

Impact of Emotional Abuse and Neglect on Depressive Symptoms with Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence among University StudentsRoma Shafique¹, Sadaf Ahsan², Hajira Khan¹**Abstract**

Emotional abuse and emotional neglect have a huge impact on an individual's mental health (St Clair et al., 2015). They have a huge prevalence not in Pakistan only but internationally (Kumari, 2020). Many studies have studied their impact on children and adolescents but very few investigated their impact on university students (Simpson, 2018). So, the current study examined their impact on depressive symptoms among university students. This study also aimed to study whether emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between emotional abuse, neglect, and depressive symptoms among 400 Pakistani university students. A cross-sectional research design was used and data was collected through the Convenient Purposive sampling technique. SPSS and Process Macro 4.1 version was used for data analysis. Results indicated that emotional abuse and neglect were positively related to depressive symptoms and they all were negatively correlated with emotional intelligence. Emotional abuse and neglect positively predicted depressive symptoms among university students. Further, it was found that emotional intelligence significantly moderates the relationship between emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and depressive symptoms. This indicates that students who have higher levels of emotional intelligence suffer less from depressive symptoms because of emotional abuse and neglect and vice versa. Findings indicate that emotional intelligence can be considered as a protective factor against the impacts of emotional abuse and neglect, and there is a need to work on it. So, the mental health practitioners can devise updated programs to improve emotional intelligence.

Keywords: Depressive Symptoms, Emotional Abuse, Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Neglect

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Introduction

Emotional abuse and neglect have a huge impact on an individual's life. St Clair et al. (2015) explored how young adults who suffer from childhood family adversities in the early years are more likely to suffer from depressive symptoms later on in their

lives. Childhood adverse experiences are defined as the neglect and abuse that an individual suffers during their childhood and adolescence (Juwariah et al., 2022). Children from all over the world suffer from these issues, and this impacts their health and well-being. It has been estimated that one billion children suffer from neglect and abuse globally (WHO, 2022). Among other childhood adversities, emotional neglect and emotional abuse have the most detrimental effects on one's life. According to statistics 36% of young adults suffer from emotional abuse while emotional neglect is underreported in some countries and in other countries, it is still reported to be 18%. However, there is still a need to explore this issue more (Kumari, 2020). Emotional abuse, in particular, is defined as the persistent and severe effects on the

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emotional development of the child caused by the actual behaviors of their parents (North, 2022). Further, it can be defined as non-constructive behaviors that are deliberately harmful to the child's need for safety and care (Willson & Kerr, 2022). These behaviors have devastating impacts on a child's mental health and that is why there is a need to explore them more. Emotional abuse can be done in many forms and infantilization is one of them. In this form, parents treat their grownup teenagers like small kids, overly control them, and are very strict with them. This form of emotional abuse can be very dangerous to teenager's mental health and are reason for many psychopathologies in their future life (Epstein et al., 2023).

Similarly, emotional neglect refers to the failure to give children an emotional environment that helps in adequate psychological, physical, and cognitive development which further helps young adults to achieve their competent and healthy adulthood (Rees, 2008). Children mostly suffer from emotional neglect when their parents are not actively involved in their lives. Parenting can be a very important factor behind emotional neglect. Authoritarian, Neglected, and absent parenting can be a reason behind most emotionally neglected children. There are several signs that a child is emotionally neglected such as children can be easily frustrated and suffer from anger outbursts, they do not easily trust other people and they also have lower self-esteem. They can easily overwhelmed in different situations such as they got anxiety and they also got emotional pain and mostly have a cold tone (Cruz, 2025).

However, Bowlby's theory of attachment has found that generalized expectancies about the others and self of a child are shaped by the attachment experiences with caregivers, which are the internal working model of the child. When they are neglected and abused by their caregivers emotionally, it forms negative cognitions of others and self that in turn results in depression (Spruit

et al., 2020). Males are more prone to all forms of childhood maltreatment, especially emotional abuse (Choudhary et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2021; Lakhdir et al., 2021). Boys who have aged 10 to 19 years, were more prone to emotional neglect as compared to girls (Karamat et al., 2022). Lakhdir et al. (2016) found that different adolescents ranging from 11-17 years old in Pakistan suffer from physical and emotional abuse and neglect. This study further suggested that this should be taken into account because most of the adolescents 800 were suffering from one type of childhood maltreatment. This maltreatment causes depressive symptoms among individuals when they grow up later in their life (Blum et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020).

