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Boundary Blurring and Recovery Difficulty in After-Hours Work Messaging

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Abstract: After-hours work messaging has become a common part of everyday employment, yet its effects are not limited to the time spent reading or replying to messages. Work-related contact during evenings, weekends, and leave periods can weaken the boundary between work and private life and keep employees mentally connected to unfinished tasks. This paper examines how after-hours messaging creates recovery difficulty through response pressure, constant availability, repeated attention shifts, and the expectation that employees should remain reachable. It argues that even brief or unanswered messages may interfere with psychological detachment when employees continue to monitor their phones or anticipate further demands. The discussion also considers how job position, managerial practice, workload, and personal boundary preferences shape employees' experiences. Three cases are used to support the analysis: the Beijing "invisible overtime" case, the French *Rentokil Initial* case, and Volkswagen's restriction on after-hours email delivery. Together, they show that the problem involves actual work, the obligation to remain available, and the organizational design of communication systems. The paper maintains that effective boundary protection requires clearer response rules, limited expectations of availability, and greater organizational responsibility for protecting non-work time.

Keywords: after-hours work messaging; boundary blurring; psychological detachment; recovery difficulty; workplace availability; digital communication

1. Introduction

Work does not always end when employees leave the workplace. Emails, instant messages, project platforms, and workplace group chats allow communication to continue during evenings, weekends, and holidays. A manager may ask about the next day's meeting, a colleague may request a file, or a client may expect a quick reply. Each message may take only a short time to handle, but repeated contact can occupy more of an employee's personal time than the visible task itself suggests.

The issue is not simply the number of messages sent after work. More important is the continuing connection to work that these messages create. Employees may feel the need to check their phones, reply quickly, or remain alert in case a request arrives. Formal working hours may have ended, yet work continues to influence attention and the use of private time.

This condition can be understood as boundary blurring. Work and personal life are rarely separated completely, and some employees value the freedom to manage tasks across different times and places. The problem begins when this flexibility becomes an informal expectation. If constant availability is treated as evidence of responsibility, employees may lose control over when they enter and leave the work role. Personal time then becomes open to interruption even when no formal overtime has been arranged.

Boundary blurring also affects recovery. Employees need periods in which work no longer directs their attention or emotional state. This temporary separation is often described as psychological detachment. After-hours messages can weaken it by bringing unfinished tasks, workplace relationships, or future demands back into mind. A short notification may require no immediate action but can still make it difficult for the employee to disengage from work.

Messaging-based work is harder to identify than traditional overtime. It is often fragmented, completed through personal devices, and mixed with ordinary private activities. Because each exchange appears minor, employers may view it as voluntary or insignificant. Employees, however, may feel that a response is necessary even when no direct order has been given. The difference between optional communication and expected availability is often shaped by workplace habits rather than written rules.

Several legal and organizational cases illustrate different parts of this problem. The Beijing "invisible overtime" case concerned regular work performed through messaging applications outside formal hours and showed that repeated digital communication may constitute actual labor. The French *Rentokil Initial* case focused on the burden of remaining reachable even when no task was being performed at a particular moment. Volkswagen's restriction on after-hours email delivery provides a different example, showing how an organization may limit contact through technical settings rather than leaving employees to protect their own boundaries.

This paper examines how after-hours work messaging weakens the boundary between work and personal life and makes recovery more difficult. It does not argue that all communication outside working hours should be prohibited. Some contact may be necessary in emergencies, shift work, international teams, or jobs with unusual schedules. The main concern is the routine use of after-hours messaging and the expectation that employees should remain available. The discussion considers how work communication enters personal time, how response pressure develops, why psychological recovery becomes difficult, and which personal and organizational conditions shape these effects. It also examines how clearer communication rules and greater organizational responsibility may protect non-work time without preventing necessary contact.

2. The Extension of Work Communication into Personal Time

The boundary between work and personal life was once supported by visible conditions. Employees worked in a particular place, followed a set schedule, and usually stopped handling tasks after leaving the workplace. This separation was never complete, especially for managers, professionals, and workers with emergency duties. Still, leaving the office normally marked a change in role (Ashforth et al., 2000). Mobile communication has weakened that signal. An employee may be physically at home while continuing to receive instructions, answer clients, correct documents, or follow updates in a workplace group chat.

After-hours messaging rarely enters private life as a clearly announced extension of the working day. It

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usually appears through small requests. A supervisor asks whether a file has been updated. A colleague sends a question that seems easy to answer. A client leaves several messages in a group chat. Each act may take only a few minutes, so the intrusion appears minor. Yet a message can interrupt dinner, stop a conversation, or return the employee's attention to a problem that had already been left behind.

Messaging also divides personal time into short and uncertain periods. An employee checks a notification, searches for a document, sends a reply, and returns to a private activity. Another message may arrive later. The total time spent typing may be limited, but the evening is no longer fully available for rest. Work is scattered across the period rather than completed in one continuous session.

The use of the same device for work and private communication makes separation more difficult. Employees may open an application to speak with family or friends and see workplace groups, client messages, or notices from managers on the same screen. Muting a chat may reduce notifications, but it does not remove the messages from view. Turning off the phone may also cut the employee off from ordinary social contact. The worker is left to maintain a boundary inside a device that carries both roles.

Private locations can also become temporary workplaces. An employee may answer a customer from the living room or edit a document while travelling. These acts may be brief, but repeated use of personal spaces for work weakens the distinction between being at work and being off work. This is one reason messaging-based labor is difficult to assess through traditional ideas of overtime. There may be no separate workplace, no continuous period of work, and no direct order to remain at a desk.

