

Childhood Adversity and its Echoes in Adult Intimate Relationships

A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are associated with long-term emotional and relational difficulties, particularly in adult romantic relationships. This review aims to examine how early exposure to abuse, neglect, and dysfunctional family environments impacts adult attachment styles, emotional regulation, communication patterns, and self-esteem. A thematic literature review of relevant empirical studies was conducted to explore these psychological mechanisms. The findings suggest that ACEs often result in insecure attachment, emotional dysregulation, and difficulties with trust, intimacy, and conflict resolution. However, the presence of supportive caregiving and resilience-building experiences can mitigate these effects. The review also identifies significant Lack of empirical evidence, particularly regarding the differential impact of ACE types and the influence of gender, culture, and socioeconomic factors. These insights underscore the importance of trauma-informed interventions and culturally responsive therapeutic strategies to enhance relational and psychological well-being in adults with a history of childhood adversity.

Keywords: Adverse Childhood Experiences, Attachment Theory, Emotional Regulation, Romantic Relationships.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, profoundly and lastingly impact individual development. These early adversities, first conceptualized in the landmark study by Felitti et al. (1998), are now widely recognized as predictors of negative psychological, emotional, and interpersonal outcomes in adulthood. While extensive research has linked ACEs to mental and physical health issues across the lifespan (Danese et al., 2009; Dube et al., 2003; Masten & Barnes, 2018), their specific influence on adult romantic relationships remains an area that requires deeper exploration. Romantic relationships play a pivotal role in emotional well-being, life satisfaction and psychological

resilience. Disruptions in early attachment relationships such as those caused by childhood trauma or neglect can hinder one's capacity to form secure, trusting bonds later in life.

(Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969). This review seeks to synthesize the current literature on the association between ACEs and adult romantic relationship functioning, with a particular focus on mediating mechanisms such as attachment style, emotion regulation, self-esteem, and communication patterns (Noel & Misra, 2021). Despite growing awareness, the specific processes linking early adversity to adult romantic dysfunction remain under theorized in applied contexts. By drawing on developmental psychology, trauma studies, and interpersonal theory, this study aims to identify the key pathways through which

ACEs affect relational outcomes. It also highlights the dual role of protective and risk factors, such as resilience, caregiver support, and emotional neglect, in shaping adult relational trajectories.

Furthermore, this review emphasizes the importance of trauma-informed interventions and preventive strategies for interrupting intergenerational cycles of dysfunction. Understanding the long-term psychological imprint of ACEs on relational life is essential not only for clinical intervention but also for promoting empathy, resilience and healthier partnerships in society at large.

A. Conceptual Framework

➤ *Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*

ACEs refer to potentially traumatic events occurring before the age of 18, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; neglect; parental substance abuse; mental illness in the household; or domestic violence (Felitti et al., 1998). These experiences can lead to toxic stress, which disrupts normal brain development and impairs cognitive, emotional and relational functioning. The more ACEs a person is exposed to, the higher the risk of negative outcomes across their lifespan (Cambron et al., 2014; Felitti et al., 2019). De Moraes et al. (2022) highlighted the role of psycho-pedagogy in helping individuals reframe and overcome adverse childhood experiences. They stress the need for a multidisciplinary team, guided by neuroscience and psycho-pedagogical principles, to effectively address and heal childhood traumas.

Scott (2020) explains that ACEs include various forms of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, which can have lasting effects on mental and physical health. This study highlights the lack of routine ACE screening in UK healthcare, leading to missed opportunities for early intervention and prevention. Radford et al. (2022) defined ACEs as early life events that significantly increase the risk of negative health and social outcomes throughout a person's life, underscoring the long-term consequences of childhood adversity.

