

**RESEARCH PAPER****From Attachment Insecurity to Trauma Expression: A Professional Exploration of Mental Health Consequences****¹Areeja Shahid*, and ²Dr. Saima Massom Ali**

1. Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Iqra University Airport campus, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan

Corresponding Author areejashahid@iqra.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to investigate the potential link between insecure attachment styles and Trauma symptoms. Specifically anxiety, depression, and sexual abuse trauma. Attachment theory describes the emotional bond of safety and comfort between a child and the caregiver. However, if that bond is ruptured the child develops an insecure attachment that leads to negative mental health consequences. A sample of female participants was recruited from various universities and wellness centers. The Adult Attachment Scale and Trauma Symptom Scale were administered to the participants. 50 females who scored high on the anxious attachment scale underwent further analysis using the trauma symptom scale. The findings indicated a significant correlation between anxious attachment and heightened levels of anxiety 0.539 ($\rho=.03$, $P<.05$), depression 0.339 ($\rho=.04$, $P<.05$), and no relationship with sexual abuse trauma -0.014 ($\rho=.03$, $P<.05$). This study empirically supports the hypothesis that insecure attachment styles contribute significantly to Trauma Symptoms. These findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions addressing insecure attachment styles to lessen the risk of Trauma Symptoms.

Keywords: Anxiety, Attachment, Depression, Insecurity, Mental Health, Sexual Abuse. Trauma Symptoms**Introduction**

According to attachment theory, individuals who their parents accept during childhood are likely to develop a safe bond with the parents where they feel safe to express themselves and their emotions as well (Bowlby, 1961). They see their parents as being responsive and attentive which increases their self-worth and they perceive the world to be reliable (Griffin, 1994).

The secure attachment style is linked to positive health outcomes and an ability to deal with stressful situations. Conversely, those who experience inconsistent, rejecting, or unreliable parenting are prone to developing insecure attachments, categorized into avoidant and anxious dimensions (Ciechanowski, Walker, Katon, & Russo, 2002).

Insecure attachment styles are also known as attachment trauma as the bond between children and parents has been ruptured which is a traumatic experience for children throughout their lives. Experiencing attachment trauma may heighten vulnerability to stress, dependency, and social isolation. Beyond emotional and physical abuse, neglect stands out as a significant developmental trauma that children encounter, playing a contributing role in various clinical disorders (Woller et al., 2012; Witt et al., 2017, 2018). Therefore, the traumatic dynamics within the caregiver relationship play a substantial role in shaping childhood trauma.

Individuals with insecure attachment styles and relationships may face an elevated risk of psychological maladjustment. This increased vulnerability is attributed to their Internal Working Models or social-cognitive patterns linked to attachment insecurity. These patterns often involve perceptions of the self as unlovable and others as unavailable in times of need. Consequently, individuals with insecure attachment may be predisposed to developing pathological reactions, especially in response to traumatic events (Sharp, Fonagy, & Allen, 2012).

Insecure anxious attachment style has consistently shown associations with inferior mental health outcomes in contrast to secure individuals across various studies. Given the inclination of anxious individuals to concentrate on their distress, struggle with managing threatening situations, and exhibit a heightened prevalence of mental health issues, it is anticipated that individuals with anxious attachment are especially susceptible to adverse mental health outcomes, specifically depression, anxiety, and experiences of sexual abuse. These aspects are the specific concern of this current study. A study found an association between insecure attachment and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder in adolescents (Venta, Hatkevich, Mellick, Vanwoerden, & Sharp, 2017). This suggests that the cognitive patterns associated with insecure attachment contribute to the manifestation of psychological distress following depression and anxiety.

Literature Review

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), early interactions with caregivers shape the development of cognitive frameworks, known as internal working models. These models contain beliefs and expectations about caregivers, such as their level of care and responsiveness. These internal working models serve as a blueprint for future relationships in adulthood, influencing perceptions of the self (e.g., one's worthiness of love), others (e.g., the reliability and supportiveness of others), and the dynamics of relationships between the self and others.

Individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety exhibit heightened reactions to perceived romantic rejection or partner criticism (Besser & Priel, 2009) (Overall et al., 2014). Moreover, those with high attachment anxiety are more susceptible to other forms of unwanted sexual experiences, including sexual coercion (Karantzas et al., 2016). This vulnerability, characterized by a fear of abandonment and sensitivity to rejection, may increase the likelihood of sexual abuse.

The experience of sexual abuse can further impact individuals with anxious attachment by reinforcing negative beliefs about the self, fostering a sense of powerlessness, and intensifying fears of rejection. These psychological consequences, coupled with the inherent challenges of anxious attachment, may create a vulnerable foundation for the development or exacerbation of depression and anxiety. The correlation between attachment insecurity and depression is more pronounced in adults who have experienced physical, psychological, or sexual abuse during childhood (Whiffen, Judd, & Ayub, 1999).

As per attachment theory, repeated struggles to secure support from attachment figures and maintain a sense of security, coupled with a reliance on alternative attachment strategies characterized by hyper-activation in anxious individuals, disrupt the development of social skills and give rise to significant challenges in interpersonal relationships. Individuals with high scores on attachment anxiety often align negative emotions with the hyper-activation of their attachment system. For them, "emotion regulation" may involve amplifying emotions, magnifying worries, and experiencing depressive reactions to real or perceived losses. Attachment anxiety is also linked to trauma symptoms, socially detrimental expressions of anger, impulsive and demanding behavior toward relationship partners, and at times, even violence (Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2007).

Anxious attachment, characterized by a fear of abandonment and a constant need for reassurance, can contribute to the development or exacerbation of depressive symptoms. Individuals with anxious attachment may experience heightened stress, self-doubt, and a pervasive fear of rejection, creating a fertile ground for the onset of depressive feelings. The research finding shows that the anxious attachment style may involve a strong desire for others' approval and a preoccupation with rejection which can contribute to the development of depressive symptoms (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). Another study suggests that insecure attachment may serve as a pathway to the onset of depression (Muris, 2001)

Anxiously attached individuals, characterized by a heightened fear of abandonment and a constant need for reassurance, and may experience a persistent state of anxiety within relationships. This chronic anxiety, stemming from fears of rejection or perceived inadequacy, can contribute to the development or exacerbation of depressive symptoms. The continuous cycle of anxious thoughts, coupled with the fear of not being worthy of love or approval, may contribute to a pervasive sense of hopelessness and sadness are key components of depression. The present research suggests that particular styles of responding to anxiety, specifically engaging in rumination or adopting hopeless cognitions in response to anxiety symptoms, may elevate the risk of developing depressive symptoms. This, in turn, contributes to the comorbidity of anxiety and depression (Starr & Davial, 2012)

The challenges associated with depressive symptoms, such as low self-esteem or a negative outlook on the future, may exacerbate existing anxieties about stability and acceptance within relationships. Anxiety is strongly associated with low self-esteem (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Numerous researchers have suggested that anxiety serves as a causal risk factor for the subsequent development of depressive symptoms (Lewinsohn et al., 1997).

Material and Methods

The research used a quantitative approach, through surveys as the primary method of data collection. A sample of 50 individuals from various universities and wellness centers was selected through a convenient purposive sampling method. Participants, aged 18 to 30, who can read and comprehend English, were included in the study. All participants are females.

The study used the Adult Attachment Revised Scale (AAS) to measure relationship attachment, covering dimensions like closeness, dependence, and anxiety. Additionally, the Trauma Symptom Checklist (TSC-40) is employed to assess symptoms associated with traumatic experiences, including dissociation, sleep disturbance, anxiety, depression, sexual abuse trauma index, and sexual problems.

