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THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL NEGLECT ON EMOTIONAL FUNCTIONING IN ADULTS WITH PTSD - A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Background: Childhood emotional neglect is a pervasive yet often underrecognized form of developmental trauma associated with long-term impairments in emotional and interpersonal functioning. Theoretical and empirical literature suggests that early emotional deprivation contributes to difficulties in emotion regulation, insecure attachment, and increased vulnerability to psychopathology, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. However, the mechanisms linking emotional neglect to adult emotional dysfunction remain insufficiently integrated within existing research.

Methods: This narrative review synthesizes findings from seminal theoretical works and empirical studies on childhood emotional neglect, attachment development, emotional regulation, and PTSD. Literature was identified through major academic databases, including peer-reviewed journal articles, clinical handbooks, and foundational texts. Key assessment tools commonly referenced in the literature include the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein & Fink, 1998), the PTSD Diagnostic Scale (Foa et al., 1997), and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). A thematic synthesis approach was used to integrate findings across studies.

Results: The reviewed literature consistently indicates that childhood emotional neglect is strongly associated with emotional dysregulation, insecure attachment patterns, and increased PTSD symptom severity. Studies also highlight neurodevelopmental disruptions in stress-response systems and persistent maladaptive self-beliefs, such as shame and low self-worth, which contribute to chronic emotional difficulties in adulthood.

Conclusions: Childhood emotional neglect represents a critical developmental risk factor for long-term emotional dysfunction and PTSD. The findings emphasize the importance of integrating attachment-based and emotion-focused approaches in trauma-informed care and highlight the need for further research to clarify underlying mechanisms and protective factors.

KEYWORDS

Childhood Emotional Neglect, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Emotional Regulation, Developmental Trauma, Attachment Theory, Adult Mental Health

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1. Introduction

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a chronic and often debilitating psychiatric condition that may develop following exposure to traumatic experiences, including violence, abuse, neglect, or prolonged emotional distress. According to the World Health Organization, PTSD is characterized by symptoms such as intrusive memories, emotional numbing, hyperarousal, avoidance behaviors, and disturbances in emotional and interpersonal functioning. Although early research predominantly focused on physical and sexual abuse as major contributors to PTSD, increasing scholarly attention has been directed toward the long-term psychological consequences of childhood emotional neglect.

Childhood emotional neglect refers to the persistent failure of caregivers to provide adequate emotional support, validation, responsiveness, and affection necessary for healthy psychological development. Unlike overt forms of abuse, emotional neglect is defined primarily by the absence of emotional attunement rather than by direct harmful actions. Due to its less visible nature, emotional neglect frequently remains underrecognized despite evidence suggesting its profound and lasting developmental impact (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014).

Developmental and attachment-based perspectives emphasize that emotionally responsive caregiving plays a central role in healthy emotional and social development. Attachment theory, initially formulated by John Bowlby and later expanded through the observational research of Mary Ainsworth and colleagues (1978), highlights the importance of early caregiver-child relationships in shaping emotional functioning across the lifespan. Within this framework, secure attachment relationships established during childhood are understood to support the development of emotional regulation, self-worth, resilience, and effective interpersonal functioning in later life. Conversely, persistent emotional neglect may interfere with the formation of emotional security and stable attachment patterns. Children raised in emotionally unresponsive environments often experience difficulties identifying, expressing, and regulating emotions, which may contribute to maladaptive coping strategies and relational difficulties that persist into adulthood.

A growing body of research has demonstrated that adverse childhood experiences, including emotional neglect, are associated with increased vulnerability to a range of psychiatric conditions, including depression, anxiety disorders, borderline personality disorder, substance misuse, and PTSD (Felitti et al., 1998; Teicher & Samson, 2013). Emotional neglect has additionally been linked to chronic emotional dysregulation, dissociative symptoms, shame, and persistent interpersonal difficulties (Dvir et al., 2014). Importantly, individuals who experienced emotional neglect during childhood frequently struggle to recognize the legitimacy of their trauma because the harm resulted from emotional absence and invalidation rather than overt abuse.

