



A study on Emotional Neglect and Emotional Regulation among Adults

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ABSTRACT

Emotional neglect represents dysfunction of the protective parental relationship on which children depend while they learn the skills needed for safe independence. It affects key developmental foundations, including perceptions of self, which should be acquired through the mirror of attuned parenting, and can have lifelong consequences for stress regulation. In distorting children's preconceptions of relationships, it has implications for everything that should be learnt through and modeled by others. It influences the development of skills needed to function effectively both independently and through relationships. The scales used are Emotional Neglect Scale and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale. A total of 60 people participated in the study of which 30 were male and 30 were female. The age of the subject ranges from 20 to 30 years. The results showed that acceptance of emotional responses, difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior, impulse control difficulties, limited access to emotion regulation strategies and lack of emotional clarity have significant positive correlation with difficulties in emotional regulation. Speaking of gender differences, males

are the ones who has low or nil acceptances of emotional responses in comparison to the females.

KEYWORDS: Emotional Neglect, Emotional Regulation, Adults

INTRODUCTION

“Because we were treated neglectfully and abusively in our young years—when we most needed self-love to be mirrored—it was difficult to hold onto...”

~ Maureen Brady

Children are important human capitals to the country. It is important for every country and society to nurture a strong, intellectual and healthy youth. However, based on the data collected by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), the number of victims has been increasing in an alarming rate in the past 5 years. Approximately 75.3% of child maltreatment cases in 2015 were classified as child neglect. Based on a national clinical dataset of over 11000 trauma-exposed youth, psychological maltreatment (emotional abuse and emotional neglect) was identified as the most prevalent (38%) form of maltreatment (Briggs et al., 2013). It was due to insufficient nurturing, lack of care, and insufficient affection. It is now increasingly believed that parental emotional neglect increases risk for the children's internalizing and externalizing behavior, as well as delays in cognitive development.

Emotional neglect is a pervasive issue that affects millions of people worldwide. It occurs when a child's emotional needs are consistently unmet by their caregivers, resulting in feelings of emptiness, disconnection, and shame. These feelings can then persist into

adulthood and impact the person's relationships, self-esteem, and mental health. They may not have been rejected or abused early in their lives; but they were not made to feel welcome, loved, and safe in the world either, and they didn't have their needs met or even seen. Instead, they were taken for granted, overlooked, treated like adults from a very young age, or used by their caregivers to help, without receiving any positive attention in return. "Emotional neglect is often minimized, even rejected as legitimate trauma because it is so frequently eclipsed by other co-occurring types of trauma. It is a real trauma. The disregard for it is ironic but understandable as emotional neglect is about omission, or lack of what was needed, rather than the presence of maltreatment which characterizes other forms of abuse. Physical and sexual abuse are embodied, horrific experiences of harm-there is physicality to it that you can point to. Even emotional abuse can be recognized by the existence of a serious wrong such as degradation, threat, shaming or manipulation. But childhood emotional neglect is different-it is an absence of warm nurturance, attainment and responsiveness to your emotional experiences and needs.

Childhood emotional neglect tends to be (not always, of course) a bit more subtle, a bit more nuanced, a bit harder to pinpoint, and thus a lot harder to recognize and to understand. In a nutshell, emotional neglect is when a parent fails to see, know, or understand their child as they really are, rather than through the lens of what the parent thinks they are or want them to be. It sometimes means a lack of attention and care, at others; it is a lack of boundaries, rules, and structure. Sometimes it is a lack of encouragement and a failure to provide the tools and lessons needed to navigate the world. Other times it is parents who are overly busy and distracted and simply fail to see their child in the way the child needs to be seen. Emotional neglect can be present even when the parent is providing for all of the child's physical needs noted Webb (2018). Emotional neglect can be present in otherwise loving, caring, and well-meaning parents, and has the ability to camouflage unfortunately it has a long-lasting impact

on the mental health of an individual. The reason why emotional neglect is so rarely discussed does, in part, because it is a product of neglect, i.e., not seeing, not known.

