

## The Relationship Between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Intimacy Avoidance in Women: The Mediating Roles of Rejection Sensitivity, Self-Compassion, and Attachment Anxiety

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to examine the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance in women and to investigate the mediating roles of rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety within a structural equation modeling framework.

**Methods and Materials:** The present study employed a cross-sectional correlational design. The study population consisted of adult women residing in Canada during the 2025–2026 research period. A total of 548 women aged 18 to 62 years ( $M = 34.71$ ,  $SD = 9.42$ ) were selected through online convenience sampling and participated voluntarily. Data were collected using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form (CTQ-SF), Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ), Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised (ECR-R), and Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS). Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were performed using SPSS version 29. Structural equation modeling and bootstrap analyses with 5,000 resamples were conducted using AMOS version 29 to evaluate direct and indirect relationships among the study variables.

**Findings:** The proposed structural model demonstrated excellent fit to the data ( $\chi^2/df = 2.22$ ,  $CFI = .957$ ,  $TLI = .951$ ,  $GFI = .924$ ,  $AGFI = .908$ ,  $RMSEA = .047$ ,  $SRMR = .041$ ). Childhood emotional neglect was positively associated with rejection sensitivity ( $\beta = .58$ ,  $p < .001$ ), attachment anxiety ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and intimacy avoidance ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while negatively associated with self-compassion ( $\beta = -.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Rejection sensitivity positively predicted attachment anxiety ( $\beta = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and intimacy avoidance ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Self-compassion negatively predicted attachment anxiety ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and intimacy avoidance ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Attachment anxiety emerged as the strongest predictor of intimacy avoidance ( $\beta = .54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Bootstrap analyses confirmed significant indirect effects through rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, attachment anxiety, and their serial pathways, indicating partial mediation.

**Conclusion:** The findings suggest that childhood emotional neglect exerts a substantial influence on women's intimacy avoidance through interconnected cognitive, emotional, and attachment-related mechanisms. Rejection sensitivity and attachment anxiety function as risk factors, whereas self-compassion serves as a protective factor. Interventions designed to enhance self-compassion, reduce rejection sensitivity, and promote attachment security may help mitigate the long-term relational consequences of childhood emotional neglect and improve women's capacity for emotional intimacy and healthy interpersonal relationships.

**Keywords:** *Childhood emotional neglect, intimacy avoidance, rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, attachment anxiety, women*

## 1. Introduction

Childhood emotional neglect is increasingly recognized as one of the most pervasive yet least visible forms of childhood adversity. Unlike overt forms of abuse, emotional neglect involves the persistent failure of caregivers to provide adequate emotional responsiveness, affection, validation, and psychological support during critical developmental periods. Because emotional neglect is characterized by the absence of expected caregiving behaviors rather than the presence of harmful actions, its long-term consequences are often underestimated despite substantial evidence demonstrating its profound influence on socioemotional development and adult interpersonal functioning (Dinzeo et al., 2025; Topino & Gori, 2025). Developmental theories suggest that children construct internal working models of themselves and others based on repeated interactions with caregivers. When emotional needs are consistently ignored or invalidated, children may develop beliefs that they are unworthy of love and that others are unreliable sources of support, beliefs that frequently persist into adulthood and shape intimate relationships (Chen, 2023; Scharfe, 2026).

The significance of childhood emotional neglect has become increasingly apparent in contemporary psychological research because of its association with a wide range of adverse mental health and relational outcomes. Studies have linked emotionally neglectful childhood environments to depression, anxiety, maladaptive schemas, emotional dysregulation, interpersonal dysfunction, and difficulties forming secure attachment bonds throughout the lifespan (Gibbons, 2024; K., 2024; Wang, 2023). Research further indicates that experiences of neglect during childhood may be particularly damaging because they undermine the development of emotional competencies necessary for establishing healthy adult relationships. Individuals exposed to emotional neglect frequently report difficulties identifying emotions, trusting others, and

engaging in reciprocal intimacy, all of which may interfere with the formation and maintenance of satisfying romantic partnerships (Papalia & Widom, 2023; Topino & Gori, 2025).

One of the most important relational consequences of childhood emotional neglect is intimacy avoidance. Intimacy avoidance refers to a tendency to resist emotional closeness, suppress vulnerability, limit self-disclosure, and maintain emotional distance in close relationships. Although intimacy is considered a central component of psychological well-being and relationship satisfaction, individuals who experienced emotionally unavailable caregiving often perceive intimacy as threatening rather than rewarding (Karveli et al., 2025; Zhou, 2024). These individuals may fear dependence, anticipate rejection, or struggle to trust romantic partners, leading to persistent avoidance of emotional closeness. Research consistently demonstrates that disruptions in early caregiving environments contribute to difficulties in adult intimacy by shaping expectations regarding safety, acceptance, and emotional responsiveness within interpersonal relationships (Doorn et al., 2024; Kara & Şahin, 2022). Consequently, understanding the mechanisms through which childhood emotional neglect contributes to intimacy avoidance remains a critical area of investigation within developmental and relationship psychology.