The Beijing "invisible overtime" case shows why such activities cannot always be dismissed as casual communication. The employee, who worked in product operations, submitted records showing that she regularly communicated with clients and colleagues through WeChat and DingTalk during evenings and rest days. The employer argued that answering occasional questions after work did not amount to overtime. The Beijing Third Intermediate People's Court distinguished temporary, minor exchanges from communication involving substantive labor. It found that part of the employee's after-hours activity was periodic, relatively fixed, and connected to the employer's management arrangements. The court treated this work as overtime and awarded RMB 30,000 in compensation (Zhang, 2024).

The value of the case lies in the way digital work was assessed. The court did not treat every message sent after working hours as overtime, but it also rejected the view that online communication was too informal to count as work. It considered the content, regularity, and managerial character of the activity. A brief social exchange with a colleague is different from handling clients, arranging duties, or dealing with operational problems. The application used to perform the task does not remove its work-related nature.

A legal finding of overtime, however, captures only part of the boundary problem. Courts normally require evidence of actual labor and some meaningful occupation of time. Boundary intrusion can occur before that threshold is reached. A short message may not support an overtime claim, but it can still break the sense that the working day has ended. An employee who reads an instruction at night may postpone the task until morning, yet the issue has already entered personal time.

Messaging records also provide an incomplete picture of digital labor. A chat history can show when an employee replied, but not how long it took to search for information, consider the response, or return attention to a private activity. Many short replies are not reported because recording several minutes of overtime seems impractical. When such contact becomes routine, employees may gradually reorganize their evenings around work without any formal change to working hours.

Not all after-hours communication is necessarily harmful. Some employees value the freedom to complete tasks at flexible times or prefer to settle a

minor issue before the next working day. The main question is whether they retain control over this arrangement. Chosen flexibility differs from a routine in which employees are expected to remain responsive. The same act of answering a message at home can reflect autonomy in one setting and pressure in another.

The extension of work into personal time usually develops through these small openings rather than through a complete transfer of office work into the home. Personal devices carry workplace conversations, private locations become temporary workspaces, and brief tasks enter periods still labelled as rest. Some activities may be recognised as overtime, as the Beijing case shows. Others remain below that legal threshold while still reducing employees' control over their own time.

3. Availability Expectations and Response Pressure

After-hours communication becomes more demanding when employees believe that messages should be noticed and answered quickly. This expectation may be written into a formal on-call arrangement, but it often develops through ordinary workplace conduct. Managers send messages late, colleagues reply within minutes, and silence in a group chat is visible. Employees learn what counts as an acceptable response by observing these repeated patterns.

Pressure is often strongest when the message gives no clear indication of urgency. A manager may write, "Please look at this," without saying whether the matter can wait until morning. The employee must then interpret the timing, the sender's intention, and the possible cost of delay. A clearly urgent message may be inconvenient, but it is easier to assess. An unclear request leaves the employee to decide whether an unstated deadline exists. This decision is shaped by hierarchy because the sender may influence work assignments, performance evaluations, or future opportunities.

Employees may still feel required to reply when managers say that an immediate answer is unnecessary. Formal permission to wait can be weakened by earlier experience. Workers notice whether delayed replies are criticised and whether fast responders are treated as more reliable. A manager may also say that a task can wait until morning while continuing to send related questions during the evening. The words permit disconnection, but the wider pattern suggests that the conversation remains open.

Workplace group chats add another source of pressure. Members can see who has acknowledged an instruction, supplied information, or remained silent. Read receipts and online indicators make private decisions about availability visible to others. An employee who would normally leave a late message unanswered may feel uncomfortable when several colleagues have already replied. In this setting, a response does more than transmit information. It also shows attentiveness and confirms that the employee is still present.

Even short replies such as "received," "noted," or "I will handle it" can strengthen the expectation of availability. These messages contain little substantive content, yet they show that the employee is watching the conversation. Once acknowledgement becomes routine, silence may be read as absence or poor cooperation. The employee replies not because the task requires immediate action but because availability itself has become something to display.

This condition is closely related to workplace telepressure, which refers to a preoccupation with and urge to respond quickly to work-related electronic communication (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015). Telepressure is not determined only by the number of messages received. One message from a senior manager may create more pressure than several routine messages from colleagues. The important issue is the meaning attached to response time and the consequences employees believe may follow from delay.

Research suggests that telepressure often affects recovery through behaviour. Employees who feel pressure to remain responsive are more likely to check smartphones, read work messages, and send replies during non-working time. These actions keep work active beyond formal hours and make

psychological detachment more difficult (Cambier et al., 2019). The feeling of pressure does not always produce the same outcome, but it becomes more harmful when it repeatedly turns into work-related phone use.

Checking can begin before any message arrives. Employees may unlock a phone to see whether something has been sent, reopen a workplace chat after noticing an increased message count, or look at email before going to sleep. Such behaviour may appear to be a personal habit. In workplaces where late requests are common and slow responses carry social or professional costs, however, checking is also a way of managing uncertainty.

This strategy rarely removes uncertainty for long. An empty inbox may reassure the employee, but it can also encourage another check later. A new message gives the employee something definite to handle while raising further questions. It may be unclear how much work is required, whether another request will follow, or whether colleagues are waiting for an answer. The phone becomes a tool for reducing uncertainty and a source of renewed concern.

Some employees answer immediately because they believe a quick reply will protect the rest of the evening. This may work when after-hours contact is rare. When quick replies become common, senders learn that the employee can usually be reached. A response that solves an immediate problem may strengthen the longer-term expectation of availability. A personal coping choice then becomes part of the workplace communication norm.

Managers do not always intend to create this pressure. A supervisor may send messages at night because that is a convenient time to review work or clear an inbox. The recipient, however, may not know whether the manager's sending time is also the expected response time. Without a clear rule, the employee must interpret each message separately. The burden does not disappear simply because the sender did not consciously demand an answer.