Neurodevelopmental research further indicates that prolonged childhood stress and emotional deprivation may substantially affect brain maturation and stress-response systems. Studies conducted by Perry (2009) and Shonkoff and Garner (2012) suggest that chronic exposure to toxic stress during childhood may alter emotional processing, neuroendocrine functioning, and memory integration, thereby increasing susceptibility to trauma-related disorders later in life.

Despite increasing recognition of emotional neglect as a serious form of developmental trauma, research specifically examining its impact on emotional functioning among adults diagnosed with PTSD remains relatively limited. A more comprehensive understanding of this relationship is essential for improving trauma-informed clinical interventions and psychological support for survivors.

Accordingly, the purpose of the present study is to examine the impact of childhood emotional neglect on emotional functioning in adults diagnosed with PTSD. Particular attention is given to emotional regulation difficulties, interpersonal functioning, self-esteem, attachment-related disturbances, and PTSD symptom severity. By integrating existing theoretical and empirical findings, this review seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the long-term psychological consequences of emotional neglect and their implications for trauma-focused treatment and clinical practice.

2. Methodology

This article adopts a narrative literature review approach to examine the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and emotional functioning in adults diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The purpose of this review is to synthesize and critically interpret existing theoretical and empirical literature concerning developmental trauma, emotional neglect, attachment processes, and emotional dysregulation in adulthood, rather than to generate primary quantitative data.

The review is based on peer-reviewed journal articles, clinical literature, and foundational theoretical works within the fields of trauma psychology, developmental psychology, psychiatry, and attachment research. Relevant literature was identified primarily through academic databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. The selection process focused on English-language publications addressing childhood emotional neglect, emotional regulation difficulties, attachment-related processes, and PTSD symptomatology in adult populations. Particular emphasis was placed on highly cited empirical studies, influential theoretical contributions, and review papers frequently referenced within trauma-related research.

Across the reviewed studies, commonly utilized assessment instruments included the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998), the PTSD Diagnostic Scale (PDS; Foa et al., 1997), and the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). These measures were repeatedly employed in the literature to assess experiences of emotional neglect, PTSD symptom severity, and deficits in emotional regulation, thereby allowing for greater conceptual consistency across findings.

The analytical process was based on thematic synthesis of the selected literature. Findings were organized into several recurring conceptual domains, including attachment disruption, emotional dysregulation, neurodevelopmental consequences of early emotional deprivation, self-concept disturbances, and interpersonal functioning in adulthood. The aim of the synthesis was to identify convergent patterns within the literature, examine theoretical relationships between variables, and integrate existing findings into a coherent explanatory framework concerning the long-term psychological consequences of emotional neglect.

Attention was additionally given to methodological quality during the interpretation of the reviewed studies. Consideration was paid to factors such as study design, sample characteristics, measurement instruments, and potential methodological limitations, including retrospective reporting bias and the predominance of cross-sectional research designs. Rather than employing statistical meta-analytic procedures, the present review emphasizes conceptual integration and critical discussion in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of how childhood emotional neglect may contribute to emotional dysfunction and PTSD-related difficulties in adulthood.

3. Results

3.1 Association Between Emotional Neglect and PTSD-Related Outcomes

The reviewed literature demonstrates a consistent association between childhood emotional neglect and long-term impairments in emotional functioning among adults diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Across empirical and theoretical works, emotional neglect is repeatedly identified as a significant developmental factor linked to emotional dysregulation, attachment insecurity, and increased vulnerability to trauma-related psychopathology in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998; Dvir et al., 2014; Teicher & Samson, 2013).

The findings indicate that the effects of emotional neglect are not limited to childhood but extend into adulthood, shaping emotional stability, interpersonal functioning, and stress-response patterns. Although emotional neglect is less visible than physical or sexual abuse, the literature consistently emphasizes that its developmental consequences are profound and clinically significant (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014).

Research on adverse childhood experiences further supports the view that emotional neglect contributes to a broad range of psychiatric outcomes, including PTSD, depression, and anxiety disorders (Felitti et al., 1998; Teicher & Samson, 2013). Importantly, several studies suggest that emotional neglect may act as an independent risk factor for PTSD symptom severity, even when controlling for other forms of childhood adversity (Dvir et al., 2014).