Attachment theory provides one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the connection between early neglect experiences and later interpersonal functioning. According to attachment theory, interactions with primary caregivers establish relational templates that guide expectations and behaviors in future relationships. Secure attachment develops when caregivers consistently provide emotional support and responsiveness, whereas neglectful or inconsistent caregiving contributes to insecure attachment patterns characterized by anxiety, avoidance, or both (Khan et al., 2022; Scharfe, 2026). Numerous studies have documented associations between childhood adversity and

insecure attachment in adulthood, suggesting that early emotional neglect undermines the development of secure relational expectations (Almeida & Costa, 2023; Dinzeo et al., 2025; Papalia & Widom, 2023). Individuals exposed to neglect often exhibit heightened attachment anxiety, characterized by fears of abandonment, excessive reassurance seeking, and concerns regarding relationship stability. Such attachment-related insecurities may subsequently interfere with intimacy development by increasing sensitivity to interpersonal threats and emotional vulnerability (Falgares et al., 2024; Karaköse & Ledermann, 2026).

Attachment anxiety has emerged as a particularly important construct in understanding interpersonal maladjustment. Individuals with elevated attachment anxiety tend to exhibit hyperactivation of the attachment system, resulting in excessive concern regarding rejection and abandonment. Although they often desire closeness and connection, their heightened fears can paradoxically undermine relationship quality and contribute to dysfunctional interpersonal patterns (Karveli et al., 2025; Wong & Denson, 2025). Empirical evidence suggests that attachment anxiety mediates the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and various psychological outcomes, including emotional distress, relationship instability, infidelity, and psychopathology (Doorn et al., 2024; Pinto-Cortez et al., 2023). Furthermore, attachment anxiety has been associated with increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety disorders, and maladaptive emotional regulation strategies, emphasizing its significance as a mechanism linking childhood experiences to adult adjustment (Scharfe, 2026; Wang, 2023).

Another psychological process that may explain the connection between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance is rejection sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity refers to the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to interpersonal rejection. Individuals who experience emotional neglect during childhood may become particularly vigilant to signs of rejection because their developmental experiences repeatedly communicated that their emotional needs would not be adequately met (Aracı-İyiyaydın et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2022). Such experiences may foster expectations of interpersonal disappointment and increase defensive responses in close relationships. Rejection-sensitive individuals often interpret ambiguous interpersonal cues as evidence of rejection, which can create cycles of withdrawal,

mistrust, and avoidance that undermine relationship functioning (Aracı-İyiyaydın et al., 2023; Zhou, 2024).

Recent empirical findings indicate that perceptions of rejection play a critical role in the development and maintenance of insecure relational patterns. Experiences of interpersonal rejection have been linked to attachment insecurity, emotional dependence, relationship dissatisfaction, and impaired emotional regulation (Aracı-İyiyaydın et al., 2023; Kaya et al., 2023). Moreover, rejection sensitivity appears to amplify the psychological impact of adverse childhood experiences by increasing vulnerability to emotional distress and relational difficulties. Individuals who anticipate rejection may avoid intimacy as a self-protective strategy designed to minimize the risk of emotional pain, thereby perpetuating cycles of interpersonal isolation and dissatisfaction (Doorn et al., 2024; Papalia & Widom, 2023). Despite the theoretical relevance of rejection sensitivity, relatively few studies have simultaneously examined its role alongside attachment anxiety in explaining the long-term effects of childhood emotional neglect on adult intimacy.

In addition to attachment-related vulnerabilities, growing attention has been directed toward self-compassion as a protective psychological resource that may mitigate the consequences of adverse childhood experiences. Self-compassion involves treating oneself with kindness, recognizing one's difficulties as part of the shared human experience, and maintaining balanced awareness of emotional suffering. Individuals with high levels of self-compassion tend to demonstrate greater emotional resilience, adaptive coping, and interpersonal functioning (Amari et al., 2022; Tavares et al., 2022). Conversely, individuals exposed to neglectful childhood environments frequently exhibit lower levels of self-compassion because their early experiences failed to provide models of emotional warmth, acceptance, and validation (Huynh et al., 2021; Quinlan et al., 2021).

Research increasingly supports the notion that self-compassion serves as a crucial mediator between attachment experiences and psychological adjustment. Secure attachment has been associated with greater self-compassion, whereas attachment insecurity predicts self-criticism, emotional avoidance, and fear of compassion (Amari et al., 2022; Deniz & Kurtuluş, 2023). Self-compassion has also been linked to relationship satisfaction, emotional regulation, psychological well-being, and resilience in the face of stress (Etxaburu et al., 2024; Huynh et al., 2021). Furthermore, self-compassion appears to buffer

the adverse effects of attachment insecurity on emotional functioning by promoting self-acceptance and reducing maladaptive responses to interpersonal stressors (Etxaburu et al., 2024; West et al., 2022). These findings suggest that self-compassion may represent an important mechanism through which childhood emotional neglect influences adult intimacy outcomes.

