

The Mediating Role of Emotional Regulation in the Relationship Between Emotional Abuse and Subjective Well-Being

Sindhu V^{1*}, Maheshbabu N²

^{1*} Research Scholar, Department of PG Studies and Research in Psychology at Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara College (Autonomous), Research Centre, Ujire, Mangalore University, Mangalagangothri and Assistant Professor, Department of PG Studies and Research in Psychology at Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara College (Autonomous), Ujire

Email ID: sindhutdh@sdmcujire.in

² Assistant Professor at Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara College, (Autonomous), Department of PG studies and Research in Psychology, and recognized Guide from Mangalore University

Email ID: madhupratihasta@sdmcujire.in

*Corresponding Author:

Sindhu V,

Research Scholar, Department of PG Studies and Research in Psychology at Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara College (Autonomous), Research Centre, Ujire, Mangalore University, Mangalagangothri and Assistant Professor, Department of PG Studies and Research in Psychology at Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara College (Autonomous), Ujire

Email ID: sindhutdh@sdmcujire.in

Cite this paper as: Sindhu V, Maheshbabu N, (2025) The Mediating Role of Emotional Regulation in the Relationship Between Emotional Abuse and Subjective Well-Being. *Journal of Neonatal Surgery*, 14 (7), 162-170.

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by emotional, cognitive, and social transformations, during which subjective well-being (SWB) plays a pivotal role in healthy adjustment and performance. Emotional abuse—defined as non-physical behaviors that humiliate, threaten, or isolate—can significantly influence adolescents' emotional functioning and psychological health. Emotional regulation (ER), which encompasses implicit and explicit strategies to monitor and modify emotional responses, is considered a key mediator in the relationship between adverse experiences and well-being. This study examined the mediating role of emotional regulation in the relationship between emotional abuse and subjective well-being among adolescents across genders. A sample of 268 adolescents aged 12–15 years (grades 6–10) was selected through convenience sampling. A 3x1 factorial research design was adopted. Standardized tools were used: the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (Momtaz et al., 2021), the Subjective Well-being Inventory (Nagpal & Sell, 1985), and the Adolescent Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Kostiuk, 2011). Path analysis was conducted to test the mediational model. The results indicate that Emotional Abuse does not have a significant direct effect on Subjective Well-being ($p = 0.341$), supporting the idea that emotional abuse influences well-being indirectly through emotional regulation. A significant positive relationship was found between Emotional Abuse and Emotional Regulation ($\beta = 6.072$), showing that higher levels of emotional abuse lead to greater difficulties in regulating emotions. Emotional Regulation was found to mediate the impact of Emotional Abuse on Subjective Well-being, particularly affecting emotional outcomes like PA and NA. Emotional Abuse negatively influenced PA (-0.123) and positively influenced NA (0.237), suggesting that emotional abuse exacerbates negative emotional states while hindering the ability to experience positive emotions. Furthermore, Emotional Abuse impaired Positive Emotion Regulation Strategies (-3.675), and was linked to negative psychological outcomes such as Negative Body Image (-2.460) and reduced Social Connection (-2.075). The findings underscore the mediating role of emotional dysregulation in the impact of Emotional Abuse on well-being.

Key words: Emotional Regulation, Emotional Abuse, Subjective Well-Being, Mediating Role

1. INTRODUCTION

Emotional Abuse among adolescents

Adolescence is a formative stage marked by rapid emotional, cognitive, and social changes that significantly shape an

damaging. Emotional abuse, also referred to as psychological maltreatment, involves non-physical behaviors such as verbal insults, threats, humiliation, rejection, and excessive control aimed at manipulating or dominating another person (American Psychological Association, 2018). While often discussed in the context of intimate relationships, emotional abuse can also occur in familial, peer, and institutional settings. Research has consistently shown that emotional abuse is associated with a range of negative mental health outcomes in adolescents, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Call et al., 2003; Kipke, 1999). Specific abusive behaviors include name-calling, public or private degradation, gaslighting, emotional neglect, and controlling a person's activities and social interactions (Valdez, 2021). These forms of abuse can alter how adolescents perceive themselves and the world, often internalizing the abuse as a personal failing. Despite its serious implications, emotional abuse is inconsistently defined across studies, and much of the existing research relies heavily on quantitative methods. However, adolescence is shaped by complex interactions between personal traits, family dynamics, peer relationships, and broader community influences. Understanding emotional abuse thus requires a developmental-ecological lens and mixed-methods research design to capture both the measurable patterns and the lived emotional experiences of adolescents (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Ness, 2022).

