

Personality Severity, Codependency and Identifying Red Flags: Role of Childhood Emotional Abuse

Soumonetra Chaudhury^{1*}, Dr. Alafia J.²

ABSTRACT

Background: Childhood emotional abuse is a traumatic event which has an everlasting impact on the individual and their adult functioning. Unlike physical abuse, emotional abuse is often subtle and under-recognised and makes the individual prone to psychological discomfort and difficulty maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships that has its impact persisting into adulthood. **Objective:** The present study examined the relationship between Childhood Emotional Abuse and Personality Severity, Codependency and difficulty identifying relationship red flags among young adults in the Indian Context. Gender differences and differences based on relationship status were also explored. **Participants and Setting:** Data were collected from 194 adults aged 18-23 through snowball sampling. **Methods:** The study employed a cross-sectional exploratory design. Data was collected using self-reported measures and was analysed using correlational analyses and t-tests. **Results:** Verbal abuse emerged as the most commonly reported form of childhood emotional abuse, while emotional rejection, though comparatively lower, was still present. Childhood emotional abuse showed a significant relationship with personality severity and difficulty identifying red flags, indicating its influence on both intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning. Childhood emotional abuse was found to be not significantly related to codependency, a finding that may reflect trauma-related adaptations such as hyper-independence rather than relational dependence. Gender differences were observed in personality severity, whereas differences based on relationship status were not statistically significant, though distinct relational patterns were noted. **Conclusions:** The findings suggest that childhood emotional abuse is linked to increased personality-related difficulties and challenges in recognising unhealthy relationship patterns among young Indian adults. The pattern of associations suggests that early emotional maltreatment may contribute to both heightened personality severity and altered relational processing, including tendencies toward emotional self-protection rather than overt dependency. Within the Indian socio-cultural context, where emotional invalidation, verbal criticism and hierarchical family structures are often normalised, such experiences may have enduring effects on how individuals understand themselves and engage in relationships. The study highlights the need for trauma-informed, culturally sensitive mental health interventions

¹Post-Graduate Student (MSc Clinical Psychology) Department of Psychology CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Bangalore, India. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3051-7898>

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Bangalore, India. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5047-842X>

*Corresponding Author

Received: January 10, 2026; Revision Received: March 23, 2026; Accepted: March 27, 2026

that address emotional abuse, personality-related difficulties and relational functioning among young adults in India.

Keywords: *Childhood Emotional Abuse, Personality Severity, Codependency, Red Flags*

Childhood emotional abuse is increasingly recognised as a pervasive and damaging form of maltreatment with profound implications for psychological development. Unlike physical or sexual abuse, emotional abuse is often subtle, chronic and socially sanctioned, making it difficult to identify and address (Salokangas et al., 2019). However, empirical research over the past few years has demonstrated that childhood emotional abuse constitutes a robust transdiagnostic risk factor, associated with elevated lifetime vulnerability to a range of psychological difficulties (Heleniak et al., 2016; Lynch et al., 2021). Alterations in emotional processing, heightened threat sensitivity, and impaired self-regulatory capacities have been proposed as core mechanisms through which early emotional maltreatment exerts its long-term effects.

Emotional abuse during childhood disrupts the development of emotional awareness, self-concept and interpersonal understanding. Children exposed to repeated emotional invalidation, rejection or verbal aggression often struggle to recognise, label and regulate their emotions, which may persist into adulthood as emotional dysregulation and interpersonal difficulties (Cao et al., 2020). Such disruptions hinder the integration of emotional experiences into a coherent sense of self, contributing to feelings of emptiness, fragmentation and instability (Heikin, 2019). These developmental impairments are particularly relevant to the emergence of personality-related difficulties in non-clinical populations since it's an area that remains comparatively underexplored.

From an attachment and developmental psychopathology perspective, the absence of a secure emotional base during early development interferes with the formation of a mentalisation capacity, which is the ability to understand one's own mental states and those of others. Fonagy et al. (2003) emphasised this ability and stated that the degree to which early attachment relationships support mentalisation plays a critical role in determining an individual's resilience to later stressors. Moreover, studies have found that when caregiving environments are emotionally neglectful or abusive, children may develop heightened emotional reactivity alongside diminished emotional insight, increasing vulnerability to personality severity characterised by negative affectivity, interpersonal antagonism and instability (Gordon et al., 2016)

Emotional dysregulation represents one of the most consistent psychological pathologies of childhood emotional abuse and is implicated across multiple forms of psychopathology (Berenbaum et al., 2003). Within interpersonal functioning, emotional dysregulation has been theorised to manifest in maladaptive relational patterns such as co-dependency, marked by excessive emotional reliance on others, inhibited self-expression, and difficulties maintaining personal boundaries (Spann & Fischer, 1990). Previous studies have linked codependency to dysfunctional family environments and childhood maltreatment (Knudson & Terrell, 2012; Evgin & Sümen, 2021). However, findings have been inconsistent, and relatively few studies have examined the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and codependency outside clinical or substance-related samples, particularly in young adult populations.

Another significant outcome of childhood emotional abuse concerns adult romantic relationship functioning, specifically the ability to identify unhealthy relational patterns or red

flags (Karakurt & Silver, 2013). Exposure to an emotionally abusive environment during childhood has been associated with increased vulnerability to revictimization and polyvictimization in adulthood, as individuals may internalise maladaptive beliefs about relationships, normalise harmful behaviours and struggle to detect early warning signs (Dugal et al., 2016). Studies have consistently shown that survivors of emotional maltreatment report difficulties in intimacy, trust and relational boundaries, leading to poorer relationship quality and increased relational distress (Reyome, 2010; Cao et al., 2020). These impairments may be particularly pronounced in the identification of healthy versus unhealthy behaviours within intimate relationships.