Scheduled delivery can reduce part of this ambiguity. A message prepared at night but delivered the next morning does not enter the employee's evening. A late message followed by "no need to reply now" is less effective because the employee has already seen the task. The phrase may reduce immediate response pressure, but it does not prevent the message from drawing attention back to work.

The difference between active work and required availability can be seen in the French *Rentokil Initial* case. The employee, a branch director, was included in a procedure for handling emergency calls outside normal working hours. Branch directors' contact details were provided to the company receiving those calls, and they were expected to take suitable action when necessary. They were also required to keep their mobile phones switched on. The employer argued that this arrangement did not amount to formal on-call duty.

In July 2018, the French Court of Cassation rejected the employer's appeal. The employee was not required to remain at a fixed location or stay under the employer's immediate direction. Even so, he had to remain continuously reachable and ready to intervene. This continuing availability supported the finding that he had been placed on call. The underlying judgment awarded more than €60,000 in unpaid on-call compensation (Cour de cassation, Chambre sociale, 2018).

The case should not be read as meaning that every employee carrying a work phone is legally on call. Its relevance is more limited. It shows that readiness can restrict non-working time even when the employee is not actively carrying out a task. The burden cannot be measured only by counting completed calls or messages. A person who must remain reachable may still have to organise private time around the possibility of work.

A similar form of restriction can develop in ordinary workplaces without meeting the legal definition of on-call duty. Employees who expect instructions may keep their phones nearby during meals, avoid activities in which they cannot check messages, or hesitate to make plans that would make an immediate reply difficult. No message needs to arrive for the evening to be shaped by work. The

possibility of contact is enough to influence how the time is used.

This distinction is often missed when organizations assess after-hours work only through visible tasks. They may count how many messages were answered or how long a call lasted. Employees experience a wider period in which they must remain ready to respond. A short exchange can occur within an evening already organised around the need to be reachable. The measurable task is brief, but the surrounding restriction is not.

Hierarchy affects how safely employees can disconnect. Workers in secure positions may feel able to leave routine messages until the next morning. New employees, temporary workers, and those under performance review may be less willing to take that risk. They may also find it harder to judge which requests are genuinely urgent because they do not yet understand the workplace's unwritten rules. Replying to everything appears safer, but the pattern can quickly become expected.

Job demands also shape availability pressure. Client-facing employees may worry about losing business, while project workers may fear delaying colleagues. Staff responsible for safety or system failures may need to respond to genuine emergencies. These concerns are not unreasonable. The problem appears when exceptional needs are used to justify routine contact. If ordinary requests are sent through the same channels as urgent matters, employees lose a reliable basis for deciding when they can disconnect.

Constant availability may also be presented as evidence of professional commitment. Employees who reply quickly are praised for being responsible, while the personal circumstances that make quick replies possible receive little attention. When one employee's preferred schedule becomes the informal standard for the group, flexibility turns into a test of dedication.

Employees may then begin comparing their response times. A reply sent within an hour appears slow when colleagues answer in five minutes. Managers do not need to order faster responses. The group gradually creates its own pace. What begins as cooperation becomes a continuing display of readiness.

Personal preference does not remove this problem. Some employees prefer to integrate work and private life and do not mind answering messages at flexible times. The value of this arrangement still depends on control. Chosen integration differs from a system in which the organization decides when personal time will be opened to work. An employee may willingly complete a task at night but still resent having to monitor a phone throughout the evening.

Clear communication rules can reduce availability pressure, but written policies must match actual management practice. A statement that employees need not reply after hours has little value if immediate responses continue to receive praise or delayed replies attract criticism. Employees learn the real rule from what happens when someone waits until morning. They also notice whether urgent channels are reserved for matters that truly cannot wait.

Availability pressure develops in the space between an ordinary message and a direct instruction. It is sustained by uncertainty, hierarchy, visibility, and repeated habits. Employees may never be formally told to stay online, yet being offline can still feel unsafe. The *Rentokil Initial* case gives this burden a clear legal form because the employee's duty to remain reachable was part of an emergency procedure. In many workplaces, the expectation is less formal. It can still reshape personal time before any substantial task begins.

4. Boundary Blurring and Recovery Difficulties

Recovery does not begin automatically when formal working hours end. An employee may leave the workplace while remaining mentally involved in unfinished tasks, difficult conversations, deadlines, or possible requests. After-hours messaging strengthens this connection because it allows work to enter periods that would otherwise support rest.

Psychological detachment is central to recovery. It refers to a temporary mental separation from work during non-working time (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

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Employees do not need to forget their jobs or avoid every work-related thought. Detachment means that work is no longer directing their attention and emotional state. They can take part in family life, leisure, or sleep without repeatedly returning to workplace concerns.

A message can interrupt this shift. It may require direct action, but even a message that can wait until morning may reactivate the work role. A notification about a meeting, an unfinished document, or a client problem reminds the employee that work remains open. Attention moves back to the task, and it may not return immediately after the phone is put down (Derks et al., 2014).

This mental remainder is easy to overlook. The visible interruption may last only a few minutes, while the employee continues to think about the issue. There may be uncertainty about how to reply, whether the sender will respond again, or what the message means for the following day. Returning to a private activity does not always mean that attention has fully returned.

The difficulty becomes greater when messages arrive at separate points during the evening. One continuous period of overtime has a clearer beginning and end. Several short exchanges can spread work across a much longer period. An employee may confirm a meeting, later send a document, and then receive comments on another task. The total time spent replying may be limited, but personal time is repeatedly reopened to work.

Recovery depends not only on the total amount of free time but also on its continuity. Employees need enough uninterrupted time for work-related activation to decline. A break between two messages may not function as genuine rest when another request is expected. The employee remains partly connected to the previous exchange and alert to what may happen next.