As depressive symptoms among the normal population are characterized by feelings of sadness, helplessness, hopelessness, feeling of guilt, tiredness, poor sleep, and concentration they are not diagnosed as a disorder (Mohammed et al., 2022). Brennan et al. (2021) found that if college students suffer from both types of neglect such as physical and emotional in their childhood, this will make them more depressive in their recent life and they can further have bad relationships with their intimate partners (Brennan et al., 2021). Lakhdir et al. (2021) found that those adolescents who are suffering from neglect and abuse, suffer from depressive symptoms in any period of their life. Parental neglect can have a detrimental impact on the development of the child, it can cause low and negative self-esteem in them and this can lead to depressive symptoms in them. These depressive symptoms further cause a somatic disorder in them (Naz & Kausar, 2015). However, these depressive symptoms can have less impact if there is a sort of protective factor.

According to different studies, Emotional Intelligence is considered to be a very important and protective factor nowadays. Individuals who are more emotionally intelligent face fewer mental health issues,

manage stress well, and adopt various coping styles as compared to those who are less emotionally intelligent (Farrahi et al., 2015; Fteiha & Awwad, 2020; Yamani et al., 2014). Emotional Intelligence is defined as the kind of intelligence in which an individual is aware of his own and others' emotions and can manage his own and other people's emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1993). Similarly, adjusting successfully to the environment, helps people to cope better with their various problems. Therefore, it is found that people who are more adept at perceiving, understanding, and managing their own emotions as well as others might be more adjusted (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Studies explain the importance of emotional intelligence as a protective factor and emotional intelligence training should be provided to the individuals so, that they can suffer less from different issues and have good emotional well-being. Fernandez-Berrocal and Extremera (2016) found that emotional intelligence in contrast to having a negative relationship with depression has a positive relationship with wellbeing. It means that if a person is emotionally intelligent, they have good mental well-being and they will suffer less from distress and depressive symptoms and regulate their emotions well (Ali & Yousaf, 2022). Davis and Humphrey (2012) explored whether Emotional intelligence strengthens or weakens the relationship between a range of stressors such as dysfunctional family, childhood negative life events and social adversities, and self-reported mental health issues in 405 adolescents. It was found that some adolescents suffer less from different mental health issues because of high emotional intelligence. The link between mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, and childhood maltreatment can be explained through emotional intelligence. Those who have low emotional intelligence suffer more from rumination, anxiety, and depression because of childhood maltreatment in childhood (Liu & Ren, 2018; Zhao, Peng,

et al., 2019; Zhao, Xiang, et al., 2021).

Rationale of the Study

Previous research has explored childhood maltreatment and Childhood adversities, parental attachment, and acceptance and rejection has been studied in adolescents. Ashiq et al. (2022) researched to find out that Pakistani adolescents are suffering from a type of psychological neglect and abuse. They found that they are suffering from parental control, dominance, emotional neglect, rejection, abuse, physical abuse, and neglect and also from abuse which is sexual. But the matter of the fact is that these adolescents are living in such a culture and society where these things are not reported openly and people usually hide the statistics regarding them. So, there is a need to study them in-depth and separately and prior research studies them as childhood maltreatment with an overall combined score (Shapero et al., 2014). There are few proofs of how these childhood traumas affect the mental health of young adults. Fazal et al. (2022) explored the childhood adversities in young adults and how they impact their mental health. This study found that most of the young adults are impacted by childhood adversities and it harms their mental health but there is a need that they should be studied more in young adults. In prior research childhood maltreatment has been collectively studied with its impact on mental health mostly in adolescents but the current research focused on studying the effect of emotional abuse and neglect on depressive symptoms with a moderating role of emotional intelligence suffered among Pakistani university students.

Objectives

The following were the objectives of the study:

- To study the relationship among emotional abuse, neglect, depressive symptoms, and emotional intelligence in university students.
- To find out the impact of emotional abuse and neglect on depressive symptoms

among university students with a moderating role of emotional intelligence.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the current study were:

1. Emotional abuse and neglect will be positively related to depressive symptoms and negatively to emotional intelligence among university students.
2. Emotional abuse and emotional neglect significantly predict depressive symptoms among university students.
3. Emotional intelligence significantly moderates the link between emotional abuse, neglect, and depressive symptoms among university students.