➤ *Attachment Theory*

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1969) and expanded by Ainsworth (1978), provides a basic framework for understanding how early events shape relational behaviors. A secure attachment is developed by consistent and sensitive caregiving, whereas inconsistent or abusive caregiving fosters insecure attachments, which are categorized as avoidant, anxious-ambivalent, or disorganized. These attachment styles influence expectations, intimacy patterns, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation in adult romantic relationships.

Studies have shown that ACEs can disrupt the formation of secure attachment bonds, leading to chronic mistrust, emotional withdrawal, or dependency in adult relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Adults with unresolved childhood trauma often struggle to express their

emotional needs, maintain intimacy, or manage conflict constructively.

Conley Wright and Kong (2023) explain how attachment theory emphasizes the impact of early caregiver relationships on emotional development, security, and future relational patterns. They highlight how attachment styles are formed through consistent caregiver interactions and note their importance and potential misapplications in child protection and out-of-home care decisions.

➤ *Emotion Regulation and Communication Patterns*

Emotion regulation, the ability to manage and express emotions adaptively, is often impaired in individuals with high ACE scores (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). Childhood adversity may condition individuals to suppress, exaggerate, or avoid emotional expression, adversely affecting communication and intimacy in adult partnerships. Maladaptive communication patterns, including emotional dysregulation, passive aggression, and avoidance, often mirror dysfunctional dynamics from childhood (Weiss et al., 2011). Oguntayo et al. (2020) found that higher exposure to ACEs significantly increased the likelihood of substance use among Nigerian youth. Age also played a role, with older adolescents showing greater vulnerabilities. This study highlights how disrupted emotional regulation due to early adversity can lead to maladaptive coping behaviors, such as substance abuse.

England-Mason et al. (2021) found that emotion regulation difficulties—such as limited access to effective strategies and nonacceptance of emotional responses—moderate the relationship between maternal ACEs and lower oxytocin levels in postpartum women. This biological dysregulation may impact maternal bonding and highlights the importance of targeting emotional regulation in interventions for ACE-affected mothers.

➤ *Self-Esteem and Identity*

ACEs may lead to internalized negative self-perceptions, affecting self-esteem and identity development (Orth and Robins, 2014). Individuals exposed to chronic invalidation or neglect may carry feelings of shame, self-doubt, or worthlessness into their adult relationships. These internalized schemas can contribute to self-sabotaging behaviors, fear of abandonment, and difficulty in asserting boundaries with romantic partners. Zheng (2024) found that ACEs significantly lowered self-esteem in emerging Chinese adults, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive interventions to support affected individuals. Ossai (2023) found a moderate negative correlation between ACEs and self-esteem among Nigerian teenagers, suggesting the need for school-based counseling and government policies to reduce the impact of ACEs.

Khodabandeh et al. (2018) studied male forensic clients and found that ACEs, especially family dysfunction, were strongly linked to adult aggression and low self-esteem, underlining ACEs as key predictors of violence-related behavior.

➤ *Resilience and Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)*

Despite these risks, many individuals exposed to ACEs demonstrate resilience. Factors such as supportive relationships, access to mental health resources, and positive childhood experiences (PCEs), such as being heard, feeling safe, or having a trusted adult, can buffer the adverse effects of trauma (Narayan et al., 2018). Secure adult attachments are still possible when protective factors outweigh early risks.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following literature review organizes existing research on the relationship between ACEs and adult romantic relationships under key thematic categories. These themes are based on the impact of childhood trauma on attachment styles, emotional regulation, interpersonal functioning, and relationship satisfaction, while highlighting mediating and moderating variables such as resilience, social support, and family dynamics.

A. *ACEs and Attachment Styles in Romantic Relationships*

Multiple studies have emphasized the foundational role of attachment theory in understanding how ACEs shape romantic bonds in adulthood. According to Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment frameworks, childhood maltreatment disrupts the formation of secure attachments, leading to maladaptive relationship patterns in adulthood.