For this reason, the frequency and distribution of messages may matter as much as their duration. Ten minutes of communication spread across an evening can be more disruptive than ten minutes completed at one clear time. Each interruption requires the employee to identify the issue, judge its urgency, decide whether to reply, and then return to the earlier activity. These repeated transitions place small but continuing demands on attention.

The effort-recovery perspective helps explain this problem. Work requires cognitive, emotional, and sometimes physical effort. Temporary strain is not necessarily harmful when employees have enough time to recover. Non-working periods allow the effects of work demands to decline (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). After-hours communication weakens this process when it continues the original task or recreates the same pressure after formal work has stopped.

A message about an unfinished assignment can restore deadline concerns. A client complaint can bring back emotional tension. A request for clarification may force the employee to recall details that had already been put aside. The person may be physically resting, but the mental processes used during work are active again.

Boundary blurring also changes how employees understand their personal time. Under a clearer boundary, the evening belongs to non-work life unless an unusual event occurs. Under a blurred boundary, personal time is available only until work claims part of it. Employees may choose activities according to whether they can be interrupted. They keep phones nearby, avoid situations in which responding would be difficult, or leave family plans flexible.

This can reduce the quality of leisure even when no message arrives. An employee may complete a personal activity while checking the phone several times. The time is formally free, but it is not fully separate from work. Leisure begins to resemble a waiting period in which the employee remains prepared for possible contact.

Anticipatory attention is important in this setting. Employees respond not only to actual messages but also to the possibility that one may arrive. When after-hours contact is common, a notification sound, an increase in the number of unread messages, or a long period without checking can create concern. The employee may wonder whether something important has been missed. Work remains

psychologically close without any direct instruction being issued.

Unclear urgency adds to the burden. When employees know that routine matters can wait until the next day, they have a clear basis for disconnecting. When urgent and ordinary messages are mixed together, each message must be assessed separately. The employee considers the sender, wording, timing, and recent workplace events. This repeated interpretation requires effort and makes recovery depend on accepting the risk of not checking.

Employees often try to reduce uncertainty by responding quickly. A brief answer may seem like the easiest way to close the issue and protect the rest of the evening. Yet a reply can restart the conversation. It may lead to another question, a request for a document, or a longer discussion. What appears to be a small act of control can open a new period of work.

Postponing the response does not always solve the problem. The employee may decide to reply the next morning but continue thinking about what should be said. An unread message, an unclear instruction, or a comment from a manager can remain mentally active. The employee may rehearse a response or worry about how the delay will be interpreted. No further work is completed, but psychological detachment remains incomplete.

Work-related rumination can develop from this condition. Rumination involves repeated thought about work problems when direct action is no longer possible or useful. After-hours messages can provide new material for these thoughts. A short comment may be interpreted as criticism. A project change may raise concern about future workload. A vague message may leave the employee uncertain about what will happen the next day.

Not every work-related thought is harmful. Employees may reflect on a successful task or develop a useful idea outside working hours. The more difficult form is repetitive thought that is hard to control and does not lead to a clear decision. Written messages can support this pattern because they often lack tone and context. Employees may reread the same words and assign different meanings to them.

Messages received near bedtime create particular difficulty. The period before sleep is often the last opportunity for work-related activation to decline. A late message may delay bedtime if the employee chooses to complete the task. It may also affect sleep without producing a long period of visible work. A complaint, correction, or unexpected request can increase alertness and bring workplace emotions back into the night.

The use of one device for both work and personal communication makes this harder to avoid. Employees often keep their phones beside the bed for ordinary personal reasons. Work messages are then present in a setting closely connected with sleep. Silencing notifications may reduce interruptions, but some employees continue checking because late communication has become familiar.

Sleep effects may appear as later sleep, repeated waking, or less restful rest. Thoughts triggered by a message can remain after the screen is turned off. A task for the next morning may become larger in the employee's mind during the quiet hours of the night. Reduced sleep then leaves fewer resources for the next working day.

This can create a cycle. Poor recovery makes concentration and emotional control more difficult during normal working hours. Tasks take longer or remain unfinished, increasing the chance that work will continue into the evening. The next recovery period is interrupted again. Because each message appears minor, the pattern may not be recognised as a continuing source of strain.

Emotional recovery is affected as well. Messages carry workplace relationships into the home. A dismissive reply, an unexpected correction, or conflict in a group chat can change the employee's mood for the rest of the evening. Irritation or anxiety may continue after the exchange ends and affect interactions with people who were not involved in the work issue.

Family members may see the employee as physically present but mentally unavailable. A short

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message can interrupt a meal, conversation, or shared plan. From the outside, the interruption may appear too small to explain the employee's distraction. The employee, however, may connect the message with workload, hierarchy, job security, or workplace reputation. Repeated interruptions can turn work communication into a source of tension within the household (Becker et al., 2021).

Weekends and annual leave are also affected when no reliable period remains free from contact. Employees may tolerate occasional weekday messages because they expect longer recovery later. When work also enters weekends and holidays, that expectation becomes weaker. A small request during leave may seem reasonable because the employee holds information that others need, but answering also confirms that absence does not fully suspend availability.

The accumulated pattern matters more than a single interruption. Most employees can deal with an occasional urgent message without serious difficulty. The problem arises when routine contact regularly opens recovery time to work and employees cannot predict when responsibility has ended. Repetition changes the meaning of non-working time.

Some employees adapt by lowering their expectations. They stop treating evenings as protected periods and accept interruption as a normal condition of employment. This adjustment may reduce complaints, but it does not necessarily mean that the problem has disappeared. It may show that employees have reorganised their private lives around work contact.

Personal coping methods can provide limited relief. Muting notifications, placing the phone in another room, or setting private response rules may reduce exposure. These measures are harder to maintain when workplace expectations remain unclear or when availability continues to be rewarded. The employee must then defend a boundary that the organization has not clearly accepted.

