

Article

EXPLORING THE LINK BETWEEN UNHEALTHY ATTACHMENT AND TRAUMA SYMPTOMS

Areeja Shahid*

Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Muhammad Ali Jinnah University, Karachi, Pakistan

Saima Masoom Ali

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Karachi, Pakistan

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Abstract: Every individual is born with innate attachment, and it is considered the survival instinct. Theorists and researchers emphasize the importance of attachment. Therefore, the first two years of a child are of great importance in forming sense of relationship. It can be considered as maternal deprivation if it is not formed during these years thus leading to trauma. The purpose of this article is to review attachment theory and relate attachment perspective to trauma symptoms. It also aims to draw the compression between healthy and unhealthy attachments. This paper intends to explain the common trauma symptoms that show up due to unhealthy attachment. It also highlights the trauma symptoms an adult struggle with due to the insecure attachment. To do so, this work includes the reviewed paper of the period between 2017-2021. In these studies, individuals with attachment trauma have found to have difficulty in maintaining interpersonal relationships along-with experiencing psychosomatic symptoms, sexual and mental issues and difficulty in regulating emotions. The work contributes to the field of psychology by enhancing the understanding of importance and impact of attachment theory by exploring the traumatic impact on adult life. The work also may facilitate clinicians and care givers in spreading awareness about trauma symptoms and finding practical solutions to cater the symptoms.

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INTRODUCTION

Attachment is the survival instinct of an individual. As Bowlby 1958 defined in terms of evolution and stated that as long as caregiver is responsive to the child's need, it increases the chance of survival. Furthermore, if the child fails to form a bond in two years, it can lead to maternal deprivation. The research on the rodents was carried out on children who are deprived maternally in the postnatal period. The experience of trauma changes their cognition and increases the chances of neurodevelopmental disorder in later life. A similar pattern is also followed in adults (Janet Sian-Fritz, et.al, 2018). However, Bowlby also gives the concept of an internal working model. He suggested that childhood attachment, is formed of an individual with the caregiver. It creates a basis for how the individual forms attachment to others in later life. According to one study, individuals with anxious attachment have problems in emotional regulation compared to individuals who have secure and avoidant styles (Henschel, Nandrino, & Doba 2020). Mary Ainsworth gives three attachment styles: secure, ambivalent-insecure, and avoidant-insecure. Later, Main and Solemn added the fourth stage as a disorganized attachment style. It found that infants who can form a

* Corresponding Author: Areeja Shahid. Email: areeja.shahid@jinnah.edu

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secure attachment with their caregiver have high self-esteem and are more self-resilient when they grow up. They also performed better in school, were more independent, and had better social skills (Cherry, 2019). On the other hand, attachment trauma may cause a greater susceptibility to stress, dependency, and social isolation. Apart from emotional and physical abuse, negligence is the major developmental trauma which a child faces (Woller et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017; Witt et al., 2017, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

If a secure relationship is not formed, it creates many problems as insecure individuals go through childhood traumatic experiences such as physical, emotional, sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect. On the other hand, securely attached individuals do not go through these experiences. (Erika, 2016). One research reported that insecure individuals suffer from social anxiety and face difficulty developing interpersonal relations, while securely attached individuals do not experience anxiety (Erozken, 2009).

Unhealthy attachment can contribute to mental health issues. One study reported that adults develop bipolar disorder because they experienced childhood trauma and insecure attachment played a crucial role in developing trauma (Peng et al. 2021). Furthermore, insecure attachment is a predictor of developing depression symptoms in children and adolescents. Therefore, attachment issues should address when treating depression (Spruit et al. 2020).