Khanna and Kumari (2024) found that emotional abuse and neglect were negatively correlated with secure attachment and romantic satisfaction, while anxious attachment patterns predicted lower satisfaction. Similarly, Quan et al. (2025) established that the relationship between childhood trauma and adult relationship fulfillment is significantly mediated by attachment style.

Dewi (2022) examined the relationship between attachment styles, emotional intelligence (EI), and ACEs among adults. The study found significant correlations between attachment domains and various components of EI, showing that higher ACE scores were associated with insecure attachment styles and lower EI. These findings suggest that ACEs can shape core personality traits, thereby affecting emotional regulation and relationship functioning in adulthood. Bedair et al. (2020) found that secure attachment was linked to higher marital satisfaction, while insecure attachment reduced both satisfaction and mutual support. Women reported receiving less support than men, highlighting the role of attachment and gender in relationship outcomes.

Zilan et al. (2023) further explored how insecure attachment and poor emotion regulation mediate the ACE–depression link, indicating potential implications for romantic distress. Hogan (2019) and Lassri et al. (2017) demonstrated that attachment avoidance linked with emotional maltreatment decreased relationship satisfaction, reinforcing the idea that early trauma alters internal working models of love.

B. *ACEs and Emotion Regulation in Relationship Functioning*

Emotional regulation deficits have emerged as a crucial mechanism for explaining the enduring effects of ACEs. Buduris (2019) applied betrayal trauma theory and found that emotion dysregulation mediates the link between insecure attachment and reduced relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Zilan et al. (2023) reported that poor emotional regulation intensifies the psychological impact of ACEs. Lorenzo et al. (2024) investigated how ACEs influence marital relationship satisfaction within the Filipino context. Their findings revealed a statistically significant but low explanatory impact of ACEs (2.17%) on relationship satisfaction, suggesting that while ACEs matter, many other factors also shape marital outcomes. The study emphasizes the need to challenge cultural stigma and recommends further qualitative research for a deeper understanding.

Adults with ACE histories often construct survival-based identities (Brannigan, 2017), which perpetuate avoidant or hypervigilant emotional styles in intimate settings. These difficulties with emotional awareness and clarity inhibit authentic communication and intimacy in adult relationships. Baksh and Sekhar (2023) found that ACEs were significantly associated with negative young adults had poor self-regulation and suicidal thoughts, but there was no gender-based differences. This demonstrates how ACEs affect mental health and emotional control.

C. *ACEs, Interpersonal Trust, and Communication in Relationships*

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that people with high ACE scores report lower trust, honesty, and communication in romantic relationships (Broquelynn & Shepard, 2021). Boisvert et al. (2016) illustrated through a longitudinal design how early peer and family relationships significantly forecasted romantic involvement and quality in later life. Jak (2016) found that positive parental attachments were directly linked to greater romantic satisfaction and reduced loneliness in adulthood, whereas childhood conflict predicted poorer outcomes. Munoz et al. (2019) found that ACEs predicted lower trust in the medical profession, suggesting disrupted attachment from early trauma affects adult help-seeking and health behaviors.

D. *Moderating and Mediating Variables: Resilience, Social Support, and Family Environment*

Social support, resilience, and family dynamics are important moderators of the ACE–relationship quality link. Quan et al. (2025) noted that while social support did not buffer the direct relationship between trauma and romantic satisfaction, it significantly influenced the trauma–attachment pathway. Daines et al. (2021) found that PCEs enhance family health outcomes and help counteract the impact of ACEs. Chen et al. (2017) proposed a stress-buffering model, showing that supportive family environments could enhance resilience and mitigate trauma effects across development.

E. Long-Term Health and Relational Outcomes of ACEs

James and Bellantonio (2024) explored the influence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on adolescent development, emphasizing their significant impact on brain development and long-term physical, mental, and emotional health. Their findings suggest that unaddressed ACEs can lead to severe developmental consequences; however, these outcomes can be mitigated by fostering resilience in children and adults. This study highlights the importance of early intervention and trauma-informed approaches in supporting emotional growth and cognitive functioning. Fletcher and Schurer (2017) found that adverse childhood experiences, especially abuse and neglect, are strongly linked to higher neuroticism and lower conscientiousness and openness in adulthood. These traits, influenced by adolescent health, may also affect the earnings and life outcomes.