Recovery requires more than moments in which no message is being answered. Employees need a reasonable expectation that routine work will not repeatedly return during personal time. Without that expectation, psychological detachment remains uncertain, leisure is fragmented, and recovery depends largely on the employee's ability to resist a communication pattern that keeps work continually within reach.

5. Factors Shaping Employees' Boundary Experiences

After-hours messaging does not affect every employee in the same way. The same message may be treated as a minor interruption by one person and as a serious demand by another. This difference is not simply a matter of personality. It is shaped by employees' boundary preferences, degree of control, job position, workload, family responsibilities, and the communication habits of the workplace.

Some employees prefer to keep work and private life separate. They are more comfortable when working hours, locations, and communication channels are clearly defined. Others accept more integration and may not object to answering a short message at night, especially if they can use working time more flexibly during the day. Neither preference is automatically better. The effect depends on whether the employee has chosen the arrangement or is required to accept it.

Control is therefore more important than preference alone. An employee may normally accept work–life integration but still dislike unpredictable contact. Another may prefer separation but accept occasional communication when the reason is clear. Boundary flexibility is less likely to cause strain when employees can decide when to read messages, whether a task can wait, and how lost personal time will be recovered.

Two employees may perform the same task at 9:00 p.m. but experience it differently. One may choose to answer and start work later the next morning. The other may feel unable to delay the reply and still be expected to follow the usual schedule. The visible activity is similar, but only the first employee has meaningful control over the movement of work into personal time.

Job position affects that control. Senior or highly valued employees may feel safe leaving routine messages until the next day. Junior staff, temporary workers, and employees in insecure positions may see rapid replies as a way to show commitment. Their concern is not always based on an explicit threat. It can arise from uncertainty about workplace expectations and the possible consequences of appearing unavailable.

New employees face a similar problem. They may not know which managers send non-urgent messages at night or which requests can safely wait. Answering everything appears to be the least risky approach. Once this pattern is established, changing it becomes difficult because colleagues and supervisors have already learned to expect a quick response.

Workload also shapes how an employee experiences after-hours contact. An occasional message may cause little difficulty when ordinary demands are manageable. The same message can feel heavier after a long working day or during a period of tight deadlines. It does not arrive as an isolated request but as another demand added to work that already feels unfinished.

When normal working hours are not enough to complete assigned tasks, after-hours messaging becomes part of a wider workload problem. Employees may continue working at night because deadlines leave no realistic alternative. The activity may look voluntary, especially when no manager directly orders overtime. In practice, the organization has shifted part of the workload into personal time.

The nature of the job also matters. Some roles involve safety incidents, system failures, shift coordination, or international clients. Employees in these positions may accept occasional after-hours contact because they understand why it is needed. A complete separation between work and personal time may not be realistic.

Difficulty arises when exceptional needs are not separated from ordinary work. If routine updates, delayed document requests, and genuine emergencies all arrive through the same channel, employees must monitor everything. They cannot know in advance which message can wait. The burden of distinguishing urgency is transferred to the recipient.

Remote and hybrid work add another layer. Working from home can increase flexibility and remove commuting time, but it also weakens the visible end of the working day. There may be no journey away from the workplace, and the laptop or phone used during work remains nearby. Colleagues may also treat physical presence at home as evidence that the employee is available.

The home environment can either strengthen or weaken this boundary. Employees with a separate work area may be able to close the door and create a clear transition. Those working from a bedroom, dining table, or shared space have fewer physical signals that work has ended. After-hours messages then enter the same environment used for rest and family life.

Family and caregiving responsibilities shape the practical cost of interruption. An employee caring for children, older relatives, or another family member may have little freedom to respond at night. A short message can arrive during meals, homework, transport, or care routines. The task may take only a few minutes, but it competes with responsibilities that cannot easily be delayed.

Employees without the same duties may reply faster and unintentionally create a standard for others. Their availability is then interpreted as stronger commitment rather than as a result of different personal conditions. This comparison places employees with less flexible private responsibilities at a disadvantage.

Managerial behaviour and team norms influence all of these experiences. A late message creates less pressure when employees know that routine matters can wait. The same message becomes more intrusive when delayed replies are criticised or fast responders receive visible praise. Employees often trust these daily signals more than written policies.

Teams also develop their own pace. In one group, employees may leave night-time messages unanswered without concern. In another, several

people reply immediately, making silence appear unusual. The meaning of after-hours communication is therefore shaped not only by the sender but also by the responses of colleagues.

These factors rarely operate alone. A separation preference may be easy to maintain in a secure job with manageable workload and supportive managers. It becomes harder in an insecure position where colleagues reply at all hours. An employee who normally accepts integration may also struggle when workload rises, family duties change, or remote work removes the transition out of the workday.

Boundary experience should not be reduced to personal resilience. Employees may mute notifications or set their own response rules, but their ability to maintain those limits depends on job security, workload, managerial conduct, and the consequences of being unavailable. Control over after-hours communication is partly personal, but it is also created by the way work is organised.

6. Rebuilding Boundaries in After-Hours Work Communication

The problems created by after-hours messaging cannot be solved only by asking employees to mute notifications or exercise greater self-control. These practices may reduce some interruptions, but they do not change the expectations behind the messages. When managers continue to contact employees at night and quick replies are treated as evidence of commitment, maintaining a boundary becomes the employee's responsibility alone. More stable protection requires changes in communication rules, managerial conduct, and the design of work systems.

This does not mean that all contact outside working hours should be prohibited. Some jobs involve system failures, safety incidents, urgent client matters, shift changes, or international work across time zones. In such settings, limited after-hours communication may be necessary. The main problem is not exceptional contact but the routine use of personal time for matters that could reasonably wait.

