



Examining the Role of Emotion Regulation in Childhood Emotional Abuse and Adult Mental Health Outcomes

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Abstract: Childhood emotional abuse is a pervasive yet often overlooked form of maltreatment that significantly impacts psychological development and long-term mental health. Unlike physical or sexual abuse, emotional abuse does not leave visible scars but profoundly alters cognitive, emotional, and social functioning. One of the key pathways through which childhood emotional abuse influences adult well-being is emotion regulation, the ability to understand, manage, and respond to emotions in adaptive ways. Deficits in emotion regulation have been linked to increased psychological distress, including heightened vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. This study explores the mediating role of emotion regulation in the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and adult mental health outcomes. Using an online survey with 81 participants aged 18–30, standardized measures assessed childhood trauma, emotion regulation difficulties, self-esteem, and psychological distress. Correlational and regression analyses revealed significant associations between emotion regulation, self-esteem, and psychological distress, suggesting that individuals with poor emotion regulation skills and lower self-esteem experience higher levels of distress. However, contrary to expectations, adverse childhood experiences (ACE) did not directly predict these outcomes, indicating that other psychological and social factors—such as resilience, coping strategies, and social support—may shape how individuals adapt to early emotional maltreatment. This underscores the importance of interventions aimed at strengthening emotion regulation and self-esteem as key protective mechanisms.

Keywords: *Childhood Emotional Abuse, Emotion Regulation, Psychological Distress, Self-Esteem, Adult Mental Health*

1. Introduction

“Emotions are the unseen architects of our lives.”

~ Lisa Feldman Barrett

Childhood emotional abuse is a profound yet often invisible form of maltreatment, one that does not leave bruises or broken bones but instead alters the very fabric of an individual's psychological development. Unlike physical or sexual abuse, which is more readily acknowledged, emotional abuse operates in the shadows, embedded in patterns of chronic invalidation, psychological neglect, rejection, and manipulation (Gama et al., 2022). A child who grows up in an environment where their emotions are consistently ignored, ridiculed, or dismissed learns an unspoken lesson: that their feelings are unimportant, exaggerated, or even shameful. Over time, these experiences disrupt the natural development of emotional processing, leaving lasting imprints on self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and overall mental well-being (Krause et al., 2003). The impact of such maltreatment does not dissipate with age but often lingers, manifesting in various forms of psychological distress in adulthood. Research has consistently linked childhood emotional abuse to increased vulnerability to mood and anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress, emotional dysregulation, and difficulties in forming secure relationships (Horwitz et al., 2001). However, a critical question remains: What drives this relationship? Why do some individuals emerge from these experiences with significant emotional distress, while others demonstrate resilience?

One key psychological mechanism that may explain this connection is emotion regulation, the ability to recognize, interpret, and manage one's emotional responses in an adaptive manner. Emotion regulation is not simply a cognitive skill but a fundamental process that influences how individuals navigate their social world, respond to stressors, and maintain psychological stability (Gross, 2015). Childhood is a crucial period for the development of these regulatory abilities, as caregivers play an essential role in modeling, validating, and shaping emotional responses. However, when a child is raised in an emotionally abusive environment, this process is severely disrupted. Without adequate guidance and support, children may develop maladaptive regulatory strategies, such as emotional suppression, avoidance, heightened reactivity, or dissociation (Gruhn & Compas, 2020). These coping mechanisms, while perhaps adaptive in the short term, often lead to significant emotional instability and heightened psychological vulnerability in adulthood.

Individuals who struggle with emotion regulation may find it difficult to process distress, manage interpersonal conflict, or develop a stable sense of self—factors that can contribute to a wide range of mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety disorders, and emotional dysregulation disorders (Dvir et al., 2014).

The current paper explores the role of emotion regulation as a mediating factor between childhood emotional abuse and adult mental health outcomes. By investigating how early emotional maltreatment disrupts the development of healthy emotional regulation, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the long-term psychological consequences of childhood emotional abuse.

2. Review of Literature

Childhood Emotional Abuse: The Silent, Lingering Impact on Psychological Development

Childhood emotional abuse is a severe form of maltreatment that often goes unnoticed due to its lack of visible or physical indicators. Unlike physical or sexual abuse, which typically result in clear and observable signs of harm, emotional abuse manifests through persistent behaviors like verbal aggression, ridicule, belittling, neglect, and rejection (Kim et al., 2023). These actions prevent children from developing a healthy sense of self-worth and a secure emotional foundation. Over time, these children internalize feelings of inadequacy, shame, and fear, which can alter their cognitive and emotional development. The absence of emotional validation and support during formative years severely impairs the development of adaptive coping strategies, leaving children vulnerable to emotional dysregulation. Because emotional abuse does not leave physical scars, it is often overlooked or minimized, which can delay intervention and support (Pereira et al., 2021).

