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CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL NEGLECT AND DEPRESSION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMOTION REGULATION DIFFICULTIES

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Abstract

Emotional neglect is a major risk factor for childhood development, linked to psychological problems, but the relationship between emotional neglect and depression is poorly understood. In the present study, the association between childhood EI and depression among young adults was explored and mediator role of EID was investigated. The study used quantitative cross sectional correlational design with 200 young adult respondents aged 18-25 years were obtained by purposive sampling. The following tools were used to collect the data: CTQ-SF, DERS-18, and PHQ-9. The reliability of all measures was good (Cronbach's α = .861, .903 and .838, respectively). Childhood emotional neglect was found to be significantly and positively correlated with emotion regulation difficulties (r = .30, p < .01), childhood emotional neglect and depression (r = .35, p < .01) and emotion regulation difficulties and depression (r = .50, p < .01) through Pearson correlation analysis. Regression analyses showed that childhood emotional neglect was associated with depression (β = .35, p < .001) and emotion regulation difficulties (β = .30, p < .001), and that emotion regulation difficulties were associated with depression (β = .48, p < .001). The mediation model showed that the indirect effect of childhood emotional neglect on depression was significant, with an indirect effect value of .16 (95% CI [.09, .24]). The results reveal emotion regulation problems as a significant psychological pathway which is related to depressive symptoms in young adults.

INTRODUCTION

Depression is a common mental health problem across the globe and is a significant cause of psychological distress and disability. It impacts on emotional functioning, interpersonal relations, academic and occupational performance, and quality of life (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022; World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). Depression is a complex interplay of biological,

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psychological, and environmental factors, but developmental research has started to pay more attention to adverse childhood experiences as a factor that increases the vulnerability to later psychological problems (McLaughlin et al., 2012). Young adulthood is an especially significant developmental stage, in which many aspects of life undergo significant shifts in identity formation, independence, education, and in relationships with others (Arnett 2000). These developmental needs can be particularly difficult for people who were not adequately cared for emotionally as children.

Childhood emotional neglect, defined as the chronic failure to be emotionally responsive to a child's needs, validate their feelings, be warm and loving, encourage them to express feelings, and provide psychological support for normal emotional development, is another form of childhood adversity that has been gaining research interest over the years (Glaser, 2002). Emotional neglect is a more insidious form of maltreatment, and is not as easy to detect as physical abuse or other types of visible neglect; it is more often defined by the lack of key emotional experiences rather than the presence of a harmful act. Emotional neglect can therefore be undetected until it is experienced in adulthood, as a psychological effect of the neglect (Bernstein et al., 2003). Emotional neglect can lead to physical care being provided but no emotional care and validation, thus not leaving a child with the ability to form secure attachments, emotional skills and coping mechanisms. Theories of childhood emotional neglect can be explained by the concept of attachment.

The attachment framework of Bowlby (1982), suggested that early interactions between caregiver and child affect how they develop internal working models of self, others and interpersonal relationships. Emotionally responsive caregiving fosters positive self-regarding beliefs and attachment, while emotionally unavailable caregiving can foster insecure attachment patterns and negative self-regarding beliefs. Empirical studies have found that childhood maltreatment experiences, such as emotional neglect, are linked to greater life-course depression and other psychological problems (Li et al., 2016; Humphreys et al., 2020). In addition to this, emotional neglect might be a specific developmental risk factor, because it is a specifically emotional learning process problem and an emotional regulation capacities problem. Childhood maltreatment has been studied in the past often as an umbrella concept that encompasses a number of child adversities, such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. While this has helped to understand the overall effects of childhood adversity, it could potentially fail to capture the specific effects of emotionally neglectful parenting (Humphreys et al., 2020). Emotional neglect is different from other forms of maltreatment because it is a pattern of repeated failures to acknowledge, respond to and validate children's emotional experiences. These experiences can affect emotional understanding, self-regulation, and adaptive interpersonal functioning and leave psychological vulnerabilities that last into adulthood.

