



Research Paper

The Role of Self-Criticism Levels in Predicting Borderline Personality Traits among Students with Childhood Trauma



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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the role of self-criticism levels in predicting borderline personality traits among students with childhood trauma. The research method was applied in terms of purpose, quantitative in terms of nature, and descriptive-correlational in terms of implementation. The statistical population of the present study consisted of all students with childhood trauma in Ardabil City in 2025. Sampling was conducted through a two-stage procedure using cluster random sampling and purposive theoretical sampling, and ultimately, 184 students with childhood trauma were selected as the final sample. The data collection instruments included the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale developed by Thompson and Zuroff (2004), the Borderline Personality Inventory (BPI) developed by Leichsenring (1999), and the Childhood Trauma Scale developed by Bernstein et al. (1994). The findings indicated that the overall regression model was statistically significant, and self-criticism levels could predict borderline personality traits among students with childhood trauma in Ardabil City. Among the dimensions of self-criticism, comparative self-criticism (Beta = 0.348) and internalized self-criticism (Beta = 0.320) had significant predictive contributions to borderline personality traits. The results of this study indicate that self-criticism, particularly its comparative and internalized dimensions, plays a key role in explaining and intensifying borderline personality traits among students who have experienced childhood trauma. Therefore, developing psychological interventions focusing on the modification of self-critical tendencies may serve as an effective strategy for reducing these traits and promoting mental health in this vulnerable population.

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Introduction

In recent years, the mental health of students and young adults has become one of the major concerns in the fields of psychology and behavioral sciences. The complexities of contemporary life, academic and social pressures, increased exposure to stressful experiences, and early emotional adversities have led researchers to pay greater attention to developmental and cognitive–emotional factors contributing to psychological vulnerability. In this regard, research evidence indicates that childhood traumatic experiences can have profound and long-lasting effects on emotional development, self-concept formation, and emotion regulation patterns in adulthood (*Laghaei et al., 2023*). Individuals who have been exposed to rejection, neglect, or abuse during their early years of life often experience greater difficulties in managing emotions, establishing stable interpersonal relationships, and maintaining psychological coherence (*Musella et al., 2025; Van Landeghem & Jakobson, 2024*). Moreover, variables such as self-criticism, internalized shame, and difficulties in emotion regulation have been recognized as important constructs that can explain the relationship between early traumatic experiences and subsequent psychological problems (*Erol & Inozu, 2024; Woolgar et al., 2024*). Therefore, investigating the role of cognitive and emotional factors in the persistence of the consequences of childhood trauma has become one of the central focuses of contemporary research in the field of psychopathology.

Borderline personality disorder is one of the most complex and challenging personality disorders in the fields of psychology and psychiatry. It is characterized by pervasive patterns of emotional instability, impulsivity, identity disturbance, unstable interpersonal relationships, and an intense fear of abandonment (*Lee et al., 2024*). This disorder is not only associated with severe impairments in individual, social, and academic functioning but is also accompanied by high levels of self-harming behaviors, suicidal thoughts, emotion regulation difficulties, and substance use (*Min et al., 2023; Sălcudean et al., 2025*). In recent years, researchers have increasingly focused on investigating the underlying factors and psychological predictors of borderline personality traits, as identifying risk factors can play an important role in prevention, screening, and the development of effective therapeutic interventions. Although borderline personality disorder is typically diagnosed during adulthood, growing evidence suggests that its origins can be traced back to early life experiences, particularly childhood experiences. Researchers argue that dysfunctional family environments, experiences of abuse, and emotional neglect during early years of life can disrupt individuals' healthy emotional and cognitive development and create conditions for the formation of maladaptive personality patterns (*Xie et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2024*). In this regard, childhood trauma is recognized as one of the most significant risk factors contributing to the development of personality-related problems and emotional disorders.

