

Research Paper

## Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in the Context of Relationships

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in the context of relationships. The study also assessed the difference in Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion on the basis of the relationship status of the participants. A total sample of 100 participants of the age group 18-40 years were chosen for the study. It was a quantitative study using a purposive sampling method. The Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998), Learned Helplessness Scale (Quinless & Nelson, 1988), and Self Compassion Scale – Short Form (Raes, et al., 2011) were used to collect the data. Correlation and one-way ANOVA were used to analyze the data, and the data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Software, version 20. The current study revealed a significant positive relationship between Emotional Abuse and Learned Helplessness among individuals who are currently in a relationship and currently single individuals and a significant negative relationship between Learned Helplessness and Self Compassion among individuals who are currently in a relationship and currently single individuals. The results indicated that there is a significant difference in Emotional Abuse and Self Compassion of individuals on the basis of relationship status.

**Keywords:** *Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, Self Compassion*

Emotional abuse is a widespread yet often hidden form of abuse experienced globally. The post-covid era has seen a significant increase in abuse cases, highlighting the need to examine emotional abuse in the Indian population. Emotional abuse leads to Learned Helplessness, which is compounded by societal stigma and opposition to divorce in the Indian subcontinent. Understanding the levels of Learned Helplessness in emotionally abusive relationships where leaving is not an option is crucial. Self-compassion plays a vital role in seeking help in abusive relationships. This study aims to explore the role of self-compassion in combating Learned Helplessness in emotionally abusive relationships and develop appropriate interventions.

### *Emotional Abuse*

Emotional abuse is a form of violence used to control and dominate victims. It involves deceptive and unpredictable behavior, often accompanied by verbal and emotional tactics.

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The intention is to diminish the victim's independence and self-worth. Emotional abuse causes psychological trauma, similar to physical abuse, but is often downplayed or ignored. It has a significant impact on mental health and can lead to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

During periods of confinement, like lockdowns, the risk of emotional abuse increased as predicted by the WHO. During the Covid-19 pandemic, The World Health Organisation (WHO) cautioned that the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to rise when protective measures are put in place and others are encouraged to stay at home or in hostels locked with their abusers. According to data provided by the National Commission of Women (NCW) in mid-April, incidents of assault and abuse increased in India during the lockdown by almost 100%. Abusers use tactics like humiliation, control, and coercion to manipulate their victims. This abuse can result in low self-esteem, social difficulties, and psychological issues.

### ***Learned Helplessness***

Domestic abuse can happen to anyone, leading to a psychological state called Learned Helplessness. The Learned Helplessness theory states that victims who are unable to foresee the results of their actions may feel hopeless and depressed. The victim eventually learns to limit their actions to those that are most likely to minimize the abuse, and they frequently engage in these behaviors rather than trying out new ones for which they are unclear of the results. They begin to become "survival-focused" rather than "escape-focused." While they may still appear confident, and independent to others and set their sights on surviving within the relationship, the abuser gains more influence over them. They believe others are less competent to help them because they feel confined and alone.

Victims feel trapped and believe they deserve the abuse or cannot find better. Childhood experiences and controlling parenting contribute to this. Victims with Learned Helplessness lack control and experience depression and dependency. Overcoming it involves developing coping mechanisms and seeking support. Acknowledging the abuse, setting boundaries, refraining from self-blame, and creating an exit strategy are crucial steps.

### ***Self Compassion***

Self-compassion is a powerful coping mechanism for those experiencing emotional abuse. It involves being open, caring, and kind to oneself, accepting one's failures, and realizing that suffering is part of the human experience. Victims of emotional abuse often lack self-compassion. To practice self-compassion, one must acknowledge their pain and treat themselves with the same care as they would a loved one. Emotional abusers often lack empathy, and victims rarely receive compassion. By practicing self-compassion, victims can validate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

In the context of relationships, it's essential to take emotional abuse, learned helplessness, and self-compassion into consideration. The mental and emotional health of individuals is negatively impacted by emotional abuse, a frequent but frequently concealed kind of abuse. Numerous studies have been done on the connection between emotional abuse and learned helplessness, notably in romantic and parent-child interactions. The cycle of abuse is frequently maintained by the victims' sense of learned helplessness in abusive relationships (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002). While learned helplessness and emotional abuse have received a lot of attention, the role of self-compassion in relationships is a relatively recent field of study. Being compassionate, understanding, and judgment-free towards oneself,

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especially during difficult circumstances, is a key component of self-compassion (Neff, 2003). It gives individuals an opportunity to acknowledge their suffering, provide meaning to their circumstances, and cultivate self-acceptance. In an effort to enhance mental well-being and promote resilience, recent research has investigated the possibility of self-compassion as an empowering tool for emotional abuse survivors.