Cumulative ACE exposure is linked to broader psychosocial consequences. Zeanah et al. (2018) explained that toxic stress from ACEs compromises brain development, influencing cognitive, emotional, and relational capacities. Kendall (2022) identified inflammatory markers (IL-6) as biological mediators connecting.

ACEs, mental health, and relationship risks. Studies such as Dua (2021), Vandevender (2014), and London et al. (2017) underscored how ACEs are associated not only with lower relationship satisfaction but also with risky sexual behavior, diminished self-esteem, and poor physical and emotional health in adulthood. Iniguez and Stankowski (2016) found that higher ACE scores were linked to an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and obesity. Interestingly, some conditions, such as hypertension and heart disease, showed inverse relationships with ACEs, suggesting complex health outcomes linked to childhood adversity. Runarsdottir et al. (2025) found that more ACEs lead to poorer health, risk behaviors, and lower quality of life in adulthood. Samardzic et al. (2010) showed that ACEs are linked to higher psychiatric issues and aggression, especially in psychotic patients.

F. ACEs, Family Dynamics, and Transgenerational Impact

Bibi et al. (2025) explored the association between Adverse Childhood Experiences and psychological well-being (PWB) among university students in Pakistan. Their results indicated a significant inverse relationship; higher ACE scores were linked to lower PWB, especially in areas such as autonomy, personal growth, and positive relations. Although age had a notable influence on ACE exposure, gender did not significantly affect either ACEs or PWB. These findings reinforce the existing global evidence of the detrimental psychological outcomes of early adversity, further validating the need for trauma-informed mental health interventions.

The role of family functioning as both a cause and consequence of ACEs has been explored in Indian and global contexts. Kewalramani and Hazra (2022) found that ACEs predicted lower family cohesion and greater conflict among Indian youth. Daines et al. (2021) reported that

ACEs affect family health resources and emotional regulation across generations. Masarik et al. (2017) used the DEARR model to demonstrate how adolescent family experiences shape marital beliefs and influence adult romantic quality, confirming the developmental-contextual nature of relationship outcomes.

G. ACEs and Psychological Well-Being

Heo and Han (2022) demonstrated that ACEs negatively impact PWB in adulthood. However, intrapersonal (self-reflection) intelligence moderated this relationship, suggesting that individuals with higher self-awareness are better able to buffer the negative effects of ACEs on well-being. Adriana et al. (2022) found a significant positive relationship between ACEs and depression in adolescents. Their study showed that ACEs contribute to higher depression levels, regardless of current family conditions, with the youngest children aged 15–17 years being especially vulnerable.

Irshad and Lone (2025) found that university students with more ACEs had lower psychological well-being and emotional intelligence. ACEs significantly predicted lower autonomy, self-acceptance, and emotion regulation. Emotional intelligence played a protective role, suggesting the need for targeted mental health support in academic settings.

H. Gaps in Understanding and Research Impetus

Although existing research has examined the effects of ACEs, key gaps remain. Most studies have failed to explore the combined impact of ACEs on attachment, emotional regulation, and romantic relationships. Romantic relationship satisfaction is often overlooked, and emotional regulation and attachment have rarely been studied together. Cultural and gender influences are underrepresented, and protective factors such as resilience and self-reflection receive limited attention. Additionally, qualitative insights into the lived experiences of individuals after ACEs are scarce. This study addresses these gaps by exploring how ACEs influence adult romantic relationships through emotional and attachment mechanisms.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a narrative and thematic review approach to examine the impact of ACEs on adult romantic relationships. This study aimed to synthesize findings from interdisciplinary research to understand how early life trauma influences adult attachment styles, emotional regulation, psychological well-being, and relationship satisfaction.