Childhood trauma refers to a set of adverse experiences that individuals encounter during their developmental years, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, emotional and physical neglect, domestic violence, lack of secure caregiving, and other severe stressful events (*Schulze et al., 2022*). Numerous studies have demonstrated that childhood trauma is associated with a wide range of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harming behaviors, and personality disorders (*De Bles et al., 2023; Xiao et al., 2023*). Substantial research evidence indicates that among personality disorders, borderline personality disorder shows the strongest association with adverse childhood experiences (*Leichsenring et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2023*). Some studies suggest that many individuals with borderline personality features report a history of unstable family environments, emotional rejection, or childhood maltreatment (*Marchetti et al., 2022*). From the perspective of attachment theory, experiencing insecure and harmful relationships during childhood can lead to the development of negative representations of the self and others (*Schulze et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2023*). Children who grow up in environments characterized by criticism, humiliation, or neglect gradually internalize deep-seated beliefs about worthlessness, inadequacy, and being unlovable (*Jiang, 2024*). These negative representations may later manifest as difficulties in emotion regulation, fear of abandonment, and instability in interpersonal relationships, which are considered core characteristics of borderline personality

(*Pedone et al., 2025*). Therefore, it can be argued that childhood trauma contributes to the development of borderline personality traits not only through direct emotional harm but also through its influence on individuals' cognitive and emotional structures.

Alongside adverse childhood experiences, another construct that has attracted increasing attention from researchers in recent years is self-criticism. Self-criticism refers to a stable tendency to negatively evaluate oneself, engage in self-blame, experience feelings of inadequacy, and excessively focus on personal failures and shortcomings (*Zaccari, Fazi, et al., 2024*). Individuals with high levels of self-criticism typically set excessively strict standards for themselves and, when confronted with failures or mistakes, exhibit reactions characterized by shame, self-devaluation, and feelings of worthlessness (*Zaccari, Mancini, et al., 2024*). This characteristic is not only associated with various emotional problems, including depression and anxiety, but also plays an important role in the development of personality disorders (*Calaresi et al., 2025*). Based on psychodynamic and cognitive perspectives, self-criticism may develop as a result of early critical experiences and the absence of unconditional acceptance within the family environment. Children who are continuously exposed to criticism, humiliation, or rejection gradually internalize the critical voice of their parents and transform it into a part of their internal dialogue. Consequently, these individuals tend to judge themselves harshly in adulthood and demonstrate excessive sensitivity toward

their mistakes and personal weaknesses (*Bogos et al., 2026; Martin-Gagnon et al., 2023*). This issue becomes more significant considering that research findings have shown a significant relationship between childhood trauma and negative self-concept across all forms of maltreatment (physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect). Such a pattern can contribute to emotional vulnerability, chronic feelings of shame, and instability in self-concept (*Melamed et al., 2024*); components that are prominently observed in borderline personality disorder. Various studies have demonstrated that self-criticism is associated with difficulties in emotion regulation, self-destructive behaviors, feelings of emptiness, and interpersonal problems (*Gao et al., 2023*). Individuals with high levels of self-criticism typically experience more intense emotional reactions when faced with failure or social rejection and have a lower capacity to manage negative emotions (*Nilsson et al., 2022*). This condition may increase their vulnerability to the development of borderline personality traits. Furthermore, some studies suggest that self-criticism may play a mediating role in the relationship between childhood trauma and personality-related problems. In other words, early adverse experiences may increase the likelihood of developing borderline features through shaping negative attitudes and beliefs about the self (*Li et al., 2025; Santoro et al., 2025*).

Students, as a group undergoing a sensitive stage of psychosocial development, may be vulnerable to the psychological consequences of childhood trauma and self-criticism. The

student period is typically accompanied by academic pressures, identity changes, independence from family, and the formation of new social relationships. Under such circumstances, individuals with a history of childhood trauma or those experiencing high levels of self-criticism may encounter difficulties in psychological adjustment to the challenges of this developmental stage. Considering the aforementioned research evidence, the presence of borderline personality traits among students may result in consequences such as reduced academic performance, interpersonal conflicts, impulsive behaviors, and mental health problems. Therefore, investigating the predictors of these traits in student populations is of particular importance. A review of domestic and international studies indicates that childhood trauma is one of the most important factors contributing to the development of borderline personality traits and other emotional-behavioral problems. Numerous studies have shown that individuals exposed to abuse, emotional neglect, or parental invalidation experience higher levels of emotional instability, internalized shame, self-harming behaviors, and borderline features. In this regard, *Li et al. (2025)* demonstrated that perceived parental invalidation plays a role in the intergenerational transmission of borderline personality features and self-harming behaviors through increasing shame. Similarly, *Santoro et al. (2025)* found that the relationship between childhood trauma and shame is explained through psychological fragmentation. Studies by *Marchetti et al. (2022)*, *Pedone et al. (2025)*, and *Schulze et*

