

PARENTAL EMOTIONAL ABUSE, EMOTIONAL REGULATION, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING AMONG YOUNG PAKISTANI ADULTS: A MEDIATING MODERATING STUDY

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Abstract

In the collectivistic society of Pakistan, children are often blamed for displaying irritable behaviour and even for showing signs of psychological distress, whereas the emotional abuse by parents is not substantially addressed. As a result, the emotional regulation of children deteriorates over time, leading to adverse effects on their psychological well-being. Although some studies have examined the impact of parental emotional abuse on children's psychological well-being, research remains limited in Pakistan, particularly with samples of young adults. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to investigate the impact of parental emotional abuse on the psychological well-being of young adults, with emotional regulation—specifically, expressive suppression as a mediator and cognitive reappraisal as a moderator. The study utilized a cross-sectional correlational research design and a purposive sampling technique to collect data from 350 young adults, all Pakistani citizens, who were college and university students aged between 18 and 30. Three instruments were used: the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire, the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, and the Psychological Well-being Questionnaire. The findings indicate that expressive suppression significantly mediates the negative impact of emotional abuse on psychological well-being, while cognitive reappraisal did not significantly moderate this

relationship. The study emphasizes the need for increased awareness among Pakistani parents regarding kind and empathetic treatment of children, and it advocates for promoting psychological help-seeking behavior among young adults.

INTRODUCTION

Parenting plays a crucial role in shaping a child's physical, psychological, and social development (Lanjekar et al., 2022). A nurturing environment is essential for healthy growth (Zvara et al., 2018), and effective parenting involves practices that prioritize the child's well-being (Wang et al., 2017). In contrast, inadequate parenting can hinder confidence, impair social relationships, and lead to academic struggles (Lanjekar et al., 2022). While the family is ideally a protective unit, it can become a source of trauma when parental abuse occurs, significantly affecting a child's well-being (Kumar et al., 2023). Abusive parenting includes any harmful physical, emotional, or social behaviors (Hassan et al., 2023), which disrupt the psychological development of the child (Smith & Carlson, 2020). Emotional abuse is defined as intentional verbal or symbolic acts causing psychological harm (Herrmann et al., 2022). It can manifest actively through hostility or passively through emotional neglect (Rost et al., 2024). Prevalence data suggests one in four children experience such abuse (Huang et al., 2022).

Emotional abuse, in particular, has long-term effects that persist into adulthood (Rost et al., 2024), remaining a significant risk factor for mental health issues even in the absence of physical or sexual abuse (Korolevskaia & Yampolskaya, 2023). Victims often develop maladaptive schemas, emotional dysregulation, impaired social functioning, and reduced life satisfaction (Barber et al., 2005). Ryff (1998) defines psychological well-being as a multidimensional construct, encompassing emotional, cognitive, and social health, often shaped by early life experiences.

Emotional regulation plays a key role in this process, enabling individuals to monitor and manage their emotions (Gross, 2015). It is crucial in the context of parental abuse, serving as both a buffer and a mechanism for recovery (Ford et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2022). Emotional regulation strategies are categorized as adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive strategies like cognitive reappraisal help individuals reinterpret negative events, while maladaptive

strategies like expressive suppression involve withholding emotional expression, often leading to further emotional issues (McRae & Gross, 2020).

Ryff's (1989) model highlights the impact of adverse childhood experiences, including emotional abuse, on well-being. Victims often struggle with trust, attachment, and social relationships (Rothwell & Davoodi, 2024), and may also face difficulties with emotional coping and daily functioning in adulthood (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Islam et al., 2023). Parental abuse disrupts attachment formation and creates feelings of rejection (Bowlby, 1988). Prolonged exposure to stress and abuse alters brain development, particularly in regions associated with decision-making and emotional regulation (Rivera et al., 2021). Mothers with histories of emotional abuse report higher stress and poorer coping mechanisms, often perpetuating a cycle of poor parenting (Buchheim et al., 2022; Köhler-Dauner et al., 2021). Numerous studies link parental psychological control and emotional abuse to reduced adolescent well-being (Aydin & Özyürek, 2021; Kim & Lee, 2023).

