effects, particularly during adolescence, affecting the adolescent's subjective sense of happiness. The more adolescents rely on expressive suppression, the higher their likelihood of experiencing internalizing issues (Compass et al., 2017). Additionally, the inability to express positive emotions can hinder adolescents' ability to share and connect with others (Dryman, 2018). Sinha and Kumar (2020) emphasize the critical role of emotional regulation in adolescents' psychological health, noting that maladaptive coping strategies like expressive suppression often lead to psychological distress. In contrast, cognitive reappraisal has been identified as a key factor in maintaining emotional resilience (Sinha & Kumar, 2020). Adolescents who experienced emotional abuse in childhood are more likely to exhibit lower self-esteem, mood disturbances, and other psychological issues (Kwan & Kwok, 2021). A meta-analysis by Di Paola (2022) further supports the link between emotional abuse and neglect and reduced psychological well-being. The study's finding that emotional abuse negatively correlates with cognitive reappraisal is consistent with the literature, as individuals who experienced parental emotional abuse in childhood often struggle to process and interpret emotional signals (Wolfe et al., 2001), leading to difficulties in employing cognitive reappraisal (Sistad et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021).

The study's second hypothesis, which proposed that expressive suppression mediates the negative

impact of parental emotional abuse on psychological well-being among Pakistani adolescents, was supported. Hayes Process 4.1 Model 1 confirmed this mediation. This finding aligns with cultural norms in Pakistan, where emotional expression is often discouraged, particularly among adolescents, due to societal expectations and familial hierarchies. Suppressing emotions may serve as a coping mechanism to avoid conflict or maintain familial harmony, but it can also exacerbate psychological distress. This is consistent with prior research indicating that emotional inhibition, often stemming from childhood emotional invalidation, predicts psychological distress (Krause et al., 2003). Similarly, Boyes et al. (2016) found that adverse life experiences and expressive suppression were linked to increased psychological distress in adolescents, a pattern that may be amplified in collectivist cultures like Pakistan, where emotional restraint is often valued.

The third hypothesis, suggesting that cognitive reappraisal moderates the negative impact of parental emotional abuse on psychological well-being, was also supported. Hayes Process 4.1 Model 4 confirmed this moderation. The study's results align with previous research indicating that reappraisal serves as a buffer between emotional distress and its negative impact on psychological well-being (Riepenhausen et al., 2022; Shum et al., 2025; Hartanto et al., 2024). These findings are congruent with earlier studies, which suggest that positive reappraisals act as a countervailing mechanism that mitigates the adverse effects of childhood emotional abuse on adult mental health (Jung et al., 2021). The buffering role of cognitive reappraisal can be explained by its ability to shift perspectives, reduce emotional intensity, enhance coping mechanisms, and improve self-esteem in abused children. In Pakistan, where cultural values are highly regarded, cognitive reappraisal may help adolescents perceive emotional abuse as a less detrimental aspect of their upbringing, potentially viewing it as a form of strict parenting rather than outright abuse.

Conclusion

The findings underscore the need for interventions addressing parental emotional abuse and its impact on adolescents' psychological well-being in Pakistan. Culturally tailored awareness programs, such as seminars and workshops, should educate parents and communities about emotional abuse and promote adaptive emotion regulation strategies like cognitive reappraisal. Mental health professionals can guide parents in fostering open communication and validating their children's emotions, while accessible psychotherapy services can address mental health challenges. Schools and community centers should provide support networks and disseminate information on creating healthy emotional environments. Policymakers must prioritize mental health initiatives, including public awareness campaigns and training for professionals, while integrating emotional well-being programs into school curricula. Culturally sensitive interventions that challenge harmful practices like emotional suppression are essential to enhance adolescents' psychological well-being and break the cycle of abuse. Additionally, the government should enact and enforce laws protecting children's rights and take action against abusive parents.

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