Emotional Abuse and Subjective well-being among adolescents

Subjective well-being (SWB) encompasses both cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction and affective experiences of emotions. During adolescence—a period of rapid psychological development—SWB serves as a key indicator of mental health, influencing academic success, social relationships, and emotional resilience. High SWB correlates with better coping and fewer internalizing problems, while low SWB often signals psychological distress (Gao et al., 2025; Gudmundsdottir et al., 2024). Emotional abuse, often subtle and non-physical, significantly undermines adolescent SWB. It includes verbal aggression, rejection, humiliation, isolation, and manipulation, which may erode self-worth, emotional security, and identity (Wang et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2023). Its covert nature often delays recognition and intervention, especially in cultural contexts where harsh parenting is normalized (Nazir et al., 2024). Prolonged exposure leads to negative self-perceptions, reduced trust, and emotional dysregulation—ultimately diminishing life satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2025; Mohammed et al., 2024). Cultural norms, lack of awareness, and insufficient legal frameworks make emotional abuse difficult to identify and address. Protective factors like supportive relationships, school environments, and early intervention can buffer its effects (Maloney et al., 2024). The digital environment has intensified the impact of emotional abuse on adolescents' subjective well-being (SWB). Social media exposes youth to cyberbullying, emotional manipulation, and social comparison, leading to public humiliation, exclusion, and psychological distress. Prolonged online stress can worsen feelings of worthlessness and anxiety (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015).

Effective intervention requires teaching emotional competence, resilience, and relationship-building. Approaches like trauma-informed care, social-emotional learning, and family therapy can help restore self-esteem, correct cognitive distortions, and improve emotion regulation (Al-Hroub & Al-Hroub, 2024). Despite growing awareness, emotional abuse lacks legal clarity and consistent recognition in policy and clinical practice. Adolescents often struggle to articulate their experiences, making diagnosis and support difficult. Greater advocacy, research, and professional training are essential for addressing emotional abuse and safeguarding adolescent well-being (Martínez-Líbano et al., 2025).

Emotional Abuse and Emotional Regulation among adolescents

Emotional regulation is crucial for psychological development as it helps individuals manage when and how emotions are experienced and expressed. It is particularly important during adolescence, a time of heightened emotional sensitivity and cognitive growth. When emotional regulation is impaired, adolescents may experience unstable moods, impulsivity, and difficulty recovering from negative emotions. This can be worsened by emotionally abusive environments, which disrupt healthy emotional development (Kwan & Kwok, 2021). The Process Model of Emotion Regulation by James Gross (1998) outlines five strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal (antecedent-focused) and expressive suppression (response-focused). Research shows that antecedent-focused strategies tend to lead to better outcomes, while response-based strategies often cause mental distress (Eisma & Stroebe, 2021). Emotional regulation develops through a combination of cognitive abilities and environmental factors, with significant disruptions occurring when adolescents face emotional abuse. This abuse, characterized by verbal hostility, rejection, and psychological control, prevents adolescents from learning effective regulation techniques, leading them to adopt unhealthy coping strategies like emotional detachment (Berzenski, 2019; Wilk et al., 2024). Emotional abuse also affects brain regions like the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, impairing the brain's ability to regulate emotions, which further contributes to emotional outbursts and difficulties in managing distress (Teicher et al., 2016; Hall et al., 2025). + Emotional regulation—the ability to manage both positive and negative emotions—is key to mental health. Strong emotional regulation skills are linked to lower anxiety and depression (Chowdhury, 2019). When regulation fails, it can result in Emotional Regulation Disorder (ERD), which often appears alongside other mental health conditions and requires comprehensive treatment.

