Parental Emotional Abuse and Mental Health Problems: Expressive Suppression as a Mediator

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Abstract

There is substantial literature on parental emotional abuse and its link to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. However, the role of expressive suppression as a mediator has not been extensively studied; therefore, the present study aimed to address this gap. A cross-sectional correlational design was employed, and purposive sampling was used to recruit adolescents aged 10 to 19 years from various cities in Pakistan. The instruments used included the DASS-21 to measure depression and anxiety, along with the Emotional Abuse Scale. Correlational analysis revealed significant positive relationships between parental emotional abuse, depression, anxiety, and expressive suppression. Furthermore, Hayes' PROCESS macro indicated that expressive suppression significantly mediated the relationship between parental emotional abuse and anxiety, but not depression. The study concludes with important implications for the mental health of adolescents.

Keywords: Parental Emotional Abuse, Depression, Expressive Suppression, Adolescents.

Introduction

Parents play a vital role in shaping their children's development by providing a nurturing and emotionally secure environment. During adolescence, a critical phase of transition from childhood to adulthood (ages 10–19), individuals undergo rapid physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes (Beam et al., 2002; Viner et al., 2015). Parents are expected to provide guidance, open communication, and emotional support to help adolescents navigate this stage effectively (Majeed, 2016; Sharma & Bedi, 2023). However, when parents engage in emotional abuse, the outcomes for adolescents can be severely damaging.

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Parental emotional abuse can be defined as non-physical behaviours intended to control, isolate, or intimidate children. These behaviours may include threats, insults, humiliation, manipulation, excessive criticism, rejection, and emotional neglect (Hoeboer et al., 2021; Rizvi & Najam, 2016). Such abuse differs from physical violence because it leaves no visible scars, yet its psychological impact is often more severe and long-lasting. Emotional abuse erodes self-worth, disrupts emotional security, and instils chronic fear, ultimately undermining the adolescent's ability to cope with life challenges (Herrmann et al., 2022; Rost et al., 2024).

The consequences of parental emotional abuse on mental health have been extensively documented. Studies indicate that such abuse is strongly associated with depression and anxiety (Norman et al., 2012; Salokangas et al., 2020). Depression is characterised by persistent sadness, hopelessness, fatigue, loss of interest, changes in sleep or appetite, and impaired daily functioning. Anxiety, on the other hand, involves fear, tension, excessive worry, and physiological responses such as rapid heartbeat and restlessness. Adolescents who are emotionally abused are more vulnerable to these disorders, which can persist into adulthood and affect social, academic, and occupational functioning (Fang et al., 2021).

Emotional abuse also negatively affects psychological well-being, which encompasses emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions of life satisfaction and mental health (Ryff, 1989). Adverse childhood experiences, especially emotional maltreatment, hinder the development of resilience, trust, and self-esteem (Rivera et al., 2021). Victims of such abuse often struggle with feelings of worthlessness, chronic stress, and difficulty forming healthy interpersonal relationships. Long-term consequences may include social withdrawal, impaired academic performance, and the development of dysfunctional coping strategies (Rothwell & Davoodi, 2024; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Neurobiological studies further suggest that chronic exposure to emotional abuse disrupts brain regions involved in emotional regulation and stress management (Rivera et al., 2021).

In the South Asian context, particularly in Pakistan, emotional abuse is often underrecognized due to cultural norms that emphasise obedience and parental authority. Adolescents may find it difficult to report or even recognise abuse, resulting in limited awareness and research on its psychological toll (Ahmed et al., 2023).

Recent evidence highlights expressive suppression as a significant mediator in the relationship between parental emotional abuse and psychological well-being (Anwar et al., 2025; Shahid et al., 2025). Expressive suppression is an emotion-regulation strategy in which individuals consciously inhibit or mask their emotional expressions to conceal their distress. While suppression may temporarily reduce conflict, overreliance on it impairs emotional processing, increases internal stress, and exacerbates depressive and anxious symptoms. Adolescents experiencing emotional abuse may resort to expressive suppression as a coping mechanism, which further intensifies mental health difficulties.