The relevance of self-compassion becomes particularly evident when considered alongside attachment processes. Developmental experiences characterized by emotional neglect may prevent children from internalizing supportive and nurturing self-representations, leading to persistent self-criticism and emotional vulnerability. Over time, diminished self-compassion may contribute to attachment anxiety and rejection sensitivity by reinforcing beliefs of unworthiness and expectations of interpersonal rejection (Quinlan et al., 2021; Topino & Gori, 2025). Consequently, self-compassion may function not only as an independent predictor of relational adjustment but also as a psychological pathway linking childhood adversity to adult relationship difficulties (Deniz & Kurtuluş, 2023; Huynh et al., 2021).

Contemporary research increasingly emphasizes the interconnected nature of childhood adversity, attachment insecurity, self-compassion, and interpersonal functioning. Studies have demonstrated that childhood neglect predicts insecure attachment styles, maladaptive schemas, emotional dysregulation, and relationship difficulties across diverse populations (Bahmani et al., 2022; Kaya et al., 2023; Topino & Gori, 2025). Similarly, attachment insecurity has been associated with poor mental health outcomes, relational dissatisfaction, and impaired emotional well-being (Karaköse & Ledermann, 2026; Wong & Denson, 2025). Evidence also suggests that adverse childhood experiences contribute to psychopathology through attachment-related mechanisms, highlighting the importance of examining intermediary psychological processes rather than focusing solely on direct associations (Dinzeo et al., 2025; Pinto-Cortez et al., 2023). Additionally, parental qualities and caregiving behaviors have been shown to exert enduring influences on emotional and relational development, reinforcing the importance of early family experiences in shaping adult interpersonal functioning (Ankori et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2022).

Although previous studies have independently examined childhood maltreatment, attachment insecurity, self-compassion, and relationship outcomes, important gaps remain in the literature. First, relatively few investigations have focused specifically on emotional neglect, despite

evidence suggesting that it exerts unique effects distinct from other forms of childhood adversity (Falgares et al., 2024; Topino & Gori, 2025). Second, research has rarely integrated rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety within a single explanatory framework. Existing studies typically investigate these constructs separately, limiting understanding of how they collectively contribute to intimacy avoidance. Third, despite growing recognition of women's relational experiences and vulnerabilities, limited research has examined these pathways specifically among adult women, a population for whom intimacy, attachment, and emotional connectedness are particularly salient aspects of psychological well-being (Giacomo et al., 2024; Paivio & Pascual-Leone, 2023; Prato-Previde et al., 2022).

Addressing these limitations is important because identifying mediating mechanisms may provide valuable insights for prevention and intervention efforts. If rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety explain the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance, interventions targeting these processes may help reduce the long-term interpersonal consequences of adverse childhood experiences. Such knowledge could contribute to the development of attachment-informed and compassion-focused therapeutic approaches designed to improve relational functioning and emotional well-being among women with histories of emotional neglect (Amari et al., 2022; Huynh et al., 2021; Karaköse & Ledermann, 2026).

Therefore, the present study aimed to examine the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance in women and to investigate the mediating roles of rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety in this relationship.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

This study employed a cross-sectional, correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the direct and indirect relationships between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance in women through the mediating roles of rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety. The target population consisted of adult women residing in Canada during the 2025–2026 research period. Participants were recruited through online advertisements disseminated via social media platforms, community organizations, women's support

networks, and university mailing lists across several Canadian provinces. Eligibility criteria included being female, at least 18 years of age, currently residing in Canada, and having sufficient English language proficiency to complete the study questionnaires. Women who reported severe cognitive impairments or who submitted incomplete questionnaires exceeding 10% missing responses were excluded from the final analyses.

A total of 612 women initially accessed the online survey. Following data screening procedures, including the removal of incomplete responses, duplicate submissions, and questionnaires exhibiting response inconsistencies, 548 participants were retained for the final analyses. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 62 years, with a mean age of 34.71 years ( $SD = 9.42$ ). The sample represented diverse educational, occupational, and marital backgrounds. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data protection procedures. Electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Participation was anonymous, and respondents were permitted to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

## 2.2. Measures

Childhood emotional neglect was assessed using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire–Short Form developed by Bernstein et al. (2003). The CTQ-SF is a widely used self-report instrument designed to retrospectively assess experiences of childhood maltreatment. The questionnaire consists of 28 items distributed across five dimensions, including emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect. For the purposes of the present study, the Emotional Neglect subscale comprising five items was utilized. Participants responded to each statement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never True) to 5 (Very Often True). Higher scores indicate greater experiences of emotional neglect during childhood. Previous studies have demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties for the CTQ-SF across diverse cultural populations, with strong evidence supporting its validity and reliability.

Rejection sensitivity was measured using the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire developed by Downey and Feldman (1996). This instrument assesses individuals' tendencies to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and

intensely react to interpersonal rejection. The questionnaire contains 18 hypothetical interpersonal situations involving potential rejection. For each situation, respondents rate both their level of anxiety concerning possible rejection and their expectations regarding acceptance. Composite rejection sensitivity scores are calculated by combining expectancy and anxiety ratings across situations. Higher scores reflect greater rejection sensitivity. The RSQ has been extensively used in psychological research and has consistently demonstrated strong construct validity, internal consistency, and test–retest reliability.