One possible pathway between childhood emotional neglect and depression is a failure to regulate emotions. Emotion regulation is the process of monitoring, assessing and adjusting emotional experiences in ways that lead to adaptive functioning (Gross, 1998). Emotion regulation is the ability to understand emotions, manage when they arise and act flexibly when faced with difficult situations. Difficulties with emotion regulation, however, include emotional awareness, emotional acceptance, emotional impulse control, access to effective emotion regulation strategies, and emotion regulation of negative emotional states (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). The acquisition of emotion regulation skills takes place in interpersonal contexts, especially with caregivers. Emotion socialization theory emphasizes that emotion socialization is mediated by caregivers' ability to teach children how to identify, interpret, express and regulate emotions (Morris et al., 2007). Children get emotional feedback and supportive responses, which help them to feel supported and

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understand their feelings. Emotional neglectful environment, however, may restrict these learning experiences, leading to emotional regulation problems such as lack of emotional awareness, emotional expression and the ability to cope effectively.

There is strong evidence from both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, and from meta-analysis, that EM problems are tightly correlated with depression, and can serve as a transdiagnostic vulnerability factor across psychological disorders (Aldao et al., 2010). Psychological mechanisms that may account for the relationship between emotion regulation and depression include: reduced positivity, increased rumination, and heightened negative reactions. Maladaptive coping mechanisms like rumination, avoidance, and emotional suppression may be used more often in people with emotional dysregulation. These approaches can help sustain negative emotional responses and boost susceptibility to depressive symptoms (Aldao et al. 2010). Additionally, cognitive theories of depression suggest that early adverse events can lead to negative schemas, in terms of negative thinking and negative self, others, and future beliefs (Beck, 2008). These cognitive "weaknesses" could combine with problems in how someone regulates their emotions, which might raise the risk of depressive symptoms if the person later faces difficulties in development.

Emerging adult years offer a valuable background against which to look at these relationships, as the emotional and social demands that are being placed upon individuals grow more complex and they must face these demands independently (Arnett, 2000). This time can be significant when it comes to emotional regulation as people experience academic, career planning, interpersonal and identity challenges. People who have been emotionally neglected in childhood might be more vulnerable because they may not have had the chance to learn adaptive ways to handle their emotions in early childhood. While previous studies have identified links between childhood adversity, challenges in emotion regulation, and depression, there have been few studies that specifically sought to identify emotion regulation difficulties as a mediator between childhood emotional neglect and depression among young adults. While the majority of previous studies has tended to concentrate on general childhood trauma and clinical samples, there are limited data on the specific association between emotional neglect and depressive symptoms among non-clinical samples of young adults. It might be beneficial to look at this pathway to better understand the mechanisms by which early emotional experiences are related to subsequent mental health outcomes. This study seeks to fill this gap, exploring the association between childhood emotional neglect and depression in young adults and testing if emotion regulation difficulties lie between the two. Based on the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), emotion socialization theory (Morris et al., 2007), emotion regulation theory (Gross, 1998) and cognitive models of depression (Beck, 2008), the study proposes that childhood emotional neglect is positively associated with depressive symptoms and emotion regulation difficulties, and that emotion regulation difficulties represent an important mechanism in this association.

The study tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Childhood emotional neglect will significantly positively predict depression among young adults.

H2: Childhood emotional neglect will significantly positively predict emotion regulation difficulties among young adults.

H3: Emotion regulation difficulties will significantly positively predict depression among young adults.

H4: Emotion regulation difficulties will significantly mediate the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and depression among young adults.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The present study was of a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational type to explore the relationship between childhood emotional neglect, emotion regulation difficulties and

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depression in young adults. The study participants comprised 200 young adults aged 18 – 25 years using purposive sampling technique. The chosen age group was selected as a developmental period of 'young adulthood' (Arnett, 2000) which is marked by major psychological, social and emotional changes, such as changes in identity, increasing autonomy, decision-making in education and employment, and changing interpersonal responsibilities. The number of participants was determined by applying the inclusion criteria defined for the study. Young adults (age 18-25) who volunteered to participate were eligible. Those not age appropriate or who were not able to give informed responses were not included. The study was conducted in a non-clinical population of young adults, and was designed to examine psychological associations between childhood emotional neglect, emotion regulation difficulties, and depression symptoms, not clinical depression diagnosis. Standardized self-report questionnaires were used to collect data. Before completing the measures, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw. The participants were informed about the study and gave informed consent to answer the questionnaires. Ethical issues of privacy, confidentiality and reduction of psychological discomfort were adhered to in the process of data collection.