Organizations therefore need to distinguish genuine urgency from ordinary work. A serious technical failure or immediate safety risk may require prompt action. A meeting reminder, routine update, document revision, or request for general information usually does not. When these matters are sent through the same channels, employees must check every message in case one is important. The lack of distinction keeps them alert even when most messages do not need an immediate response.

Separate communication channels can make this distinction clearer. Routine work can remain in email or project platforms that employees are not expected to monitor after hours. Phone calls or another agreed channel may be reserved for emergencies. The effectiveness of this arrangement depends on restraint. If managers use the urgent channel for poorly planned or delayed tasks, employees soon learn that every form of communication may require attention.

Clear response expectations are equally important. Employees should know whether they are required to read, acknowledge, or act on messages outside their scheduled hours. These are not the same duty. Reading requires employees to monitor a device. Acknowledging a message shows that they remain available. Acting on it may involve a longer period of work.

For routine matters, the normal rule should be that no reading or response is required until the next working period. Employees should not need to send short replies such as "received" or "noted" merely to show that they are present. Silence after work should be treated as a normal condition of being off duty rather than as a lack of cooperation.

Written rules are useful only when management practice supports them. A workplace may state that employees are free to disconnect, but the message loses force if managers praise immediate replies or criticise those who wait until morning. Employees judge communication expectations through daily reactions. They notice what happens when someone does not answer at night and whether fast responders receive better opportunities.

Managers who prefer to work late can reduce pressure through scheduled delivery. A message written at midnight can be sent the next morning. This allows the manager to use a preferred schedule without bringing a new task into another employee's evening. Adding the phrase "no need to reply now" is less effective because the employee has already seen the message and may begin thinking about it.

Technical restrictions can provide stronger protection. Volkswagen introduced such an arrangement in Germany in 2011 for some employees using company BlackBerry devices. Work emails stopped being delivered shortly after the working day and resumed before the next shift (McMillan, 2011). Employees could still use their phones, but routine emails did not continue to enter their personal time.

The value of this policy was not simply that employees received fewer notifications. It shifted part of the responsibility for disconnection from the individual to the organization. Workers did not have to decide repeatedly whether to ignore each message or worry that colleagues were replying while they remained silent. The system created a visible stopping point for routine communication.

A fixed technical block will not suit every workplace. Employees with irregular schedules, international responsibilities, or formal on-call duties may need different arrangements. Some workers also prefer greater control over when they complete tasks. The Volkswagen case is useful not as a universal model but as evidence that communication systems can be designed to protect personal time rather than leaving all decisions to individual employees.

A more flexible approach may allow employees to set protected hours linked to their actual schedules. Routine messages sent during those periods can be delayed, while a separate channel remains available for genuine emergencies. This preserves some flexibility without requiring every employee to follow the sender's preferred working time.

Formal on-call work requires clearer treatment. Employees who are expected to remain reachable should know when the duty begins and ends, what kinds of incidents require action, and how quickly they must respond. On-call responsibility should not remain an informal expectation attached to a managerial or professional role.

The *Rentokil Initial* case shows why this distinction matters (Cour de cassation, Chambre sociale, 2018). The employee's burden did not depend only on the number of calls received. He had to remain reachable and ready to intervene. When a job genuinely requires this level of availability, the arrangement should be recognised as part of the work rather than described vaguely as flexibility or responsibility. Compensation, time off, or other protection should reflect the restriction placed on personal time.

Communication rules will also have limited effect when workload is too high. An organization may discourage late messages while assigning deadlines that cannot be met during normal hours. Employees then continue working in the evening without being directly told to do so. The behaviour appears voluntary, but the volume and timing of work leave little practical choice.

Repeated night-time communication may indicate understaffing, unclear task allocation, poor coordination, or unrealistic deadlines. In such cases, delayed delivery and notification settings address only the surface of the problem. Employees may still open laptops after dinner or complete work privately so that the organization does not see how much time is required.

Managers should examine why after-hours contact occurs. A rare urgent request is different from a team that regularly needs evening work to meet ordinary deadlines. When the pattern is routine, the response should include workload adjustment, clearer responsibilities, or changes to scheduling rather than advice about personal time management.

Leave periods also require protection. Employees are often contacted during leave because they hold information that other people cannot find. A brief request may appear reasonable, but it shows that the handover was incomplete. Before leave begins,

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teams should make necessary records accessible, assign substitute contacts, and identify unfinished issues. The absent employee should not remain the default source of information.

Boundary protection should still allow employees some control over how they arrange their work. Some people prefer to pause during the day for personal responsibilities and complete a task later. This kind of flexibility can be valuable. The problem begins when one person's chosen schedule creates an obligation for everyone else.

An employee who chooses to work at night should not assume that colleagues are also available. Managers and team members need to separate their own sending time from another person's response time. Scheduled delivery and clear status information can help maintain this difference.

Team norms are also important. Routine issues can be collected for the next working day instead of being sent one at a time throughout the evening. Group chats can be kept for matters that require shared attention, while ordinary updates remain in less intrusive channels. These practices reduce the number of decisions employees must make about whether to reply.

The success of any boundary rule depends on whether employees can use it without disadvantage. A formal right not to respond has little value if promotion, task allocation, or informal reputation still depends on constant availability. Organizations need to judge commitment through the quality of work completed during agreed hours, not through the speed of late-night replies.

Rebuilding boundaries does not require a complete separation between work and personal life. Digital communication and flexible schedules make some overlap unavoidable and, at times, useful. The aim is to prevent routine availability from becoming an unlimited condition of employment. Employees should be able to recognise when contact is truly urgent, when a message can wait, and when the working day has actually ended. Without that clarity, recovery remains dependent on the individual employee's willingness and ability to resist a communication pattern created by the workplace.