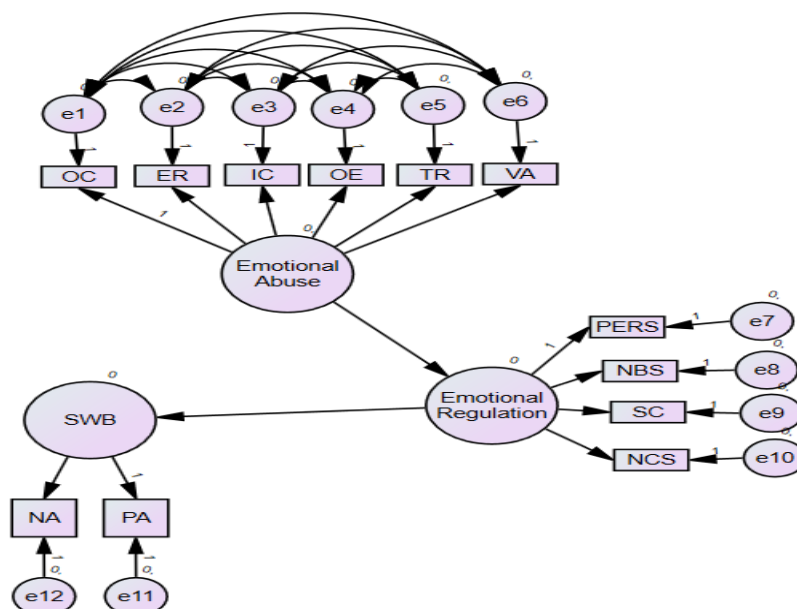
The emphasis on emotional abuse may promote the creation of preventative and therapeutic measures. By comprehending how that included recollections of emotional abuse episodes influence one's ability to regulate emotions in the future, we may be able to mitigate the detrimental consequences of this kind of abuse on intergenerational attachment styles. These issues can result in societal issues like psychological disorders, conjugal misconduct, and parental assault (Gama, C.M.F.

et al., 2021). Psychological abuse had a favorable correlation with emotional and behavioral issues and a negative correlation with resilience and self-esteem. Emotional and behavioral issues were also predicted by resilience and self-worth. Lastly, emotional and behavioral issues mediated by resilience and self-esteem were predicted by psychological abuse. The association between psychological abuse and behavioral issues and the relationship between psychological abuse and emotional issues in teenagers was partially mediated by resilience and self-worth. Resilience and self-worth therefore seem to be protective factors against emotional and behavioral issues in those who have experienced psychological abuse (Arslan.G, 2016).

The present study conceptualizes the relationship between Emotional Abuse (EA), Emotional Regulation (ER), and Subjective Well-being (SWB), emphasizing the mediating role of Emotional Regulation. The model proposes that Emotional Abuse (EA) negatively influences individuals' ability to regulate their emotions (ER), which in turn impacts their Subjective Well-being (SWB). Specifically, Emotional Abuse (EA) is hypothesized to lead to difficulties in Emotional Regulation (ER), which disrupts emotional experiences, resulting in lower Positive Affect (PA) and heightened Negative Affect (NA). The model suggests that individuals who experience Emotional Abuse struggle with regulating emotions effectively, leading to poorer emotional outcomes such as a reduced ability to experience positive emotions (PA) and an increase in negative emotions (NA), thereby diminishing overall Subjective Well-being (SWB).

The Figure 1 outlines the pathway through which Emotional Abuse (EA) affects Subjective Well-being (SWB), with Emotional Regulation (ER) as a central mediator.

Figure 1: Shows the conceptual model of Emotional regulation as a mediator between Emotional abuse and Subjective well-being



Method

Aim: To examine whether emotional regulation mediates the relationship between emotional abuse and subjective well-being among adolescents.