The procedure involved obtaining informed consent and demographic information from participants. They completed the Adult Attachment Revised Scale and were assessed on the subscales of depression, anxiety, and sexual abuse trauma index using the Trauma Symptom Checklist. For statistical analysis, SPSS was utilized to examine the correlation between anxious attachment and the subscales of trauma symptoms, specifically depression, anxiety, and sexual abuse trauma index.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Information of Participants (N=50)

Category	Measure	%
Age	18-20	30
	21-23	36

	24-26	34
Gender	Male	0
	Female	100
Education in years	12 years	20
	14 years	46.67
	16 years	33.33
Anxious Attachment Scores	27/30	16
	26/30	60
	25/30	10
	24/30	14

Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics, stated as percentages. Out of the total 150 participants, a subgroup of 50 was carefully selected. These individuals met a criterion of scoring at least 24 out of 30 on the Anxious Attachment subscale of The Adult Attachment Revised Scale (AAS)—notably, all selected participants identified as female.

Breaking down the subgroup further, 8 participants scored 24, 5 scored 25, 30 scored 26, and 7 scored 27 out of the total 30 on the Anxious Attachment subscale. Turning to age distribution, 15 participants fell within the 18-20 age range, 18 in the 21-23 age range, and 17 in the 24-26 age range. In terms of educational background, 9 participants completed 12 years of education, approximately 24 completed 14 years, and 17 participants achieved 16 years of education.

Table 2
Correlation

Variable	<i>n</i>	1	2	3
1. Anxious Attachment	50	1	-	-
2. Depression	50	0.339**	1	-
3. Anxiety	50	0.539**	-	1
4. Sexual Abuse Trauma Index	50	-0.014	-	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results indicate a positive correlation between depression and anxious attachment style with a correlation coefficient of 0.339 ($p = 0.04$, $p < 0.05$). A significant positive relationship also exists between anxious attachment and anxiety with a correlation coefficient of 0.539 ($p = 0.03$, $p < 0.05$). These findings are congruent with previous studies.

However, results indicate that there is a negative relationship between anxious attachment style and sexual abuse trauma index with a correlation coefficient of -0.014 ($p = 0.03$, $p < 0.05$).

This study explored the relationship between anxious attachment style and depression in adult females. The result shows that anxious attachment style is associated with depression in females. Bowlby discovered that losing a secure attachment in early life was strongly linked to depression. Insecure attachments gradually result in a negative outlook and a sense of helplessness about oneself. As individuals grow older, the complexities of interpersonal relationships enhance the likelihood of experiencing depression.

Anxious attachment and depression are linked together with the negative internal working models. Individuals with anxious attachments develop negative working models that may lead to dependency on others, where individuals consistently consider themselves less and evaluate themselves harshly. As highlighted in another study, Fear of rejection and abandonment could be attributed to the tendency of individuals with anxious attachments to form negative internal working models of themselves. Consequently, they may perceive

lower self-efficacy and tend to view others as a source of support. (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000) However, they perceive rejection from others which results in depressive behavior. Broadly, experiencing rejection from others has been identified as being linked to depression (Coyne, 1976).

Evaluation and self-criticism could be another major link that ties anxious attachment individuals with depressive symptoms. A self-critical perspective can contribute to a sense of inadequacy, increased vulnerability to stress, and a higher likelihood of experiencing depressive symptoms. According to Dagnino.P. et al, 2017, the connection between anxious attachment and depression is linked to self-criticism and dependency. It can be empirically stated that self-criticism played a mediating role between attachment style and depression.

Another study suggests that insecure attachment is a positive predictor of depression, and the mediation occurs through poor sleep quality. In other words, diminished sleep quality can trigger negative emotions, including depression. (Yige.L, et al., 2020) The findings of the previous study show a strong positive correlation between sleep and anxious attachment (Shahid, & Ali, S., 2023)

Chorot et al. (2017), describe that an insecure attachment can contribute to mental health challenges in early stages of life. Specifically, their findings highlight that those exhibiting a preoccupied attachment style towards their peers face a heightened risk of developing depression and anxiety which leads to our second hypothesis of this study.

The second hypothesis suggests that there is a significant association between anxious attachment style and anxiety in female adults. This hypothesis is proved by the results of the current study and previous studies.

Insufficient parent-child relationships contribute to the emergence of anxiety and depression in young individuals. Numerous research studies have already explored these two constructs, anxiety and depression together. (Kircanski, et al., 2017), This is because both disorders frequently stem from similar origins, comprising a mix of genetic and environmental factors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Additionally, Surcinelli, Rossi, Montebanocci, and Baldaro (2010) established that individuals with a secure attachment exhibited low levels of depression and anxiety, while participants that had an insecure attachment displayed high levels of depression and anxiety.