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An Analysis of the Formation Mechanism of Attachment Anxiety in Cold Wars within Intimate Relationships

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Abstract: Cold wars in intimate relationships involve silence, emotional distance, and avoidance, which can heighten attachment anxiety. This paper explores how emotional withdrawal leads to threat perception, negative interpretation, rumination, and reassurance-seeking, reinforcing a pursuit-withdrawal cycle. It also outlines factors that intensify this pattern and suggests strategies such as clear communication, emotional regulation, and stronger boundaries to reduce anxiety.

Keywords: intimate relationships; cold wars; emotional withdrawal; rumination

1. Introduction

Conflict is common in intimate relationships, as partners may disagree over daily habits, emotional needs, or future plans. Some individuals choose to address these issues through direct communication, while others withdraw and enter what is often referred to as a "cold war." This state is not merely a brief cooling-off period, but a prolonged form of emotional disengagement in which communication is reduced or completely halted, leaving the underlying conflict unresolved (Wright & Roloff, 2009).

Moderate silence can sometimes help regulate emotions. However, when silence lacks explanation, clear time boundaries, or a plan for resuming communication, it becomes ambiguous and unsettling. The partner who is ignored often struggles to understand the status of the relationship, and silence may be interpreted as a sign of instability (Williams, 2007; Wright & Roloff, 2009). This situation is particularly challenging for individuals with attachment anxiety. Attachment anxiety refers to a strong fear of rejection or abandonment in close relationships, accompanied by a need for clear emotional reassurance to feel loved and accepted (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson & Rholes, 2017).

During a cold war, the absence of communication makes it difficult for anxiously attached individuals to maintain a sense of security. They may repeatedly check messages, revisit past conversations, overanalyze their partner's behavior, and engage in self-blame or catastrophic thinking (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). The lack of information created by silence is often filled with negative assumptions—for example, interpreting delayed responses as intentional neglect or emotional distance as a loss of affection. These

cognitive distortions intensify anxiety and can interfere with daily functioning.

Cold wars can trigger a "pursuit–withdrawal" cycle (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Papp et al., 2009). The anxious partner may attempt to restore closeness through frequent contact or emotional expression, while the other partner, feeling pressured, may withdraw even further. This dynamic can escalate tension within the relationship. The digital communication environment also amplifies uncertainty; for instance, seeing a partner online without receiving a reply can easily be perceived as rejection (Fox & Warber, 2014).

Therefore, attachment anxiety during cold wars is not solely a result of individual traits but is also shaped by interaction patterns and communication styles. Understanding this process can help individuals respond more effectively to emotional challenges within relationships.

2. Cold Wars as a Form of Relational Withdrawal

A cold war in a close relationship often starts after a disagreement, hurt, or unmet need. The problem is not talked about. One or both partners talk less and show less emotion. They may still live together or stay in the relationship, but normal interaction becomes hard. Daily talk is short, emotional response is weak, and attempts to discuss the issue may get no reply.

Relational withdrawal is not just less talking. It also means less attention, care, support, and physical closeness. The withdrawing partner may avoid conflict because talking feels tiring or painful. Silence can also show anger. Sometimes, the person expects the other to understand the reason without explanation. The other partner must guess what happened and what the silence means.

This withdrawal has a strong effect because close relationships need regular emotional response (Collins & Feeney, 2000). Partners expect to be seen, heard, and valued. When this stops, it may feel like rejection. The partner who wants contact may feel lonely and may question the relationship.

2.1 Main Features of Cold Wars

Less communication is a clear sign. Conversations become short and only about basic things like food, work, or bills. The conflict is avoided. Emotional topics are not discussed. Questions may get one-word answers or no reply. The amount of communication also drops. A couple who talks often may stop sharing daily life. Messages are fewer. Calls are not answered. A message may be read but not answered. Replies may come late and have little emotion. This change affects meaning. A simple reply like "fine" may feel cold. The partner may focus on tone, timing, and small details because clear information is missing. Emotional distance is common. A partner may be present but not warm. Eye contact is avoided. The person may stop asking about feelings. Support may disappear. This can hurt more than being apart. When partners are together but do not respond, it is hard to ignore. The anxious partner may see the other acting normal but not communicating.

Delayed or no replies also matter. A delay may not mean rejection, but during conflict it may feel like it does. The waiting partner may see it as intentional. No reply often leads to repeated checking. The person may check the phone many times. Each check brings hope. When no reply comes, anxiety grows. Physical contact may also stop. Partners may not hug, sit close, or sleep together. One may turn away or sleep elsewhere. Touch is important because it shows care. A hug can show the relationship is safe. When touch stops, the anxious partner may feel less secure. Daily routines may change. Partners may stop eating or going out together. One may avoid the other. Daily life continues, but emotional connection drops. These changes make the conflict feel bigger. It spreads into daily life. The anxious partner may feel everything has changed.

2.2 Differences between Temporary Silence and Relational Cold Wars

Not all silence is a cold war. Short silence can be healthy when emotions are strong. A person may need time to calm down and think.

The key difference is clarity. A healthy pause includes explanation. A partner may say they need time and will talk later. This shows communication will continue. A short pause does not harm basic security. Both know they will talk again. Silence supports communication. Silence becomes harmful when used to avoid conflict for a long time. Some people avoid emotional talk. They may think ignoring the problem will help. Avoidance may reduce stress for a short time, but the problem stays. One partner may keep asking. The other may withdraw more. New problems may appear. Avoidant silence is unclear. The partner does not say when or if they will talk. The other person feels unsure. Silence can also be punishment. A partner may stop talking to show anger or cause guilt. The goal is to force change. This creates imbalance. One controls when communication starts and stops. The other has little chance to respond. This can become emotional control. A partner may use silence to gain power. The other may accept blame to restore contact. The difference is in how silence is used. Healthy silence has a reason and an end. Controlling silence does not. Time matters, but not alone. Short silence can still hurt if used as punishment. Long silence may be okay if both agree. Meaning depends on purpose and clarity.