A recurring observation across the literature is that individuals with histories of emotional neglect often have difficulty recognizing their experiences as traumatic. Because the harm is rooted in emotional absence rather than overt abuse, emotional neglect may be minimized or invalidated by survivors, contributing to delayed help-seeking and chronic emotional distress (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014).

3.2 Emotional Dysregulation and Affective Difficulties

A central finding across the reviewed literature concerns the strong relationship between childhood emotional neglect and impaired emotion regulation. Studies using standardized instruments such as the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004) consistently show that individuals with histories of emotional neglect exhibit reduced emotional awareness, impaired impulse control, limited distress tolerance, and difficulties accessing adaptive regulation strategies.

The literature suggests that these difficulties are closely related to disruptions in early caregiver responsiveness. When emotional needs are not consistently recognized or validated during childhood, the development of emotional identification and regulation skills may be significantly compromised. As a result, individuals often enter adulthood with limited capacity to manage complex emotional states.

These regulatory impairments are strongly associated with PTSD symptomatology. Emotional numbing, intrusive memories, hyperarousal, and affective instability are frequently reported among individuals with emotional neglect histories (Dvir et al., 2014). In addition, maladaptive coping strategies such as emotional avoidance, withdrawal, dissociation, and impulsive responses to stress are commonly observed.

The reviewed studies further indicate that these patterns often function as long-term adaptations to early emotional deprivation. While such strategies may reduce distress in the short term, they tend to maintain or exacerbate emotional difficulties in adulthood, particularly in the context of PTSD symptom persistence.

3.3 Attachment Disruptions and Interpersonal Functioning

Attachment-related disturbances represent another major and consistent theme in the reviewed literature. Research grounded in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1978) indicates that childhood emotional neglect is strongly associated with insecure attachment patterns, particularly avoidant and disorganized styles.

The absence of consistent emotional responsiveness during childhood interferes with the development of secure internal working models. Individuals exposed to emotional neglect may develop expectations of rejection, emotional unavailability, or relational inconsistency, which later shape interpersonal functioning in adulthood.

Adults with such histories frequently report difficulties with trust, emotional intimacy, and relational stability. Emotional withdrawal, fear of dependency, avoidance of vulnerability, and heightened sensitivity to rejection are commonly described patterns. In some cases, individuals may alternate between emotional detachment and heightened relational anxiety, reflecting underlying attachment insecurity.

The literature further suggests that these interpersonal difficulties may intensify PTSD symptoms by limiting access to supportive relationships and reducing emotional buffering during stress. Difficulties in forming stable relationships may therefore function both as a consequence of emotional neglect and as a maintaining factor in trauma-related symptomatology.

3.4 Neurodevelopmental Consequences of Early Emotional Deprivation

The reviewed studies also highlight the neurodevelopmental consequences of chronic emotional deprivation during childhood. Developmental trauma research indicates that prolonged exposure to emotionally neglectful environments may disrupt stress-response systems and alter brain structures involved in emotional processing, memory integration, and regulation of affect (Perry, 2009; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

Such disruptions are associated with long-term dysregulation of physiological stress systems, including heightened stress reactivity and reduced ability to return to baseline following emotional arousal. These neurobiological patterns are frequently observed in individuals with trauma histories, including PTSD.

The literature further suggests that chronic emotional neglect may impair the integration of emotional and cognitive processing systems. This can result in difficulties in interpreting emotional experiences coherently, contributing to dissociative tendencies, emotional fragmentation, and impaired regulation of internal states.

In addition, early stress exposure has been linked to alterations in neural circuits responsible for executive functioning and emotional control, which may contribute to impulsivity, affective instability, and reduced stress tolerance in adulthood.

3.5 Self-Concept and Cognitive-Emotional Patterns

Another consistent finding in the literature concerns disturbances in self-concept among individuals with histories of emotional neglect. Across studies, emotional neglect is associated with chronic shame, low self-esteem, self-criticism, and persistent feelings of inadequacy.

The reviewed literature suggests that the absence of emotional validation during childhood plays a central role in shaping these self-perceptions. When emotional experiences are consistently ignored or invalidated, individuals may internalize beliefs that their emotions are unimportant or undeserving of attention. Over time, these early experiences contribute to enduring negative self-referential patterns.

