



**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development**

**CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND ITS IMPACT ON  
HAPPINESS AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG YOUNG ADULTS  
IN UNIMAS**

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**Bachelor of Psychology (Honours)**

**2022**

UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

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Final Year Project Report

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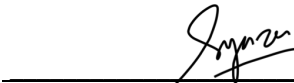
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**CHILDHOOD EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND ITS IMPACT ON HAPPINESS AND COPING  
STRATEGIES AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN UNIMAS**

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a  
Bachelor of Psychology with Honours

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## **Abstract**

In Malaysia, there were still a few studies conducted on childhood emotional abuse and its consequences on happiness as most research would focus on psychopathological consequences, and on a few specific coping strategies such as substance use, unhealthy eating, and social supports. Childhood emotional abuse was rooted in our culture, and it went on in our daily lives whether we were aware of it or not, especially in parenting. Childhood emotional abuse was the verbal assaults on a child's sense of worth, meanwhile, happiness was the emotion of joy, gladness, well-being. Coping strategies was defined as a series of action or thought process that was used when faced with stressful situations. This research focused to study the relationship of childhood emotional abuse on happiness level and on coping strategies. An online survey was distributed among UNIMAS undergraduate students from all of the faculties. The survey included questions from CTQ-SF, Brief-COPE, and Self-rating Happiness Scale. The correlational analysis was done by using Pearson product-moment correlation in SPSS. The results showed that there was a significant negative correlation between childhood emotional abuse and happiness level. For coping strategies, there were significant correlation between childhood emotional abuse and denial, substance use, use of emotional support, behavioural disengagement, self-blame, humour, and religion. Meanwhile, there was no significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and self-distraction, active coping, venting, use of instrumental support, positive reframing, planning, and acceptance.

**Keywords:** Emotional abuse, happiness, coping strategy, young adults.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Introduction

The contents of this chapter included the introductory information of this study which are the background of study, problem statement, research objectives, questions, and hypotheses, conceptual framework of the study, definitions of terms, and the significance of study.

### 1.1 Background of Study

Emotional abuse or psychological abuse was a non-physical abuse that was harmful as much as physical abuse and other types of abuse. Instead of inflicting pain towards one's body part, emotional abuse inflicts pain onto one's mental health and psychological conditions, consciously and unconsciously. Victims tend to not recognize the behaviour of the abuser as an abuse because they were already familiar of the abusive behaviour and also due to codependency, especially in a familial relationship or romantic relationship. Victim of an abuse typically dependent to the abuser such as children and spouses or partner. Emotional abuse could occur in any type of relationship. Emotional abuse presented itself in parent-child relationship, romantic relationship, friendship, and even in workplace among colleagues (IBCCES Learning Community, n.d.). However, in this study emotional abuse was focused on the period during childhood as untreated child of abuse suffered persistent consequences that lasted until adulthood. As the generation changes from time to time, awareness on abuse and violence were spreading to a larger scale, some behaviour of the older people that was inherited and learnt from the past becoming less relevant and would be counted as abuse or violence toward children.

Childhood emotional abuse was found in a parent-child relationship. Parenting styles was one of the methods for how emotional abuse may occur to a child. Research by Yee et al. (2019)

found out that authoritarian and permissive style of parenting were significantly correlated to emotional abuse among adolescents in Kuala Lumpur (KL), Malaysia. Authoritarian parenting style by both parents (mother and father) had strong correlation in developing emotional abuse compared to permissive style and authoritative style. However, unlike permissive and authoritarian style, authoritative parenting style had no significant correlation in emotional abuse among adolescents. Therefore, authoritarian, and permissive parenting style had high tendency for the presence of emotional abuse and high intensity of emotional abuse towards adolescents in KL. Based on a study by Wright (2007) in the Journal of Emotional Abuse, there were five actions or behaviour that could be considered as emotional abuse towards children which were through humiliation, demeaning, use of threatening language and behaviour, refuse to show affection, and isolation of child. For example, parents not allowing their child to meet with their friends, threaten to hit or destroy their belonging, curse their child when they are angry, and condemning the child achievement instead of celebrating were some examples of behaviour that negatively affecting children's emotional and psychological process. Besides parent-child relationship, childhood emotional abuse could come from peers, siblings, and teachers. The effects of emotional abuse were divided into psychopathological effects, neurophysiological effects (Carpenter et al., 2009), and interpersonal functions (Yee et al., 2019). Psychopathological effects included bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, and borderline personality disorder (Gratz et al., 2011), eating disorder (Marshall, 1996), depression, and post-traumatic syndrome disorder (PTSD) (Messman-Moore & Coates, 2007). Interpersonal functions such as relationship issues, adaptational difficulties (Yates, 2007), and attachment issues (Messman-Moore & Coates, 2007) could be disrupted due to emotional abuse in childhood.