al. (2022) have also emphasized that childhood maltreatment, insecure attachment, and inadequate social support are significantly associated with increased borderline personality traits. Furthermore, *Jiang (2024)* showed that experiential avoidance mediates the relationship between childhood trauma and borderline personality, while *Zhong et al. (2024)* demonstrated that borderline personality traits and reduced self-control can intensify the emotional consequences of childhood trauma. In domestic studies, the role of cognitive and emotional variables in explaining borderline personality features has also received considerable attention. The findings of *Daneshkhah and Dousti (2026)* indicated that self-criticism, internalized shame, and emotional deprivation schemas are significant predictors of emotional adjustment among individuals with borderline personality traits. Moreover, *Yavarian et al. (2026)* found that a negative family emotional climate is associated with increased borderline personality features among students. *Shamsabadi et al. (2022)* also showed that personality organization plays a mediating role in the relationship between childhood maltreatment and borderline personality symptoms. Additionally, *Izadpanah et al. (2025)* reported that emotion regulation difficulties and self-critical beliefs play mediating roles in the relationship between childhood trauma and psychological problems. Overall, although research findings emphasize the significant associations among childhood trauma, self-criticism, and borderline personality traits, direct investigation of the role of self-criticism

levels in predicting borderline personality traits among students with childhood trauma, particularly within the Iranian population, remains limited. Therefore, the present study aims to address this research gap. Based on the aforementioned evidence, it appears that childhood trauma and self-criticism are both important factors associated with borderline personality traits; however, the interaction between these variables and the predictive power of self-criticism among students with childhood trauma require further investigation. The present study was conducted to examine the role of self-criticism levels in predicting borderline personality traits among students with childhood trauma, with the aim of providing a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors contributing to personality vulnerability. It is expected that the findings of this study will not only contribute to the theoretical development of personality psychopathology but also provide a foundation for designing effective preventive and therapeutic interventions in student populations.

Research Method

Considering that the researcher can directly utilize the findings of this study, the research was applied in terms of purpose. Furthermore, all data collected in this study were objective (quantitative); therefore, in terms of nature, the research was quantitative. Regarding the method of implementation, the study employed a descriptive-correlational design. The statistical population of the present study consisted of all university students with childhood trauma in Ardabil

City in 2025. Sampling was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, using cluster random sampling, the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire developed by [Bernstein et al. \(1994\)](#) was distributed among 1,000 students from various academic fields, including humanities, basic sciences, engineering sciences, and medical sciences. In the second stage, the scores obtained from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire of these 1,000 students were examined. Using purposive theoretical sampling, 250 students who obtained scores higher than the conceptual mean of the questionnaire were selected as participants for the second stage of the study. Subsequently, clinical interviews were conducted with these 250 students, and ultimately, 184 students were identified as having a history of childhood trauma. These individuals were selected as the final research sample. The data collection instruments used in this study included the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale developed by [Thompson and Zuroff \(2004\)](#), the Borderline Personality Inventory (BPI) developed by [Leichsenring \(1999\)](#), and the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire developed by [Bernstein et al. \(1994\)](#). The Levels of Self-Criticism Scale developed by [Thompson and Zuroff \(2004\)](#) was designed based on two dimensions: comparative self-criticism (CSC) and internalized self-criticism (ISC). This questionnaire consists of 22 items, of which 10 items assess internalized self-criticism and 12 items assess comparative self-criticism. The scoring range of this questionnaire is based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). [Yamaguchi and Kim \(2013\)](#) reported satisfactory internal consistency for this scale.