Another study shows that individuals with an anxious attachment style tend to experience elevated levels of depression and anxiety. This connection was explained by the mediating influence of self-esteem: those who developed an anxious attachment style during childhood often displayed diminished self-esteem, resulting in depressive and anxious symptoms in adulthood. Similarly, Lee and Hankin (2009) illustrated that an anxious attachment style can contribute to reduced self-esteem, subsequently leading to an increase in both anxious and depressive symptoms.

The third hypothesis of this study is that there is a relationship between sexual abuse trauma and anxious attachment. The results of this study reject the hypothesis, showing no correlation between anxious attachment and sexual abuse trauma. However, previous studies provide information on link between anxious attachment and sexual abuse trauma.

One possible explanation for this lack of correlation could be the absence of responses to these questions, potentially stemming from the societal taboo surrounding the topic in Pakistan.

Previous studies show that the link between sexual abuse trauma and an anxious attachment style is rooted in the impact that early traumatic experiences can have on the development of attachment patterns. Anxious attachment style is characterized by a heightened fear of abandonment, a strong desire for closeness, and a tendency to worry about the availability of love and support in relationships. Sexual abuse trauma, especially during formative years, can disrupt the development of a secure attachment. Individuals who have experienced sexual abuse may struggle with trust, intimacy, and a sense of safety in relationships. The trauma can create a fear of being abandoned or rejected, leading to insecurity in relationships.

Studies show that a fear of abandonment is connected to sexual compliance (Willis & Nelson-Gray, 2017), and individuals with high attachment anxiety are susceptible to various forms of non-consensual sex, such as sexual coercion (Karantzas et al., 2016). Consequently, those with elevated attachment anxiety, marked by a fear of abandonment and sensitivity to rejection, may be more inclined to agree to sexual compliance and less inclined to resist. Research suggests that women with high attachment anxiety are more likely to consent to unwanted sex, often motivated by a desire to prevent a partner from losing interest or to alleviate tension in the relationship (Impett & Peplau, 2002).

Another research has indicated that mothers who experienced childhood abuse exhibit higher occurrences of anxious attachment with their own children compared to mothers without a history of abuse (Lyons-Ruth & Block, 1996; Morrel et al., 2003).

Conclusion

The current study shows that insecure attachment style, characterized by a negative internal model of relationships, can contribute to the manifestation of trauma symptoms later in life, including depression, anxiety, and vulnerability to sexual abuse. People with insecure attachment are discovered to be more predisposed to heightened vulnerability to stress, thereby elevating the likelihood of experiencing symptoms associated with poor mental health (Lim, Hodges, & Lilly, 2020).

The early experiences of insecure attachment create a foundation that shapes the individual's emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships, influencing their susceptibility to mental health challenges and traumatic experiences. It appears that adult attachment insecurity can lead to distress and depression. Literature shows the relationship between insecure attachment and sexual abuse however, current study doesn't show any such relation or association. This could be due to the cultural and religious sensitivity as in Pakistani cultural, it is still considered a taboo to talk about abuse let alone sexual abuse.

Recommendations

Based on this study the following major points are recommended

- Future researchers should target a large diverse population to increase the generalizability and to accurately check the cultural impact on results.
- Enhance awareness about the link of attachment style and emotional well-being.
- Clinicians may prepare assessment and interventions to address anxious attachment in children and adults both.