The Indian socio-cultural context presents unique factors that may intensify the impact of childhood emotional abuse on adult psychological and relational outcomes. Parenting practices in India often emphasise obedience, emotional restraint and respect for authority, which may unintentionally normalise emotionally invalidating behaviours such as criticism, shaming or comparison (Animisetty, 2025; Waseem & Firdous, 2025). Emotional expression is frequently discouraged, and discussions surrounding psychological distress and relational abuse remain stigmatised. Moreover, limited relationship education and restricted discourse around intimate relationships may reduce young adults' ability to recognise relational red flags, increasing vulnerability to maladaptive relationship patterns. However, irrespective of the cultural realities, empirical research examining childhood emotional abuse and its influence on personality severity and romantic relationship functioning within Indian non-clinical populations remains scarce.

Furthermore, gender and relationship status may play an important role in shaping the psychological outcomes of childhood emotional abuse. Emerging research suggests that males, female and gender diverse individuals may exhibit distinct patterns of emotional processing and interpersonal functioning following early emotional trauma (Helpman et al., 2017). Similarly, individuals who are single versus those in a romantic relationship may differ in their capacity to recognise unhealthy relational behaviours and in the manifestation of personality-related difficulties. However, these variables have received limited attention in existing literature, particularly within the Indian context.

Considering the gaps, the present study examined the relationship of childhood emotional abuse with personality severity, co-dependency and difficulties in identifying relationship red flags among Indian young adults, while exploring gender and relationship status differences across these variables. This focus is essential since research on childhood abuse has grown globally, yet its psychological and relational consequences in non-clinical Indian populations remain strikingly underexplored. Understanding these associations in young adults, who are at a formative stage of identity, emotional development, and romantic relationship patterns, is essential, as early signs of impairment may indicate elevated risk for later psychological difficulties. Moreover, individuals outside clinical settings may exhibit subtle or emerging emotional and interpersonal disturbances that often go unnoticed, despite representing a high-risk or prodromal group for future psychopathology (Kelleher et al., 2012). Investigating these patterns within a culturally specific context provides an opportunity to identify vulnerabilities before they progress, strengthen prevention efforts and contribute to international literature by highlighting culturally shaped expressions of distress. In doing so, this study offers an important advancement in understanding the relationship of childhood emotional abuse, which can motivate other researchers in developing research on how emotional abuse shapes personality development and relational functioning in one of the world's largest and most diverse young adult populations.

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Design

The current study employed a cross-sectional exploratory design, allowing the researcher to simultaneously study a large population at a given period. As the design did not deliberately manipulate the setting under investigation, biases were avoided while conducting the research. The results were applied to understanding emotional abuse in an everyday environment.

2.2 Sample

2.2.1 Population

The population for the tool were young adults, which found its basis in Erikson's psychosocial development theory, which states that young adults from the age of 18-40 undergo a conflict between intimacy vs isolation when they seek to form a romantic relationship and failure, which leads to isolation. Thus, early adults were the population considered for the current study.

2.2.2 Sampling Strategy

The study focused on young adults who were between the age of 18- 23.

2.2.3 Sample size

The population consisted of 211 participants, out of which 17 were discarded for reasons such as incomplete questionnaires, lack of consent, belonging from the exclusion criteria. Thus, the final study was based on 194 participants from ages 18-23 identifying themselves as male, female and non-binary. The sample size was chosen due to the nature of the analysis and the number of tests included in the research, which required a larger sample size.

2.2.4 Sampling Technique

Snowball Sampling was incorporated into the study. This sampling technique was chosen as it allowed us to select a population possessing specific traits through a non-random approach for broader accessibility to a population with rare characteristic traits. In the given study, the research was incorporated into young adults.

2.2.5 Inclusion criteria

The current study included young adults across genders from the age group of 18-23 who are currently residing in India.

2.2.6 Exclusion criteria

- a) Individuals who do not fall under the age group
- b) Individuals who are currently under medication
- c) Individuals who have premorbid psychological disorders

2.3 Operational Definitions

2.3.1 Childhood Emotional Abuse

The current study defined childhood emotional abuse based on the scores obtained on the Emotional Abuse questionnaire developed by Momtaz et al. in 2022, which understands abuse in terms of verbal abuse, overcontrol, terrorising, insufficient control, over-expectation and emotional rejection (Momtaz et al., 2022).

2.3.2 Co-dependency

The current study captured co-dependency based on the score obtained on the Spann-Fischer Codependency Scale developed by Fischer and Spann in 1990, which is based on the

definition of co-dependency as a dysfunctional way of associating with others with an intense emphasis outside of themselves, absence of emotional expression, and personal significance drawn from interactions with others (Fischer & Spann, 1990).

2.3.3 Personality Severity

Personality severity, in the current study, can be defined as the score obtained in the Personality Inventory for DSM-5 Brief Form (PID-5 BF), developed by the American Psychological Association (APA), which represents personality severity in terms of maladaptive personality features in five personality trait areas, namely negative affect, detachment, hostility, disinhibition, and psychoticism (Zhang et al., 2021; American Psychological Association, 2013).

2.3.4 Relationship Red Flag

The current study defined red flags in terms of the relationship red flag scale by Kearney and O'Brien, 2021, where red flags are assessed on six parameters: monitoring, controlling, demeaning, threatening and aggressive, jealous and possessive behaviours and healthy behaviours.