Despite emerging findings, research on expressive suppression as a mediator in the context of Pakistani adolescents remains scarce. Given the cultural stigmas surrounding mental health and the limited exploration of parental emotional abuse in Pakistan, investigating this relationship is crucial.

The present study, therefore, aims to examine the direct relationship between parental emotional abuse and mental health problems—specifically depression and anxiety—while testing expressive suppression as a mediator among adolescents. Findings are expected to fill a critical gap in the literature and provide practical implications for prevention, intervention, and policy development within the Pakistani context.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design to investigate the relationship between parental emotional abuse and mental health problems, with expressive suppression as a mediator, among Pakistani adolescents.

Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants. The sample consisted of 384 Pakistani adolescents aged 10 to 19 years, enrolled in schools and colleges. The selected age range represents a developmental stage during which individuals are particularly susceptible to parental influences and the onset of psychological difficulties.

Instruments

Three standardised instruments were employed to assess the study variables:

Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ; Momtaz et al., 2022)

This 30-item scale was used to measure parental emotional abuse. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("never") to 5 ("very often"), with higher scores indicating greater experiences of emotional abuse. The EAQ has demonstrated excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995)

The depression and anxiety subscales of the DASS-21 were used to assess mental health problems. Each subscale consists of 7 items, totalling 14 items used in this study. Respondents rated their symptoms over the past week on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("did not apply to me at all") to 3 ("applied to me very much or most of the time"). Both subscales have demonstrated good internal consistency in previous research, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80.

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003)

Only the expressive suppression subscale (4 items) was used to measure the mediator variable. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). The expressive suppression subscale has demonstrated acceptable reliability in previous studies, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.73 to 0.78.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were included if they met the following criteria:

- Aged between 10 and 19 years.
- Currently enrolled in school or college in Pakistan.
- Reported experiencing parental emotional abuse.
- Provided voluntary consent to participate.
- Both male and female adolescents were included to ensure gender diversity.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines consistent with the American Psychological Association's (7th edition). Institutional ethical approval was obtained before the commencement of data Collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants. For those under 18, additional

written consent was obtained from their parents or legal guardians. Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires, beginning with a brief demographic form, followed by the EAQ, ERQ (expressive suppression subscale), and DASS-21 (depression and anxiety subscales). The survey required approximately 20–25 minutes to complete. All participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Upon completion, participants were thanked for their time and contribution.

Results

Table 1: Participants' Characteristics (N=346)

Characteristics	F	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age			14.72	1.77
Gender				
Boys	274	79		
Girls	72	21		
Educational Status				
School Scholar	238	69		
College Scholar	108	31		
Socioeconomic Status				
Lower Class	211	61		
Middle Class	99	29		
Upper Class	36	10		

The above table shows that out of 346 participants, the majority were boys (274, 79%), while girls constituted 72 (21%). The mean age of participants was 14.72 years with a standard deviation of 1.77. Regarding educational status, 238 (69%) were school scholars and 108 (31%) were college scholars. In terms of socioeconomic status, most participants belonged to the lower class (211, 61%), followed by the middle class (99, 29%) and the upper class (36, 10%).

Table 2: Correlation among Study Variables (N=346)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1.PEA	-	.99**	.18**	.23**
2.ES		-	.18**	.81**
3.Depression			-	.45**
4.Anxiety				-

*Note: **p<.01*

The above table depicts parental emotional abuse, expressive suppression, depression and anxiety have significantly relationship with one another.