Emotional dysregulation is when a child experiences difficulty with registering emotions, responding with emotions appropriate to context and regulating emotional responses in social situations (i.e., suppressing emotions or presenting with overly dramatic and excessive emotional responses). Children who freely express a range of emotions and can regulate their emotions well tend to have better peer relationships, stronger social connections and better educational outcomes. Children who have these skills also tend to have better relationships, more satisfying employment and better mental health throughout their later life. Children who are able to recognize and respond well to their feelings, and the feelings of others, and express their emotions in healthy and socially acceptable ways are better able to make and keep friends. Good emotional intelligence is associated with better life satisfaction and better educational and vocational outcomes (Salovey & Grewel, 2005). According to Dadds and Salmon (2003) a child who gets conflicting or unforgiving caregiving experiences face issues anticipating the results of his/her behavior and this might be shown in shortfalls in processing emotional information. Children who have experienced maltreatment may have few socially acceptable ways of self-calming, commonly relying on emotional over-control (e.g., not crying when hurt) or emotional under-control (e.g., disproportionate reactions to minor events). They need support to build more adaptive self-regulation activities into their daily lives (Essau et al., 2017).

Poor emotional regulation is a core difficulty in many childhood disorders that are associated with challenging behavior. Supporting a child to tolerate and manage strong emotions can help them to relinquish challenging behavior (Essau et al., 2017; Hertz et al., 2012).

Emotional Neglect

Burgess and Conger (1978) broadly defined neglect as the “harming of a child either through lack of care or supervision.” They further asserted that it is difficult to clearly define neglect as it deals with behaviors regarding caregiver-child relationships, which falls along a continuum, and often it is not clear where a specific case falls along this continuum.

Dubowitz et al. (1993) defined neglect as occurring “when the basic needs of children are not met, regardless of cause. Basic needs include adequate shelter, food, health care, clothing, education, protection, and nurturance.” The National Incidence Studies describe child neglect by breaking the concept into three categories: physical, educational, and emotional neglect (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). All three categories involve the adequacy of care and assume that all children have basic needs that must be met.

Crittenden (1999) defined the core of emotional neglect as the “failure to connect emotionally.”

In a study conducted by Blumenthal (2015) a summary of all the theoretical models in three different causal neglect models has been given. According to him a model of parental deficit, an environmental deficit model and an ecological-transactional model. In the parental deficit model, the main cause of child neglect is inadequate parenting as the starting point in childhood includes individuals (parents, guardians), and not communities, who are primarily responsible for ensuring child welfare. Parental characteristics (psychopathology, cognitive distortions or experience inappropriate care) are the major causal factors for child neglect. This model does not take in consideration the social and economic circumstances that can affect parenting, as well as recognition and sustenance of neglect. Material deprivation is the primary cause of child neglect in the environmental deficit model. The model emerged from sociological theories of explaining the causes and effects of intergenerational poverty. In this

model, poverty induces stress that makes parents unable to materially and emotionally satisfy the needs of the child. In an ecological-transactional model, the cause of neglect is in the interaction of family characteristics and environmental factors. In this model, the focus was on the level of stress as well as stress coping mechanisms. The increased level of stress may impact the coping mechanism and it is then the neglect may occur.

Webb (2016) states that “when a parent fails to respond to a child’s emotional needs, childhood emotional neglect happens.” Further, the author adds that when emotional neglect happens, it may sound like nothing, and it often looks like nothing but actually, it can have as great an impact upon a child as abuse, even though it’s not noticeable or memorable like abuse is. Often, that lack of emotional response doesn’t look unhealthy at all; the parents may take great care of the child overall. But something invisible is missing: that is the parent doesn’t validate their child’s feelings or respond to their child’s emotional needs. And that has consequences. The author further suggests that emotionally neglected children can end up feeling deeply alone. This results in making children feel that their needs are not important, their feelings don’t matter, or that they should never ask for help (because it’s perceived as a sign of weakness). When the individual grows up, childhood emotional neglect can stick around as unnecessary guilt, self-anger, low self-confidence, or a sense of being deeply personally flawed

Emotional Regulation

Individuals vary in the way they respond to emotion, which impacts social, relational, and professional outcomes in a range of situations. Emotions trigger a set of response tendencies determining whether one will respond to a situation. Thompson et al. (1995) has defined emotion regulation as consisting of “the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for

monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to accomplish one's goals.”

According to Gross et al. (2011) emotion regulation is defined as “an activation of a goal that recruits one or more processes to influence emotion generation.”

According to Gross et al. (2015) the target of this regulatory goal can be to induce a change in the person who experiences the emotion (intrinsic) or to induce a change in someone else (extrinsic), as when parents help their children regulate emotions. The regulatory goal can promote hedonic motivation to feel less negative or more positive in the short term, or it can promote instrumental motivation such as modifying emotions in ways that promote long-term objectives. The regulatory goal can be explicit, involving deliberate and effortful processes, or implicit, involving unconscious and effortless processes. Finally, regulatory goals can aim to decrease (down regulate) or increase (up regulate) facets of emotional responding, such as the intensity, duration, and frequency of a given emotion.

