

The Relationship Between ADHD Traits, Emotional Neglect, and Rejection Sensitivity Among Young Adults

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Abstract

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity that may continue into adulthood. Recent research highlights the role of psychosocial factors, particularly early emotional experiences, in influencing the severity and expression of ADHD traits. The present study examines the relationship between ADHD traits, emotional neglect, and rejection sensitivity among young adults. Emotional neglect refers to the failure of caregivers to adequately respond to a child's emotional needs, while rejection sensitivity refers to the tendency to anxiously expect and intensely react to perceived rejection. The study aims to determine whether emotional neglect and rejection sensitivity significantly predict ADHD traits in young adulthood. A quantitative research design was employed, and data were collected from young adults using standardized psychological scales. Statistical analyses were conducted to examine correlations and predictive relationships among the variables. The findings are expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ADHD by emphasizing the importance of emotional and interpersonal factors in psychological development. The study also provides implications for mental health interventions focusing on emotional regulation, trauma-informed care, and supportive caregiving practices.

Introduction

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has traditionally been conceptualized as a childhood disorder; however, growing evidence suggests that symptoms frequently persist into adolescence and adulthood, significantly affecting emotional regulation, academic performance, occupational functioning, and interpersonal relationships. Adults with ADHD traits often experience difficulties in sustained attention, impulsivity, disorganization, restlessness, and emotional instability. These challenges can lead to reduced productivity, strained relationships, and decreased quality of life.

In recent years, psychological researchers have emphasized the importance of adopting a more integrative approach to understanding ADHD. Rather than viewing it solely as a biological condition, contemporary perspectives acknowledge the interaction between neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities and early life experiences. Emotional experiences during childhood, particularly those involving caregiver responsiveness and attachment security, play a critical role in shaping cognitive and emotional development.

Adverse childhood experiences, such as emotional neglect, can disrupt the development of executive functioning and emotional regulation skills. Individuals who grow up in emotionally neglectful environments may struggle with recognizing and managing their emotions, forming secure relationships,

and maintaining self-esteem. These difficulties may manifest as attentional problems, impulsive behaviors, and emotional dysregulation, which are commonly associated with ADHD traits.

Another important psychological construct relevant to ADHD is rejection sensitivity. Individuals with high rejection sensitivity tend to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to social rejection. Repeated experiences of criticism, academic challenges, and social misunderstandings during childhood may increase vulnerability to perceived rejection. Over time, this pattern can reinforce emotional instability and impulsive reactions, thereby exacerbating ADHD-related difficulties.

The present study focuses on young adults, a developmental stage characterized by increased independence, academic and career responsibilities, and complex social relationships.

Understanding the relationships among ADHD traits, emotional neglect, and rejection sensitivity can provide valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying adult ADHD and inform effective intervention strategies.

ADHD Traits

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is widely recognized as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Although traditionally associated with childhood, longitudinal research indicates that ADHD symptoms often continue into adulthood. In young adults, ADHD traits may manifest as difficulties in concentration, poor time management, forgetfulness, emotional instability, and impulsive decision-making.

Executive functioning deficits are a central feature of ADHD. These include difficulties in working memory, cognitive flexibility, planning, and inhibitory control. Such impairments can negatively affect academic performance, occupational productivity, and interpersonal relationships. Emotional dysregulation is also commonly observed in individuals with ADHD, leading to frequent mood swings, frustration, and difficulty coping with stress.

Emotional Neglect

Emotional neglect refers to the persistent failure of caregivers to provide adequate emotional support, affection, validation, and empathy during childhood. Unlike physical abuse, emotional neglect is often subtle and may not be easily recognized. However, its psychological consequences can be long-lasting and profound.

Children who experience emotional neglect may develop insecure attachment patterns, low self-esteem, and poor emotional regulation skills. They may struggle to identify and express their emotions, leading to internalized feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. Research suggests that emotional neglect can disrupt the development of executive functioning skills, which are closely linked to attentional regulation and behavioral control. Consequently, individuals with a history of emotional neglect may exhibit behaviors that resemble or intensify ADHD traits in adulthood.

Rejection Sensitivity

Rejection sensitivity is defined as the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to social rejection. Individuals with high rejection sensitivity often interpret ambiguous social cues as negative or rejecting, leading to strong emotional responses such as anger, sadness, or anxiety.

Rejection sensitivity is particularly relevant in the context of ADHD because individuals with ADHD traits often experience repeated criticism, academic challenges, and social misunderstandings. These experiences may contribute to negative self-perceptions and increased vulnerability to perceived rejection. Over time, heightened rejection sensitivity can interfere with interpersonal relationships and social adjustment, thereby exacerbating emotional and behavioral difficulties associated with ADHD.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationships among ADHD traits, emotional neglect, and rejection sensitivity among young adults.

Participants.