Variables:

Independent Variable (IV):

- Emotional Abuse

Mediator:

- Emotional Regulation

Dependent Variable (DV):

- Subjective Well-Being

Hypothesis

H1: Emotional Abuse (EA) is significantly and negatively associated with Subjective Well-being (SWB).

H2: Emotional Abuse (EA) is significantly and positively associated with Emotional Regulation (ER) difficulties.

H3: Emotional Regulation (ER) significantly mediates the relationship between Emotional Abuse (EA) and Subjective Well-being (SWB).

H4: Higher Emotional Regulation (ER) difficulties are associated with lower Positive Affect (PA) and higher Negative Affect (NA), contributing to reduced Subjective Well-being (SWB).

Sample Description

Convenience sampling method would be adopted to select the sample. The sample for the study consists of 268 participants age group between 12-15 years.

Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Adolescents aged **12 to 15 years**
- Willing to provide **informed consent** (and assent under 18, with parental consent)
- Able to comprehend and respond to English or the local language of the questionnaire

Exclusion Criteria:

- Diagnosed with **severe mental health disorders** (e.g., psychosis, schizophrenia) as per self-report or institutional records
- Currently undergoing **psychological therapy or psychiatric treatment** for trauma or emotional disorders
- Incomplete or inconsistent responses in the survey/questionnaires
- Adolescents with **intellectual disabilities** that impair comprehension or communication

Tools for Measurement

The tools used for the study are

The Subjective well-being by Nagpal and emotional abuse scale developed by Momtaz. Subjective well-being inventory was developed by Nagpal and Sell (1985). The inventory consists of 40 items covering eleven areas of subjective well-being. They are: - (i) General well-being positive affect, (ii) Expectation achievement congruence, (iii) Confidence in coping, (iv) Transcendence, (v) Family group concern, (vi) Social support, (vii) Primary group concern, (viii) Inadequate mental mastery, (ix) Perceived ill health (x) Deficiency in social contacts and (xi) General well-being, negative affect. All the scales have the scoring of the Likert type. Subjective well-being scale validity had been found to be highly significant and satisfactory. Patil and Halyal (1999) have reported that the test-retest reliability of the subjective well-being Inventory is 0.79 and the validity is 0.86. The tools have adequate reliability and validity.

Emotional Abuse:

A 30-item self-report questionnaire was developed a comprehensive instrument to measure all aspects of emotional abuse of children and adolescents for ages 12 years and older developed by Momtaz V, Mansor. M, Talib. M, Kahar. R and Momtaz. T (2021). The items in the questionnaire were framed based on the Wright et al. (2009) approach and Glaser's (2011) categorization of emotional abuse. The questions were prepared by the developer to assess (a) verbal abuse (degrading, humiliating, nominating, ridiculing, criticizing), (b) emotional rejection, (c) overcontrol, (d) unstable control, (e) lack of control, (f) isolating, (g) over-expectation, and (h) terrorizing (corrupting and exploiting, using the child for caregivers' needs, and emotional black points).

The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated by Cronbach's α with 0.93. The sub-scale of the reliability is stated as below.

Table 1: shows the reliability of the sub-scale in Emotional Abuse

Sub-scale	Reliability
Verbal Abuse	0.87
Emotional Rejection	0.81
Overcontrol	0.83
Insufficient Control	0.75
Over-expectation	0.77
Terrorizing	0.84

The validity of the questionnaire was done by two methods which has good content validity and Concurrent validity with 0.87

Emotional regulation

Adolescent Emotional regulation questionnaire developed by Lynne Marie Kostiuk (2011). The Adolescent Emotional regulation questionnaire has internal consistency reliabilities for the four factors: Positive Emotion Regulation Strategies, Negative Body, Social Connection, and Negative Cognition. were satisfactory, with Cronbach Alpha values ranging from 0.70 - 0.89. The Adolescent Emotional regulation questionnaire has both divergent and convergent validity.