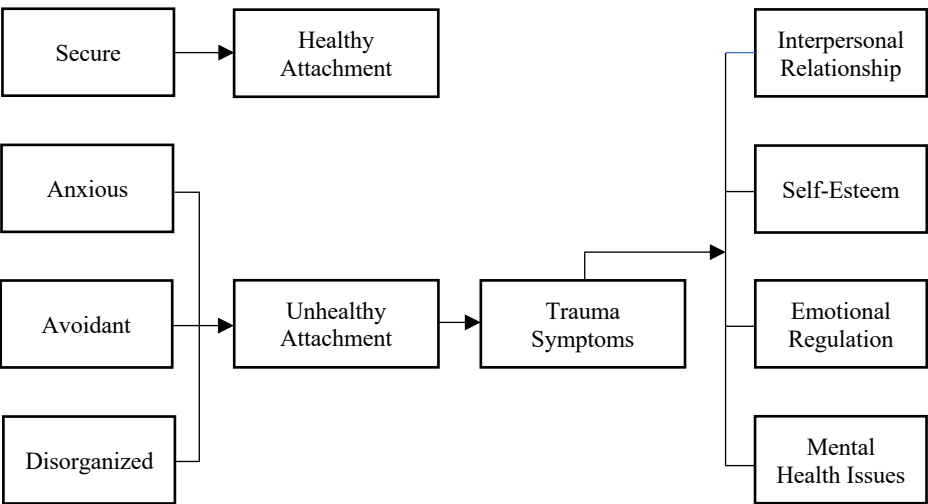


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Unhealthy attachment also influences eating behavior as loss or increase in appetite, which is one of the symptoms of trauma (Briere & Runtz, 1989). A study suggested that individuals who have anxious attachment are not capable of disengaging themselves from negative emotion and involve in over-eating, which negatively impact BMI (Wilkinson, 2021).

This study aims to review research papers published between 2017-2021 on how unhealthy attachments can become a trauma for individuals and impact different adulthood domains with the following key research objectives.

- 1. To identify the factors contributing to forming unhealthy relationships and leading to trauma;
- 2. To find out how unhealthy relationships affect interpersonal relations;
- 3. To investigate how unhealthy attachment contributed to problems regulating emotions, low self-esteem and mental health issues.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, all relevant articles published between years 2017-2021 were studied for content analysis. The researches were obtained open access journals and libraries. The search terms used include: attachment trauma, insecure attachment, interpersonal issues, child-parent bond.

Google Scholar	Wiley Library	MDPI	Link Springer	Sci-Direct Hub	Pub Med
1	2	2	1	4	2

Table 1: Online Sources of Research Papers

Inclusion Criteria

As mentioned in Table 1, about 12 articles were selected from different sources to review. Articles were only included if they are related to research questions and research objectives. There were many articles that were excluded from the current study after being reviewed. Articles were excluded for not relating with the research objectives and had mentioned trauma from perspectives other than unhealthy attachment.

RESULTS

Attachment trauma is considered to be a traumatic experience for an infant or child has when a primary caregiver does not or cannot provide adequate care, affection, and comfort. When the caregiver ignores a baby's distress, for instance, this can be a traumatic experience. When the infant is crying and frightened, and the caregiver ignores the distress and provides no comfort. The findings of this review are described below in writing and figurative form both.

Unhealthy Attachment Leading to Trauma

A researcher on unhealthy childhood attachments revealed that when individuals reach adulthood, they experience sabotaged relationships, validation seeking, clingy and controlling behaviors, and anxiousness (Rachel Slade, 2019). Furthermore, it can also be seen that anxious mothers can contribute to traumatic events, anxious attachment styles, and relationship dissolution in adulthood (Eunkook Koh, Tai-Young Park, Yanghyun Park, 2020). In addition, insecure attachment plays a negative role in traumatic romantic relationships, and prior relationships create difficulty in forming new, and healthy relationships in individuals (Sai Aizawa, 2021). Furthermore, children who have insecure and anxious attachment styles cannot form secure emotional bases (Eunkook Koh, Tai-Young Park, Yanghyun Park, 2020). Securely attached individuals experience more positive moods and positivity in various domains, while they also experience less somatic complaints like tiredness and other somatic symptoms (Mónac, Schoeps, & Montoya-Castilla, 2019).