In addition, the reliability coefficient of this questionnaire in the study by [Yamaguchi and Kim \(2013\)](#) was reported as 0.90. The Borderline Personality Inventory (BPI) was developed by [Leichsenring \(1999\)](#) to assess borderline personality traits in clinical and non-clinical samples. The items are answered in a yes/no format. This inventory originally consists of 53 items and was developed based on [Kernberg \(1967\)](#) concept of borderline personality organization. The total score ranges from 0 to 51. This questionnaire includes four dimensions: identity disturbance, primitive defense mechanisms, reality testing, and fear of intimacy. [Leichsenring \(1999\)](#) demonstrated that the internal consistency and test-retest reliability of this instrument were at satisfactory levels. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the dimensions of this instrument in [Leichsenring \(1999\)](#) study ranged from 0.68 to 0.91. The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) was developed by [Bernstein et al. \(1994\)](#). The second version consisting of 53 items was introduced in 1995, and finally, the 34-item final version was developed in 1998. This questionnaire assesses childhood maltreatment through five subscales, including: (1) physical abuse; (2) emotional abuse; (3) physical neglect; (4) emotional neglect; and (5) sexual abuse. In addition, an overall maltreatment score can be obtained from this scale. The items are scored based on a Likert scale and categorized into five levels: never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always. [Bernstein et al. \(1994\)](#) reported the reliability coefficients of the different factors of this questionnaire using test-retest reliability and Cronbach's alpha, ranging from 0.79 to 0.94.

Research Findings

- Descriptive Findings

In this section, the central tendency index of the mean and the dispersion index of the

standard deviation for the variables of self-criticism levels and borderline personality traits are reported.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Self-Criticism Levels and Borderline Personality Variables

Variable / Component and Dimensions	Mean	Standard Deviation
Comparative Self-Criticism	3.776	1.684
Internalized Self-Criticism	3.975	1.796
Self-Criticism Level	3.875	1.490
Borderline Personality	24.239	14.663

The findings indicated that the means of comparative self-criticism, internalized self-criticism, self-criticism level, and borderline personality were 3.776, 3.975, 3.875, and 24.239, respectively. Their standard deviations were 1.684, 1.796, 1.490, and 14.663, respectively.

- Inferential Findings

Before applying the linear regression model, the primary assumption, namely the Durbin–Watson test for the independence of residuals, was examined. The results are presented in the following table.

Table 2. Results of the Durbin–Watson Test for Examining the Assumption of Independence of Regression Residuals

Model	Multiple Correlation Coefficient (R)	Coefficient of Determination (R ²)	Adjusted Coefficient of Determination (Adjusted R ²)	Standard Error of the Estimate	Durbin–Watson Statistic
1	0.572	0.327	0.320	12.093	1.733

The Durbin–Watson statistic ranges from 0 to 4. The optimal range for this test is considered to be between 1.5 and 2.5, within which it can be concluded that the regression residuals are independent. The Durbin–Watson statistic in this model was 1.733. Therefore, the assumption was confirmed, and the use of the regression model was considered appropriate. Furthermore, based on the information presented in the above

table and the coefficient of determination, it can be stated that self-criticism levels can predict approximately 32% of the borderline personality traits among students with childhood trauma in Ardabil City. To examine the linearity of the descriptive data related to self-criticism levels in predicting the criterion variable (borderline personality traits), a scatter plot of the data was used. The results are presented in the following figure.