For this study, the focus was on individuals coping strategies which might be related to participants history of childhood emotional abuse. It was known that there were plenty coping

strategies been applied by individuals to cope with their problems. Some strategies were greatly beneficial and were known as the adaptive coping, or they could be destructive which helped them to cope in the short-term was also known as maladaptive coping. According to Carver (1997) who developed the Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (COPE) and Brief-COPE, a test to find out individuals coping strategies, there were fourteen types of coping strategies which were active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humour, religion, use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, self-distraction, denial, venting, substance use, behaviour disengagement, and self-blame. The test measured coping styles in term of problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping (*Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory (Brief-COPE)*, 2021). Based on past research, problem-focused coping was highly effective when the adverse experience was perceived as controllable situation while emotion-focused coping and avoidant coping styles were more effective when the adverse situation was perceived as uncontrollable (Smith et al., 2016). In a few studies of emotional abuse and coping strategies, researcher tend to choose a sample of individuals diagnosed with substance use disorder (Loy et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2020) as they assume that they were highly likely to be exposed to an abusive relationship and diagnosis of substance use disorder could be the result of coping. Some other sample groups for measuring individuals coping strategies in past studies included victims of natural disaster (Carver, 1997), breast cancer patients (Yusoff, Low, & Yip, 2010), financial stress, assault victims, and mental illness patients.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Emotional abuse left no physical scars as evidence to a person just like how physical or sexual abuse did. Emotional scars tend to be left untreated that they caused other psychological issues such as low self-esteem, feeling worthless, anxiety, and guilt (*Emotional Abuse*, n.d.). Emotional abuse usually co-occured with other types of abuse as emotional abuse might be in



the form of violent behaviors (Karakurt & Silver, 2013). According to a study by Dye (2019), emotional abuse was strongly correlated with depression, anxiety, stress, and neuroticism personality. This correlation had stronger significant compared to the correlations of physical abuse, sexual abuse, or physical and sexual abuse combined to depression, anxiety, stress, and neuroticism personality. Therefore, depression, anxiety, stress, and neuroticism personality were usually found and was high in intensity in a person who had gone through emotional abuse during childhood. These effects of emotional abuse could persist into adulthood which cause low self-esteem, abandonment issue, and unstable relationship. Compared to previous studies, this research focused on the psychological well-being such as happiness and coping strategies instead of the biopsychosocial effects on mental health. Moreover, as there were still lack of research on emotional abuse in Malaysia on community samples, the study of coping strategies on community samples were also still receiving less spotlight as they focused more on individuals with substance use disorder.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

#### **1.3.1 Main objective**

1. To study childhood emotional abuse, happiness level, and type of coping strategies among young adults in UNIMAS.

#### **1.3.2 Specific Objectives**

1. To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and the level of happiness among young adults in UNIMAS.
2. To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and the type of coping strategies among young adults in UNIMAS.
  - To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and self-distraction as coping strategies

- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and active coping as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and denial as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and substance use as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and use of emotional support as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and behavioural disengagement as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and venting as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and use of instrumental support as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and positive reframing as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and self-blame as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and planning as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and use of humour as coping strategies
- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and acceptance as coping strategies

- To study the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and religion as coping strategies

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

1. What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and the level of happiness among young adults in UNIMAS?
2. What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and their type of coping strategies among young adults in UNIMAS?
  - What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and self-distraction as coping strategies?
  - What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and active coping as coping strategies?
  - What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and denial as coping strategies?
  - What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and substance use as coping strategies?
  - What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and use of emotional support as coping strategies?
  - What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and behavioural disengagement as coping strategies?
  - What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and venting as coping strategies?
  - What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and use of instrumental support as coping strategies?
  - What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and positive reframing as coping strategies?

