



# Unresolved Chapters: The Lingering Impact of Childhood Trauma on Adult Relationships

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**Abstract:** *The present study investigates the effect of childhood trauma on adult relationships empirically by conducting self-constructed surveys upon a general adult population (sample size - 29 individuals). Based on existing research on the adverse effects of trauma on adult life, the study contributed further to the understanding of the specific impact that childhood trauma has on romantic experiences and relationships. The results were in correlation to the existing studies and theories, and showed that individuals having experienced traumatic experiences do perceive romantic bonds with anxious attachment or avoidant attachment patterns. Individuals also face issues in building trust and intimacy with their partners and also struggle with talking about their concerns and issues. The research posits that more interventionist studies can be done in this area for the betterment of individuals who had undergone childhood trauma...*

**Key Words:** *Childhood trauma, romantic relationships, attachment style, intimacy*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Romantic relationships are cyclical in nature. How one sees such relationships while growing up influences their capacity to engage in relationships of their own and also perceive them in similar ways. Psychology is not new to observing patterns of trauma, violence and even care being repeated in relationships that children observe while growing up. Adults, who had experiences of observing healthy bonds, turn out to be secure beings. This is not a new fact to be placed in psychology. However, the impact that early life experiences, especially trauma in children, still needs to be studied in the context of adult relationships.

The present study seeks to investigate how childhood trauma influences adult relationships. In particular, the study explores how early life experiences, such as abuse, whether physical/emotional, neglect and other traumatic events affect the very basis of relationships in adulthood. Moreover, it focuses on how these experiences during an individual's formative years can influence different aspects of adult relationships.

In simple words, childhood trauma can be defined as an extremely distressing experience that threatens a child's sense of safety and well-being. Abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, or other adverse events are some very prominent examples of these distressing experiences. These experiences can either be one-time events or ongoing situations that have a very significant and lasting impact on the well-being of the child. These events can likely overwhelm the child and have a very severe impact on their coping mechanisms at the developmental stage, leading to significant and lasting impacts on their emotional, psychological, and physical health. Such events also tend to interfere with the child's growing sense of security, which in turn will have lasting effects on their emotional and psychological development (Downey, 2022).

This study explored the long-term effects of childhood trauma on adult relationships. It specifically examined how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) affect emotional intimacy, relationship satisfaction, communication patterns, trust, and attachment styles. The key variables under investigation were the types of childhood trauma experienced and the outcomes in adult relationships, such as *emotional regulation* (the ability of an individual to control and manage their own emotions), *conflict resolution* (the ability to find logical and peaceful solutions to a disagreement or problem), *attachment*, that can be defined as a strong emotional bond that develops between individuals at various stages and also overall relationship stability, which is to establish a supportive and secure relationship.



The effects of childhood trauma on adult relationships represents a critical area of psychological and as well as sociological research, as early life experiences play a significant role in shaping emotional, social, and behavioural outcomes of an individual later in life. Childhood trauma, defined broadly, includes any form of abuse from neglect to exposure to violence that occurs during formative years. Such experiences often leave lasting psychological scars, influencing an individual's ability to form healthy relationships in adulthood (Quan et al., 2025). The nature and severity of childhood trauma can vary from person to person, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect or the exposure to domestic violence or substance abuse in the home are some of the distressing events that an individual might have faced. However, the ways in which these early experiences translate into difficulties with intimacy, trust and communication in adult relationships remains an area that requires further exploration and study.

### **Rationale of the Study**

This research is motivated by the need to better understand how different forms of childhood trauma influence the way individuals manage and maintain relationships as adults. Past studies have frequently demonstrated that childhood trauma leads to difficulties in forming secure attachments, trust issues, and challenges with regard to communication in relationships. These difficulties are not only relevant in romantic relationships but sometimes also extend to friendships, family dynamics, and even professional interactions at times. As such, the effects of childhood trauma can lead to a cycle of unhealthy relationship patterns that often remain unresolved without any form of appropriate therapeutic intervention.