The relationship between self-compassion and healthy romantic behavior, such as being more helpful and loving towards partners rather than dominating or verbally abusive, was investigated by Neff, K. D., and Beretvas, S. N. in 2013. Self-reported SC levels and partner reports of relationship behavior were connected in the study, which had 104 couples in total. The results demonstrated that individuals who exhibited self-compassion (SC) exhibited more positive interpersonal behavior than individuals who did not. Additionally, SC was a more accurate predictor of constructive relationship behavior than trait self-esteem (SE) or attachment style. Last but not least, the fact that couples can accurately assess one another's SC levels shows that SC is a quality that can be noticed.

In this paper, the aim is to delve into the relationship between emotional abuse, learned helplessness, and self-compassion within the context of relationships. By examining the interplay of these variables, the study seeks to enhance the understanding of the experiences of individuals in abusive relationships and identify potential avenues for intervention and support. Additionally, the influence of relationship status on emotional abuse learned helplessness, and self-compassion will be explored, providing insights into the unique dynamics experienced by individuals who are divorced, currently single, in relationships, or married.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research design*

The current study utilizes a quantitative study which adopts a correlational design to determine if there is any relationship between the variables. It also uses a between-group design to study the existing differences with respect to socio-demographic details.

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 100 participants, with roughly equal distribution based on relationship status. The participants were heterosexual individuals who fell under the age range of 18-40 years. The participants were taken from the states of Karnataka and Telangana, India. The current study used convenience sampling method to select the participants.

### *Objectives of the study*

1. To study the relationships between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion among currently married, currently in a relationship, and currently single individuals.
2. To find if there exists any difference in Emotional Abuse based on Relationship Status.
3. To find if there exists any difference in Learned Helplessness based on Relationship Status.
4. To find if there exists any difference in self-compassion based on relationship status.

### *Hypotheses*

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There are no significant relationships between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion

There is no significant relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion among currently married individuals.

There is no significant relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion among individuals currently in a relationship.

There is no significant relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion among currently single individuals.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no significant difference in Emotional Abuse based on Relationship Status.

**H<sub>03</sub>:** There is no significant difference in Learned Helplessness based on Relationship Status.

**H<sub>04</sub>:** There is no significant difference in Self Compassion based on Relationship Status.

### *Tools used for the study*

Three measures were used in this study,

- 1. Emotional Abuse questionnaire (EAQ)** was developed by Jacobson and Gottman to measure Emotional Abuse in intimate relationships. It includes 28 items. It is a 4-point scale ranging from 1 to 5. Score 1 point for every “never”, 2 points for “rarely”, 4 points for “occasionally” and 5 points for “very often.” Points will be summed up for the total score. In terms of reliability, several studies have examined the internal consistency of the EAQ and have found it to be generally reliable. For example, one study found that the EAQ had high internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of .94, indicating that the items on the questionnaire were consistently measuring the same construct. In terms of validity, there have been mixed findings. Some studies have found that the EAQ has good construct validity, meaning that it measures what it claims to measure. For example, one study found that the EAQ was positively correlated with other measures of Emotional Abuse and negatively correlated with measures of relationship satisfaction.
- 2. Learned Helplessness scale (LSS)** Quinless, F. W., & Nelson, M. A. (1988) developed a measure of Learned Helplessness. 50 items were developed 20 items were selected for inclusion in the LHS. Response to each item was graded, using a 4-point Likert scale. The maximum score is 80. A standardized alpha reliability coefficient of .85 was obtained for a sample of 241 healthy adults. The instrument is believed to have adequate internal consistency.
- 3. Self-compassion scale –short form (SCS-SF)** Raes, F., Pommier, E., Neff, K. D., & van Gucht, d. (2011) 12-item self-report measure used to measure capacity for self-compassion. The SCS–SF demonstrated adequate internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha  $\geq 0.86$ ) and a strong correlation with the long-form SCS ( $r = 0.97$ ; Raes et al., 2011). Self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, min Mindfulness, over-identification. Internal consistencies are relatively low not recommended to use subscale interpretation

### *Procedure*

After selecting suitable measures, preparations were made for collecting data online. A Google Form was used to create and organize the questions. After requesting approval, the study was started. Following a brief explanation of the study's objectives and the obtaining of participants' informed consent, the questionnaire was administered to the participants. It took about 10 minutes to finish the questionnaire on average. The responses from the participants were gathered after the survey was finished for data analysis. Descriptive and