Procedure

Data were collected offline using printed questionnaires, which were distributed directly to the participants. Each questionnaire included a detailed explanation of the nature and purpose of the study, along with an informed consent form to ensure ethical participation. After collection, the completed forms were reviewed and the responses were manually entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for data organization. The data were then transferred to SPSS AMOS (23v) for statistical analysis.

Statistical Analysis

Mediating analysis using SPSS AMOS to find out the mediating effect of Emotional regulation between Emotional Abuse and Subjective well-being.

Results and Discussion

Table 2: Shows the Regression Weights of Mediation Analysis of Emotional Abuse on Subjective Well-being through Emotional Regulation

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Subjective well-being	<---	Emotional Abuse	.237	.249	.953	.341
Emotional Regulation	<---	Emotional Abuse	6.072	1.502	4.041	***

Table 3: Shows the Direct effect of Mediation Analysis of Emotional Abuse on Subjective Well-being through Emotional Regulation

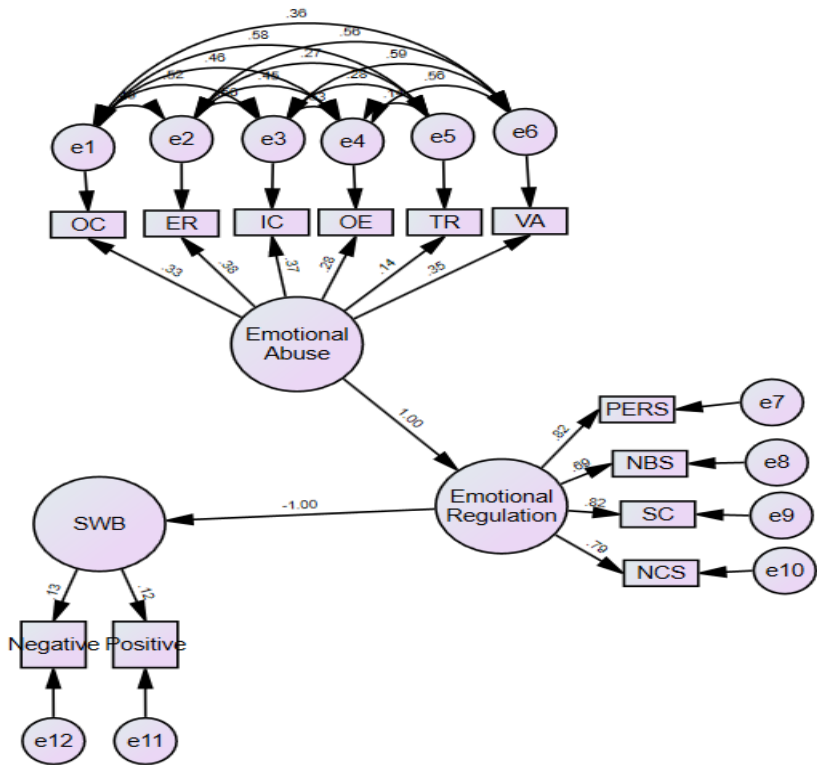
	Emotional Abuse	Subjective well-being	Emotional Regulation
Subjective well-being	.237	.0001	.0001
Emotional Regulation	6.072	.0001	.0001

Table 4: Shows the Indirect effect of Mediation Analysis of Emotional Abuse on Subjective Well-being through Emotional Regulation

	Emotional Abuse	Subjective well-being	Emotional Regulation
Subjective well-being	.0001	.0001	.0001
Emotional Regulation	.0001	.0001	.0001
Terrorizing	.0001	.0001	.0001
Over expectation	.0001	.0001	.0001
Insufficient control	.0001	.0001	.0001
Over control	.0001	.0001	.0001
Emotional rejection	.0001	.0001	.0001

	Emotional Abuse	Subjective well-being	Emotional Regulation
Verbal Abuse	.0001	.0001	.0001
Positive affect	-.123	.0001	.0001
Negative affect	.237	.0001	.0001
Positive Emotion Regulation Strategies	-3.675	.0001	.0001
Negative Body	-2.460	.0001	.0001
Social Connection	-2.075	.0001	.0001
Negative Cognition	6.072	.0001	.0001