Self-compassion was assessed using the Self-Compassion Scale developed by Neff (2003). The scale consists of 26 items measuring six components of self-compassion: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. Participants indicate the frequency with which they experience each statement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Almost Never) to 5 (Almost Always). After reverse-scoring negatively worded items, higher total scores represent greater levels of self-compassion. The Self-Compassion Scale has been widely validated across clinical and non-clinical populations and demonstrates excellent internal consistency, convergent validity, and factorial validity.

Attachment anxiety was measured using the Experiences in Close Relationships–Revised questionnaire developed by Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000). The ECR-R is a 36-item self-report measure assessing adult romantic attachment patterns through two primary dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. The present study utilized the Attachment Anxiety subscale, which consists of 18 items evaluating fears of abandonment, excessive need for reassurance, and concerns regarding relationship security. Participants responded using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate elevated attachment anxiety. Numerous studies have reported excellent psychometric characteristics for the ECR-R, including strong reliability, temporal stability, and construct validity.

Intimacy avoidance was assessed using the Fear of Intimacy Scale developed by Descutner and Thelen (1991). The instrument contains 35 items designed to measure discomfort with emotional closeness, reluctance to disclose personal information, and difficulties establishing intimate interpersonal relationships. Responses are provided on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at All Characteristic of Me) to 5 (Extremely Characteristic of Me).

Higher scores indicate greater avoidance of intimacy and emotional closeness within interpersonal relationships. The Fear of Intimacy Scale has demonstrated satisfactory validity and reliability in both community and clinical samples and is widely recognized as a comprehensive measure of intimacy-related difficulties.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 and AMOS version 29. Initially, descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis values, were calculated for all study variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine bivariate relationships among childhood emotional neglect, rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, attachment anxiety, and intimacy avoidance. Prior to model testing, assumptions of multivariate normality, linearity, absence of multicollinearity, and adequacy of sample size were evaluated.

Structural equation modeling was subsequently employed to examine the hypothesized serial mediation model. Direct, indirect, and total effects were estimated simultaneously. Model fit was evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ ), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). To assess the significance of indirect effects, bias-corrected bootstrap procedures with

5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals were employed. Indirect effects were considered statistically significant when confidence intervals did not include zero. Statistical significance for all analyses was established at  $p < .05$ . The final model evaluated the extent to which childhood emotional neglect predicted intimacy avoidance directly and indirectly through heightened rejection sensitivity, reduced self-compassion, and increased attachment anxiety among Canadian women.

### 3. Findings and Results

A total of 548 Canadian women were included in the final analyses. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 62 years ( $M = 34.71$ ,  $SD = 9.42$ ). Regarding educational attainment, 18.4% had completed high school, 24.8% held a college diploma, 39.6% possessed a bachelor's degree, and 17.2% had completed postgraduate studies. In terms of marital status, 46.9% were married or cohabiting, 38.5% were single, and 14.6% were divorced, separated, or widowed. Employment status indicated that 61.1% were employed full-time, 14.8% were employed part-time, 12.6% were students, and 11.5% reported being unemployed or homemakers. The demographic distribution reflected substantial variability in age, educational background, and relationship status, providing an appropriate sample for examining interpersonal and attachment-related processes among adult women. Data screening procedures confirmed acceptable levels of normality for all study variables, with skewness and kurtosis values remaining within recommended thresholds for structural equation modeling.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables*

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Childhood Emotional Neglect	16.84	5.41	—				
2. Rejection Sensitivity	12.73	3.82	.58***	—			
3. Self-Compassion	78.65	15.94	-.51***	-.56***	—		
4. Attachment Anxiety	67.29	14.11	.62***	.68***	-.59***	—	
5. Intimacy Avoidance	101.43	19.72	.54***	.61***	-.49***	.71***	—

\*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for the principal study variables. Childhood emotional neglect demonstrated significant positive associations with rejection sensitivity ( $r = .58$ ,  $p < .001$ ), attachment anxiety ( $r = .62$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and intimacy avoidance ( $r = .54$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while exhibiting a significant negative association with self-compassion ( $r = -.51$ ,  $p <$

$.001$ ). Rejection sensitivity was positively related to attachment anxiety ( $r = .68$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and intimacy avoidance ( $r = .61$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas it was negatively associated with self-compassion ( $r = -.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Self-compassion demonstrated significant inverse relationships with attachment anxiety ( $r = -.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and intimacy avoidance ( $r = -.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The strongest observed

correlation emerged between attachment anxiety and intimacy avoidance ( $r = .71, p < .001$ ), suggesting a substantial association between attachment insecurity and difficulties in establishing emotional closeness. Overall, the

pattern of correlations was consistent with the proposed theoretical model and provided preliminary support for testing the hypothesized mediation pathways through structural equation modeling.