The importance of this research is also to understand the fact that many adults who have experienced childhood trauma may not even be aware of how their past influences their current relationships. In many cases, these individuals often feel confused or frustrated followed by severe patterns of insecurity, conflict and emotional distance in their personal lives. By conducting this research, I aim to bring these underlying dynamics into the mainstream focus, providing insights that can help both clinical practice and society's understanding of trauma which has often been a taboo in many households worldwide.

### **2. LITERATURE REVIEW:**

D.S. Black, S. Sussman, and J.B. Unger (2010) conducted a study titled "Witnessing interparental violence in emerging adulthood". This study spanned almost a decade from the years 2000 to 2010, and it primarily highlighted the long-lasting effects of childhood trauma on adult interpersonal functioning. The primary focus of the study was on how childhood emotional, physical, and sexual abuse impacted an individual's romantic relationships in adulthood. The participants' self-reported questionnaires were gathered by the researchers in order to assess their communication styles, relationship satisfaction, and proneness to enter abusive relationships. The results of the study demonstrated that individuals who had experienced some form of childhood abuse are significantly more likely to report dissatisfaction in their adult relationships and either engage in or become victims of abusive dynamics of any sort, whether emotional or physical. These individuals frequently tend to have much lower self-esteem and emotional regulation as compared to others, which further contributed to their relationship difficulties.

Hart S.N., Brassard M.R. and Karlson H.C. (1996) conducted a study titled "Evidence for the Effects of Psychological Maltreatment". The study spanned almost 4 years, between the years 1992 and 1996, and it primarily highlighted the lasting effects of early psychological trauma. The research involved mostly clinical interviews and longitudinal assessments of children exposed to psychological abuse, tracking their development into adulthood, which made it a very long drawn study. The study then specifically focused on their emotional regulation and patterns in adult relationships. The findings of this study indicated that participants who have experienced any form of psychological maltreatment as children had significant difficulties in trusting others, managing emotions, and resolving conflicts in their adult relationships. They were thus more prone to engage in passive-aggressive or volatile behaviour, which in turn is a reflection of their unresolved emotional challenges from their childhood.

Bailey, H. N. DeOliveira, C. A. Wolfe, V. V. Evans, and Hartwick C (2012) conducted a study titled "The impact of childhood maltreatment history on parenting: a comparison of maltreatment types and assessment methods". This study was conducted between 2007 and 2012 and observed parents who had been emotionally mistreated as children, recording their interactions with their own children and analysing them for signs of emotional neglect or abuse of any kind towards their own children. The findings showed that parents who experienced some forms of emotional mistreatment were much more likely to exhibit hostile or neglectful behaviours toward their children, thus putting in motion a cycle of emotional mistreatment across multiple generations. These patterns were also extremely prevalent



with dysfunction in the parents' own adult relationships, leading to increased conflict and emotional distance between the partners.

Briere, J. and Runtz, M. (1990) conducted a study titled “Differential Adult Symptomatology Associated with Three Types of Child Abuse Histories”. The primary data for this study was gathered between the years 1985 and 1989 and the study's findings were published later in 1990, which emphasized the long-term effects of childhood trauma on the interpersonal and emotional well-being of adults. This research involved about 450 participants, which was an extremely large sample size. These participants reported experiencing some form of sexual and/or emotional abuse during their childhood. Through various structured interviews and questionnaires, the participants were assessed on several grounds regarding their adult relationship functioning, emotional regulation, and mental health outcomes. According to the key findings of the study, individuals who had faced some sort of childhood abuse displayed much lower levels of overall relationship satisfaction in their adult lives. Additionally, these individuals also showcased higher rates of emotional dysregulation, often leading to conflicts in their romantic relationships. Also, the study discovered that these individuals had a much greater prevalence of mental health issues, including depression and anxiety amongst others.