References

- Baer, J. C., & Martinez, C. D. (2006). Child maltreatment and insecure attachment: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 24(3), 187–197.
- Bifulco A, Moran P M, Ball C, Bernazzani O (2002), Adult attachment style. I, Its relationship to clinical depression. *Social Psychiatry Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 37, 50-59
- Bowlby J (1977), A etiology and psychopathology in the light of attachment theory. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 130, 201–210.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Cicchetti, D., Rogosch, F. A., & Toth, S. L. (2006). Fostering secure attachment in infants in maltreating families through preventive interventions. *Development and Psychopathology*, 18(3), 623–649.
- Ciechanowski, P. S., Walker, E. A., Katon, W. J., & Russo, J. E. (2002). Attachment theory: A model for health care utilization and somatization. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 64, 660–667.
- Dagnino, P., Pérez, C., Gómez, A., Gloger, S., & Krause, M. (2017). Depression and attachment: How do personality styles and social support influence this relation? *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome*, 20(1), 237. doi:10.4081/ripppo.2017.237
- Feeney, J. A., Noller, P., & Hanrahan, M. (1994). Assessing adult attachment. In M. B. Sperling & W. H. Berman (Eds.), *Attachment in adults: Clinical and developmental perspectives* (pp. 128–152). New York: Guilford.
- Felitti, V. J. (2002). The relation between adverse childhood experiences and adult health: Turning gold into lead. *Zeitschrift für Psychosomatische Medizin und Psychotherapie*, 48, 359–369.
- Griffin, D. W., & Bartholomew, K. (1994). Models of the self and other: Fundamental dimensions underlying measures of adult attachment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67, 430–445. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.67.3.430
- Impett E. A., Peplau L. A. (2002). Why some women consent to unwanted sex with a dating partner, Insights from attachment theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(4), 360–370.
- Karantzas G. C., McCabe M. P., Karantzas K. M., Pizzirani B., Campbell H., Mullins E. R. (2016). Attachment style and less severe forms of sexual coercion, A systematic review. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(5), 1053–1068.
- Lim, B. H., Hodges, M. A., & Lilly, M. M. (2020). The Differential Effects of Insecure Attachment on Post-Traumatic Stress, A Systematic Review of Extant Findings and Explanatory Mechanisms. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 21(5), 1044-1060.
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2007). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change*. New York: Guilford.
- Mikulincer M., Shaver P. R. (2007). *Attachment in Adulthood, Structure, Dynamics, and Change*. New York, NY, Guilford Press.

- Muris, P., Meesters, C., van Melick, M., & Zwambag, L. (2001). Self-reported attachment style, attachment quality, and symptoms of anxiety and depression in young adolescents. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 30, 809–818. doi:10.1016/S0191-8869(00)00074-X
- Pietromonaco P.R., Barrett L.F. (2000). The internal working models concept, what do we really know about the self in relation to others? *Review of General Psychology*, 4, 155–157. doi, 10.1037/1089-2680.4.2.155
- Rees, C. (2007). Childhood attachment. *British Journal of General Practice*, 57(544), 920-922. doi:10.3399/096016407782317955.
- Rees, C. A. (2005). Thinking about children's attachments. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 90(10), 1058–1065.
- Shahid, A., & Ali, S. M. (2023). Attachment Styles and Their Impact on Sleep Disturbances and Dissociation in Adults, A Comprehensive Study. *Annals of Psychophysiology*, 10(1), 34–43.
- Starr, L. R., & Davila, J. (2012). Responding to Anxiety with Rumination and Hopelessness: Mechanism of Anxiety-Depression Symptom Co-Occurrence? *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 36(4), 321-337. doi:10.1007/s10608-011-9363-1. PMID: 22865943; PMCID: PMC3409687.
- Whiffen, V. E., Judd, M. E., & Aube, J. A. (1999). Intimate relationships moderate the association between childhood sexual abuse and depression. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 14, 940–954.
- Willis M., Nelson-Gray R. O. (2017). Borderline personality disorder traits and sexual compliance, A fear of abandonment manipulation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 117, 216–220
- Liu, Y., Li, H., Xu, X., Li, Y., Wang, Z., Zhu, H., Zhang, X., Jiang, S., Li, N., Gu, S., Wang, F., & Huang, J. H. (2020). The relationship between insecure attachment to depression: Mediating role of sleep and cognitive reappraisal. *Neural Plasticity*, Article ID 1931737.
- Zuroff D.C., Fitzpatrick D.A. (1995). Depressive personality styles, implications for adult attachment. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 18, 253-265. doi, 10.1016/0191-8869(94)00136-G