2.4 Tools for Measuring the Variables

2.4.1 Emotional Abuse Questionnaire:

It is a 30-item self-report questionnaire developed by Momtaz et al. in 2022 for individuals aged above 12 years. It is a 5-point Likert scale. It assesses emotional abuse in terms of six subscales: verbal abuse, overcontrol, terrorising, insufficient control, over-expectation and emotional rejection. Some examples are “My parents or one of my family members used to forbid me from having relationships with my friends, or they still do”, and “Those around me used to take me under their control strongly, or they still do”. The study had a high reliability and validity score. It had a Cronbach's alpha of .93, indicating that the questionnaire was reliable and a correlation value of 0.87, which means a significantly high and desirable value (Momtaz et al., 2022). As the study was conducted in Iran and, therefore, can be applied in a South Asian country like India since it captures the cultural appropriateness of a South Asian country.

2.4.2 Personality Inventory DSM-5 Brief Form (PID-5 BF)

It is a 25-item inventory developed by the American Psychological Association based on the DSM-5 to assess maladaptive personality traits. It is a 4-point Likert Scale. Some examples are “I get stuck on one way of doing things, even when it's clear it won't work” and “I often have thoughts that make sense to me, but others say are strange”. It has a high internal consistency of 0.84 in Chinese young adults and a high inter-reliability score of 0.73 (Zhang, 2021). Moreover, as previous studies have been conducted on the Chinese population, it has high cultural appropriateness to be administered to young adults in India.

2.4.3 Spann-Fischer Co-dependency Scale

It is a self-report consisting of 16 items developed by Fischer and Spann in 1991. It is a 6-point Likert scale. It measures co-dependency in individuals as a maladaptive pattern of attaching to others, characterised by an intense emphasis outside of oneself, an absence of emotional expression, and personal significance derived from interpersonal connections. Some examples of items are “Sometimes I get focused on one person to the extent of abusing other relationships and responsibilities” and “When someone upsets me, I will hold it in for a long time, but once in a while I explode” (Fishner & Spann, 1991). It has high Cronbach Alpha Internal consistency coefficients, which ranged from .61 and .76 test-retest reliability

coefficients of .60 and .66 in a Turkish population (Ulusoy & Gucray, 2017), indicating high reliability and validity scores and high cultural appropriateness. Moreover, as previous studies have administered the scale on young adults, it is also desirable for the current population under study (Hussein, 2022).

2.4.4. Relationship Red Flag

The current study defines red flags in the Relationship Red Flag Scale by Kearney and O'Brien, 2021, a 30-item questionnaire. It is divided into six relationship red flags domains: monitoring behaviours, controlling behaviours, demeaning behaviours, threatening and aggressive behaviours, jealous and possessive behaviours and healthy dating behaviours. It is a 4-point Likert scale. Some examples of items are "I Call dating partner names" and "Makes negative comments about dating partner's body". The alpha value for the inventory ranges from 0.63 to 0.88 and has an overall high internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .93$) and a high convergent validity (Kearne, & O'Brien, 2021).

2.5 Procedures

The proposed research aimed to explore the relationship of childhood emotional abuse with personality severity, co-dependency and difficulty in identification of red flags in individuals currently in a romantic relationship in India. Based on the aim, the data was collected from the young adults through Google Forms and questionnaire booklets. The sample size was 194 young adults across genders. The data was collected through the snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling techniques were incorporated as it was more feasible for the researcher to obtain the large sample size included in the study. Before the collection of the data, the participants were provided with a consent form. After obtaining their consent, the participants were informed about the research and provided with the necessary instructions to complete the questionnaires. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the participants could withdraw from the research study at any point. After the collection of the data from the sample, they were provided with a pamphlet with information about red flags. After the data collection procedure, the data were carefully coded in the computer, and Jamovi software was used for further statistical analysis.

2.6 Ethical Consideration

- Institutional Clearance. Prior institutional clearance was taken from the ethics boards before conducting the research.
- Informed consent. Before the conduction of the research study, the researcher provided the participants with an informed consent form, which assured their voluntary participation in the research and the confidentiality of their data. The research purpose was clearly stated to the participants, and no deception was practised in the study. Further, the participants were given pamphlets about relationship red flags.
- Confidentiality and privacy. The participants' privacy was maintained by collecting the demographic details and their initials' names. The data collected through the study were only used for the research and were accessed by fellow researchers for the conduction of the study. No information was disclosed without taking prior permission from the participants. The data would further be used for publication, conferences and paper presentations.
- Voluntary Participation. The participants also had the right to withdraw their participation in the research without facing any penalty.
- Risks and benefits. The research study did not involve potential benefits, risks, and discomforts to the participants.

RESULTS

The population consisted of 211 participants, out of which 17 were excluded for reasons such as incomplete questionnaires, lack of consent, belonged from the exclusion criteria. Thus, the final study was based on 194 participants aged 18-23 identifying as male, female and non-binary. Most of them lived with their parents, followed by living in PG/hostel or sharing an apartment with friends, and residing primarily in an urban background. Moreover, the participants mainly belonged to the upper middle class, followed by the middle socio-economic class. Further, to conduct the analysis and analyse the results, Jamovi software was used. The results were analysed objectively, followed by the respective hypothesis. Moreover, all the significant level was set at the 0.05 level.