Edwards, Holden, Felitti, and Anda (2003) conducted a study titled “Relationship Between Multiple Forms of Childhood Maltreatment and Adult Mental Health in Community Respondents: Results from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study”. The study was conducted between the years 1995 to 2003, it provided a complex analysis of how childhood adversity can shape adult life and also examined the impact of adverse childhood experiences on adult mental health and interpersonal relationships. The study involved over 8,000 adults, making it an extremely comprehensive study. Self-reported data was collected and used for the research to explore the connection between childhood trauma and its repercussions on emotional well-being in adulthood. The findings revealed that individuals with higher ACE's experienced much poorer relationship quality, higher emotional dysregulation, and increased levels of mental illness. Also, these adverse effects were particularly more prevalent among participants with four or more ACEs.

### **3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

The survey method has been chosen for this study as the primary research technique to collect data. The survey method is very well-suited for this type of research because it allows for the collection of qualitative data from a large section of the participants, making generalizability an easier process. Additionally, the survey design can easily be manipulated to capture detailed information across various barriers, such as the types of childhood trauma experienced, current relationship satisfaction, attachment styles, and emotional regulation in adulthood.

#### *Survey Design*

The survey consists of a series of closed-ended as well as open-ended questions to measure the following key variables - the form of childhood trauma individuals might have encountered (physical, emotional or sexual), individual level of trust and emotional regulation, their attachment styles (based on studies by Bowlby and Ainsworth) and lastly, their present relationship satisfaction levels (based on the levels of emotional and physical intimacy and overall satisfaction). The survey was created by the researcher only, taking references from existing scales and measures created in the past.

#### *Sample Population*

The target population for this study consists of men and women between the ages of 35-50 who are currently residing in Delhi. This age group was chosen because individuals in this particular age demographic are more likely to have experienced significant childhood traumas and have had enough time to develop certain relationship patterns, making them ideal for studying the long-term effects of trauma. Also, people in this age group may have been in long-term relationships or marriages, which allows for an intensive study of how childhood trauma affects said adult relationships.

The study recruited 29 participants, with a balanced representation of both men and women. A sample size of this size is enough to conclude meaningful conclusions while also keeping the entire survey process feasible. The selection of participants was done through convenient sampling; participants were recruited through online platforms like social media and Whatsapp.

### **4. RESULTS:**

Based on the survey conducted, some of the important results are shown below –

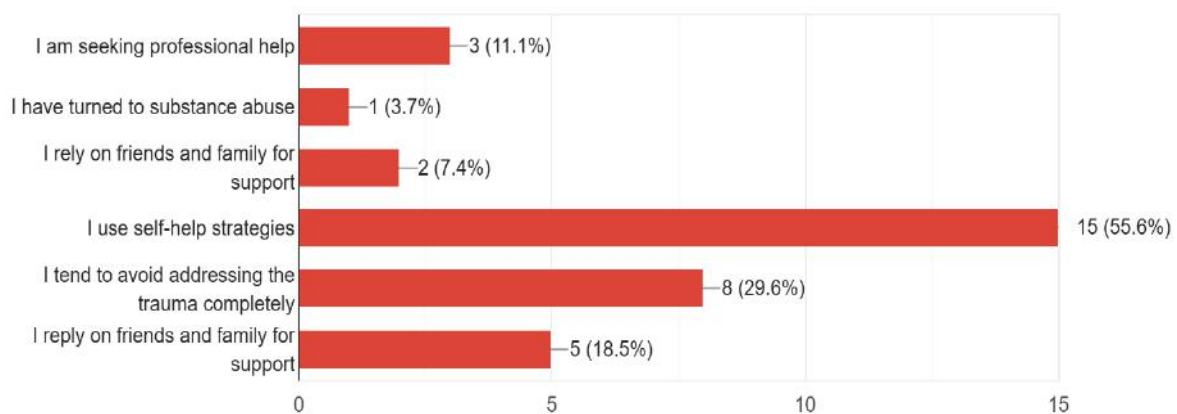


Figure 4.1 Participants' Coping Strategies to manage the impact of Childhood Trauma