Research consistently highlights that individuals who experience emotional abuse in childhood often struggle with emotional instability in adulthood, presenting with a higher incidence of mood disorders, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. These effects not only influence emotional functioning but also affect social relationships, making it challenging for individuals to develop trust and intimacy with others. In adulthood, the lingering impact of childhood emotional abuse can be seen in patterns of maladaptive coping, poor self-esteem, and difficulties in managing interpersonal conflict (Styron & Janoff-Bulman, 1997). The long-term consequences of this form

of abuse underscore the importance of addressing the emotional and psychological needs of children in abusive environments to prevent future mental health issues.

Psychological Distress in Adulthood: The Long-Term Impact of Early Emotional Abuse

Psychological distress is a broad term used to describe a range of emotional and psychological symptoms, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and general emotional instability. These distressing symptoms can significantly impair an individual's quality of life and ability to function effectively in daily activities (Zhu et al., 2022). For individuals with a history of childhood emotional abuse, psychological distress often emerges in adulthood as a result of prolonged emotional trauma. The abuse experienced during childhood disrupts the development of healthy emotional regulation, making it difficult for these individuals to manage their emotions in adaptive ways (Pereira et al., 2021). As a result, they may experience heightened emotional reactivity, intense feelings of sadness or anger, and an inability to effectively cope with stress or anxiety.

In addition to mood disturbances, individuals with a history of childhood emotional abuse may struggle with relationship difficulties, including issues with trust, emotional intimacy, and effective communication (Li et al., 2020). The chronic nature of psychological distress in these individuals can lead to a cascade of further mental health problems, as emotional dysregulation fuels ongoing negative self-beliefs and emotional instability. Furthermore, the cumulative effect of experiencing continuous distress over time can result in decreased quality of life, social isolation, and impaired occupational functioning (Wright et al., 2009). Thus, childhood emotional abuse acts as a precursor to chronic psychological distress, which, if left unaddressed, can significantly reduce an individual's overall well-being.

Emotion Regulation Deficits: The Critical Role of Emotional Processing in Adult Mental Health

Emotion regulation refers to the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional reactions in a way that promotes adaptive functioning and well-being. It involves both the ability to control one's emotional responses to external events and the capacity to adjust emotional experiences in line with social and personal goals (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015). Healthy emotion regulation skills are essential for navigating the complexities of life, managing stress, and maintaining emotional balance. However, individuals who have experienced childhood emotional

abuse often face significant challenges in regulating their emotions (McLaughlin & Lambert, 2017). The lack of emotional validation and support from caregivers during childhood hinders the development of emotional intelligence and regulation strategies.

Emotion regulation deficits are strongly linked to a variety of psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Berzenski, 2019). For individuals with a history of emotional abuse, the inability to effectively regulate emotions contributes to the intensity and frequency of negative emotional experiences. Over time, the chronic emotional instability resulting from these deficits can lead to a cycle of emotional reactivity, maladaptive behavior, and continued psychological distress. Therefore, emotion regulation plays a critical role in determining how individuals with a history of emotional abuse cope with adversity and whether they are able to manage the emotional scars of their past experiences. Strengthening emotion regulation skills is thus crucial for improving mental health outcomes and promoting resilience among individuals affected by childhood emotional maltreatment (Heleniak et al., 2016).

Self-Esteem and its Role in Mediating the Effects of Childhood Emotional Abuse on Adult Mental Health

Self-esteem, or the overall sense of self-worth and personal value, is a critical component of psychological well-being. A positive self-concept enables individuals to cope with challenges, engage in healthy relationships, and maintain emotional stability. In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to experience feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, and emotional instability (Cherry, 2023). For individuals who have experienced childhood emotional abuse, self-esteem is often severely damaged. The constant invalidation and emotional neglect during formative years prevent these individuals from developing a secure and positive sense of self. As a result, their self-esteem remains fragile and easily disrupted by external criticism or rejection. Low self-esteem is a major predictor of psychological distress, as it fosters a negative internal dialogue that reinforces feelings of worthlessness and self-doubt. This negative self-perception often exacerbates the emotional difficulties associated with emotional abuse, making it difficult for individuals to engage in adaptive coping strategies or maintain healthy relationships (Khalid et al., 2024).