Measures

Childhood Emotional Neglect

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF) created by Bernstein et al. (2003) was used to evaluate childhood emotional neglect. The Childhood Trauma Quest (CTQ-SF) is a self-report retrospective questionnaire to evaluate childhood maltreatment experiences. For the present study, the emotional neglect subscale was utilized to evaluate the participants' perception of a lack of emotional support, affection, validation and responsiveness from caregivers during childhood. The emotional neglect subscale measures how emotionally unavailable and less responsive emotionally supportive individuals were to their childhood environment. A higher score reflects higher childhood emotional neglect experiences. The CTQ-SF has been found to have good reliability and validity for measuring retrospective childhood maltreatment experiences (Bernstein et al., 2003).

Emotion Regulation Difficulties

The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale – 18 Item Version (DERS-18) was used to assess emotion regulation difficulties. The DERS-18 measures challenges in emotional regulation such as emotional awareness, emotional acceptance, emotional impulse control, emotional regulation strategies, and emotional clarity. The DERS-18 has a positive correlation with greater difficulties in emotion regulation, with higher scores reflecting higher difficulties. The instrument was chosen because difficulties with emotion regulation were proposed as the intervening mechanism for childhood emotional neglect to be associated with depressive symptoms. The measure has shown good psychometric qualities for measuring emotion regulation problems (Victor & Klonsky, 2016).

Depression Symptoms

Kroenke et al. (2001) developed the Patient Health Questionnaire–9 (PHQ-9) to measure depressive symptoms. The PHQ-9 is a nine-item self-report instrument derived from the criteria for MDD. Measures symptoms such as negative mood, lack of interest, sleep problems, fatigue, difficulty focusing, and guilty feelings. A higher PHQ-9 score signifies more depression symptoms. The PHQ-9 was not used for the diagnosis of depression in the present study but to assess the degree of severity of depressive symptoms.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by running statistical procedures in line with the study objectives and

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hypotheses. Descriptive statistics were computed to provide summary data on responses of participants and distribution of study variables. To assess the reliability of the study measures, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used in the internal consistency reliability analyses. Pearson product–moment correlation analysis was used to explore the associations between childhood emotional neglect, emotion regulation difficulties and depression. Simple and multiple regression analyses were used to assess if childhood emotional neglect predicted depression and difficulties with emotion regulation and if difficulties with emotion regulation predicted depression symptoms. Finally, mediation was performed to determine whether the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and depression was mediated by emotion regulation difficulties. Childhood emotional neglect was the independent variable, emotion regulation difficulties was the mediator, and depression was the dependent variable.

Results

The present study explored the links between childhood emotional neglect, emotion regulation problems, and depression in young adults. Data were investigated with descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson product–moment correlation, regression analyses and mediation analysis. The aim of these analyses was to assess (a) the ability of childhood emotional neglect to predict depression and (b) whether emotion regulation difficulties mediated the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and depressive symptoms. These analyses are summarized in the thesis in Chapter Four and included reliability, descriptive statistics, correlations, regression models and mediation analysis.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used to determine internal consistency reliability for all of the research instruments. The results showed that all measures exhibited good internal consistency, leading to the affirmation of the reliability of the measures in the present sample in assessing childhood emotional neglect, difficulties with emotion regulation, and depressive symptoms.

Table 4.1 Internal Consistency Reliability Measures

Measure	*No. of Items*	*Cronbach's α*
Childhood Emotional Neglect (CTQ-SF)	5	.861
Depression (PHQ-9)	9	.838
Emotion Regulation Difficulties (DERS-18)	18	.903

Note. N=200, α = Cronbach's alpha.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to analyze the distribution of the research variables (emotional neglect during childhood, emotion regulation problems and depression). Means and standard deviations were provided to give an overview of participants' scores on the major study variables.

Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 200)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*Skewness*	*Kurtosis*
Childhood Emotional Neglect (CTQ)	3.29	.98	-0.26	-0.25
Emotion Regulation Difficulties (DERS)	2.77	.75	0.14	0.36
Depression (PHQ-9)	1.34	.66	0.08	-0.01

Note: Higher scores indicate greater childhood emotional neglect, emotion regulation difficulties, and depressive symptoms.

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Correlation Analysis

Pearson product–moment correlation was performed for the relationships between childhood emotional neglect, emotion regulation difficulties and depression. The results revealed higher positive correlations between all variables of the study. Childhood emotional neglect had a positive association with emotion regulation difficulties, where higher rates of childhood emotional neglect was correlated with increased emotion regulation difficulties. Childhood emotional neglect was also positively correlated with depression, such that subjects who experienced more emotional neglect also had higher levels of depressive symptoms. In addition, emotion regulation difficulties were positively correlated with depression, and higher levels of emotion regulation difficulties were correlated with higher levels of depression symptoms.

Table 4.3 Pearson Correlations Among Childhood Emotional Neglect, Emotion Regulation Difficulties, and Depression

Variable	*1*	*2*	*3*
1. Childhood Emotional Neglect	—		
2. Emotion Regulation Difficulties	.30**	—	
3. Depression	.35**	.50**	—

Note. *N*=200, $p < .05$. **p** < .01.

Regression Analysis

Childhood Emotional Neglect Predicting Depression

A simple linear regression was performed to see if childhood emotional neglect had a significant relation with depressive symptoms in young adults. As predicted in Hypothesis 1, the results showed that childhood emotional neglect predicted depression. Childhood emotional neglect was also associated with more depressive symptoms.

Table 4.4 Regression Analysis Predicting Depression From Childhood Emotional Neglect

Model Summary

R	R^2	*Adjusted* R^2	*F*	*p*
.35	.12	.11	27.15	<.001

Coefficients

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	β	*t*	*p*
Constant	0.40	.15	—	2.67	.008
Childhood Emotional Neglect	.24	.05	.35	5.21	<.001

Childhood Emotional Neglect Predicting Emotion Regulation Difficulties

A second regression analysis was performed to determine whether childhood emotional neglect predicted emotion regulation difficulties. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, results showed that childhood emotional neglect was a significant predictor of emotion regulation difficulties. The discovery indicates that lack of emotional support and responsiveness in childhood was linked with increased challenges in the regulation of emotional experiences in young adulthood.

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Table 4.5
Mediation Path A: CTQ Predicting DERS
Regression Analysis Predicting Emotion Regulation Difficulties From Childhood Emotional Neglect

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*p*
Childhood Emotional Neglect	.28	.06	.30	<.001

Model: R^2 = .09, F(1,198)=19.60, p<.001

Emotion Regulation Difficulties Predicting Depression

To assess the prediction of depression by emotion regulation difficulties, after accounting for childhood emotional neglect, a multiple regression analysis was performed. The results showed that the emotion regulation impairments were significantly associated with the depressive symptoms, thereby supporting Hypothesis 3.

Table 4.6
Path B and Direct Effect
Regression Analysis Predicting Depression From Childhood Emotional Neglect and Emotion Regulation Difficulties

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*
Childhood Emotional Neglect	.08	.04	.12	.09
Emotion Regulation Difficulties	.42	.06	.48	<.001

Model: R^2 = .25, F(2,197)=32.90, p<.001

Mediation Analysis

The mediation analysis was used to test if childhood emotional neglect was a mediator of the relationship between emotion regulation difficulties and depression. Childhood emotional neglect was used as the predictor variable, emotion regulation difficulties as the mediator, and depression was the outcome variable. Childhood emotional neglect had a large overall effect on depression. Including emotion regulation difficulties in the model reduced the direct association between childhood emotional neglect and depression, but the indirect association via emotion regulation difficulties was significant. These findings support Hypothesis 4 such that emotion regulation difficulties were a medium-sized statistical mediator of the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and depressive symptoms. In general, the results confirmed the conceptual model proposed. Childhood emotional neglect was found to be strongly related to increased depression and emotion regulation problems in young adults. Further, emotion regulation problems were found to be a significant mediator between childhood emotional neglect and depressive symptoms. The results indicate that emotional regulation problems are deemed as an important psychological pathway that is linked with depressive symptoms among those who experienced childhood emotional neglect.