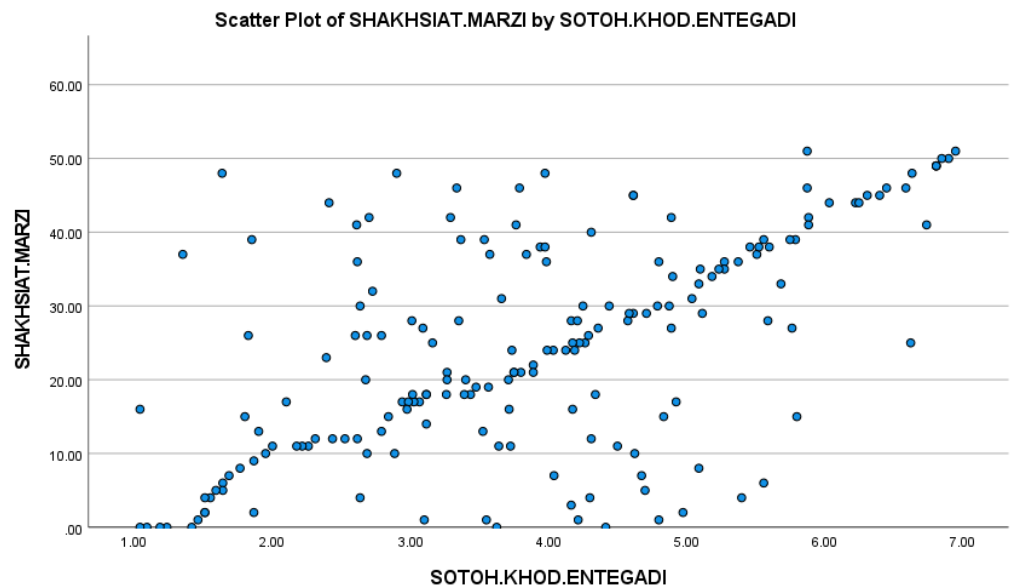


Figure 1. Scatter Plot of the Descriptive Data of Self-Criticism Levels in Predicting the Criterion Variable of Borderline Personality Traits

Based on the information presented in the above figure, the scatter plot of the descriptive data of self-criticism levels in relation to the criterion variable of borderline personality traits among students with childhood trauma in Ardabil City confirms the existence of a

linear relationship between the predictor and criterion variables. Therefore, the assumption of linearity is confirmed. Subsequently, the overall regression model of the present study is presented as follows:

Table 3. Results of the Regression Model for Predicting Borderline Personality Traits among Students with Childhood Trauma Based on Self-Criticism Levels

Model	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square	F Statistic	Significance Level (p)
1					
Regression	12876.889	2	6438.445	44.021	0.001
Residual	26472.589	181	146.257		
Total	39349.478	183			

Based on the information presented in the above table, the significance level of the regression model is lower than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, it can be concluded that the overall regression model is confirmed, and self-criticism levels can predict borderline

personality traits among students with childhood trauma in Ardabil City. Subsequently, to examine the predictive contribution of the dimensions of self-criticism levels, the coefficient table was used. The results are presented in the following table:

Table 4. Results of the Predictive Contribution of Predictor Variables (Dimensions of Self-Criticism Levels) in Predicting the Criterion Variable of Borderline Personality Traits among Students with Childhood Trauma Based on Standardized and Unstandardized Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t Statistic	Significance Level (p)
	B Coefficient	Standard Error	Beta Coefficient		
1					
Constant	2.419	2.491	—	0.971	0.333
Comparative Self-Criticism	3.032	0.600	0.348	5.053	0.001
Internalized Self-Criticism	2.609	0.562	0.320	4.639	0.001

Based on the information presented in the above table, among the dimensions of self-criticism levels, the predictive contributions of comparative self-criticism (Beta = 0.348) and internalized self-criticism (Beta = 0.320) in predicting borderline personality traits were statistically significant.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of examining the role of self-criticism levels in predicting borderline personality traits among students with childhood trauma. The findings revealed that self-criticism had a positive and significant relationship with borderline personality traits and could predict variations in these traits among students with adverse childhood experiences. This finding indicates that individuals who hold more negative views of themselves and continuously engage in self-blame and negative self-evaluation are more likely to experience emotional instability, identity disturbance, and interpersonal difficulties associated with borderline personality traits. The obtained results are consistent with developmental and cognitive-emotional

perspectives, which emphasize the role of early adverse experiences in the formation of negative self-structures and psychological vulnerability. According to these perspectives, children who grow up in environments characterized by criticism, rejection, or emotional invalidation gradually internalize the critical voice of their environment and develop persistent patterns of self-blame and feelings of worthlessness; patterns that may later manifest as borderline personality features in adulthood. The findings of the present study are consistent with the results of *Li et al. (2025)*, who demonstrated that parental invalidation and feelings of shame play important roles in the transmission of borderline personality features and self-harming behaviors. The results of this study are also in line with the findings of *Santoro et al. (2025)*, highlighting the role of psychological fragmentation and shame in the relationship between childhood trauma and psychological problems. Furthermore, *Marchetti et al. (2022)* and *Pedone et al. (2025)* showed that childhood maltreatment and neglect are associated with increased borderline personality traits and personality vulnerability. Consistent with