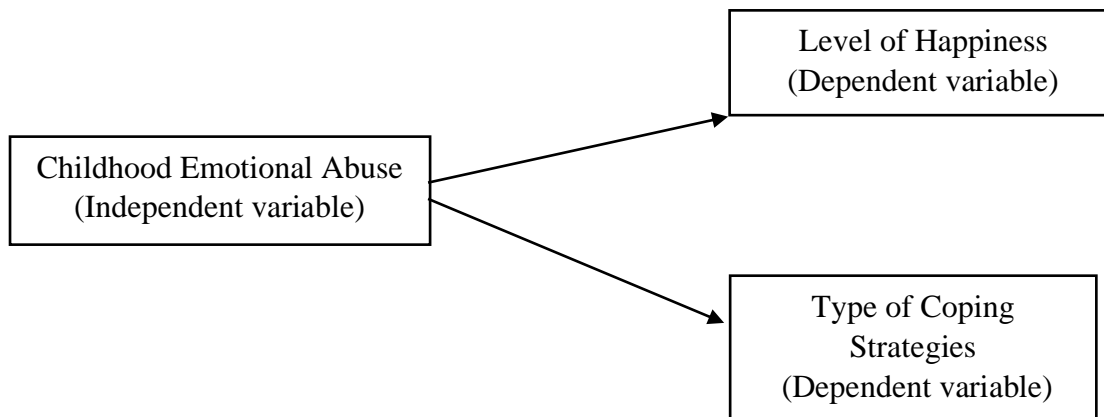
- What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and self-blame as coping strategies?
- What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and planning as coping strategies?
- What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and use of humour as coping strategies?
- What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and acceptance as coping strategies?
- What is the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and religion as coping strategies?

### **1.5 Research Hypotheses**

1. There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and level of happiness among young adults in UNIMAS.
2. There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and type of coping strategies among young adults in UNIMAS.
  - There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and self-distraction as coping strategies.
  - There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and active coping as coping strategies.
  - There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and denial as coping strategies.
  - There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and substance use as coping strategies.
  - There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and use of emotional support as coping strategies.

- There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and behavioural disengagement as coping strategies.
- There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and venting as coping strategies.
- There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and use of instrumental support as coping strategies.
- There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and positive reframing as coping strategies.
- There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and self-blame as coping strategies.
- There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and planning as coping strategies.
- There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and use of humour as coping strategies.
- There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and acceptance as coping strategies.
- There is a significant relationship between childhood emotional abuse and religion as coping strategies.

## 1.6 Conceptual Framework



*Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of this study*

## 1.7 Definition of Terms

### 1.7.1 Emotional Abuse

#### Conceptual Definition

Also known as psychological abuse, a pattern of behaviour that is performed repeatedly and intentionally that may cause damage to individuals' behavioural and affective functioning as well as one's mental well-being. Emotional abuse can be in a form of verbal abuse, intimidation, humiliation, exploitation, harassment, rejection, isolation, and excessive control. (American Psychology Association, n.d.).

#### Operational Definition

According to Bernstein et al. (2003), emotional abuse defined as "verbal assaults on a child's sense of worth or well-being or any humiliating or demeaning behaviour directed toward a child by an adult or older person" (p. 175). Emotional abuse was measured by the questions from emotional abuse subscale of Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form on how damaging behaviour such as violence and neglect affect individual emotionally. From a scale of one to five, participants rated the frequency and severity of their experience in emotional abuse (Watts et al., 2020).

## **1.7.2 Happiness**

### **Conceptual Definition**

According to American Psychology Association (APA) (n.d. -a), happiness is an emotion of joy, gladness, satisfaction, and well-being.

### **Operational definition**

Measuring the current level of joy, satisfaction, and well-being of individuals through a single-item scale developed by Abdel-Khalek (2006). The item was rated on an 11-point scale, zero (0) as the lowest level of happiness to ten (10) as the highest level of happiness for a person.

## **1.7.3 Coping Strategy**

### **Conceptual Definition**

APA (n.d. -b) defined coping strategy as a series of actions or a thought process that is used when faced with a stressful event or adverse situation, or in modifying reactions to such situation.

### **Operational Definition**

Identification of individuals' coping strategy by using brief-COPE (Carver, 1997) that has two items from fourteen facets. From a scale of zero to three, participants reported the frequency of them applying coping methods in the presence of stressors in daily life.

## **1.8 Significance of Study**

As stated in the problem statement, this study could shed more lights into the study of emotional abuse, especially in Malaysia, as there had been lack of spotlight given to the study of emotional abuse. From this study, the gap in the study of childhood emotional abuse and psychological well-being was expected to be reduced by a little. This study would benefit not just the abused victims but would be useful in preventing emotional abuse towards children from their parents

as emotional abuse could occur unintentionally. This study would benefit the community in order to help and assist the victims of emotional abuse for treatments, counselling, and living better life.

## **1.9 Summary**

In this chapter, we covered the background of study, problem statement, research objectives, questions, and hypotheses, the conceptual framework of the study, definitions of terms, and significance of this study.