Unhealthy Attachment and Interpersonal Relationship

It is essential that one does not ignore the childhood roots to the present-day manifestation of relationships. Adler (1964) regarded Neglected Style of Life as the third external factor contributing to maladjustment. Children who feel unloved and unwanted are likely to borrow heavily from these feelings in creating a neglected style of life. It was found that early adverse experiences from caregivers and the environment pose a threat to future interpersonal relationships and social behavior. Unhealthy relationships with the parents can contribute in developing the internal model of the individuals that they are unworthy and unlovable, which can impact future relationships (Eunkook Koh, Tai-Young Park, Yanghyun Park, 2020). The insecurely attached individual find it difficult to deal and interact with others; therefore, they went from loneliness because of an inferiority feeling. If they develop relationship, they experience threats (Akdoğan, 2017).

Unhealthy Attachment and Emotional Regulation

Attachment and eating behavior are closely related. It is discovered that individuals who have formed insecure Attachments in childhood have difficulty regulating emotions and suppressing emotions, which can result in emotional eating. However, it makes us understand that early feeding practices and interaction with parents play an important role (Beijers et al. 2021). Furthermore, early healthy attachment with parents plays a prominent role in teaching individuals how to regulate their emotions. On the other hand, individuals who fail to develop secure attachments cannot learn constructive methods to deal with emotions (Poole, Dobson, & Pusch 2018). A secure individual can manage and express emotions (Mónac, Schoeps, & Montoya-Castilla, 2019). However, Anxious and

avoidant attached individuals have difficulty in making career decisions. (Wright, Kacmarski, & Jenkins-Guarnieri, 2017).

Insecure Attachment Leading to Low Self-Esteem

One of the factors for self-esteem is that individuals who went through emotional abuse have not developed a secure attachment in childhood. The attachment, which is formed with a caregiver, is fearful (Liu et al. 2018). The unhealthy attachment also profoundly affects individual perception about himself in later life and has great difficulty in various domains. If the child develops avoidant attachment, it makes them anxious and lowers self-esteem as they are distant from others and become addicted to a smartphone (Kim, & Koh 2018). They not only suffer from the individual-level problem but also in moving society as due to unhealthy attachment and low self-esteem, they are not open to cultural diversity because they have trust issues (Han 2017). Children who receive negligence from their parents start internalizing the beliefs such as "I'm not good enough". It restrains them from believing in themselves and their capabilities.

Unhealthy Attachment and Mental Health Problems

Individuals need to form a secure attachment; otherwise, it will lead to unstable mental health. As insecure attachment can cause poor sleep quality, which can lead to depression symptoms. (Liu, 2020). In addition, sleeping issues is one of the symptoms of trauma (Briere & Runtz, 1989). An anxiously attached individual form rejection schema from their mother, which can contribute to depression symptoms; it is important to change the schema for treating depression among young adults (Kaya & Aydin 2021). Negative schemas can cause trouble in any stage of an individual's life. It can stop individual's mental growth especially when an individual is making bond with another individual either with colleagues at workplace, friends or with intimate relations.

CONCLUSION

Importance of attachment styles and child-parent bond has been accepted as a major aspect of life. This review focused on research work done in years 2017-2021 on attachment trauma and unhealthy attachments. It points out several aspects on an individual level that can lead to trauma and mental health issues. Trauma symptoms such as disturbed interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, self-esteem and mental health issues are found to be linked with unhealthy attachment. The implications of this work are both theoretical and practical. It enhances theoretical understanding of the unhealthy attachment leading to trauma symptoms. Practically, it may assist psychologists, parents and educationists in spreading awareness and making treatment plans accordingly. It may also help adult individuals to understand the different aspects of their own life.

Limitation and Recommendations

This study has a few limitations that include limited data and the fact that taking five years of research into account may not provide much evidence. Secondly, finding includes the issues that are mostly related to an individual. Many more factors on societal level can be included as well. Unhealthy attachments can also be linked with all the traumatic symptoms. And it can also be reviewed on gender basis. Gender plays a major role as males and females go through different childhood experiences. Birth order can also be taken in consideration for future researches.

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