Method

Research Design and Sampling

A cross-sectional research design was used and data was collected by using a convenient purposive sampling technique (Makwana et al., 2023). The data for the present research was collected from several universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The sample was comprised of 400 university students both males ($n=200$) and females ($n=200$) enrolled in different universities. The sample size was calculated by using G* Power software (Kang, 2021). Participants' age range was from 18 to 27 years ($M=22.36$, $SD=2.08$) and had 14 years of education ($M=15.70$, $SD=1.23$).

Measures

Demographic Information

For the current study, demographic information like gender, age, and years of education was also collected from participants.

Abuse and Neglect Questionnaire-Revised (Yousaf et al., 2022)

For assessing emotional neglect and emotional abuse this scale was used which contains a total of 51 items. It is a Likert scale of four points, which ranges from never true (1) to very often true (4). It has five subscales such as physical neglect, emotional neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional abuse but for the current study only emotional abuse and emotional neglect subscales were used. The

emotional Neglect subscale contains 8 items and the Emotional abuse Subscale has 19 items. Both subscales were reported to have good validity of 0.78 and 0.94 (Yousaf et al., 2022). High scores on these subscales indicate a higher level of emotional neglect and abuse.

Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale-Urdu (Salman et al., 2020)

CESD-U Scale was used for measuring depressive symptoms in this study. CESD was developed by Radloff in 1977 and it was published in English (Radloff, 1977). This scale earlier had 20 items and later on, they were reduced to 10 items to increase its utility (Andresen et al., 1994). Salman et al. (2020) translated this scale into Urdu. This Urdu version scale has 10 items and is scored from 0 to 3, with 0 indicating rarely and 3 all of the time for all items except 5 and 8 which are reversed scores. A composite score ranged from 0-30, with 10 or more considered depressive. This scale has a good alpha reliability coefficient of .75-.82 (Salman et al., 2020).

Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale Urdu Version (Zahra et al., 2020)

For assessing the emotional intelligence in this study Wong and Law EIS Urdu version was used. This scale contains 16 items. These items are scored on a Likert scale of seven points, with 7 indicating Strongly Agree and 1 indicating Strongly Disagree. High scores indicate a higher level of emotional intelligence. This questionnaire was previously developed in the English language to assess emotional intelligence (Wong & Law, 2002). This scale was translated into Urdu language and has a good alpha reliability coefficient for this scale, which was .93 (Zahra et al., 2020).

Procedure

Before conducting this study, permission was taken from the Ethical Review Board of Foundation University. Participants were approached in person from different universities ($n=400$) in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The targeted universities were

Foundation University Islamabad, Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad, Bhatia University Islamabad, Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi, Arid University Rawalpindi and NUML University Rawalpindi. Informed consent both written and verbal was taken to ensure the participant's willingness and relevant information regarding the study was given to them before giving them a questionnaire

booklet. Complete assurance was given to them that their data would be kept confidential and they could withdraw from the research without any penalty. After their willingness, they were requested to fill out the questionnaire. After Data collection, SPSS Version 20 and Process Macro Version 4.1 (2022) were used to analyze the data.

Results

Table 1

Psychometric Properties, Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlation among Study Variables (N=400)

| Variables | α | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Range | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|-------|---|--------|--------|---------|
| Emotional Abuse | .96 | 38.94 | 14.96 | 19-69 | - | .86*** | .59*** | -.43*** |
| Emotional Neglect | .92 | 15.52 | 6.52 | 8-31 | | - | .56*** | -.38*** |
| Depressive Symptoms | .92 | 9.59 | 6.80 | 0-28 | | | - | -.86*** |
| Emotional Intelligence | .99 | 70.25 | 24.19 | 16-98 | | | | - |