**Table 2**

*Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model*

Fit Index	Obtained Value	Recommended Value	Interpretation
$\chi^2$	486.73	—	—
df	219	—	—
$\chi^2/df$	2.22	< 3.00	Good Fit
CFI	.957	> .90	Excellent Fit
TLI	.951	> .90	Excellent Fit
GFI	.924	> .90	Good Fit
AGFI	.908	> .90	Good Fit
RMSEA	.047	< .08	Excellent Fit
SRMR	.041	< .08	Excellent Fit

The fit indices presented in Table 2 indicate that the hypothesized structural model demonstrated an excellent fit to the observed data. The chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio ( $\chi^2/df = 2.22$ ) was well below the recommended threshold of 3.00, suggesting satisfactory model parsimony. Incremental fit indices including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI = .957) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = .951) exceeded .95, indicating excellent correspondence between the proposed model and empirical data. Likewise, the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI = .924) and Adjusted

Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI = .908) surpassed recommended criteria. Error-based indices further supported model adequacy, with RMSEA (.047) and SRMR (.041) both falling within ranges indicative of excellent fit. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the theoretical model linking childhood emotional neglect to intimacy avoidance through rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety adequately represented the covariance structure observed within the sample.

**Table 3**

*Standardized Direct Effects Among Study Variables*

Structural Path	$\beta$	SE	CR	p
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Rejection Sensitivity	.58	.04	13.72	< .001
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Self-Compassion	-.44	.05	-10.88	< .001
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Attachment Anxiety	.29	.05	6.37	< .001
Rejection Sensitivity → Attachment Anxiety	.45	.04	10.91	< .001
Rejection Sensitivity → Intimacy Avoidance	.23	.05	5.11	< .001
Self-Compassion → Attachment Anxiety	-.31	.04	-7.29	< .001
Self-Compassion → Intimacy Avoidance	-.18	.05	-4.14	< .001
Attachment Anxiety → Intimacy Avoidance	.54	.04	12.76	< .001
Childhood Emotional Neglect → Intimacy Avoidance	.17	.05	3.82	< .001

The direct-effect estimates presented in Table 3 revealed that childhood emotional neglect significantly predicted all proposed mediating variables. Women reporting higher levels of emotional neglect during childhood demonstrated greater rejection sensitivity ( $\beta = .58, p < .001$ ), lower self-compassion ( $\beta = -.44, p < .001$ ), and higher attachment anxiety ( $\beta = .29, p < .001$ ). Rejection sensitivity emerged as a significant positive predictor of both attachment anxiety ( $\beta$

$= .45, p < .001$ ) and intimacy avoidance ( $\beta = .23, p < .001$ ). Self-compassion exerted protective effects, significantly reducing both attachment anxiety ( $\beta = -.31, p < .001$ ) and intimacy avoidance ( $\beta = -.18, p < .001$ ). Attachment anxiety demonstrated the strongest direct effect on intimacy avoidance ( $\beta = .54, p < .001$ ), indicating that fears of abandonment and relationship insecurity substantially contributed to avoidance of emotional closeness. Even after

accounting for the mediators, childhood emotional neglect maintained a significant direct effect on intimacy avoidance

( $\beta = .17, p < .001$ ), suggesting the presence of partial rather than complete mediation.