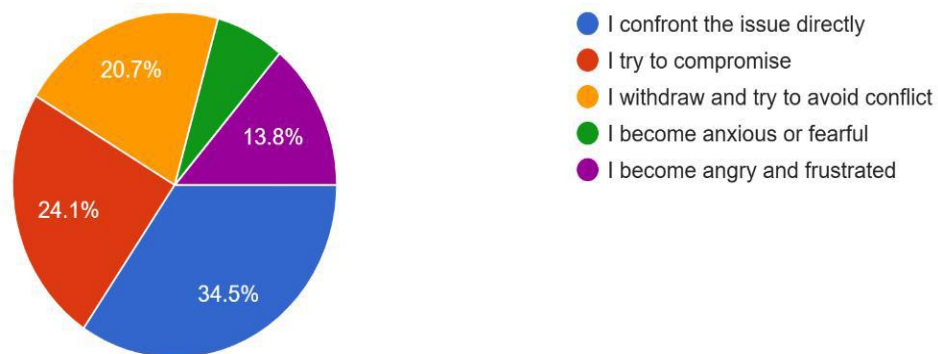


Figure 4.2 Participants' conflict management strategies when faced with challenges in relationships

## 5. DISCUSSION:

The primary goal of this study was to examine the impact of childhood trauma on adult relationships, mainly focusing on individuals between the ages of 25-55 living in Delhi. According to the study's findings, there were several very interesting patterns which highlighted the significant ways in which early trauma influences adult relationships as well as relationship satisfaction and also emotional regulation. As stated in the questionnaire's instructions, a discrepancy in the number of responses was observed in the section on coping strategies, as participants were permitted to choose more than one option, leading to a higher total count of responses than the number of individuals surveyed. This consideration was taken into account during data analysis.

A significantly large proportion of the sample reported having experienced some form of childhood trauma, with emotional abuse being the most frequent type (42.9%), followed by neglect (25%), and then sexual abuse and physical abuse (21%), and finally witnessing domestic abuse (14.3%). The very high frequency of these traumatic experiences is an extremely concerning issue, as they are known to lead to various psychological issues of sorts. Additionally, the survey also examined the sample's ability as well as their capacity to regulate their emotions especially in the context of their relationships. The respondents who reported experiencing some form of childhood trauma often struggled with regulating their emotions in adult relationships, particularly when it came to managing conflict and expressing emotions in a healthy way. This finding is also prevalent in a variety of research that suggest that early trauma can hamper the development of integral emotional regulation skills, often leading to difficulties in adult relationships.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings of this study was that many participants were often uncomfortable and/or hesitant in discussing the effects of childhood trauma on their current relationships, particularly in the intimacy and trust aspect. Even in modern times like these, there remains a stigma surrounding trauma, especially in a conservative setting like Delhi, which often also contributes to this discomfort. A lack of comfort in sharing trauma-





related issues will only impede the entire healing process and also affect how individuals address intimacy challenges when it comes to their relationships.

### ***Impact of Trauma on Intimacy***

The participants also reported significant struggles with intimacy in their adult relationships, particularly those who had experienced very extreme forms of emotional abuse or neglect in childhood. Participants with traumatic childhood experiences often had difficulties when it came to vulnerability, there was also a fear of being emotionally hurt, and a general discomfort with closeness. These are also individuals more likely to exhibit avoidant attachment styles or find it difficult to engage in any sort of emotional sharing, which is an extremely important component of a healthy and functioning adult relationship. These people also tend to have this heightened need for control in their relationships, which they often use as a defence mechanism to protect themselves from potential harm. This tendency to create emotional and sometimes physical distance can create tensions in relationships, as they may be deemed emotionally absent or unavailable.