Figure 2: Shows the mediation analysis of Emotional Regulation Between Emotional Abuse and Subjective Well-Being



VA=Verbal Abuse, ER=Emotional Rejection, OC= Over Control, IC= Insufficient Control, OE=Over Expectation, TT=Terrorizing, PA=Positive Affect, NA=Negative Affect, PERS= Positive Emotion Regulation Strategies, NB=Negative Body, SC= Social Connection, NC= Negative Cognition

Table 2 shows the Regression Weights of Mediation Analysis of Emotional Abuse on Subjective Well-being through Emotional Regulation. The analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Emotional Abuse (EA), Emotional Regulation , and Subjective Well-being , with particular attention to the affective outcomes such as Positive Affect and Negative Affect. The findings suggest that Emotional Abuse does not have a significant direct effect on Subjective Well-being (p = 0.341), which aligns with studies that have found emotional abuse to have an indirect impact on well-being through other mechanisms such as emotional regulation. For example, López et al. (2022) emphasized that emotional abuse might not always have a direct impact on psychological outcomes but can influence individuals through disrupted coping and emotional regulation processes. Sánchez et al. (2023), who identified that higher Subjective well-being is associated with more frequent experiences of positive emotions and fewer negative emotions. Conversely, low SWB leads to a heightened experience of negative emotions, as observed in individuals who have experienced emotional abuse and poor emotional regulation often correlates with lower well-being (Gross & John, 2003). Studies on emotional regulation have shown that individuals with poor emotional regulation skills are more likely to experience negative psychological outcomes, including lower life satisfaction (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer,

2010).

However, Emotional Abuse was found to significantly affect Emotional Regulation ($\beta = 6.072$), showing a strong positive relationship between higher levels of Emotional Abuse and greater difficulties in emotional regulation. This is consistent with the work of Becerra et al. (2021), who demonstrated that individuals who have experienced emotional abuse tend to struggle with regulating their emotions effectively, which can result in more intense emotional reactions and dysregulation.

Similarly, Schmidt et al. (2020) found that emotion regulation difficulties are a common consequence of emotional maltreatment, affecting individuals' ability to manage emotional responses.

The mediating role of Emotional Regulation in the relationship between Emotional Abuse and Subjective Well-being is underscored by the total effects. The analysis shows that Emotional Abuse leads to emotional regulation difficulties, which then influence emotional outcomes such as PA and NA. Previous research by Tóth et al. (2021) has shown that emotional abuse indirectly impacts well-being by disrupting emotional regulation, leading to negative emotional states like NA and lower PA. Further, Martínez et al. (2022) found that individuals with poor emotional regulation as a result of childhood abuse exhibit lower levels of SWB due to increased emotional distress and negative emotional experiences. For instance, some studies have shown that adverse experiences like emotional abuse can lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms that may enhance emotional regulation as a protective response (e.g., Alink et al., 2009). However, the lack of significance in this study suggests that this relationship might not be robust across different populations or might require additional moderating variables to be significant (Baumeister et al., 2007).

Table 3 Shows the results of Direct effect, the model confirms that Emotional Abuse has a significant impact on Emotional Regulation, reinforcing that emotional abuse contributes to difficulties in regulating emotions. Frías et al. (2021) emphasize that emotional abuse can lead to increased emotional dysregulation, which negatively influences emotional experiences like Positive affect and Negative affect. The study by Dávila et al. (2022) further supports this, showing that poor emotional regulation contributes to both lower Positive affect and higher Negative affect in individuals exposed to emotional abuse.