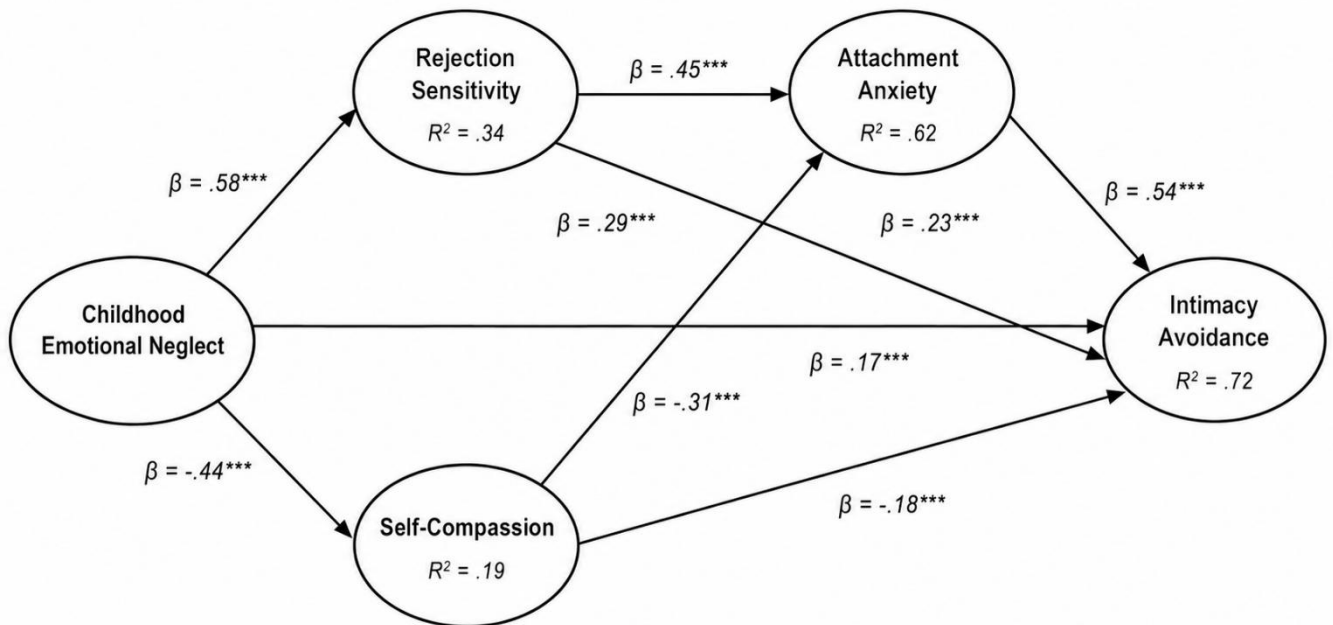
**Table 4**

*Bootstrap Analysis of Indirect Effects*

Indirect Path	Standardized Effect	Boot SE	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Result
Emotional Neglect → Rejection Sensitivity → Intimacy Avoidance	.133	.021	.095	.179	Significant
Emotional Neglect → Self-Compassion → Intimacy Avoidance	.079	.017	.048	.116	Significant
Emotional Neglect → Attachment Anxiety → Intimacy Avoidance	.157	.024	.112	.206	Significant
Emotional Neglect → Rejection Sensitivity → Attachment Anxiety → Intimacy Avoidance	.141	.022	.101	.188	Significant
Emotional Neglect → Self-Compassion → Attachment Anxiety → Intimacy Avoidance	.074	.015	.046	.108	Significant
Total Indirect Effect	.584	.037	.516	.654	Significant
Total Effect	.754	.041	.677	.829	Significant

**Figure 1**

*Structural Model Linking Childhood Emotional Neglect to Intimacy Avoidance Through Rejection Sensitivity, Self-Compassion, and Attachment Anxiety*



Note. All path coefficients are standardized ( $\beta$ ).  $*** p < .001$ .  $R^2$  values indicate the proportion of variance explained in endogenous variables.

Bootstrap analyses based on 5,000 resamples demonstrated that all hypothesized indirect pathways were statistically significant because none of the confidence intervals included zero. The indirect pathway through attachment anxiety alone produced the largest individual mediating effect ( $\beta = .157$ ), indicating that emotional neglect contributes substantially to intimacy avoidance through the development of insecure attachment dynamics. The serial

pathway involving rejection sensitivity and attachment anxiety also demonstrated a strong mediating effect ( $\beta = .141$ ), suggesting that emotionally neglected women may become increasingly vigilant toward rejection, which subsequently intensifies attachment-related fears and contributes to avoidance of intimacy. The indirect pathway through self-compassion and attachment anxiety was likewise significant ( $\beta = .074$ ), indicating that diminished

self-compassion represents an additional mechanism linking childhood neglect experiences to later interpersonal difficulties. The total indirect effect was substantial ( $\beta = .584$ ), accounting for the majority of the overall relationship between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance. The total effect of childhood emotional neglect on intimacy avoidance remained strong ( $\beta = .754$ ), highlighting the enduring influence of early emotional deprivation on adult relational functioning. Taken together, these findings provide robust empirical support for the proposed serial mediation model and demonstrate that rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety collectively explain a considerable proportion of the association between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance among Canadian women.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance in women, with particular emphasis on the mediating roles of rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety. The findings demonstrated that childhood emotional neglect was positively associated with rejection sensitivity, attachment anxiety, and intimacy avoidance, while being negatively associated with self-compassion. Furthermore, the structural equation model revealed that rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety significantly mediated the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance. The overall model exhibited excellent fit indices, suggesting that the proposed theoretical framework effectively explained the pathways through which early emotional neglect influences adult relational functioning. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the enduring influence of childhood emotional experiences on adult attachment processes and intimate relationship outcomes.

One of the principal findings of the study was the significant positive relationship between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance. Women who reported higher levels of emotional neglect during childhood also reported greater difficulties with emotional closeness, vulnerability, and interpersonal intimacy in adulthood. This finding aligns with attachment theory, which proposes that emotionally unavailable caregiving environments interfere with the development of secure internal working models and reduce confidence in the availability and responsiveness of

significant others (Chen, 2023; Scharfe, 2026). Children whose emotional needs are repeatedly ignored may learn to suppress emotional expression and avoid dependency on others as adaptive survival strategies. Although these strategies may reduce emotional pain during childhood, they often become maladaptive in adulthood, limiting the capacity for intimacy and relational trust.