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inferential statistics were used for analysis. The raw scores obtained for each of the variables were statistically analyzed using bivariate correlational analysis to understand the relation between the variables. One way ANOVA was utilized to compare the variables based on the relationship status. This was done using IBM SPSS version 20

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Table No. 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in Currently Married Individuals*

Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Emotional Abuse	37	40.51	15.242	-	.271	-.219
2. Learned Helplessness	37	44.00	6.502	.271	-	-.267
3. Self Compassion	37	38.95	6.968	-.219	-.267	-

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

Table 1 displays the relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in currently married individuals. From the above table, it is evident that there are no significant correlations between Emotional Abuse and Learned Helplessness ( $r = 0.271$ ), Learned Helplessness and Self Compassion ( $r = -0.267$ ), and Self Compassion and Emotional Abuse ( $r = -0.219$ ).

Thus,  $H_{01a}$  stating that there is no significant relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in currently married individuals has been accepted. This would imply that Individuals who are married do not experience significant levels of Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness and Self Compassion.

*Table No. 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in Individuals Currently in Relationship*

Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Emotional Abuse	34	38.82	13.543	-	.352*	-.236
2. Learned Helplessness	34	47.35	7.185	.352*	-	-.696**
3. Self Compassion	34	35.00	7.394	-.236	-.696**	-

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

Table 2 displays the relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in individuals who are currently in a relationship. From the above table, it is evident that there is a significant positive correlation between Emotional Abuse and Learned Helplessness ( $r = 0.352$ ), and a significant negative correlation between Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion ( $r = -0.696$ ). However, the relationship between Self Compassion and Emotional Abuse ( $r = -0.236$ ) is not statistically significant. Therefore, the Hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion among individuals currently in a relationship is partly rejected.

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Similar findings were discussed in the study by Wilson, K et al., (1993) who looked at the links between help-seeking, Learned Helplessness, and the degree of abuse in four groups of women. It was observed that abused women showed higher levels of self-reported abuse and Learned Helplessness than women who did not seek assistance or who were not abused, whether by living in a shelter or attending a support group.

The analysis also reveals that there is a significant negative correlation between Learned Helplessness and Self Compassion which implies that individuals experiencing Emotional Abuse tend to have low Self Compassion. The findings are supported by that of Xue, S., et al., (2023) who hypothesized that college students' poor mental health during the COVID-19 lockdown may have been caused by Learned Helplessness, and self-compassion as a beneficial psychological trait may have influenced the relationship between Learned Helplessness and mental health. Analyses were made to determine how self-compassion affected the link between Learned Helplessness and emotions including stress, anxiety, and sadness. Self-compassion is shown to be a moderator of the link between Learned Helplessness and poor mental health since the interaction term between Learned Helplessness and self-compassion has a significant coefficient on anxiety, depression, and stress.

**Table No. 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and, Self Compassion in Currently Single Individuals**

Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Emotional Abuse	37	40.51	15.242	-	.403*	-.188
2. Learned Helplessness	37	44.00	6.502	.403*	-	-.657**
3. Self Compassion	37	38.95	6.968	-.188	-.657**	-

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

Table 3 displays the relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in currently single individuals. From the above table, it is evident that there is a significant positive correlation between Emotional Abuse and Learned Helplessness ( $r = 0.403$ ), and a significant negative correlation between Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion ( $r = -0.657$ ). However, the relationship between Self Compassion and Emotional Abuse ( $r = -0.188$ ) is not statistically significant. Therefore, the Hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion among currently single individuals is partly rejected. Therefore, the Hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion among currently single individuals is partly rejected.

Some research evidence shows contrary results in the relationship between Self Compassion and Emotional Abuse. Ross, N. D., et al., (2019) examined if deficiencies in self-compassion linked with Emotional Abuse would explain feelings of shame and provide an explanation for the path from maltreatment to depression. They relied on a theoretical framework known as introjection, which holds that survivors should treat themselves as their carers treated them (Benjamin, 2003). They proposed that the direct relationship between Emotional Abuse and depressive symptoms would be partially moderated by self-compassion and shame.