Note. *** $p < .001$

Table 1 shows the results of alpha reliability, *M*, *SD*, and correlation. Analysis showed that all the scales had good alpha reliability. Results explained that emotional abuse and neglect had a positive

relationship with depressive symptoms and emotional abuse, and neglect and they all had a negative relationship with emotional intelligence.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Showing Depressive Symptoms Predicted by Emotional Abuse and Emotional Neglect among University Students (N=400)

| Variables | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | β | 95%CI | | <i>R</i> ² | ΔR^2 | <i>F</i> |
|--------------------|----------|-----------|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------------------|--------------|----------|
| | | | | <i>LL</i> | <i>UL</i> | | | |
| Model I | | | | | | .02 | .02 | 3.76** |
| Constant | | | | | | | | |
| Years of education | -.79** | .39 | -.14** | -1.57 | -.01 | | | |
| Age | .03 | .24 | .01 | -.43 | .49 | | | |
| Model II | | | | | | .40 | .38 | 66.05*** |
| Constant | | | | | | | | |
| Emotional Abuse | .21*** | .04 | .46*** | .14 | .28 | | | |
| Emotional Neglect | .19** | .08 | .18** | .03 | .35 | | | |

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .05$

Table 2 shows the effect of emotional neglect and abuse on depressive symptoms

among university students. Hierarchical regression was conducted, where years of

education and age of students were control variables. Results revealed emotional abuse and neglect significantly predicted

depressive symptoms and accounted for a 38% variance in depressive symptoms.

Table 3

Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence between Emotional Abuse and Depressive Symptoms among University Students (N=400)

| Variables | R^2 | ΔR^2 | F | ΔF | Depressive Symptoms | | | | | 95% CI | |
|-----------|-------|--------------|----------|------------|---------------------|-------|-----|------|-------|--------|--|
| | | | | | β | t | P | LL | UL | | |
| Constant | .82 | .02 | 609.7*** | 53.94*** | 6.87 | 3.76 | .00 | 3.28 | 10.46 | | |
| EA | | | | | .41 | 10.38 | .00 | .33 | .48 | | |
| EI | | | | | -.05 | -2.36 | .01 | -.09 | -.01 | | |
| EA*EI | | | | | -.004 | -7.35 | .00 | -.01 | -.00 | | |

Note. *** $p < .001$, EA=Emotional Abuse, EI=Emotional Intelligence, LL=Lower Limit, UL=Upper Limit, CI= Class Interval.

Figure 1

Moderation of Emotional Intelligence between Emotional Abuse and Depressive Symptoms among University Students (N=400)

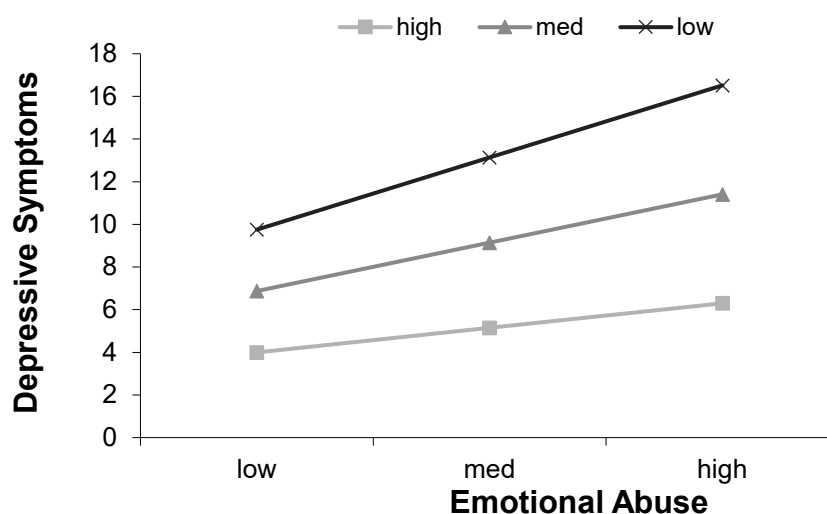


Table 3 and Figure 1 show the moderation of emotional intelligence between emotional abuse and depressive symptoms as emotional intelligence weakens the association between emotional abuse and depressive symptoms. The main effect

caused by emotional abuse is significant. The result also demonstrates the link between emotional abuse and emotional intelligence, which significantly predicts depressive symptoms in a negative direction among university students.