Descriptive statistics for childhood emotional abuse and its subscales are presented in *Table 1*. Verbal abuse showed the highest mean score (M=11.2), indicating that it was the most frequently experienced form of emotional abuse among participants. Emotional rejection demonstrated the lowest mean score (M=4.12); however, this value was not low in absolute terms, indicating that rejection was still meaningfully present within the sample. Moreover, all subscales showed significant deviations from normality based on the Shapiro-Wilk test. Further, *Table 2* displays descriptive statistics for the five dimensions of personality severity, where Negative affect had the highest mean (M=7.64), suggesting it was the most prominent personality trait in the sample, however even the lowest domain, antagonism showed a moderate score (M=5.20), suggesting maladaptive personality traits are present across dimensions rather than being limited to a single area.

Similarly, for the variable red flags, as depicted in *Table 3*, the participants showed the greatest ease in identifying threatening and aggressive behaviours (M=17.30) and the greatest difficulty identifying healthy relational behaviour (M=7.40). This suggests greater sensitivity to overtly harmful behaviours than to positive relational signals.

Table 1 *Depicting the descriptive statistics of childhood emotional abuse and its subscales (N=194)*

	Verbal Abuse	Emotional Rejection	Overcontrol	Insufficient Control	Over expectation	Terrorizing
Mean	11.2	4.12	7.78	6.99	4.99	3.60
Median	10.0	3.00	6.00	6.00	5.00	2.00
Standard Deviation	7.41	3.48	6.86	5.01	3.25	3.96
Shapiro-Wilk W	0.942*	0.908*	0.899*	0.928*	0.945*	0.836*

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 2 *Depicting descriptive statistics for sub-variables of Personality Severity (N=194)*

	Negative Affect	Detachment	Antagonism	Disinhibition	Psychoticism
Mean	7.64	5.73	5.20	5.95	6.14
Median	8.00	6.00	5.00	5.00	6.00
Standard Deviation	4.24	4.05	4.03	4.20	3.98
Shapiro-Wilk W	0.955***	0.949***	0.933***	0.940***	0.956***

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3 Depicting the descriptive statistics of red flags and their subscales (N=194)

	Monitoring Behaviour	Controlling Behaviour	Demeaning Behaviour	Threatening & Aggressive Behaviour	Jealous & Possessive Behaviour	Healthy Behaviour
Mean	15.3	15.8	16.3	17.3	16.3	7.40
Median	17.0	16.00	17.00	18.00	17.00	6.00
Standard Deviation	4.42	3.34	3.21	2.98	3.30	3.16
Shapiro-Wilk W	0.869**	0.933***	0.890***	0.828***	0.892***	0.776*

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4 Correlation Coefficient (r) between childhood emotional abuse with personality severity, co-dependency and red flags

Variables		Childhood Emotional Abuse
Co-dependency	Pearson's r	0.024
	p-value	0.735
Personality Severity	Pearson's r	0.629***
	p-value	<.001
Red Flags	Pearson's r	-0.370***
	p-value	<.001

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5 Correlation Coefficient between personality severity, co-dependency and red flags

Variables		Personality Severity	Co-dependency
Co-dependency	Pearson's r	0.153*	
	p-value	0.034	
Red flags	Pearson's r	-0.310***	-0.058
	p-value	<.001	0.424

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Further, Pearson correlations were conducted to examine the association between childhood emotional abuse and the three primary variables. As shown in *Table 4*, Childhood emotional abuse was positively correlated with personality severity $r(194) = 0.629, p < .001$. On the other hand, childhood emotional abuse was negatively correlated with identifying relationship red flags, $r(194) = -0.370, p < 0.001$. However, no significant association was found between childhood emotional abuse and co-dependency, $r(194) = 0.2, p = 0.975$. For inter-correlations among personality severity, co-dependency and red flags, as reported in *Table 5*, personality severity was positively correlated with co-dependency at $r(194) = 0.153, p < 0.05$ and negatively correlated with identifying red flags, $r(194) = -0.310, p < 0.001$. There was no significant correlation between co-dependency and identifying red flags.

Furthermore, when descriptive statistics were conducted by gender identity as depicted in *Table 6*, across the variables, non-binary individuals reported the highest scores on personality severity, co-dependency, and childhood emotional abuse. Females reported the highest difficulty identifying red flags. However, since the population was not homogeneously distributed, advanced statistical analysis was conducted. There was a significant difference in the three genders only for the variable personality severity ($F(2) = 62.395, p < 0.001$), as shown in *Table 7*. However, the post hoc comparisons did not reveal significant pairwise differences, as shown in *Table 8*, likely due to unequal and small group sizes. Furthermore, no significant

Personality Severity, Codependency and Identifying Red Flags: Role of Childhood Emotional Abuse

gender differences were observed for codependency, childhood emotional abuse or difficulty identifying red flags.

Table 6 Depicting descriptive statistics across genders for codependency, personality severity, red flags and childhood emotion abuse (N=194)

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	SE
Codependency	Female	117	30.4	17.24	1.59
	Male	75	30.8	18.84	2.17
	Non-binary	2	42.0	18.38	13.00
Personality Severity	Female	117	29.2	18.19	1.68
	Male	75	32.4	17.29	2.00
	Non-binary	2	49.0	1.41	1.00
Red flags	Female	117	87.5	15.24	1.41
	Male	75	90.0	12.83	1.48
	Non-binary	2	79.0	18.38	13.00
Childhood emotional abuse	Female	117	37.4	25.71	2.38
	Male	75	40.3	28.77	3.32
	Non-binary	2	58.5	62.93	44.50

Note: SD is the standard deviation, and SE represents the standard error

Table 7 Homogeneity of Variances Test (Levene's)