As per Gjone et al. (1997) emotional dysregulation is a significant marker for both externalizing and internalizing disorders. The idea of externalizing disorders alludes to conduct or disruptive disorders, whereas internalizing disorders alludes to mood disorders or emotional problems.

Kim and Cicchetti (2010) assert that the development of emotional understanding and regulation cannot occur when there is a lack of sensitive interaction, impacting children's abilities to learn emotional regulation strategies. This oftentimes occurs when childhood environments are unpredictable or frightening. In some cases, parents and/or caregivers are unavailable or unable to provide nurturing, structural regulation to the child. Being witness to domestic violence, or victim to physical and mental abuse changes a child's reaction to future perceptions of fear.

METHOD

SAMPLE

A total of 60 people participated in the study of which 30 were male and 30 were female. The age of the subjects ranges from 20 to 30 years.

MEASURES

- **Emotional Neglect Scale:** To measure an individual's past experience of neglect (the independent variable), the Neglect Scale (NS) was used (Straus et al., 1995). The NS measures an individual's experience of previous neglect or lack there-of. The NS includes statements addressing the following areas of neglect: academic, medical, basic needs, and emotional. The NS is a 12-item (shorter version) scale and has been reduced to 12-items. High internal consistency reliability has been found for the overall scale with a Cronbach's alpha rating of .96 (Harrington et al., 2002). Moderate internal consistency reliability has been found with each subscale with ratings as follows: emotional = .85, physical = .82, cognitive = .78, and supervisory = .81.
- **Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale:** It is a 16-item version (DERS-16) is a self-report measure that assesses individuals' typical levels of difficulties in emotion regulation. Based upon the original 36 item version DERS, the DERS-16 uses a clinically-useful conceptualization of emotion regulation that was developed to be applicable to a wide variety of psychological difficulties and relevant to clinical applications and treatment development (Gratz, 2007; Gratz & Tull, 2010). The DERS-16 assesses five aspects of difficulties in emotion regulation. They are non-acceptance of emotional responses, difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior,

Impulse control difficulties, limited access to emotion regulation strategies and lack of emotional clarity.

PROCEDURES

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through Google forms; each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardised Psychological Tests were administered to the participants.

HYPOTHESIS

- There will be no difference among male and female adults in terms of emotional neglect and emotional regulation.
- There will be a negative correlation between emotional neglect and emotional dysregulation among adults.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the study is to study the effect of emotional neglect in childhood on emotional regulation in adulthood.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The responses of participants were analysed using t-test to see the effect of emotional neglect and their ability to regulate their emotions between male adults and female adults. Mean and Standard deviation data is presented in table1, table 2 shows the correlation between Emotional neglect and difficulty in emotional regulation, and table 3 shows the effect of emotional neglect on difficulty in emotional regulation among male adults and female adults

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation scores of 60 adults with variables Emotional Neglect and Emotional Regulation with their respective sub dimensions

	Male female	Emotional neglect	Difficulty in emotional regulation	Non acceptance of emotional responses	Difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior	Impulse control difficulties	Limited access to emotional regulation	Lack of emotional clarity
N	male	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	female	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Mean	male	39.8	27.7	6.60	6.27	5.07	8.97	4.17
	female	38.8	25.4	5.10	5.43	4.87	8.63	3.83
Standard deviation	male	5.72	6.66	2.34	1.91	1.64	2.58	1.58
	female	5.94	4.85	1.45	2.11	1.53	1.83	0.834

Table 2

Correlation matrix of emotional neglect, difficulty in emotional regulation, non-acceptance of emotional responses, difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior, impulse control difficulties, limited access to emotional regulation and lack of emotional clarity

	Emotional neglect	Difficulty in emotional regulation	Non acceptance of emotional responses	Difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior	Impulse control difficulties	limited access to emotional regulation	lack of emotional clarity
Emotional neglect	—						
Difficulty in emotional regulation	-0.070	—					