The study further explored how childhood trauma impacted the participants' ability to trust their partners in adult relationships. The findings revealed that trust was a major issue for individuals who had experiences regarding abandonment, emotional neglect, or betrayal during childhood. These individuals also found it difficult to believe that others would treat them with the same care and respect that they treated their counterparts with. As a result, they tend to frequently also test their partners, exhibit jealousy and experience paranoia in situations where they believe that their trust is challenged.

### ***Coping Strategies to handle negative effects of trauma***

Another very essential part of the study was understanding how participants cope with the emotional turmoil of their past and also in their adult relationships. The findings of the survey revealed a multitude of coping mechanisms, both adaptive and maladaptive, that participants used.

*Self-Help Strategies:* A surprisingly significant number of participants turned to self-help strategies as a way of managing their emotions and dealing with the effects of trauma. These strategies included practices, journaling, exercises like yoga and running and for some reading self-help books. Self-help strategies provide some degree of emotional control or support at the moment, but they may not address the underlying issues that stem from the deeply ingrained trauma.

*Seeking Professional Help:* Another positive coping mechanism that emerged was seeking professional help. But the response to this mechanism was not very positive. A few participants reported seeking therapy or counselling to address the emotional impact of their trauma. This could perhaps be because of the stigma that still exists in society around therapy and counselling in general. Another reason for this could also be that the participant may not feel comfortable and may hesitate to talk about their problems openly. On the other hand, those who sought therapy are more likely to have higher levels of relationship satisfaction, as therapy allowed them to process their respective trauma and work on emotional intimacy and trust issues in a supportive and nurturing environment.

*Relying on Friends and Family for Support:* Several participants also leaned on their friends and family, to cope with their trauma. Having trusted individuals around you and whom you can confide in allows participants to feel less isolated and more loved and supported. However, while support from friends and family can be beneficial, these relationships will not be able to provide the specialized emotional support needed to address the deeper scars caused by trauma.

### ***Comparison to Existing Research***

The findings of this study are largely in line with a multitude of existing research on childhood trauma and its impact on adult relationships.

This study's findings align with *Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969)*, which claims that early childhood attachment styles have a significant impact on adult relationships. However, while a study like Bowlby's primarily focuses on romantic relationships, this research has a much broader perspective and goes beyond that, focusing on the impact of trauma in an individual's childhood and the multitude of ways in which it has an impact on their adult relationships and also emotional regulation, providing a different and broader perspective altogether. Additionally, while studies like Bowlby's Attachment Theory primarily highlight intimacy issues as a major aspect, this study identified a multitude of difficulties that exist in providing consistent emotional support as another key challenge for adults with childhood trauma.



Van der Kolk's work (2014) is research that primarily focuses on how trauma alters the functioning of the brain, emotional regulation and also an individual's relationship pattern in adulthood. This study also aligns with the perspective of childhood trauma affecting emotional regulation. Moreover, this study places a stronger emphasis on the psychological aspects of attachment and directly links those to romantic relationship outcomes, whereas an area of expertise like that of Van der Kolk merely touches on the topic but does not focus on it exclusively.

According to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study (Felitti et al., 1998), there is a strong connection between trauma experienced in one's childhood and later-life mental as well as physical issues. The present research itself builds on the ACE study, but it narrows its focus to adult relationships specifically, thus deepening the understanding of how ACEs manifest in adulthood particularly in the context of intimate partnerships. While the ACE Study's main focus was on the health outcomes that came about due to trauma during childhood, this research on the other hand focuses on examining the impact of childhood trauma on adult relationships, offering a deeper understanding of how ACEs manifest within partnerships.

Johnson and colleagues (2002) highlighted the link between childhood abuse and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). While this research examines similar themes to that of Johnson's study, focusing on the connection between early abuse and subsequent violence in relationships, it also takes a broader approach by including a wider variety of trauma types (e.g., neglect, witnessing domestic abuse etc) and focusing not only on abuse but on attachment and emotional regulation.