Emotional regulation, whether conscious or unconscious, is essential for resilience and effective coping (Gross, 2015; Liu et al., 2023). Adolescents with strong emotional regulation are better at managing stress and interpersonal challenges. Cognitive reappraisal helps reframe negative events positively (Deng et al., 2024; Yao & Duo, 2023), while expressive suppression, though occasionally useful, can hinder emotional processing (Aldao et al., 2010; John & Gross, 2021; Xiao et al., 2022). According to the tripartite model by Morris et al. (2007), parenting shapes a child's emotional regulation. Adolescents who manage their emotions effectively can reduce the impact of parental control (Deng et al., 2024). Cognitive reappraisal has been identified as a helpful tool for survivors of abuse (Liu et al., 2023), with meta-analyses supporting its effectiveness in trauma recovery (Williams et al., 2022).

Cultural perspectives on parental abuse vary. In South Asian societies, it remains a taboo subject

(Ahmed et al., 2023), whereas Scandinavian countries take a proactive approach. This cultural divide results in limited research from regions like Pakistan, where more evidence-based studies are needed. In collectivistic societies, emotional suppression is a common regulation strategy, contrasting with the adaptive reappraisal approaches found in individualistic cultures (Lee & Zafar, 2021). Given the significant impact of abusive parenting on adolescent development, the current study aims to fill this research gap by exploring the moderating role of cognitive reappraisal and the mediating role of expressive suppression in this context.

Although there is substantial literature regarding the impact of parental emotional abuse on psychological well-being—specifically poor psychological well-being—this remains a taboo subject in the collectivistic society of Pakistan. Children often suppress their emotions or use reappraisal strategies to cope with parental emotional abuse. However, recent study has shown that parental emotional abuse has a negative and significant effect on the psychological well-being of adolescents, with expressive suppression acting as a mediator and cognitive reappraisal moderating this effect among adolescents in Pakistan (Shahid et al., 2025). However, the young adult sample has not been adequately explored. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to assess the impact of parental emotional abuse on the psychological well-being of Pakistani young adults aged 18 to 30, with expressive suppression as a mediator and cognitive reappraisal as a moderator.

Hypotheses

1. Expressive suppression is likely to positively mediate the negative impact of parental

emotional abuse on psychological wellbeing among young Pakistani adults.

2. Cognitive reappraisal is likely to positively and significantly moderate the negative effect of parental emotional abuse on psychological wellbeing among young Pakistani adults.

Method

The current study adopted a cross-sectional correlational research design and employed a purposive sampling technique to collect data from Pakistani citizens, both men and women, aged between 18 and 30, who were college and university students. Three validated instruments were used: the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), an 18-item scale assessing various dimensions of psychological well-being on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“most agreeable”) to 7 (“too much agreeable”), with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.87$ to 0.93); the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ), developed by Mumtaz et al. (2022), consisting of 30 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater emotional abuse and a reliability coefficient of 0.94 ; and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003), a 10-item scale measuring two strategies—emotional suppression (items 2, 4, 6, and 9) and cognitive reappraisal (items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, and 10)—on a 7-point Likert scale (1-7), with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.75 . Participants met specific inclusion criteria: they were Pakistani students aged 18 to 30 who had experienced emotional abuse from their parents. Ethical procedures were followed in accordance with APA 7th edition guidelines, including obtaining institutional approvals and informed consent from participants and, where applicable, their parents or guardians. Participants completed a demographic form followed by the study questionnaires in approximately 15 to 25 minutes and were thanked for their participation.

Results

Table 1 Participants’ Characteristics (N=350)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Age			25.24	3.41
Gender				
Men	276	79		
Women	74	21		
Educational Status				

Intermediate	60	17
Bachelor	144	41
Master	112	32
PhD	34	10

Note. SD = Standard Deviation

The above table depicts among 350 participants, mostly men (276, 79%) participated while women 74, 21%. The mean age of participants in this study is 25.24 (SD= 3.41). The categories of the educational status depicted that

participants with intermediate education are 60 (17%), with bachelor education are 144 (41%), with master are 112 (32%), and lastly with 34 (10%) with PhD education.

Table 2 Correlational Analysis (N=350)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1.PEA	-	-.47**	1**	-.82**
2.Cognitive Reappraisal		-	-.48**	.49**
3.Expressive Suppression			-	-.82**
4.Psychological Wellbeing				-

Note. PEA= Parental Emotional Abuse, ** $p < .01$

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 Mediation Analysis (N=350)

Antecedents	Consequences							
	Expressive Suppression (M)				Psychological Wellbeing (Y)			
		β	SE	P		β	SE	P
PEA (X)	a	.14	.000	.001	c'	.53	.43	.21
Expressive Suppression (M)	-				b	-6.67	3.02	.02
Constant	I	-.88	.03	.001	I	115.21	3.19	.001
	$R^2=.99$ $F(1,348)=277203.06$				$R^2=.64$ $F(2,347)=345.67$			
	$P<.001$				$P<.001$			

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 ($\beta = .53$, SE = .43, $p > .05$). However, the effect of expressive suppression on psychological wellbeing is negatively significant ($\beta = -6.67^*$, SE=3.02, * $p < .05$).