The observed relationship between emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance is consistent with previous research demonstrating that adverse childhood experiences undermine adult relationship functioning. Topino and Gori reported that childhood neglect significantly predicted maladaptive self-conceptions and insecure attachment patterns in adulthood, which subsequently influenced interpersonal functioning (Topino & Gori, 2025). Similarly, Doorn et al. found that adverse childhood experiences were associated with relational difficulties through attachment-related mechanisms (Doorn et al., 2024). The present findings extend this literature by specifically demonstrating that emotional neglect contributes to avoidance of intimacy among women, highlighting the long-term relational consequences of emotionally deprived developmental environments.

Another important finding was the strong positive relationship between childhood emotional neglect and rejection sensitivity. Women who experienced higher levels of emotional neglect were more likely to anticipate rejection and respond defensively to perceived interpersonal threats. This finding is theoretically consistent with developmental perspectives suggesting that repeated experiences of emotional unavailability foster expectations that emotional needs will remain unmet in future relationships. Such expectations increase vigilance toward signs of rejection and contribute to heightened interpersonal sensitivity (Araci-İyaydm et al., 2023). When caregivers fail to provide emotional validation, children may internalize beliefs that they are unworthy of care or acceptance, leading them to interpret ambiguous social interactions as evidence of rejection.

This finding corresponds with prior empirical evidence linking adverse childhood experiences to maladaptive interpersonal expectations. Yu et al. demonstrated that parental neglect contributes to insecure relational perceptions and emotional difficulties through attachment-related pathways (Yu et al., 2022). Likewise, Kaya et al. reported that childhood trauma significantly predicts interpersonal cognitive distortions that increase vulnerability to relational difficulties (Kaya et al., 2023). The present

results suggest that rejection sensitivity may represent an important cognitive-affective mechanism through which emotional neglect shapes adult interpersonal functioning. Women who become chronically vigilant to rejection may avoid intimacy as a means of minimizing the possibility of emotional hurt, thereby reinforcing patterns of relational withdrawal.

The study also found a significant negative relationship between childhood emotional neglect and self-compassion. Women who reported more severe neglect experiences demonstrated lower levels of self-kindness, emotional acceptance, and compassionate self-understanding. This finding is consistent with theoretical models proposing that self-compassion develops through experiences of emotional warmth, validation, and caregiving responsiveness during childhood. When such experiences are absent, individuals may struggle to internalize nurturing self-representations and instead develop self-critical and emotionally punitive attitudes (Amari et al., 2022; Quinlan et al., 2021).

Previous studies have similarly documented associations between childhood maltreatment and diminished self-compassion. Quinlan et al. found that childhood maltreatment predicted lower self-compassion and more insecure attachment orientations among adolescents exposed to high-risk environments (Quinlan et al., 2021). Huynh et al. further demonstrated that self-compassion mediates the relationship between attachment security and intimate relationship quality (Huynh et al., 2021). The present findings reinforce these observations and suggest that emotional neglect may disrupt the development of adaptive self-relating processes that are essential for healthy emotional and interpersonal functioning. Without self-compassion, individuals may find it difficult to regulate distress, tolerate vulnerability, and engage in emotionally intimate relationships.

A further key finding concerned the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and attachment anxiety. The results indicated that women with greater histories of emotional neglect exhibited higher levels of attachment anxiety characterized by fears of abandonment, excessive reassurance seeking, and concerns regarding relationship security. This finding aligns closely with attachment theory and a substantial body of empirical research demonstrating that emotionally inconsistent or neglectful caregiving contributes to insecure attachment representations (Almeida & Costa, 2023; Khan et al., 2022). Emotional neglect may prevent children from developing confidence in the reliability of attachment figures, resulting in heightened

concerns about rejection and abandonment during adulthood.

The present findings are supported by numerous previous investigations. Falgares et al. reported that childhood emotional maltreatment predicts anxious attachment patterns and subsequent psychological difficulties (Falgares et al., 2024). Likewise, Papalia and Widom found that insecure attachment styles mediate the effects of childhood maltreatment on maladaptive behavioral outcomes (Papalia & Widom, 2023). Dinzeo et al. similarly demonstrated that adverse childhood experiences significantly influence adult attachment styles and emotional functioning (Dinzeo et al., 2025). Together, these studies support the interpretation that attachment anxiety constitutes a central mechanism linking early neglect experiences to later relational dysfunction.

One of the most notable findings of the present study was that attachment anxiety exerted the strongest direct effect on intimacy avoidance among all variables included in the model. Although attachment-anxious individuals often desire closeness, their fears of abandonment and rejection may create interpersonal dynamics that ultimately discourage authentic intimacy. Constant concerns regarding relationship stability can generate emotional exhaustion, mistrust, and defensive relational strategies that undermine closeness. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that attachment insecurity predicts poorer relationship quality, emotional distress, and maladaptive interpersonal behaviors (Karaköse & Ledermann, 2026; Wong & Denson, 2025). Individuals who fear abandonment may simultaneously crave and avoid intimacy because emotional closeness increases perceived vulnerability to rejection.