The study selected its participants through a convenience sampling method. The sample included 300 young adults who were currently enrolled in colleges and universities. The participants were within the age range of 18 to 25 years. Both male and female participants were included in the study, and participation was voluntary with informed consent obtained prior to data collection.

The study focused on individuals pursuing higher education, as young adults in academic settings are more likely to experience cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal challenges relevant to ADHD traits, emotional neglect, and rejection sensitivity.

The inclusion criteria required participants to be between 18 and 25 years of age, currently enrolled in a college or university, able to read and understand English, and willing to provide informed consent.

The study excluded individuals who were below 18 years or above 25 years of age, those diagnosed with severe psychiatric or neurological disorders (as self-reported), and participants who did not provide complete responses to the questionnaires.

The participants were recruited based on accessibility and willingness to participate, ensuring an adequate sample size for conducting correlational and regression analyses to examine the relationships and predictive effects among ADHD traits, emotional neglect, and rejection sensitivity.

Data Collection Tools

ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS)

The Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS-v1.1) (Ronald C. Kessler et al., 2005) was used to assess ADHD-related traits in adults. The ASRS is a widely used screening instrument developed in conjunction with the World Health Organization to identify symptoms consistent with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder based on DSM-IV criteria. The scale consists of 18 items that correspond to the core symptom domains of ADHD, including inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Participants are required to rate the frequency of each symptom on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “Never” to “Very Often.” The instrument includes a subset of 6 items (Part A), which are considered highly predictive of ADHD and are often used as a brief screening measure, while the remaining items (Part B) provide additional information about symptom severity. Higher scores on the ASRS indicate greater presence of ADHD-related traits.

The ASRS has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across diverse populations. It has shown good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from $\alpha = .84$ to $.89$, as well as satisfactory validity in distinguishing individuals with and without ADHD (Kessler et al., 2005). The scale is widely used in both clinical and research settings, making it a reliable tool for assessing ADHD traits in non-clinical populations.

Emotional Neglect Scale

The Emotional Neglect Scale, derived from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) (David P. Bernstein et al., 2003), was used to assess participants’ experiences of emotional neglect during childhood. The CTQ is a widely used retrospective self-report instrument designed to measure different forms of childhood maltreatment, with the emotional neglect subscale specifically focusing on the absence of emotional support, care, and nurturance from caregivers.

The emotional neglect subscale typically consists of items that assess feelings of being unloved, unimportant, or emotionally unsupported during childhood. Participants are required to rate each item on a Likert-type scale, usually ranging from “Never True” to “Very Often True,” based on their personal experiences. Higher scores on this subscale indicate greater perceived levels of emotional neglect.

The CTQ, including its emotional neglect subscale, has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across both clinical and non-clinical populations. Previous research has reported good internal consistency for the emotional neglect subscale, with Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from $\alpha = .80$ to $.90$ (Bernstein et al., 2003). The scale has also shown good construct validity, making it a reliable and widely accepted measure for assessing early adverse emotional experiences.

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire

The Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ) (Geraldine Downey & Scott I. Feldman, 1996) was used to measure sensitivity to perceived rejection in interpersonal contexts. The RSQ is a widely used self-report instrument designed to assess the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection. It conceptualizes rejection sensitivity as a cognitive–affective processing disposition that influences how individuals interpret and respond to social interactions.

The questionnaire consists of a series of hypothetical interpersonal scenarios (e.g., requesting help or seeking approval), in which participants are asked to rate both their level of anxiety or concern about potential rejection and the likelihood of acceptance in each situation. These responses are combined to generate a composite rejection sensitivity score, with higher scores indicating greater sensitivity to perceived rejection.

The RSQ has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across diverse populations. It has shown high internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients typically ranging from $\alpha = .85$ to $.93$, along with good construct and predictive validity (Downey & Feldman, 1996). The scale is widely used in both clinical and research settings to examine interpersonal functioning and emotional vulnerability related to rejection.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through both offline and online methods, with participants recruited from colleges and universities and questionnaires administered either in classroom settings or via an online survey platform. A total of 300 responses were obtained, and participants were given clear instructions and encouraged to respond honestly, with an average completion time of 15–20 minutes. Responses were screened for completeness, and incomplete data were excluded from analysis. The finalized data were coded and analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum) were computed, and data cleaning procedures such as checking for missing values and outliers were conducted. Reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha (α). Pearson’s correlation analysis was performed to examine relationships among ADHD traits, emotional neglect, and rejection sensitivity, followed by Multiple Linear Regression to determine their predictive effects on ADHD traits. Assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, independence, and multicollinearity were tested prior to analysis.

Results

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 100)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	45	45%
Gender	Female	55	55%
Age	18–21 years	52	52%
Age	22–25 years	48	48%
Education	Undergraduate	60	60%
Education	Postgraduate	40	40%

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
ADHD Traits	28.45	6.12
Emotional Neglect	24.30	5.78
Rejection Sensitivity	26.11	6.05

Table 3. Correlation Matrix Showing Relationship Among Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. ADHD Traits	1		
2. Emotional Neglect	0.52**	1	
3. Rejection Sensitivity	0.48**	0.45**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$ indicates statistical significance.