Indirect Effect (N=350)

Indirect Path	Effect	Standardized Effect	LLCI	ULCI
Expressive Suppression	-.95	-1.87	-3.58	-.27

Indirect effects depict expressive suppression negatively and significantly mediate the relationship

of predictor parental emotional abuse and outcome psychological wellbeing.

Table 4 Moderation Analysis (N=350)

Variables	β	SE	t	P	R^2	F	LLCI	ULCI
					.69	265.69		
EPA	-.45	.04	-9.48	.001			-.54	-.35
CR	.21	.21	1.02	.30			-.19	.62
EPA X CR	.002	.001	1.42	.15			-.001	.006

Note. SMA= social media addiction, SC=social connectedness

Hayes' Process Model 1 was utilized to examine the moderating role of cognitive reappraisal between parental emotional abuse and psychological wellbeing among young adults. According to the table above, there is a direct negative significant effect of parental emotional abuse on psychological wellbeing ($\beta = -.45^{***}$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the results indicates that cognitive reappraisal effect on psychological wellbeing is not significant ($\beta = .21$, $SE = .21$, $p > .05$). The combined effect of parental emotional abuse and cognitive reappraisal on psychological wellbeing is also non-significant ($\beta = .002$, $SE = .001$, $p > .05$), indicating that cognitive reappraisal does not significantly moderate the negative significant impact of parental emotional abuse on psychological wellbeing.

Discussion

The Correlational analysis of this cross sectional study revealed that emotional abuse is significantly positively linked with expressive suppression and negatively with both psychological well-being and cognitive reappraisal. These results align with previous research indicating that young adults exposed to emotional abuse often struggle with emotional regulation, relying on avoidance and suppression, which worsens mental health outcomes (Lonigro et al., 2022). Such individuals may experience low self-esteem, interpersonal sensitivity, difficulty expressing emotions, and feelings of loneliness (Shi et al., 2024). Emotional maltreatment during childhood has been linked to long-term decreases in life satisfaction (Kwan & Kwok, 2021), and excessive use of expressive suppression has been associated with internalizing problems (Compass et al., 2017). Inhibiting emotional expression can also

impair connection and social sharing (Dryman, 2018). Maladaptive emotional regulation strategies like expressive suppression increase distress, whereas cognitive reappraisal contributes to resilience (Sinha & Kumar, 2020). A meta-analysis by Di PAOLA (2022) further confirms the association between emotional abuse and poor psychological outcomes. Victims of emotional abuse often struggle to interpret emotional cues, making it difficult to apply reappraisal techniques effectively (Sistad et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021).

The first hypothesis, stating that expressive suppression mediates the negative effects of parental emotional abuse on well-being, was also supported through Hayes Process Model 1. This mediation reflects cultural dynamics in Pakistan, where emotional expression is often discouraged, particularly among youth. Young adults may suppress emotions to avoid familial conflict or uphold societal norms, but such suppression intensifies psychological distress. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that childhood emotional invalidation and emotional inhibition predict later distress (Boyes et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2003). In collectivist cultures like Pakistan, where emotional restraint is valued, suppression may serve as a temporary coping strategy that ultimately undermines mental health.

Hayes' Process Model 1 did not support the second assumption of the study. This finding contradicts earlier studies that emphasise the buffering effect of reappraisal on emotional distress (Hartanto et al., 2024; Riepenhausen et al., 2022; Shum et al., 2025). Reappraisal assists young adults in reframing negative experiences, thereby enhancing their coping capacity and self-esteem. The non-significant moderating role of cognitive reappraisal may be

attributed to overwhelming emotional abuse, which could adversely affect the efficacy of reappraisal and other coping mechanisms in children. Furthermore, expressive suppression may be more prevalent, particularly in Pakistan's collectivistic society, where clerics and other professionals often advocate for expressive suppression among the younger generation, and encourage respect for elders regardless of the elders' behaviour.

Limitations and Recommendations

Several limitations should be noted. The purposive sampling technique limits the generalizability of findings to the broader Pakistani population. Future studies should use stratified sampling for better representation. Secondly, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations; longitudinal research is recommended to assess changes over time. Third, the uneven distribution of college and university students, as well as gender imbalance, restricts demographic analysis. Future research should aim for balanced samples.

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