The mediation analyses provided particularly important insights regarding the mechanisms underlying intimacy avoidance. The indirect effects indicated that rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and attachment anxiety each significantly contributed to explaining the association between childhood emotional neglect and intimacy avoidance. These findings suggest that emotional neglect does not influence adult relationships solely through direct pathways but also through a network of interconnected psychological processes. Women who experience neglect may become more sensitive to rejection, less compassionate toward themselves, and more anxious within attachment relationships, all of which increase the likelihood of avoiding emotional intimacy.

The significant mediation effect of rejection sensitivity supports theoretical models emphasizing the role of

interpersonal expectations in relationship functioning. Rejection-sensitive individuals often interpret social cues through a lens of anticipated rejection, leading them to withdraw emotionally or avoid intimacy altogether. This interpretation is consistent with research indicating that perceptions of rejection contribute to insecure attachment and interpersonal dysfunction (Araci-İyiyaydm et al., 2023). The findings suggest that interventions targeting maladaptive rejection expectations may help reduce intimacy avoidance among women with histories of emotional neglect.

Similarly, the mediation effect of self-compassion highlights the protective role of adaptive self-relating processes. Women who maintain higher levels of self-compassion may be better equipped to cope with interpersonal challenges, tolerate emotional vulnerability, and develop secure relationships despite adverse childhood experiences. These findings are congruent with previous studies demonstrating that self-compassion promotes psychological adjustment and buffers the effects of attachment insecurity (Etxaburu et al., 2024; Tavares et al., 2022). Self-compassion may facilitate intimacy by reducing self-criticism and increasing emotional resilience during interpersonal interactions.

The serial mediation pathways involving attachment anxiety further support the central importance of attachment processes in adult relationship functioning. Emotional neglect appears to increase vulnerability to attachment anxiety both directly and indirectly through rejection sensitivity and diminished self-compassion. These pathways are consistent with studies showing that attachment insecurity mediates the effects of childhood adversity on emotional and relational outcomes (Doorn et al., 2024; Pinto-Cortez et al., 2023). The findings suggest that attachment anxiety may represent the final common pathway through which multiple psychological vulnerabilities converge to influence intimacy avoidance.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study contributes to emerging literature emphasizing the interconnected nature of childhood adversity, attachment, self-processes, and adult relationships. Previous investigations have linked childhood neglect to insecure attachment, emotional dysregulation, maladaptive schemas, and mental health difficulties (Bahmani et al., 2022; Gibbons, 2024; Karveli et al., 2025). Additional evidence demonstrates that attachment insecurity

contributes to depression, anxiety, burnout, relational dissatisfaction, and reduced psychological well-being (Scharfe, 2026; Wang, 2023; Wong & Denson, 2025). The present findings integrate these separate lines of research by demonstrating how childhood emotional neglect influences intimacy avoidance through a combination of cognitive, emotional, and attachment-related mechanisms. The results further reinforce the developmental significance of parental emotional responsiveness and caregiving quality in shaping lifelong relational outcomes (Ankori et al., 2025; Paivio & Pascual-Leone, 2023; Prato-Previde et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological processes connecting childhood emotional neglect to adult intimacy difficulties among women.

## 6. Limitations and Suggestions

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions regarding the relationships among emotional neglect, rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, attachment anxiety, and intimacy avoidance. Second, all variables were assessed using self-report measures, which may be influenced by recall bias, social desirability, and subjective interpretation. Third, the study focused exclusively on women residing in Canada, limiting the generalizability of findings to men, non-binary individuals, and populations from different cultural contexts. Fourth, childhood emotional neglect was measured retrospectively, and participants' current psychological functioning may have influenced recollections of childhood experiences. Finally, additional variables such as personality traits, emotional regulation strategies, social support, and relationship history were not included in the model and may contribute to intimacy avoidance.

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to clarify the temporal and causal relationships among childhood emotional neglect, attachment processes, and intimacy-related outcomes. Researchers may also investigate whether these pathways differ across developmental stages, cultural contexts, and relationship statuses. Examining gender differences would provide valuable insight into whether the mechanisms identified in the present study operate similarly among men and other populations. Future research could incorporate additional mediators and moderators such as emotion regulation, resilience, interpersonal trust, social support, and

psychological flexibility. Multi-method approaches involving interviews, partner reports, and behavioral assessments may further enhance understanding of the processes underlying intimacy avoidance. Experimental and intervention-based studies would also help determine whether modifying self-compassion, attachment anxiety, or rejection sensitivity leads to measurable improvements in relational functioning.

The findings suggest that clinicians working with women who report intimacy difficulties should carefully assess histories of childhood emotional neglect and explore how these experiences continue to influence current relationships. Therapeutic interventions may benefit from addressing rejection-related beliefs, fostering self-compassion, and restructuring insecure attachment patterns. Compassion-focused approaches, attachment-based therapies, and interpersonal interventions may be particularly useful for helping clients develop greater emotional security and relational trust. Mental health professionals should also emphasize the development of emotional awareness, self-acceptance, and adaptive coping skills to reduce avoidance of intimacy. Preventive programs aimed at improving parenting practices and emotional responsiveness may contribute to healthier attachment development and reduce the long-term relational consequences of childhood emotional neglect.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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