Table 4.7
Mediation Effect
Indirect Effect of Childhood Emotional Neglect on Depression Through Emotion Regulation Difficulties

Effect	*B*	*Boot SE*	*95% CI*
Total Effect	.24	.05	[.14, .34]
Direct Effect	.08	.04	[-.01, .17]

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Effect	*B*	*Boot SE*	*95% CI*
Indirect Effect (CTQ → DERS → PHQ)	.16	.04	[.09, .24]

Note. Mediation is significant when the confidence interval does not include zero.

Discussion

In the present study, the association between childhood emotional neglect and depression among young adults was explored and the role of emotion regulation difficulties in this association was examined. Results confirmed the proposed conceptual model as evidenced by significant positive relationships between childhood emotional neglect, emotion regulation difficulties and depressive symptoms. Specifically, childhood emotional neglect was a significant predictor of depression and emotion regulation problems, and emotion regulation problems were a significant predictor of depressive symptoms. Moreover, there was evidence of mediation analysis for emotional neglect during childhood accounting for a portion of the association between emotional neglect and depression. The results add to the existing literature highlighting the importance of early emotional experiences and regulatory processes in understanding vulnerability to depressive symptoms. Results from this study were congruent with earlier findings showing that childhood emotional neglect was related to depression; that is, this adverse childhood experience proved to be a risk factor in the development of depression in later years.

Meta-analytic studies have indicated that adverse childhood events may be linked to an increased risk of depression in adulthood, which further demonstrates that adverse early-life events may lead to psychological vulnerability later in life (Li et al., 2016). Likewise, Humphreys et al. (2020) found that the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire was significantly linked to depressive outcomes, with childhood maltreatment experiences. This current literature adds to the existing literature by investigating emotional neglect as a specific type of childhood adversity instead of a combination of childhood adverse events. This is significant because emotional neglect is when parents fail to respond to and validate children's emotions, an aspect of functioning that is essential to the development of emotional security. Developmental-Attachment approaches explain this association between emotional neglect and depressive symptoms in childhood. Early caregiver responsiveness is expected to shape internal working models of self-worth, interpersonal relationships and emotional safety (Bowlby, 1982). If children are emotionally unavailable consistently, they could start to form negative thoughts about their emotional needs and interpersonal worth. With time, these beliefs can lead to susceptibility to depressive symptoms when confronted by stressful experiences in later developmental stages.

Childhood emotional maltreatment has been shown to be linked to maladaptive psychological mechanisms, such as negative self-perceptions and emotional functioning problems (Young et al., 2014). The second key finding was childhood emotional neglect was a significant predictor of emotion regulation difficulties. Such results lend support to theory that emotional development takes place in the context of caregiver–child interactions. In emotion socialization theory, caregivers are a key aspect in teaching children to experience, express, and manage emotions (Morris et al., 2007). Children gradually acquire their emotional awareness, and supportive responses and validation help them to acquire adaptive regulation strategies. Emotionally neglectful environments, on the other hand, can limit the chances for emotional learning and lead to challenges in recognizing emotions, tolerating distress, and choosing appropriate coping responses.