Table 4 presents the results of a mediation analysis examining the indirect effects of Emotional Abuse (EA) on Subjective Well-being (SWB) through Emotional Regulation (ER). The indirect effects capture how Emotional Abuse influences Subjective Well-being through Emotional Regulation. The findings highlight that Emotional Abuse has a significant impact on various psychological outcomes by disrupting Emotional Regulation. First, the analysis shows that Emotional Abuse negatively affects Positive Affect (PA) (-0.123), indicating that those who experience emotional abuse tend to have lower levels of positive emotions, likely due to difficulty in managing emotions effectively. The negative impact on Negative Affect (NA) (0.237) suggests that emotional abuse contributes to heightened negative emotions through impaired emotional regulation. These findings suggest that emotional abuse exacerbates negative emotional states and hinders the ability to experience positive emotions, with Emotional Regulation acting as the mediator for these changes. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that Emotional Abuse has a significant negative effect on Positive Emotion Regulation Strategies (-3.675), indicating that emotional abuse impairs individuals' ability to employ healthy strategies to regulate emotions. This suggests that victims of emotional abuse struggle with managing their emotions in adaptive ways, potentially contributing to worsened mental health outcomes. Similarly, Negative Body Image (-2.460) and Social Connection (-2.075) are negatively affected by emotional abuse through impaired emotional regulation, highlighting that those who experience emotional abuse may struggle with poor self-image and difficulty forming healthy social bonds. Additionally, the analysis shows that Emotional Abuse leads to an increase in Negative Cognition (6.072) through disrupted emotional regulation. This means that emotional abuse may exacerbate negative thought patterns or cognitive distortions, such as feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness, which are commonly linked to emotional dysregulation. However, for other types of emotional abuse, such as Terrorizing, Over Expectation, and Verbal Abuse, the table shows no indirect effects on Subjective Well-being or Emotional Regulation, suggesting that these forms of emotional abuse may not have a significant impact on emotional regulation in this particular mediation model or may act through direct effects on well-being. Specifically, Emotional Abuse leads to emotional regulation difficulties, which in turn reduce Positive affect and increase Negative affect. Alvarez et al. (2023) found that emotional dysregulation often mediates the impact of negative life events, including emotional abuse, on psychological well-being. This study highlights the role of emotional regulation as a key mechanism through which emotional abuse affects emotional experiences and overall well-being.

In summary, these findings are consistent with a growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of Emotional Regulation in understanding the psychological effects of Emotional Abuse on Subjective Well-being. While Emotional Abuse does not directly affect Subjective well-being, it significantly disrupts emotional regulation, which mediates the impact of emotional abuse on well-being, particularly through changes in Positive and Negative Affect. Interventions targeting emotional regulation may therefore be crucial in mitigating the negative effects of emotional abuse on psychological outcomes. These results align with the work of Vázquez et al. (2023), who suggested that therapeutic approaches focusing on emotional regulation could help improve emotional functioning and well-being in individuals who have experienced emotional abuse.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the critical role of Emotional Regulation as a mediator between Emotional Abuse and Subjective Well-being. While Emotional Abuse does not directly impact Subjective Well-being, it significantly disrupts emotional regulation, leading to negative emotional outcomes such as reduced Positive Affect and increased Negative Affect. The findings underscore the importance of emotional regulation in understanding how emotional abuse affects psychological well-being. Interventions that focus on improving emotional regulation could mitigate the adverse effects of emotional abuse, enhancing well-being and emotional functioning in affected individuals. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex psychological mechanisms through which emotional abuse influences emotional and mental health.

LIMITATIONS

The sample may not be fully representative of the broader population, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The study does not account for potential moderating factors, such as individual differences in coping strategies or external support systems, which could impact the relationship between emotional abuse and emotional regulation.

Implications

Awareness can be raised about emotional abuse, as many adolescents who experience maltreatment may not recognize or understand it. Intervention can be planned for the adolescents experiencing Emotional Abuse that effects on Emotional regulation.

Scope for Further Study

Future research could explore the longitudinal relationships between emotional abuse, emotion regulation, and well-being. It could also investigate how emotion regulation interacts with other coping strategies—such as social support or problem-solving—to identify protective factors that may buffer the impact of emotional abuse. Additionally, examining cultural and demographic differences in how emotional abuse affects emotion regulation and well-being could provide insight into how these variables moderate outcomes across diverse populations.

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