**Table No 3. Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance in Emotional Abuse Learned Helplessness and Self-Compassion**

Variable	Currently Married		Currently in Relationship		Currently Single		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Emotional Abuse	40.51	15.24	38.82	13.54	53.41	29.86	4.82	0.01*
Learned Helplessness	44.00	6.50	47.35	7.18	46.83	6.09	2.61	0.07
Self Compassion	38.95	6.96	35.00	7.39	35.97	6.82	3.00	0.05*

Table 4 shows the mean, standard deviation, and F-values for Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion among the three groups based on relationship status. Results indicated significant mean differences based on relationship status for Emotional Abuse with  $F(2,97) = 4.827$  and a corresponding p-value of 0.01 ( $<0.05$ ). Thus, the null hypothesis  $H_{02}$  stating that there is no significant difference in Emotional Abuse based on relationship status was rejected. Findings revealed that Emotional Abuse was higher in currently single individuals compared to the other two groups. This implies that these were likely to have been in emotionally abusive relationships. The Post Hoc comparisons indicated significant between-group differences between each group with the other two groups. No past research has been done evaluating the differences in Emotional Abuse based on relationship status. However, Karakurt, G., & Silver, K. E. (2013) studied the moderating roles of age and gender on Emotional Abuse within intimate relationships. It was reported that younger men experience higher levels of Emotional Abuse that decline with age. Older women also experienced less Emotional Abuse than older males. On the whole, it was observed that Emotional Abuse was more common in younger participants.

For the difference between the groups based on Learned Helplessness, no significant results were indicated as  $F(2,97) = 2.614$  with a corresponding p-value of 0.078 ( $>0.05$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis  $H_{03}$  stating that there is no significant difference in Learned Helplessness based on relationship status was accepted. Differences in Learned Helplessness have not been studied in the context of relationships; however, studies have been carried out looking at the differences based on gender. Cemalcilar, Z. et al., (2003) looked into three aspects of the Learned Helplessness (LH) phenomenon: the induction of helplessness in humans by a new instrumental task; the effects of a therapy technique that relies on direct retroactive reevaluation of the helplessness experience; and the role of personality traits in both helplessness induction and therapy. The effects of the helplessness-induction and therapy procedures did not differ significantly by gender, but correlation analyses showed that individual differences, particularly in the interaction between gender and personality traits, can have a significant impact on LH and the ability to benefit from therapy.

The results indicated significant mean differences in Self Compassion based on relationship status with  $F(2,97) = 3.000$  and a corresponding p-value of 0.054 ( $<0.05$ ). Thus, the null hypothesis  $H_{04}$  stating that there is no significant difference in self-compassion based on relationship status was rejected. The results indicate that Self Compassion was highest in

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currently married individuals compared to the other two groups. The Post Hoc comparisons indicated significant between-group differences between each group with the other two groups. Although there does not exist any literature on the differences of Emotional Abuse based on relationship status, multiple studies have been conducted evaluating gender differences in Self Compassion across varying contexts. Yarnell, L. M., et al., (2019) suggest that women are slightly less self-compassionate than males, but it has not been thoroughly investigated how gender role orientation plays a role. Results confirmed that self-identified men had significantly greater levels of self-compassion than self-identified women, with a small effect size for gender differences in self-compassion for both samples. By gender, sample, and gender role orientation measure, different effect sizes and unique conclusions were found.

### *Summary*

This study aimed to assess the relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in various relationship contexts. The findings revealed significant relationships among these variables, with Emotional Abuse significantly influencing Learned Helplessness and Self Compassion. Emotional Abuse was highest among currently single individuals, while Self Compassion was highest among currently married individuals. However, Learned Helplessness did not significantly differ across relationship statuses. The study also found that Emotional Abuse could predict the levels of Learned Helplessness and Self Compassion in the participants.

## **CONCLUSION**

The major findings of the research indicate that there was no significant relationship between Emotional Abuse, Learned Helplessness, and Self Compassion in currently married individuals. In individuals who were in relationships, there was a significant positive relationship between Emotional Abuse and Learned helplessness and a significant negative correlation between Learned helplessness and Self Compassion. The same findings resonated in currently single individuals. No significant relationship was found between Emotional Abuse and Self Compassion in both these populations.

There was a significant difference in Emotional Abuse based on relationships. Findings revealed that Emotional Abuse was higher in currently single individuals compared to the other two groups. No significant differences were found in Learned Helplessness based on relationship status. Significant differences were found in Self Compassion based on relationship status. The results indicate that Self Compassion was highest in currently married individuals compared to the other two groups.

### *Limitations of the study*

The study had limitations, including reliance on self-report measures and limited sample size, limiting generalizability. Additionally, the study did not include individuals from the LGBTQIA+ community, thus limiting the applicability of the findings to homosexual relationships.

### *Implications*

These findings have implications for interventions targeting Emotional Abuse, emphasizing the importance of enhancing Self Compassion and reducing Learned Helplessness. Self-Compassion-based interventions have shown promise for survivors of Emotional Abuse and could be expanded to diverse contexts to combat Learned Helplessness. Future research



should replicate and expand upon these findings, including larger samples and qualitative approaches to gain deeper insights into the dynamics among these variables.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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