The link between self-esteem and mental health is well-documented, with research showing that individuals with low self-esteem are more prone to developing anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders. Additionally, low self-esteem often acts as a mediator between childhood emotional abuse and adult mental health outcomes. In other words, the damage done to self-esteem in childhood may partially explain why individuals who experienced emotional abuse are at greater risk of psychological distress in adulthood. Strengthening self-esteem is thus an important therapeutic goal for individuals affected by childhood emotional abuse, as it can significantly reduce the risk of developing mental health issues and improve overall psychological functioning (Sarkar et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the mediating role of emotion regulation in the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and adult mental health outcomes.

3.2 Hypotheses

H1: Emotion regulation mediates the relationship between childhood emotional abuse (as measured through ACEs) and psychological distress in adulthood.

H2: Greater adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) will be associated with greater difficulties in emotion regulation.

H3: Greater difficulties in emotion regulation will be associated with higher psychological distress.

H4: Greater difficulties in emotion regulation will be associated with lower self-esteem

H5: Lower self-esteem will be associated with higher psychological distress.

H6: Greater adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) will be associated with lower self-esteem.

H7: Greater adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) will be associated with higher psychological distress.

3.3 Procedure

The study was conducted using an online survey via Google Forms. Before participation, individuals were presented with an informed consent form, which outlined the purpose of the

study, assured confidentiality, and emphasized that participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time without consequences. Upon providing consent, participants completed a series of questions designed to assess childhood trauma, emotional regulation difficulties, self-esteem, and psychological distress. The survey was structured for clarity and ease of completion, ensuring a smooth experience for all participants. After submitting their responses, participants were thanked for their time and effort. Additionally, they were provided with the researcher's contact information should they have any questions or wish to learn more about the study.

3.4 Measure

This study used four standardized measures to assess childhood trauma, emotional regulation difficulties, self-esteem, and psychological distress.

Childhood trauma was assessed using a 10-item questionnaire based on the **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) framework**. This measure evaluates exposure to emotional abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, with higher scores indicating greater trauma exposure.

Emotional regulation difficulties were measured using the 16-item **Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS-16)**. This scale assesses challenges in impulse control, emotional awareness, and access to regulation strategies, with higher scores reflecting greater difficulties.

Self-esteem was evaluated using the 10-item **Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)**. It measures an individual's overall sense of self-worth and self-acceptance, where higher scores indicate greater self-esteem.

Psychological distress was assessed using the 10-item **Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)**. This measure evaluates symptoms of anxiety and depression, with higher scores reflecting greater distress.

3.5 Sample

The study included 81 participants between the ages of 18 and 30, consisting of 40 females, 28 males, and 13 individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ or gender diverse. Participants were recruited through online platforms and community networks to ensure a diverse and inclusive sample. The only eligibility criterion was being within the specified age range, allowing individuals from different backgrounds and life experiences to take part. By including a range of gender identities and perspectives, the study aimed to explore how childhood trauma relates to emotional regulation, self-esteem, and psychological distress in young adults. The varied sample provided an

opportunity to examine these relationships across different lived experiences, contributing to a broader understanding of psychological well-being.

4. Analysis of data

Table 1. *N, Mean & Standard Deviation*

	Adverse Childhood Exp	Emotion Regulation	Self Esteem	Psychological Distress
N	81	81	81	81
Mean	2.26	46.2	17.6	22.1
Standard Deviation	2.44	4.41	3.85	7.84

Table 2. *Correlation Matrix for Adverse Childhood Experiences, Emotion Regulation, Self-Esteem, and Psychological Distress*

	Adverse Childhood Exp	Emotion Regulation	Self Esteem	Psychological Distress
Adverse Childhood Exp	-			
Emotion Regulation	0.173	-		
Self Esteem	0.179	-0.262*	-	
Psychological Distress	0.154	0.331**	-0.306**	-

Table 3. *Linear Regression Analysis for Emotion regulation*

Table 3.1. *Descriptives Model Fit Measures*

Model	R	F	R²
1	0.173	2.44	0.0300

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=81

Table 3.2. *Model Coefficients - Emotion regulation*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	45.490	0.664	68.53	<.001
Adverse childhood exp	0.313	0.200	1.56	0.122