Table 3: Mediation Analysis (N=346)

	Consequences						
	ES (M)				Depression (Y)		
Antecedents		*β*	*SE*	*P*		*β*	*SE*	*P*
PEA (X)	a	.14	.00	<.001	c’	-.10	.17	.57
ES (M)	-				b	.86	1.25	.49
Constant	*I*	-.89	.03	<.001	*I*	16.51	2.48	<.001
	R^2= .99, F=276169.31				*R^2=.03, F=5.96*			
	****P<.001*				***P<.01*			

*Note: **p<.01, ***p<.001,* PEA= Parental Emotional Abuse, ES= Expressive Suppression

The mediation analysis examined the role of expressive suppression (ES) in the relationship between parental emotional abuse (PEA) and depression. Results indicated that PEA significantly predicted ES (path *a*: β = .14, SE = .00, p < .001), suggesting that higher parental emotional abuse was associated with greater expressive suppression. However, the direct effect of PEA on depression (path *c’*: β = –.10, SE = .17, p = .57) was nonsignificant. Similarly, ES did not significantly predict depression (path *b*: β = .86, SE = 1.25, p = .49). The overall model for ES was significant (R^2 = .99, F = 276169.31, p < .001), whereas the model for depression explained only 3% of the variance (R^2 = .03, F = 5.96, p < .01).

Table 4: Indirect Effect (N=346)

Indirect Path	Effect	Boot SE	LLCI	ULCI
Expressive Suppression	.12	.19	-.24	.50

As shown in Table 4, the bootstrapped indirect effect of PEA on depression through ES was nonsignificant (Effect = .12, Boot SE = .19, 95% CI = [-.24, .50]), as the confidence interval included zero. This suggests that while ES was significantly related to both PEA and depression, it did not mediate the relationship between them.

Table 5: Mediation Analysis (N=346)

	Consequences						
	ES (M)				Anxiety (Y)		
Antecedents		*B*	*SE*	*P*		*β*	*SE*	*P*
PEA (X)	A	.02	.004	<.001	c’	-.004	.004	.92
ES (M)	-				b	1.27	.05	<.001
Constant	*I*	8.36	.48	<.001	*I*	-3.17	.62	<.001
	R^2= .08, F=32.65				*R^2=.66, F=341.54*			
	****P<.001*				****P<.001*			

*Note: ***p*<.001, PEA= Parental Emotional Abuse, ES= Expressive Suppression

The mediation analysis tested whether Expressive Suppression (ES) mediates the relationship between Parental Emotional Abuse (PEA) and Anxiety. Results showed that PEA significantly predicted ES (path *a*: β = .02, SE = .004, p < .001), indicating that higher levels of parental emotional abuse were associated with greater expressive suppression. However, the direct effect

of PEA on anxiety was nonsignificant (path *c'*: β = –.004, SE = .004, p = .92). In contrast, ES significantly predicted anxiety (path *b*: β = 1.27, SE = .05, p < .001). The overall model for ES was significant (R^2 = .08, F = 32.65, p < .001), and the model for anxiety was also significant (R^2 = .66, F = 341.54, p < .001).

Table 6: Indirect Effect (N=346)

Indirect Path	Effect	Boot SE	LLCI	ULCI
Expressive Suppression	.03	.004	.02	.03

As shown in Table 6, the bootstrapped indirect effect of PEA on anxiety through ES was significant (Effect = .03, Boot SE = .004, 95% CI = [.02, .03]). This indicates that expressive suppression fully mediates the relationship between parental emotional abuse and anxiety.

Discussion

There is substantial literature on childhood abuse; however, limited research exists on parental emotional abuse and its impact on depression and anxiety, particularly among adolescents in Pakistan. The current study aims to fill this gap by investigating the relationship between parental emotional abuse, depression, and anxiety, while examining the mediating role of expressive suppression. This study contributes to the academic literature and offers practical implications for parents, educators, and mental health professionals.

The findings support the hypothesis that parental emotional abuse is significantly associated with adolescents' mental health difficulties, particularly increased levels of anxiety. Adolescents exposed to emotional abuse by their parents are more likely to encounter emotional difficulties such as low self-esteem, interpersonal problems, challenges in emotional expression, and feelings of loneliness and abandonment (Shi et al., 2024). These results align with previous research demonstrating that emotional maltreatment during childhood has long-lasting adverse effects on adolescents' mental health and adjustment (Kwan & Kwok, 2021).

The link between parental emotional abuse and poor mental health outcomes can be understood through the internalisation of negative self-perceptions and the chronic invalidation of emotions. Adolescents who endure such abuse often exhibit difficulties in regulating their emotions, may rely on maladaptive strategies such as expressive suppression, and can experience emotional numbness or detachment from others (Dryman, 2018; Lonigro et al., 2022). These maladaptive patterns may interfere with academic performance, social interactions, and overall emotional stability.