A relationship between childhood adversity and compromised emotion regulation has been supported by previous research. Young et al. (2014) emphasized that neglect and abuse in childhood may impact emotional development by interfering with emotional awareness, emotional processing, and adaptive regulation. Developmental research also indicates that

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caregiver neglect in the early environment is correlated with problems in emotion regulation in childhood and adolescence (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010). The present results corroborate this view, suggesting that the emotional neglect experiences of individuals were positively associated with their problems in emotional regulation during young adulthood. The third finding revealed that emotion regulation problems were significant predictors of depressive symptoms. The findings are in line with large-scale studies that have found that emotion regulation problems are a transdiagnostic liability factor for depression and other psychological disorders (Aldao et al., 2010). People who have trouble with emotional regulation might have problems with negative affective responses, and may resort to unhelpful coping strategies such as rumination, avoidance, or suppression. These processes may underlie the maintenance of negative emotional experiences and the risk of depression.

Gross's process model of emotion regulation (1998) also provides evidence for the link between emotion regulation difficulties and depression, by highlighting the importance of monitoring and regulating the emotional response in psychological adjustment. At various points of emotional regulation, such as being aware of emotions, accepting emotions, and deciding on a coping strategy, difficulties might interfere with adaptive coping and lead to enduring negative emotions. Empirical studies have already shown that emotion dysregulation is significantly correlated with depressive symptoms and may be linked to early adversity as a mechanism for psychopathology development later in life (Aldao et al., 2010). The current study makes an important contribution with the mediation finding. The results showed that emotion regulation problems statistically mediated the childhood emotional neglect-depression relationship, suggesting that emotion regulation problems may be a pathway through which childhood emotional neglect is linked with depression. This discovery is consistent with previous studies that have found that childhood adversity and later psychological disorders can be explained by emotion regulation processes. For instance, Crow et al. (2014) identified emotion dysregulation as a mediator between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult depressive symptoms – suggesting the importance of emotion dysregulation processes within the etiology of depression. The mediation by emotion regulation difficulties is also similar to cognitive and developmental theories of depression.

According to Beck's cognitive theory, early negative experiences can lead to the formation of maladaptive schemas that include negative schemas of self, others, and future (Beck, 2008). Emotional neglect can lead to a sense of being unsupported, emotionally invalidated, and combine with emotional regulation problems and make one more prone to depressive symptoms. Therefore the present results fit an integrative theory that links childhood emotional experiences to later psychological functioning by emotional and cognitive pathways. The results also provide insights into the nature of depression in early adulthood. It is a time of emerging adulthood when people are more independent and responsible, facing new complex emotional and interpersonal demands (Arnett, 2000). Those who have been emotionally neglected as a child may have fewer tools for emotional regulation that make navigating these challenges more difficult. Thus, an investigation of emotion regulation problems could be useful to understand psychological risk factors linked to depressive symptoms at this developmental period.

Clinically, the results indicate a need to take developmental history and emotion regulation skills into account in assessing depressive symptoms in young adults. Emotion regulation skills, emotional awareness, acceptance, and adaptive coping skills could be the target of intervention if the individual is experiencing depressive symptoms due to early emotional deprivation. The present study was cross-sectional, however, future intervention studies are needed to confirm whether or not improving emotion regulation skills decreases the number

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of depressive symptoms in people with childhood emotional neglect symptoms. There are a number of caveats that need to be taken into account when accounting for these results. The first problem with the cross-sectional design is that conclusions about the temporal and/or causal relationship between childhood emotional neglect, emotion regulation difficulties, and depression are not warranted. The results of the mediation analysis suggest a path that is supported statistically, but this path needs to be assessed in a longitudinal study to establish developmental directionality. Second, the study was based on self-reporting measures that were retrospective, which could be affected by memory limitations or emotional states of the respondents. Thirdly, findings of purposive sampling cannot be generalized to larger populations. Longitudinal designs and more diverse samples should be used in future studies to explore these relationships. Other psychological mechanisms such as attachment insecurity, self-esteem, cognitive schemas, resilience, and social support could also be explored in future studies to gain further understanding of how CEV might contribute to depression. Studies of clinical populations and emotion regulation intervention strategies may also yield more insights on prevention and intervention strategies. In conclusion, the present research offers support for the link between childhood emotional neglect and depressive symptoms in young adults and emotion regulation difficulties as a psychological mechanism in this relationship. The results highlight the need to take both developmental experiences and emotional regulation processes into account when exploring vulnerability to depression.

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