	F	df1	df2	p
Codependency	0.897	2	191	0.409
Personality Severity	2.599	2	191	0.077
Red flags	0.487	2	191	0.615
Childhood emotional abuse	2.908	2	191	0.057

Table 8 Tukey Post-Hoc Test – Personality Severity

		Female	Male	Non-binary
Female	Mean difference	—	-3.16	-19.8
	p-value	—	0.454	0.267
Male	Mean difference		—	-16.6
	p-value		—	0.396
Non-binary	Mean difference			—
	p-value			—

Table 9 *Depicting the descriptive statistics for those who are in a relationship (N=113) and those who are single (N=81).*

	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Childhood emotional abuse	Single	113	38.2	32.0	26.7	2.52
	Relationship	81	39.4	32.0	28.0	3.12
Codependency	Single	113	30.7	27.0	16.3	1.53
	Relationship	81	30.7	26.0	19.9	2.21
Personality Severity	Single	113	29.1	25.0	17.5	1.65
	Relationship	81	32.9	36.0	18.2	2.03
Red flags	Single	113	89.3	91.0	13.8	1.30
	Relationship	81	87.0	92.0	15.1	1.68

Table 10 *Welch’s T-Test*

		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference
Childhood emotional abuse	Welch's t	-0.3143	167	0.754	-1.2586	4.00
Codependency	Welch's t	-0.0162	150	0.987	-0.0435	2.69
Personality Severity	Welch's t	-1.4785	168	0.141	-3.8605	2.61
Red flags	Welch's t	1.0895	162	0.278	2.3151	2.12

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Lastly, the descriptive statistics for participants who were single versus in a romantic relationship are presented in Table 9. Single participants showed higher difficulty identifying red flags and lower personality severity scores, while participants in relationships showed lower codependency scores. The Welch’s t-test indicated that none of the group differences were statistically significant (Table 10), and the variables did not differ significantly by relationship status ($p > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted on 194 young adults aged 19-23, identifying as male, female and non-binary. Most participants resided with their parents or in shared/hostel accommodations and primarily came from Urban backgrounds. The study examined the relationship between childhood emotional abuse, personality severity, codependency, and difficulty identifying red flags in romantic relationships. It further explored how childhood emotional abuse relates to personality severity and the ability to identify relationship red flags among Indian young adults. The findings, overall, reinforce the long-standing view that emotional abuse in childhood has enduring consequences for emotional regulation, personality development and relational functioning.

Personality Severity, Codependency and Identifying Red Flags: Role of Childhood Emotional Abuse

A prominent pattern observed in this study was the strong association between childhood emotional abuse and personality severity. This aligns with extensive literature showing that emotional abuse disrupts emotional development, undermines mentalisation, and impairs the formation of a coherent and stable sense of self (Heikin, 2019; Cao et al., 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2020). Such disruptions often persist into adulthood, contributing to difficulties in emotional stability and interpersonal functioning, as described in prior work on personality development following abuse (Lee & Song, 2017). Within the Indian cultural context, where emotional expression is often discouraged and criticism may be normalised within family system, children often grow up with limited emotional validation and inconsistent responses from their caregivers, further heightening the impact of emotional abuse.

One of the prominent findings in the present study was the predominance of verbal abuse as the most commonly reported form of emotional abuse. Verbal aggression, criticism, and harsh communication are often culturally minimised in Indian households and may be perceived as discipline rather than abuse (Waseem & Firdous, 2025). However, repeated exposure to verbal abuse can profoundly impact self-worth, emotional security and internalised self-concepts (Hamamra et al., 2025). Emotional rejection, although, was reported comparatively less frequently in the present study, was still meaningfully present and should not be interpreted as negligible. Emotional rejection, characterised by emotional unavailability, dismissal or lack of worth, is often considered to be damaging since it deprives a child of emotional attunement and reinforces a sense of worthlessness (Stauffer, 2020; Clare, 2022). Therefore, these patterns suggest that both overt and covert forms of emotional abuse can contribute to long-term psychological vulnerability in young adults

The study also found that individuals who experienced greater emotional abuse had more difficulty identifying healthy relational cues while having greater sensitivity towards overtly harmful behaviours. This is supported by research indicating that childhood abuse comprises key self-system functions such as self-esteem, perceived control and emotional insight (Maughan & Cichetti, 2002; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010). When emotional needs are repeatedly invalidated during early developmental years, individuals may struggle to interpret relational signals as adults. Moreover, the greater sensitivity towards identifying over harmful behaviours could be because of trauma-related hypervigilance (Briere & Scott, 2015). In the Indian context, where controlling, critical or dismissive behaviours are sometimes framed as ‘care’ or ‘discipline’, young adults may have fewer models of healthy relational interactions, making it especially difficult to recognise positive behaviours in intimate relationship, more alarmingly, confusing overtly harmful red flags as an expression of love (Harel & Koslowsky, 2024; Rajan, 2025).

While previous studies have linked childhood emotional abuse to codependency (Evgin & Sümen, 2021; Knudson & Terrell, 2012), our study did not find any significant relationship between the two variables. One possible explanation lies in trauma-related patterns of hypervigilance and emotional self-protection. Individuals who have learned to depend only on themselves due to lack of reliable emotional support growing up become excessively independent and vigilant (White, 2004; Browne & Winkelman, 2007). Such experiences shape relational avoidance rather than dependency. This distinction is primarily meaningful in cultures like India, where emotional suppression, self-reliance and tolerance to distress are often rewarded from an early age (Waseem & Firdous, 2025). Thus, emotional abuse may contribute to defensive distancing rather than relational enmeshment.