A structured keyword-based literature search was conducted across databases such as Google Scholar, APA PsycNet and ResearchGate. Keywords included: “Adverse Childhood Experiences,” “attachment styles,” “emotion regulation,” “romantic relationships,” “psychological well-being,” and “relationship satisfaction.” The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles and empirical studies published between 2016 and 2025,

ensuring contemporary relevance while incorporating foundational theoretical works on attachment and trauma.

Studies were selected that addressed the psychological mechanisms linking ACEs with adult relational outcomes, including mediators such as emotion regulation and moderators such as resilience or social support. The selected studies were reviewed qualitatively and categorized under key thematic areas derived inductively, including (i) ACEs and Attachment, (ii) Emotion Regulation, (iii) Trust and Communication, (iv) Mediating/Moderating Variables, (v) Long-Term Health Outcomes, and (vi) Psychological Well-Being.

This methodology guided the identification and thematic organization of relevant psychological mechanisms linking ACEs to adult romantic relationship outcomes.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

With an emphasis on attachment patterns, emotional regulation, interpersonal trust, psychological well-being, and family dynamics, this thematic review summarizes recent studies on the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on romantic relationships in adulthood. Studies have consistently shown that individuals with high ACE scores

A. Narrative Analysis

➤ Attachment Styles and Relationship Satisfaction

A consistent finding across studies is that ACEs are associated with insecure attachment styles—particularly anxious and avoidant patterns—which, in turn, reduce romantic satisfaction (Khanna & Kumari, 2024; Quan et al., 2025; Snyder et al., 2024). Secure attachment is positively correlated with marital satisfaction (Bedair et al., 2020), whereas higher ACE scores predict emotional detachment and communication difficulties in adult partnerships (Dewi, 2022).

➤ Emotion Regulation as a Mediator

Emotion regulation difficulties have emerged as a key mechanism through which ACEs affect adult relationship outcomes (Buduris, 2019; Zilan et al., 2023). Adults with high ACE exposure often experience emotional suppression or hypervigilance, negatively affecting intimacy and conflict resolution (Brannigan, 2017; Lorenzo et al., 2024).

➤ Impaired Interpersonal Trust and Communication

ACEs contribute to lower levels of trust, honesty, and communicative openness in romantic relationships (Boisvert et al., 2021; Boisvert et al., 2016). Early family conflict and peer interactions significantly predicted lower romantic engagement and increased loneliness in adulthood (Jak, 2016).

➤ Moderators and Protective Factors

Social support and resilience moderate the effects of ACEs, particularly attachment-related distress (Daines et al., 2021; Quan et al., 2025). Positive childhood experiences

(PCEs) and supportive environments act as buffers that reduce emotional harm (Chen et al., 2017).

➤ Long-Term Health and Developmental Outcomes

ACEs have biological and developmental consequences, impacting not only mental health but also relational functioning across the lifespan (James & Bellantonio, 2024; Kendall, 2022). Toxic stress from ACEs influences neural development and emotional intelligence (Zeanah et al., 2018; Dua 2021).

➤ Transgenerational and Family Impact

Studies have highlighted how childhood trauma affects family cohesion and may perpetuate dysfunction across generations (Bibi et al., 2025; Masarik et al., 2017; Kewalramani & Hazra, 2022). Lower parental bonding and higher intergenerational conflicts were frequently observed.

➤ Psychological Well-Being and Coping

A strong inverse relationship was observed between ACEs and psychological well-being, particularly in areas such as autonomy, self-acceptance, and purpose (Heo & Han, 2022). However, individual differences, such as self-reflection intelligence, moderate this impact, enabling adaptive coping in some individuals (Adriana et al., 2022).