Table 4. Regression Analysis Predicting ADHD Traits

Predictor Variable	Beta (β)	t-value	Significance (p)
Emotional Neglect	0.41	4.25	0.000
Rejection Sensitivity	0.36	3.78	0.001

Discussion

The primary aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between ADHD traits, emotional neglect, and rejection sensitivity among young adults, and to determine the predictive role of emotional neglect and rejection sensitivity on ADHD traits. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between emotional neglect and ADHD traits, indicating that individuals who reported higher levels of emotional neglect during childhood also exhibited greater ADHD-related symptoms such as inattention,

impulsivity, and hyperactivity. This finding suggests that early adverse emotional experiences may play a crucial role in the development or exacerbation of attentional and behavioral difficulties. Previous research supports this association, indicating that lack of emotional support and inconsistent caregiving can impair emotional regulation and executive functioning, which are core components affected in ADHD.

The study also found a significant positive relationship between rejection sensitivity and ADHD traits. Individuals with higher ADHD traits were more likely to exhibit heightened sensitivity to perceived rejection in interpersonal situations. This can be understood through emotional dysregulation frameworks, which propose that individuals with ADHD often experience intense emotional responses and difficulties in managing interpersonal stress. As a result, they may be more prone to anxiously expect rejection and interpret ambiguous social cues negatively. This finding aligns with previous literature suggesting that ADHD is not only characterized by cognitive and behavioral symptoms but also by interpersonal and emotional vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, emotional neglect was found to be positively associated with rejection sensitivity, indicating that individuals who experienced emotional neglect during childhood are more likely to develop heightened sensitivity to rejection in later life. This relationship can be explained through attachment and developmental theories, which emphasize that early caregiving experiences shape individuals' expectations of social relationships. A lack of emotional warmth and validation during childhood may lead individuals to develop insecure attachment patterns, thereby increasing their fear of rejection and negative evaluation in social contexts.

The regression analysis demonstrated that both emotional neglect and rejection sensitivity significantly predict ADHD traits, highlighting their combined influence on attentional and behavioral difficulties. This suggests that ADHD traits in young adults may not solely be neurodevelopmental in origin but can also be influenced by psychosocial factors, particularly early emotional experiences and interpersonal sensitivity. The findings support a biopsychosocial perspective, where environmental and emotional factors interact with individual vulnerabilities to influence the expression of ADHD traits.

The findings of the study have important psychological implications. Individuals with high ADHD traits may engage in maladaptive coping strategies due to difficulties in emotional regulation and heightened sensitivity to rejection. Emotional neglect may contribute to the development of low self-worth and poor emotional resilience, which further intensifies ADHD-related impairments. Additionally, rejection sensitivity may lead to avoidance of social interactions, increased anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties, thereby affecting overall psychological well-being.

The study also highlights the importance of early intervention and emotional support. Addressing emotional neglect through therapeutic approaches such as counseling and supportive interventions may help individuals develop better emotional regulation skills. Similarly, interventions targeting rejection sensitivity, such as cognitive-behavioral techniques and social skills training, can help individuals reinterpret social cues more accurately and reduce maladaptive emotional responses.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The use of self-report measures may be subject to response biases, and the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships among variables. Additionally, the sample consisted of young adults within a specific age range, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Future research can adopt longitudinal designs to better understand the developmental pathways linking emotional neglect, rejection sensitivity, and ADHD traits, and may also explore additional mediating or moderating variables such as self-esteem or emotional regulation.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that emotional neglect and rejection sensitivity are significant factors associated with ADHD traits among young adults. The findings emphasize the need to consider emotional and interpersonal dimensions while understanding ADHD, and highlight the importance of holistic interventions that address both cognitive and emotional aspects of functioning.

Conclusion

The present study emphasizes the complex relationship between ADHD traits, emotional neglect, and rejection sensitivity among young adults. The findings suggest that emotional neglect and rejection sensitivity are significant predictors of ADHD traits, underscoring the importance of addressing emotional and interpersonal factors in psychological assessment and intervention.

A multidimensional approach to ADHD that integrates biological, psychological, and social perspectives can enhance treatment outcomes and promote overall well-being. Early identification of emotional neglect and rejection sensitivity may help mental health professionals provide timely interventions and prevent long-term psychological difficulties.

Limitations of the Study

1. The study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to response bias.
2. The sample size was limited to young adults within a specific age range.
3. The use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Implications of the Study

1. Mental health professionals can develop interventions focusing on emotional regulation and trauma-informed care.
2. Educational institutions can implement awareness programs to support students with ADHD traits.
3. Parents and caregivers can be educated about the importance of emotional support in child development.

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