Personality Severity, Codependency and Identifying Red Flags: Role of Childhood Emotional Abuse

Moreover, the significant relationship between personality severity, codependency and difficulty finding red flags further accounts for the complex interaction between emotional development and relational functioning. Personality severity has long been conceptualised as emerging from disruptions of attachments and impaired mentalisation capacity. Previous studies suggest that individuals with higher personality severity are more likely to exhibit emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, and difficulties in interpersonal insight (Hopwood & Donnellan, 2010; Miller & Lynam, 2012), thereby making such traits to impair one's ability to recognise relational red flags or maintain healthy boundaries, which was also found to be consistent with the associations in our current study. Similarly, co-dependency, which is linked to low self-confidence and unmet childhood needs (Dugal et al., 2016; Kaletsch et al., 2014), can contribute to difficulty identifying or responding to relational red flags (Saini & Seikh, 2015; Duval et al., 2018).

With respect to relationship status, although differences were not statistically significant, the results offer useful insights into relational development during young adulthood. Greater difficulty in identifying red flags among singles may reflect limited opportunities to engage in close interpersonal dynamics where relational boundaries, conflict and emotional cues are actively negotiated. In contrast, lower levels of co-dependency among individuals in romantic relationships may indicate exposure to relational feedback that might be facilitating greater self-other differentiation and awareness of interpersonal needs (Lampis et al., 2019). These patterns suggest that relational experiences themselves may function as an environment for learning and refining relationship-related perceptions and responses (Kallova et al., 2025). Moreover, in young adulthood, where relational schemas are still forming, engagement in intimate relationships may play a role in shaping how individuals recognise, interpret and respond to relational cues (Smith et al., 2010), even in the absence of statistically significant group difference.

Furthermore, the gender patterns in the sample suggested that women are more likely to find it challenging to identify red flags, while non-binary individuals reported generally higher psychological vulnerability. Although these findings should be interpreted with caution due to unequal group sizes, they, however, align with broader evidence showing women and gender diverse individuals often experience unique forms of relational and emotional adversity, including heightened exposure to emotional invalidation or relationship based stressor (Wilson et al., 2015). Within many Indian families, women are socialised to prioritise harmony, adjust or compromise to others' needs and tolerate discomfort, which may limit opportunities to develop assertiveness and boundary-setting skills, increasing their vulnerability towards difficulties identifying unhealthy relational patterns in adulthood (Rai & Pallavi, 2025). For gender-diverse individuals, emotional abuse may be compounded by experiences of familial rejection, invisibility or lack of acceptance within a largely heteronormative and binary social framework (Strauss et al., 2020). Patriarchal family structures and rigid gender norms may also play an integral role in shaping how emotional abuse is experienced, internalised and expressed across gender in India context (Shukla et al., 2023). It is important to understand these dynamics to interpret gender differences in relational functioning and highlight the need for culturally sensitive, gender inclusive mental health interventions.

CONCLUSION

Childhood emotional abuse has long been associated with disruptions in emotional development through patterns of rejection, criticism, threat and emotional unavailability that may persist into adulthood. Such experiences usually occur in subtle and insidious ways,

Personality Severity, Codependency and Identifying Red Flags: Role of Childhood Emotional Abuse

gradually determining a child's self-esteem, emotional security and sense of belonging (Ross et al., 2019). The present study sought to examine the significant and enduring relationship of childhood emotional abuse with personality severity, co-dependency and relational functioning among Indian young adults.

The findings emphasise that emotional abuse, which is often overlooked in comparison to physical forms of maltreatment, has meaningful implications for emotional regulation, personality development and ability to identify relationship red flags. Difficulties in recognising healthy relationship patterns suggest that early emotionally invalidating environments may impair the development of adaptive relational schemas (Nicholson, 1991). It further suggests gaps in relational learning and emotional modelling, which may place young adults at increased risk for maladaptive relational experiences. Although childhood emotional abuse was not directly associated with co-dependency, its strong association with personality severity and its observed relationship between personality severity, co-dependency and difficulty identifying red flags underscore the complex pathways through which early emotional trauma influences adult functioning.

By examining these associations among the variables in a non-clinical population, the study contributes to a dimensional understanding of psychological vulnerability and emphasises the importance of early identification and prevention. Moreover, the findings are particularly relevant within the Indian context, where emotional abuse may be normalised within the family systems shaped by hierarchical and patriarchal norms.

The findings are also relevant in their implications for mental health practitioners working with individuals who have histories of childhood emotional abuse. Clinicians are recommended to remain attentive to the possibility that such individuals may struggle to identify healthy relational behaviours and may be vulnerable to maladaptive personality patterns. Therapeutic interventions that focus on enhancing emotional awareness, self-esteem, boundary setting, and relational skills may be particularly beneficial. Moreover, early identification and trauma-informed approaches may be helpful to overcome the long-term effects of emotional abuse (McLeod et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has several limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design limits conclusions about causality between childhood emotional abuse and later psychological outcomes. Moreover, the sample consisted only of young adults, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to other age groups. Additionally, the reliance on self-report measures may have introduced recall bias or social desirability effects.

Future research should emphasise longitudinal designs for a better understanding of how childhood emotional abuse contributes to personality development and relational difficulties over time, along with including more diverse and clinical populations to improve generalisability. The use of multiple assessment methods, such as clinical interviews or observational techniques, may also enhance the validity of the findings. Further exploration of cultural and family-related factors within the Indian context is recommended to gather deeper insight into prevention and intervention strategies.

REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association. (2013). *The Personality Inventory For DSM-5—Brief Form (PID-5-BF)—Adult*. Retrieved February 17, 2022, From <http://www.appi.org/CustomerService/Pages/Permissions.aspx>
- Animisetty, M. (2025). A Systematic Review on the Psychological Impact of Manipulative Parenting on children in the Indian Sociocultural Context. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 13*(3).
- Berenbaum, H., Raghavan, C., Le, H.-N., Vernon, L. L., & Gomez, J. J. (2003). A Taxonomy of Emotional Disturbances. *Clinical Psychology: Science And Practice, 10*, 206–226.
- Briere, J., & Scott, C. (2015). *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Browne, C., & Winkelman, C. (2007). The Effect of Childhood Trauma on Later Psychological Adjustment. *Journal Of Interpersonal Violence, 22*(6), 684-697.
- Cao, H., Ma, R., Li, X., Liang, Y., Wu, Q., Chi, P., ... & Zhou, N. (2020). Childhood Emotional Maltreatment and Adulthood Romantic Relationship Well-Being: A Multilevel, Meta-Analytic Review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 15*24838020975895.
- Clare, T. (2022). Exploring psychological growth in adult offspring following perceived parental rejection in childhood.
- Dugal, C., Bigras, N., Godbout, N., & Bélanger, C. (2016). *Childhood Interpersonal Trauma and Its Repercussions in Adulthood: An Analysis of Psychological And Interpersonal Sequelae*. Intechopen.
- Duval, E., Jansen, P. W., & Kerpershoek, N. (2018). Codependency in romantic relationships: Predicting the perceived and actual willingness to initiate change. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy, 17*(4), 321-338.
- Evgin, D., & Sümen, A. (2021). Childhood Abuse, Abuse, Codependency, And Affecting Factors in Nursing and Child Development Students. *Perspectives In Psychiatric Care*.
- Fischer, J. L., & Spann, L. (1991). Measuring Codependency. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly, 8*(1), 87-100.
- Fonagy, P., Target, M., Gergely, G., Allen, J. G., & Bateman, A. W. (2003). The developmental roots of borderline personality disorder in early attachment relationships: A theory and some evidence. *Psychoanalytic inquiry, 23*(3), 412-459.
- Gordon, K. H., Simonich, H., Wonderlich, S. A., Dhankikar, S., Crosby, R. D., Cao, L., ... & Engel, S. G. (2016). Emotion dysregulation and affective intensity mediate the relationship between childhood abuse and Suicide-Related behaviors among women with bulimia nervosa. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 46*(1), 79-87.
- Hamamra, B., Mahamid, F., & Bdier, D. (2025). Verbal violence and its psychological and social dimensions in intimate and familial relationships. *Discover mental health, 5*(1), 130. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44192-025-00270-x>
- Harel, T., & Koslowsky, M. (2024). Development and validation of the relational behavior interactions scale for couples. *Scientific Reports, 14*(1), 8086.
- Heikin, R. E. (2019). The Effects of Child Maltreatment on Social Relationships in Emerging Adulthood.
- Heleniak, C., Jenness, J. L., Stoep, A. V., McCauley, E., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2016). Childhood Maltreatment Exposure and Disruptions in Emotion Regulation: A Transdiagnostic Pathway to Adolescent Internalizing and Externalizing Psychopathology. *Cognitive therapy and research, 40*(3), 394–415. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10608-015-9735-z>
- Helpman, L., Zhu, X., Suarez-Jimenez, B., Lazarov, A., Monk, C., & Neria, Y. (2017). Sex Differences in Trauma-Related Psychopathology: a Critical Review of Neuroimaging

- Literature (2014-2017). *Current psychiatry reports*, 19(12), 104. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-017-0854-y>
- Hopwood, C. J., & Donnellan, M. B. (2010). How should the internal structure of personality inventories be evaluated? *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(3), 332-346.
- Hussein, M. E. M. A. T. (2022). Examining predictive factors of relationship behaviors.
- Kaletsch, M., Krüger, B., Pilgramm, S., Stark, R., Lis, S., Gallhofer, B., ... & Sammer, G. (2014). Borderline Personality Disorder Is Associated with Lower Confidence in the Perception of Emotional Body Movements. *Frontiers In Psychology*, 5, 1262.
- Kalova, N., Prosek, T., & Zaman, S. (2025). Learning through romantic experiences: Development and validation of a new measure. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 02654075251412467.
- Karakurt, G., & Silver, K. E. (2013). Emotional Abuse In Intimate Relationships: The Role of Gender and Age. *Violence And Victims*, 28(5), 804-821.
- Kearney, M. S., & O'Brien, K. M. (2021). Is It Love or Is It Control? Assessing Warning Signs of Dating Violence. *Journal Of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(11-12), 5446-5470.
- Kelleher, I., Murtagh, A., Molloy, C., Roddy, S., Clarke, M. C., Harley, M., & Cannon, M. (2012). Identification and characterization of prodromal risk syndromes in young adolescents in the community: a population-based clinical interview study. *Schizophrenia bulletin*, 38(2), 239–246. <https://doi.org/10.1093/schbul/sbr164>
- Kim, J. S., & Cicchetti, D. (2010). Longitudinal trajectories of self-system processes and depressive symptoms among maltreated and nonmaltreated children. *Child Development*, 81(2), 562-576.
- Knudson, T. M., & Terrell, H. K. (2012). Codependency, Perceived Interparental Conflict, And Substance Abuse in the Family of Origin. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 40(3), 245-257.
- Lampis, J., Cataudella, S., Agus, M., Busonera, A., & Skowron, E. A. (2019). Differentiation of Self and Dyadic Adjustment in Couple Relationships: A Dyadic Analysis Using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model. *Family process*, 58(3), 698–715. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12370>
- Lee, M. A., & Song, R. (2017). Childhood Abuse, Personality Traits, And Depressive Symptoms in Adulthood. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 65, 194-203.
- Lynch, S. J., Sunderland, M., Newton, N. C., & Chapman, C. (2021). A systematic review of transdiagnostic risk and protective factors for general and specific psychopathology in young people. *Clinical psychology review*, 87, 102036.
- Maughan, A., & Cicchetti, D. (2002). Impact of child maltreatment and inter adult violence on children's emotion regulation abilities and socioemotional adjustment. *Child Development*, 73(5), 1525-1542. doi: 10.1111/1467-8624.00488
- Mclaughlin, K. A., Colich, N. L., Rodman, A. M., & Weissman, D. G. (2020). Mechanisms Linking Childhood Trauma Exposure and Psychopathology: A Transdiagnostic Model of Risk and Resilience. *BMC Medicine*, 18(1), 1-11.
- McLeod, B. D., Weisz, J. R., & Wood, J. J. (2019). Examining the association between therapeutic alliance, treatment satisfaction, and improvement in youth psychotherapy. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 48(sup1), S238-S250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2019.1571576>
- Miller, J. D., & Lynam, D. R. (2012). An examination of the Psychopathic Personality Inventory's nomological network: A meta-analytic review. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 3(3), 305-326.
- Momtaz, V., Mansor, M., Talib, M. A., Kahar, R. B., & Momtaz, T. (2022). Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ): A New Scale for Measuring Emotional Abuse and Psychological Maltreatment 1. *Japanese Psychological Research*, 64(1), 1-11.