Non acceptance of emotional responses	-0.133	0.377 **	—				
Difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior	-0.048	0.437 ***	0.243	—			
Impulse control difficulties	0.003	0.357 **	0.144	0.474 ***	—		
limited access to emotional regulation	-0.049	0.586 ***	0.479 ***	0.614 ***	0.551 ***	—	
lack of emotional clarity	-0.113	0.430 ***	0.253	0.382 **	0.342 **	0.393 **	—
Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001							

Table 3*Group Descriptives for T Ratio*

	Group	N	Mean	SD	P
Emotional neglect	Male	30	39.80	5.72	0.509
	Female	30	38.80	5.945	
Difficulty in emotional regulation	Male	30	27.73	6.66	0.126
	Female	30	25.40	4.847	
Non acceptance of emotional responses	Male	30	6.60	2.34	0.004
	Female	30	5.10	1.447	
Difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior	Male	30	6.27	1.91	0.114
	Female	30	5.43	2.112	

Impulse control difficulties	Male	30	5.07	1.64	0.626
	Female	30	4.87	1.525	
limited access to emotional regulation	Male	30	8.97	2.58	0.566
	Female	30	8.63	1.829	
lack of emotional clarity	Male	30	4.17	1.58	0.310
	Female	30	3.83	0.834	

Discussion of Result

The results found that there is significant positive correlation between non acceptance of emotional responses and difficulty in emotional regulation ($r=0.377$, $p < .01$). The results also found that there is significant positive correlation between difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior responses and difficulty in emotional regulation ($r=0.437$, $p < .01$). Further, the results also found that there is significant positive correlation between impulse control difficulties and difficulty in emotional regulation ($r=0.357$, $p < .01$) and significant positive correlation between limited access to emotional regulation and difficulty in emotional regulation ($r=0.586$, $p < .0001$). Moreover, the results found that there is significant positive correlation between lack of emotional clarity and difficulty in emotional regulation ($r=0.430$, $p<.001$) and a significant positive correlation between non acceptance of emotional responses and limited access to emotional regulation ($r=0.479$, $p<.001$). The results found that there is significant positive correlation between impulse control difficulties and difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior ($r=0.474$, $p<.001$). In addition to this, significant positive correlation was found between limited access to emotional regulation and in difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior ($r=0.614$, $p<0.001$). Likewise, the results found that there is significant positive correlation between lack of emotional clarity and difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior ($r=0.382$, $p < .01$). A significant positive correlation between limited access to

emotional regulation and impulse control difficulties ($r=.551$, $p<.001$) was discovered. Though, significant positive correlation between lack of emotional clarity and impulse control difficulties was observed. The results found that there is significant positive correlation between lack of emotional clarity & limited access to emotional regulation ($r=0.393$, $p<.001$).

However, t ratio was also done to find gender differences. The results revealed that male are higher than females when it comes to non-acceptance of emotional responses ($t = 0.004$, $p<.05$) and no other gender differences were found in any other variable except non-acceptance of emotional response.

CONCLUSION

Emotional neglect represented dysfunction of the protective parental relationship on which children were dependent while they learnt the skills needed for safe independence. It affected key developmental foundations, including perceptions of self, which should be acquired through the mirror of attuned parenting, and could have lifelong consequences for stress regulation. In distorting children's preconceptions of relationships, it had implications for everything that should be learnt through and modeled by others. It influenced the development of skills needed to function effectively both independently and through relationships. The scales used were Emotional Neglect Scale (Straus et al., 1995) and Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale. A total of 60 people participated in the study of which 30 were male and 30 were female. The age of the subject ranges from 20 to 30 years. The results showed that acceptance of emotional responses, difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior, impulse control difficulties, limited access to emotion regulation strategies and lack of emotional clarity are significant positive correlation with difficulties in emotional

regulation. Speaking of gender differences, males are the ones who have low or nil acceptances of emotional responses in comparison to the females.

In a study conducted by Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013), child abuse and neglect can have a huge number of long term consequences for physical wellbeing, psychological consequences, behavioral consequences and societal consequences which includes impaired brain development, abusive head trauma, poor physical health, poor mental and emotional health, cognitive difficulties, social difficulties, difficulties during adolescents, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, abusive behaviors, direct and indirect costs, prevention strategies, support system and taboo.

It has been found that there is no significant correlation between difficulty in emotional regulation and emotional neglect. Contrary to the previous studies, it can be seen in the present studies that there is no effect on the difficulty in emotional regulation in adulthood in presence of emotional neglect in childhood. However significant gender differences exist in the context of emotional neglect and difficulty in emotional regulation. The males have been found to score higher than females.

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