Consistent with prior evidence, emotional abuse also increases the risk of long-term psychological distress, persisting into adulthood. Repeated exposure to parental emotional harm during formative years can disrupt developmental processes and hinder the formation of a stable self-concept (Sinha & Kumar, 2020). A meta-analysis by DI PAOLA (2022) confirmed the significant association between emotional abuse, neglect, and diminished mental health outcomes, highlighting the need for early interventions and parental awareness programs.

Notably, the present study revealed that expressive suppression significantly mediated the relationship between parental emotional abuse and anxiety, but not depression. These findings are consistent with Shahid et al. (2025), who reported that expressive suppression mediated the relationship between parental emotional abuse and psychological well-being. A possible explanation for this pattern is that expressive suppression, as a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy, is more strongly linked to anxiety symptoms due to the heightened physiological arousal

and worry associated with suppressed emotions. Suppressing emotions may amplify tension and internal distress, thereby fueling anxiety. In contrast, depression is often more strongly related to persistent negative self-schemas, hopelessness, and cognitive distortions rather than immediate emotional inhibition. Therefore, while expressive suppression plays a key role in explaining anxiety, its mediating role in depression may be weaker or nonsignificant.

Finally, the findings have important cultural implications. In Pakistan, where parental authority is highly valued and emotional expression is frequently discouraged, emotional abuse may be normalised or misinterpreted as discipline. This cultural context can prevent adolescents from recognising their experiences as abusive or seeking professional help (Ahmed et al., 2023). Thus, awareness campaigns and culturally sensitive interventions are essential to reduce the prevalence and consequences of parental emotional abuse.

Conclusion

This study focused on adolescents aged 10 to 19 years, including both school and college students in Pakistan, to address gaps in the literature by investigating the mediating role of expressive suppression in the relationship between parental emotional abuse and mental health problems, specifically depression and anxiety. The correlational quantitative analysis, using Hayes' PROCESS Macro 4.2, revealed that expressive suppression significantly mediated the relationship between parental emotional abuse and anxiety but not depression. These findings emphasise the need for further research to explore this mechanism more profoundly and to develop interventions that address the emotional regulation strategies of adolescents exposed to parental emotional abuse.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several limitations. First, the use of a purposive sampling technique limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of adolescents in Pakistan; future research should employ stratified or random sampling methods to improve representativeness. Second, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causality, highlighting the need for longitudinal studies to examine how parental emotional abuse influences adolescents' mental health outcomes over time. Third, the sample had imbalances in representation between school and college students, as well as uneven distributions of gender and socioeconomic status; therefore, future studies should aim for an equal distribution of demographic characteristics.

Implications

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for interventions addressing parental emotional abuse and its impact on expressive suppression, anxiety, and depression among adolescents in Pakistan. Awareness programs should be developed to educate parents and communities about the harmful consequences of emotional abuse, with a focus on encouraging healthier parenting practices that promote emotional validation rather than suppression. Mental health professionals can play a pivotal role by working with families to foster open communication, empathy, and adaptive emotion regulation strategies, thereby reducing adolescents' reliance on expressive suppression. Schools and community centres are equally important in safeguarding adolescent mental health. Establishing peer support networks and offering counselling services can provide safe spaces for adolescents affected by emotional abuse. Training programs for teachers and school staff should include the identification of signs of emotional abuse, as well as guidance on addressing the emotional needs of students who may use maladaptive strategies such as

suppression to cope. At the policy level, government initiatives are critical. Stronger legislation should be enacted and enforced to protect children's emotional and psychological rights, alongside ensuring equitable access to adolescent mental health services. Furthermore, nationwide campaigns promoting positive parenting should be prioritised. Finally, incorporating emotional well-being and emotion regulation skills into school curricula can help adolescents build resilience, prevent long-term psychological harm, and reduce their vulnerability to anxiety and depression.

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