Table 4. *Linear Regression for self esteem*

Table 4.1: *Model Fit Measures*

Model	R	F	R ²
1	0.179	2.59	0.0319

Table 4.2: *Model Coefficients - Self esteem*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	16.931	0.579	29.26	<.001
Adverse childhood exp	0.282	0.175	1.61	0.110

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=80

Table 5: *Linear Regression for Psychological Distress*

Table 5.1: *Model Fit Measures*

Model	R	F	R ²
1	0.153	1.88	0.0235

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=80

Table 5.2. *Model Coefficients - Psychological distress*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	21.024	1.195	17.59	<.001
Adverse childhood exp	0.492	0.359	1.37	0.175

5. Results and Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the role of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) in shaping adult mental health outcomes, with a particular focus on emotion regulation (ER), self-esteem (SE), and psychological distress (PD). Correlational analyses revealed significant relationships among these variables. Notably, difficulties in emotion regulation were negatively correlated with self-esteem ($r = -0.262, p < .05$) and positively correlated with psychological distress ($r = 0.331, p < .01$). Given that higher scores on the DERS-16 reflect greater difficulties in emotion regulation, these findings suggest that individuals who struggle to regulate their emotions tend to report lower self-esteem and higher levels of distress. These associations are consistent with existing literature highlighting the role of emotional regulation difficulties in predicting negative psychological outcomes (Berzenski, 2019; McLaughlin & Lambert, 2017).

Additionally, self-esteem was found to be negatively correlated with psychological distress ($r = -0.306, p < .01$), indicating that individuals with lower self-worth are more likely to experience heightened emotional distress. This aligns with prior research demonstrating that low self-esteem serves as a significant risk factor for mood disorders and poor mental health functioning (Cherry, 2023; Khalid et al., 2024). Together, these results support the notion that both emotional regulation abilities and self-esteem play critical roles in determining psychological resilience and vulnerability in adulthood.

However, an unexpected finding was that ACE did not show a statistically significant direct correlation with emotion regulation, self-esteem, or psychological distress. This result contrasts with some previous studies that have reported a robust association between childhood adversity and emotional dysfunction in adulthood (Dvir et al., 2014; Pereira et al., 2021). One potential explanation could lie in individual variability in processing and coping with early adversity. Moreover, the effects of ACE may be moderated or mediated by additional factors such as social support, temperament, or resilience, which were not directly assessed in this study. It is also possible that the impact of emotional abuse may be more subtle or diffuse, affecting outcomes indirectly through complex psychosocial pathways.

To further explore these relationships, a regression analysis was conducted to determine whether emotion regulation and self-esteem could predict psychological distress. The analysis revealed that both emotion regulation ($\beta = 0.331, p < .01$) and self-esteem ($\beta = -0.306, p < .01$)

were significant predictors of psychological distress, meaning that individuals with poorer emotion regulation and lower self-esteem are more likely to experience distress. F-test values were also computed for the overall model fit: emotion regulation ($F = 2.44$), self-esteem ($F = 2.59$), and psychological distress ($F = 1.88$). These F-test values indicate that the regression models for emotion regulation and self-esteem were statistically significant predictors of psychological distress, with emotion regulation showing a stronger model fit.

These findings suggest that the impact of childhood adversity on adult mental health is not necessarily direct but may be mediated by factors such as an individual's ability to regulate emotions and their perception of self-worth. The lack of a direct correlation between ACE and psychological distress underscores the complexity of the relationship between early adversity and later mental health outcomes. While childhood adversity may lay a foundation for emotional and psychological challenges, its influence is likely shaped by how individuals cope with and interpret their experiences over time.

In practical terms, these results highlight the potential value of interventions aimed at improving emotion regulation and self-esteem as protective factors against psychological distress. Such interventions could be especially important for individuals with histories of childhood adversity, as these factors may buffer against long-term mental health challenges. Future research should explore additional mediating variables, such as coping strategies, resilience, or social support networks, to better understand the indirect pathways through which childhood adversity impacts adult mental health.

6. Conclusion

This study underscores the significant role of emotion regulation and self-esteem in shaping adult mental health outcomes. While Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) did not directly predict psychological distress, both emotion regulation and self-esteem emerged as key factors influencing mental well-being. These findings suggest that the impact of childhood adversity is not solely deterministic but is shaped by an individual's ability to regulate emotions and maintain a healthy self-concept. Strengthening these psychological resources may serve as a protective mechanism against distress, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. Future research

should explore additional mediating factors, such as resilience and coping strategies, to further clarify the pathways through which early adversity affects adult mental health.

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