Table 4

Moderation of Emotional Intelligence between Emotional Neglect and Depressive Symptoms among University Students (N=400)

| Variables | R^2 | ΔR^2 | Depressive Symptoms | | 95% CI | | | | |
|-----------|-------|--------------|---------------------|------------|---------|-------|-----|------|-------|
| | | | F | ΔF | β | t | P | LL | UL |
| Constant | .82 | .02 | 600.6*** | 50.9*** | 8.92 | 5.24 | .00 | 5.58 | 12.27 |
| EN | | | | | .91 | 10.06 | .00 | .73 | 1.08 |
| EI | | | | | -.07 | -3.56 | .00 | -.11 | -.03 |
| EN*EI | | | | | -.0081 | -7.14 | .00 | -.01 | -.02 |

Note: *** $p < .001$, EA=Emotional Neglect, EI=Emotional Intelligence, LL=Lower Limit, CL= Upper Limit, CI= Class Interval.

Figure 2

Moderation of Emotional Intelligence between Emotional Neglect and Depressive Symptoms Among University Students (N=400)

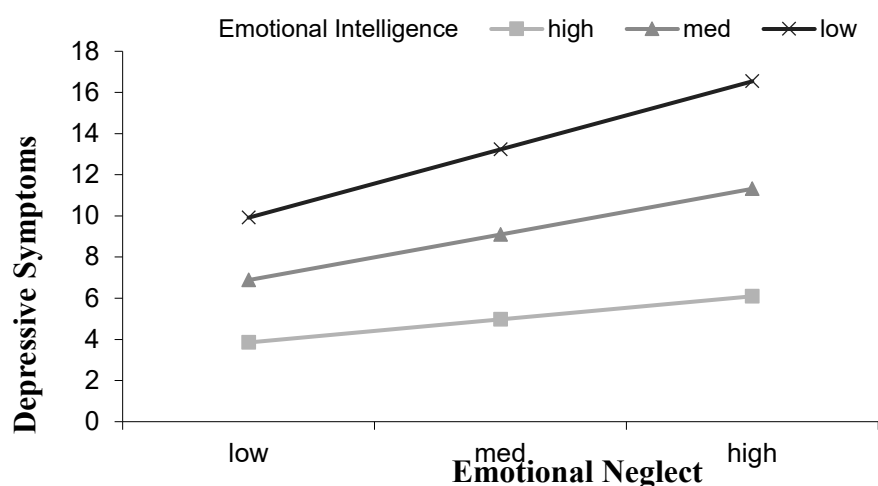


Table 4 and Figure 2 show the moderating role of emotional intelligence between depressive symptoms and emotional neglect as emotional intelligence weakens the relationship between emotional neglect and depressive symptoms. The main effect caused by emotional neglect is significant.

The result also demonstrates the link between emotional neglect and emotional intelligence, which significantly predicts depressive symptoms in a negative direction among university students.

Discussion

University students who are in the age range of 18-27, and are considered to be young adults have been suffering from different issues (Simpson, 2018). Among all these issues, emotional neglect and abuse are the most underreported and researchers emphasize exploring it more (Kumari et al., 2020). Furthermore, it has been found that emotional intelligence can potentially serve as a protector inconsistent

with many issues of mental health such as depression and it is very important to know more about emotional intelligence in Pakistani Young adults (Ain et al., 2021). The current research was designed to inquire into the impact of emotional abuse and neglect on depressive symptoms along with the moderation of emotional intelligence among university students.

The current research uncovered that emotional abuse and neglect were

positively associated with depressive symptoms whereas they were negatively related to emotional intelligence. Previous literature also found a positive relationship between emotional abuse and neglect and a negative relationship between emotional abuse, neglect, depressive symptoms, and emotional intelligence (Bahari et al., 2019; Downey et al., 2008; Fernandez-Berrocal et al., 2006; Karamat et al., 2022; Lakhdar et al., 2021; Liu & Ren, 2018; Spruit et al., 2020).