According to the study by Black, Sussman, and Unger (2010), there is an extremely significant link between childhood abuse and the difficulties that arise in adult relationships, particularly romantic relationships. This research supports the current study's focus by specifically examining how emotional, physical, and sexual abuse among others, experienced during childhood can shape adult relational patterns, including satisfaction, communication, and vulnerability to abuse and also the trust factor.

According to the study "Evidence for the Effects of Psychological Maltreatment" by Hart, Brassard, and Karlson (1996), early psychological abuse can have long lasting effects on the emotional development and adult relationship dynamics of an individual. This study supports the current research's emphasis on emotional consequences that arise due to trauma by tracking individuals exposed to psychological maltreatment during childhood, particularly focusing on their ability to manage emotions and maintain healthy interpersonal connections.

Bailey, DeOliveira, Wolfe, Evans, and Hartwick's research (2012) highlights the cyclical nature of emotional abuse, showing how parents who were mistreated as children often tend to perpetuate emotional neglect or abuse toward their own children, thus projecting their own unresolved issues on their children, which in turn serves as a coping mechanism. This study supports the current research by focusing on the transfer of emotional maltreatment across generations, emphasizing the role of early trauma.

Briere and Runtz's study (1990) primarily focuses on how childhood abuse contributes to emotional dysregulation, lower relationship satisfaction, and mental health challenges in adulthood. Similarly, this research also delves into the significant difficulties that survivors face in managing emotions and sustaining healthy long-lasting relationships. Like Briere and Runtz study, this study also focuses on the psychological consequences of abuse, which include lower levels of overall relationship satisfaction and also higher rates of emotional dysregulation.

## **6. CONCLUSION:**

In conclusion, this research analyses the extreme and lasting impact of childhood trauma on adult relationships. By diving deep into the various types of childhood trauma ranging from abuse and neglect to emotional neglect and witnessing domestic abuse, this study reveals how these early experiences shape emotional regulation, attachment patterns, and the dynamics within a relationship. The findings highlight the subtle yet penetrating ways in which childhood trauma manifests in relationships. These findings not only broaden our understanding of trauma's long-term effects but it also emphasizes the need for trauma-informed approaches in a multitude of fields. As we continue to explore the complex yet significant relationship between childhood trauma and adult relationships, it is extremely crucial to recognize the role of early experiences in adult interpersonal functioning. By addressing such critical matters, it will be possible for us to cultivate healthier relationships as a community and also empower many individuals to heal, to stop hiding and be proud survivors, ultimately leading to more fulfilling and resilient connections.

## **7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS:**

While this study does provide valuable insights as well as detailed explanations into the long-lasting effects of childhood trauma on adult relationships, it also on the other hand opens several pathways perhaps some of which are pre-existing,



for future research. One important direction for future research could be to explore the role of resilience factors such as self-care, optimism, emotional and behavioural regulation and a strong sense of self awareness in diminishing the impact of childhood trauma on their adult lives. Understanding how individuals develop resilience despite the early adversities they have faced could help in the betterment of therapeutic approaches and also with interventions that are aimed at strengthening coping mechanisms and emotional regulation in adult relationships.

Additionally, there is a need to diversify the study of trauma altogether and investigate the intersection of cultural and societal influences and its profound impact on trauma and its effects. An extremely important question must be asked, how cultural beliefs, family dynamics, and societal expectations shape the ways in which trauma manifests in terms of a relationship? This question must also be worked on to be answered. Investigating an intersection like this one will be able to provide a much more nuanced understanding of how a certain cultural context plays a role in the life of an individual that has faced certain traumas.

Lastly, future studies could benefit from designing interventions specifically for couples or relationship therapy. Understanding which therapeutic techniques is the best approach to address the challenges of each individual, who is very different from the other, could help in developing more targeted and effective treatments with better overall outcomes.

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