These cognitive-emotional schemas are closely linked to PTSD symptom maintenance. Negative beliefs about the self, including perceptions of helplessness, worthlessness, and emotional defectiveness, may reinforce trauma-related distress and contribute to persistent emotional dysregulation.

Furthermore, shame-based cognitive patterns are frequently associated with interpersonal avoidance and withdrawal, which reduce opportunities for corrective relational experiences and reinforce isolation.

The literature also indicates that maladaptive self-concept may interfere with therapeutic processes by limiting emotional openness and increasing resistance to vulnerability, particularly in trauma-focused interventions (Linehan, 1993; Courtois & Ford, 2009).

4. Discussion

The findings of this narrative review indicate a consistent association between childhood emotional neglect and impaired emotional functioning in adults diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Emotional neglect emerges across the literature as a key developmental risk factor linked to emotional dysregulation, insecure attachment, and increased PTSD symptom severity (Felitti et al., 1998; Dvir et al., 2014).

From an attachment perspective, these findings align with Bowlby's theory, which emphasizes the role of early caregiver responsiveness in shaping internal working models of relationships (Bowlby, 1988). Persistent emotional neglect may contribute to the development of insecure attachment patterns characterized by expectations of rejection, emotional unavailability, and relational instability. Empirical attachment research supports this interpretation, linking emotional neglect with avoidant and disorganized attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

The association between emotional neglect and emotional dysregulation is also consistent with trauma-informed and developmental models. The literature suggests that early emotional deprivation may impair the development of emotion regulation capacities, including emotional awareness, distress tolerance, and adaptive coping strategies (Gratz & Roemer, 2004; Dvir et al., 2014). These deficits are commonly reflected in PTSD symptom patterns such as emotional numbing, hyperarousal, and avoidance.

Neurodevelopmental research provides additional explanatory context, indicating that chronic emotional neglect may alter stress-response systems and neural circuits involved in emotional processing (Perry, 2009; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Such alterations may contribute to heightened emotional reactivity and reduced regulatory capacity in adulthood.

A further consistent finding concerns negative self-concept. Individuals with histories of emotional neglect frequently report chronic shame, low self-esteem, and self-critical beliefs, which may reinforce PTSD symptoms and hinder psychological recovery (Linehan, 1993).

Clinically, these findings highlight the importance of addressing emotional neglect in trauma-focused treatment. Interventions that target emotional regulation, attachment-related difficulties, and maladaptive self-beliefs may be particularly beneficial (Courtois & Ford, 2009; Shapiro, 2018).

However, several limitations should be acknowledged, including reliance on retrospective self-report data and the predominance of cross-sectional study designs, which restrict causal interpretation.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs and further examine protective factors such as resilience and social support.

Overall, the literature supports the view that childhood emotional neglect represents a significant and enduring risk factor for emotional dysfunction and PTSD in adulthood.

5. Conclusions

This narrative review examined the impact of childhood emotional neglect on emotional functioning in adults diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The synthesized literature indicates that emotional neglect is consistently associated with long-term impairments in emotional regulation, increased PTSD symptom severity, and difficulties in interpersonal functioning. Individuals with histories of emotional neglect tend to exhibit heightened emotional dysregulation, chronic shame, and persistent relational difficulties in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998; Dvir et al., 2014).

The findings support attachment and neurodevelopmental perspectives suggesting that early emotional deprivation disrupts the development of secure attachment patterns and effective emotion regulation systems (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth et al., 1978). The absence of consistent emotional responsiveness in childhood appears to have enduring consequences for psychological functioning, particularly in the context of trauma-related psychopathology.

From a clinical perspective, these results highlight the importance of recognizing emotional neglect as a core component of developmental trauma. Trauma-informed interventions should address not only PTSD symptoms but also underlying difficulties in emotional awareness, attachment security, and maladaptive self-beliefs (Courtois & Ford, 2009; Shapiro, 2018).

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to clarify developmental pathways linking emotional neglect and PTSD, as well as identify protective factors such as resilience, social support, and therapeutic engagement.

Overall, childhood emotional neglect represents a significant yet often underrecognized factor in the development and maintenance of PTSD symptoms in adulthood.

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