This review reveals that ACEs have multifaceted and long-lasting effects on adult romantic relationships through disrupted attachment, emotional dysregulation, reduced trust, and impaired well-being. However, protective factors such as resilience, supportive family dynamics, and self-awareness can mitigate these outcomes. While most studies adopt cross-sectional designs, future longitudinal and culturally contextual research especially in underrepresented populations will be essential to deepen our understanding of trauma's relational legacy and to guide effective therapeutic interventions.

In summary, this review highlights that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) negatively affect adult romantic relationships by disrupting attachment styles, emotional regulation, and interpersonal functioning. Factors such as dissociation, social support, and self-reflection moderate these outcomes. While ACEs often lead to relational difficulties, resilience and early interventions can help individuals form healthier relationships in adulthood. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies and contextual factors to develop effective trauma-informed support systems.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR THERAPEUTIC AID AND INTERVENTION

A. Emotion Regulation and Self-Awareness Interventions

The reviewed studies emphasize that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) negatively impact individuals' emotional regulation, attachment behavior, and interpersonal functioning. Therapeutic approaches that promote emotional awareness, self-reflection, and regulatory skills are crucial. Interventions should focus on helping individuals recognize, process, and effectively manage their

emotions using tools such as mindfulness training, emotion-focused therapy, and psychoeducation. Strengthening these capacities may help individuals navigate relationship difficulties more effectively and reduce emotional reactivity stemming from unresolved childhood traumas.

B. Family-Centered Approaches

Given the relational nature of ACEs, involving family systems in the healing process is essential. Strength-based interventions can enhance communication, reduce conflict, and promote emotional safety within family units. Programs that foster secure attachment, teach conflict resolution, and support parenting skills can help prevent the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Integrative family and parent-child interaction therapies are especially effective in restoring healthy dynamics and building resilience in both children and adults.

C. Building Resilience Through Coping Strategies

Resilience building is a critical pathway for mitigating the long-term effects of ACEs. Teaching adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving, seeking social support, and practicing self-care, can empower individuals to manage stress and enhance their psychological well-being. Counselling programs that integrate cognitive-behavioural techniques, strength-based frameworks, and community support systems show promise in improving emotional outcomes and relationship quality for individuals with a history of childhood adversity.

D. Need for Longitudinal and Comprehensive Assessment

Most studies in the literature adopt cross-sectional designs, limiting causal interpretations and insights into the developmental trajectories. Longitudinal research is necessary to fully understand how ACEs influence adult romantic relationships over time. Such studies can reveal evolving relational patterns and identify protective or risk-enhancing factors. Additionally, researchers must use validated multidimensional tools that assess diverse childhood adversities (e.g., physical abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction) and capture various aspects of adult romantic functioning, including trust, satisfaction, commitment, and communication. A comprehensive assessment ensures an accurate diagnosis and enhances the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions.

VI. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on this thematic review, the following future directions are proposed:

- **Longitudinal Research:** Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to track how ACEs impact romantic relationships over time, beyond single-point associations.
- **Cultural and Contextual Exploration:** Research must explore how sociocultural variables, such as gender norms, family structure, and cultural attitudes, moderate the effects of ACEs on adult relationships, especially in underrepresented or non-Western cultural contexts.
- **Protective Factors and Resilience:** More studies should investigate protective factors (e.g., self-awareness, emotional intelligence, community support) that help

individuals overcome the negative effects of ACEs on their mental health.

- **Integrated Models:** Future research should develop multifactorial models incorporating psychological, biological, and relational dimensions to understand how ACEs shape adult romantic outcomes holistically.
- **Intervention Development:** Relationship-based and trauma-informed interventions tailored for individuals with high ACE exposure should be created and tested to promote emotional regulation, trust, and communication.
- **Transgenerational Patterns:** More research should look at how childhood trauma affects relationship dynamics between generations as well as the individual.

These directions will help fill existing gaps and guide the development of more targeted and culturally responsive interventions.

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