Personality Severity, Codependency and Identifying Red Flags: Role of Childhood Emotional Abuse

- Nicholson, C. S. (1991). Childhood Maltreatment, Adult Attachment, And Emotional Adjustment. *Partner Violence: Exploring Mental Health Issues*. NASPA Journal
- Rai, S. K., & Pallavi, K. (2025). *Love or control? How communication patterns shape toxic relationships*. *All Research Journal*, 11(4a), Article 12453. <https://doi.org/10.22271/allresearch.2025.v11.i4a.12453>
- Rajan, B. (2025). Fearing the “known unknown” men: A study on “red flags” and safety work on dating apps in India. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 1-22.
- Reyome, N. D. (2010). Childhood Emotional Maltreatment and Later Intimate Relationships: Themes from the Empirical Literature. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 19(2), 224-242.
- Ross, J., Werbart, A., & Håkansson, A. (2019). The mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and codependency. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 28(6), 671-686. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2019.1617148>
- Saini, M., & Sheikh, S. (2015). Codependency and relationship satisfaction among married individuals. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(1), 64-66.
- Salokangas, R. K., Schultze-Lutter, F., Schmidt, S. J., Pesonen, H., Luutonen, S., Patterson, P., ... & Hietala, J. (2019). Childhood Physical Abuse and Emotional Abuse Are Specifically Associated with Adult Mental Disorders. *Journal Of Mental Health*.
- Shukla, S., Rathore, M., & Verma, A. L. R. (2023). *Role of gender and family in emotional abuse among adults*. *Journal of Chemical Health Risks*, 13(4S), 517–522. <https://jchr.org>
- Smith, J. D., Welsh, D. P., & Fite, P. J. (2010). Adolescents' relational schemas and their subjective understanding of romantic relationship interactions. *Journal of adolescence*, 33(1), 147–157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2009.04.002>
- Spann, L., & Fischer, J. L. (1990). Identifying Codependency. *The Counselor*, 8(27), 27-31.
- ULUSOY, Y., & GÜÇRAY, S. S. (2017). Adaptation Of Composite Codependency Scale To
- Stauffer, K. A. (2020). *Emotional Neglect and the Adult in Therapy: Lifelong consequences to a lack of early attunement*. WW Norton & Company.
- Strauss, P., Cook, A., Winter, S., Watson, V., Wright Toussaint, D., & Lin, A. (2020). Mental health issues and complex experiences of abuse among trans and gender diverse young people: Findings from Trans Pathways. *LGBT health*, 7(3), 128-136.
- Ulusoy, Y., & Güçray, S. S. (2017). Adaptation of composite codependency scale to Turkish: A validity and reliability study. *Journal of International Social Research*, 10(49).
- Waseem, A., & Firdous, N. (2025). Unheard and Unseen: A Systematic Literature Review of Emotional Abuse Among Indian Adolescents. *Adolescents*, 5(3), 41. <https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents5030041>
- White, J. K., Hendrick, S. S., & Hendrick, C. (2004). Big Five Personality Variables And Relationship Constructs. *Personality And Individual Differences*, 37(7), 1519-1530.
- Wilson, D. R., Fite, P. J., Stoppelbein, L., & Greening, L. (2015). Gender differences in the relation between emotional abuse and childhood problematic behaviors. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(8), 2247-2256. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-014-0022-6>
- Zhang, Y., Mathur, P., & Block, L. (2021). Personality matters during a pandemic: Implicit theory beliefs influence preparedness and prevention behaviors. *Journal of the Association for Consumer*

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Chaudhury, S. & Alafia, J. (2026). Personality Severity, Codependency and Identifying Red Flags: Role of Childhood Emotional Abuse. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 2137-2153. DIP:18.01.216.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.216