Similarly, the present study hypothesized that emotional abuse and neglect would positively predict depressive symptoms among university students. Using Hierarchical regression analysis, the study results demonstrated that emotional abuse and emotional neglect significantly predicted depressive symptoms. These findings were supported by the previous literature which has studied the impact of maltreatment in childhood on depressive symptoms, as it was found that maltreatment in childhood such as emotional abuse and neglect are the determinants of depressive symptoms among adolescents along with other forms but these previous researches use the overall or composite score to measure the childhood maltreatment and its impact on depressive symptoms (Blum et al., 2019; Sekwoski et al., 2020; Shapero et al., 2014). Similarly, another objective of this research was to investigate the impact of emotional abuse and neglect on depressive symptoms in university students with a moderation of emotional intelligence. For that, it was hypothesized that emotional intelligence will weaken the link between emotional abuse and depressive symptoms among university students. Moderation analysis through Process Macro was run to study the moderating role of emotional intelligence. The analysis demonstrated that emotional intelligence significantly negatively moderates the relationship between emotional abuse and depressive symptoms. The interaction effect suggested that at a minimal level of emotional intelligence, as

the emotional abuse increased depressive symptoms also increased. At a moderate level of emotional intelligence, as emotional abuse increases depressive symptoms start decreasing. At the highest level of emotional intelligence, as the emotional abuse increased depressive symptoms significantly decreased.

Likewise, it was also hypothesized that emotional intelligence will weaken the link between emotional neglect and depressive symptoms. The findings revealed that emotional intelligence significantly negatively moderates the association between emotional neglect and depressive symptoms. Further, the interaction effect showed that at the lowest degree of emotional intelligence, as the emotional neglect increased depressive symptoms also increased. At a moderate degree of emotional intelligence, emotional neglect increases depressive symptoms starts decreasing. At a high degree of emotional intelligence, as emotional neglect increased, depressive symptoms significantly decreased. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, few researchers studied the moderating role of emotional intelligence and some studies did it was between family dysfunction, negative life events, and mental health issues (Davis & Humphrey, 2012; Zhao et al., 2019). The findings also showed that emotional intelligence can be considered as a protection against depressive symptoms for university students who suffer from emotional abuse and neglect. So, there is a need to develop programs to enhance emotional intelligence and to provide education that how they can practice it in their daily life.

Limitations and Recommendations

There were some notable limitations in the recent study such as the current study measured the trait of emotional abuse and neglect or remembrance of emotional abuse and neglect from childhood and did not measure the state. So, future research can work on that along with other psychological factors that can cause depressive symptoms

among university students, which are not addressed in the current study. The present study collected data from the universities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad only, so, the findings of the current research cannot be generalized to overall populations. So, to know more about it, university students from other cities must be investigated. For more in-depth knowledge, students from both urban and rural populations must be included in future studies.

Implications

The present study will create awareness in society about the impact of emotional neglect and abuse on depressive symptoms among university students. It will also help the parents to understand that emotional abuse and emotional neglect can impact their children's mental health later on in their lives. Similarly, the recent study will help mental health practitioners and professionals devise training programs for enhancing emotional intelligence among individuals because it is found to be a protective factor against depressive symptoms due to emotional abuse and neglect. Current research will help mental health professionals understand the Pakistani cultural perspective on emotional neglect, emotional abuse, depressive symptoms, and emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

The current research aims to assess the impact of emotional neglect and abuse on depressive symptoms with moderation of emotional intelligence among university students. The outcomes of the research showed a significant correlation between emotional neglect, abuse, depressive symptoms, and emotional intelligence. The recent study also revealed that emotional abuse and neglect were significantly positive predictors of depressive symptoms. Similarly, emotional intelligence was found to be a significant moderator and it weakened the correlation between emotional abuse, neglect, and depressive symptoms among university students. Even though this study is cross-sectional, it will act as a baseline for mental

health practitioners and professionals to educate society about this issue of emotional neglect and abuse and how they can reduce its impacts by enhancing emotional intelligence. Furthermore, more longitudinal studies are required for a better understanding.

Ethics Statement

All the ethical standards of APA were met. Permission was taken from the Foundation University Ethical Review Board. Informed consent was taken, both verbally and in written from all the students to participate in this study.

Contribution of Authors

Roma Shafique: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft
Sadaf Ahsan: Methodology, Writing - Reviewing & Editing, Supervision
Hajira Khan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Reviewing & Editing, Supervision

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest declared by the authors.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets of the current study are not available publicly due to ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author [R.S.] upon the reasonable request.

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