these findings, [Schulze et al. \(2022\)](#) reported that the severity of childhood trauma and insecure attachment are predictors of borderline personality features. This consistency can be explained by the fact that early traumatic experiences not only disrupt psychological security and self-coherence but also create conditions for the development of maladaptive self-evaluation patterns. Consequently, individuals may exhibit intense emotional reactions and self-critical responses when confronted with failures, disappointments, and interpersonal difficulties.

On the other hand, the findings of the present study are consistent with studies that have emphasized the role of cognitive–emotional variables in explaining the consequences of childhood trauma. For example, [Jiang \(2024\)](#) demonstrated that experiential avoidance can mediate the relationship between childhood trauma and borderline personality traits. Similarly, [Zhong et al. \(2024\)](#) found that borderline personality traits and impaired self-control play roles in transmitting the negative effects of childhood trauma on emotional problems. These findings indicate that the consequences of childhood trauma are not merely limited to the direct experience of adversity but continue through complex cognitive and emotional mechanisms. In this regard, self-criticism can be considered one of the most important constructs contributing to the persistence of shame, worthlessness, and difficulties in emotion regulation, thereby increasing individuals' vulnerability to borderline personality features.

The findings of the present study were also consistent with the results of domestic studies. [Daneshkhah and Dousti \(2026\)](#) demonstrated that self-criticism and internalized shame are associated with emotional adjustment difficulties among individuals with borderline personality traits. Furthermore, [Izadpanah et al. \(2025\)](#) reported that self-critical beliefs and emotion regulation difficulties play mediating roles in the relationship between childhood trauma and psychological problems. In addition, the findings of [Shamsabadi et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Yavarian et al. \(2026\)](#) confirmed the importance of family environment and childhood maltreatment in the development of borderline features. The convergence of the findings of the present study with both domestic and international research indicates that self-criticism can be considered one of the key factors contributing to the persistence of the negative consequences of childhood trauma and the development of borderline personality traits.

- Research Limitations

The present study, like other studies in the field of behavioral sciences, had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting and generalizing the findings. First, the use of self-report instruments may have influenced participants' responses due to biases such as social desirability bias, memory errors, and subjective perceptions of the participants, particularly for variables such as childhood trauma and borderline personality traits, which are influenced by emotional experiences and individual interpretations. Second, the correlational and

cross-sectional nature of the study limits the possibility of making causal inferences among the variables; therefore, conclusions regarding the direction of effects between variables cannot be made with certainty. Third, the study population was limited to university students, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other age groups, cultural contexts, or clinical populations. Furthermore, some influential variables, such as socioeconomic status, history of receiving psychological services, attachment styles, and social support, were not controlled in the present study, which may have affected the results.

- Practical Recommendations

Considering the findings of the present study and the significant role of self-criticism in predicting borderline personality traits among students with childhood trauma, the following practical recommendations are proposed:

- Designing and implementing university-based educational workshops focusing on reducing self-criticism, enhancing self-compassion, and teaching emotion regulation skills for students with psychological vulnerabilities.
- Utilizing psychological screening programs in university counseling centers to identify students with a history of childhood trauma and elevated levels of self-criticism.
- Encouraging therapists to employ compassion-focused approaches, Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and

cognitive–emotional therapies to reduce self-blaming patterns and borderline personality features.

- Providing parental and family education regarding the psychological consequences of excessive criticism, emotional rejection, and emotional invalidation during childhood.
- Developing preventive programs in schools and universities aimed at promoting mental health, coping skills, and emotional resilience among adolescents and young adults.
- Encouraging counselors and mental health professionals to consider the role of childhood traumatic experiences and self-critical beliefs when assessing and treating emotional and personality-related difficulties.
- Designing group-based interventions for students with childhood trauma, focusing on improving self-concept, reducing shame, and strengthening healthy interpersonal relationships.
- It is recommended that mental health policies for university students incorporate psychological support programs for individuals with a history of childhood adversity.

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