2.3 The Uncertainty Created by Cold Wars

Uncertainty is central. The ignored partner gets little information. The person may not know what caused the reaction or what the silence means. This leads to guessing. The anxious partner may think about the conflict again and again to find a reason (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). This rarely works because the needed answer is missing. The person may change explanations often. Silence may seem like anger at one moment and loss of love at another. It becomes hard to read feelings. Usual signs like warmth and touch disappear. The anxious partner loses signals of safety. Neutral actions may seem negative. Normal behavior may be seen as rejection. Digital communication can make this worse. A partner may be active online but not reply. This may feel like being ignored on purpose. Online signs are not always clear, but the anxious partner may still use them as clues. Checking becomes frequent. Fear of breakup grows. There is no clear end, but no clear safety either. The person feels stuck between hope and fear. This is harder than clear conflict. There is no clear problem to solve. The anxious partner does not know what to do. Fear grows more if the relationship is tied to self-worth. Silence may feel like personal failure. Past experiences also matter. Someone with past rejection may react more strongly. Old memories affect current feelings (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). The anxious partner may try to reduce uncertainty by reaching out. Messages and calls increase. No reply increases fear. Uncertainty affects daily life. Focus drops. Sleep may be disturbed. Work feels less important. Emotions change often. Small signs bring hope. Silence brings fear again. This cycle makes calm hard to keep.

3. Attachment Anxiety and the Need for Emotional Security

Attachment anxiety is closely related to a person's sense of safety in intimate relationships. People with attachment anxiety often want a high level of closeness, but they are not sure whether this closeness will continue (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). They may feel loved when the partner is warm and responsive. When the partner becomes distant, their sense of safety can quickly weaken (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019).

This form of anxiety is not only a wish to receive more attention. It includes a deep concern that care may be withdrawn without warning. The person may worry that the partner will lose interest, choose someone else, or end the relationship. These fears can remain present even when there is no clear sign of separation.

Cold wars can make these fears much stronger. Communication becomes limited, emotional support is reduced, and the partner's intentions are unclear. The person with attachment anxiety then loses many of the signals that usually create security. Silence is often read as a threat because it removes the expected signs of love, acceptance, and commitment.

3.1 The Basic Meaning of Attachment Anxiety

A strong need for closeness is one of the main features of attachment anxiety. People with this tendency often want frequent communication and clear emotional contact. They may feel comfortable when the partner shares feelings, replies to messages, spends time with them, and gives direct signs of care.

This need is not always shown through direct requests. Some people may avoid saying that they feel insecure because they fear appearing weak or dependent. They may try to gain closeness through frequent messages, repeated questions, emotional complaints, or close attention to the partner's behaviour.

Reassurance has an important role in this pattern. The person may need to hear that the relationship is stable and that the partner still cares. One statement of reassurance may provide relief, but the effect may not last for long. A later delay, cold reply, or change in mood can bring the fear back.

This repeated need for reassurance comes from weak internal security. The person finds it difficult to believe that the relationship remains stable when the partner is not actively showing care. Love must be confirmed again through words, replies, touch, or shared time. When these signs are absent, the person may assume that the relationship has changed.

Sensitivity to rejection is another key feature. People with attachment anxiety often notice small changes in their partner's behaviour. They may pay attention to reply speed, tone of voice, facial expression, body position, and the amount of time spent together. These details help them judge whether the partner is emotionally close or distant.

A minor change may receive more attention than it deserves. A tired voice may be understood as annoyance. A short message may be treated as emotional withdrawal. A request for personal space may be seen as a sign that the partner no longer wants the relationship. The anxious person often reacts to the possible meaning of the behaviour rather than the behaviour itself.

Fear of abandonment is usually stronger than ordinary concern about conflict. Most people feel uncomfortable when a partner becomes distant. A person with attachment anxiety may experience the same distance as a sign of possible loss. The emotional response can be intense even when the conflict is temporary.

This fear can lead to constant preparation for rejection. The person may look for signs that the partner is planning to leave. Positive behaviour may be treated as temporary, while negative behaviour is taken as more reliable. A warm interaction may create comfort for a short time, but one period of silence can become proof that the relationship is unsafe.

Attachment anxiety is also linked to doubt about personal value (Murray et al., 2000). The person may not only ask whether the partner still cares. They may also ask whether they are worthy of love. Conflict can quickly become a judgment about the self.

When the partner withdraws, the anxious person may think that they are too difficult, unattractive, demanding, or unimportant. The partner's silence is then understood as a result of personal weakness. Instead of viewing the cold war as a communication problem between two people, the person may treat it as proof that they have failed in the relationship.

This self-doubt can make it hard to express real needs. The person may fear that asking for respect, time, or emotional support will push the partner away. They may accept unfair treatment to avoid separation. They may also apologize repeatedly even when responsibility for the conflict is shared.

The need to protect the relationship can become stronger than the need to protect personal boundaries. The person may stop discussing their

own hurt and focus only on restoring contact. When the partner begins communicating again, the relief may be so strong that the original problem is left unresolved.

3.2 Sources of Attachment Anxiety

Attachment anxiety may be connected to unstable emotional care in early life (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). A child learns about emotional security through repeated contact with caregivers. When care is steady and available, the child can develop the expectation that support will be provided when needed.

Care is not always stable. A caregiver may be warm at some times and distant at others. Responses may depend on mood, stress, work, health, or family conflict. The child cannot easily predict whether comfort will be available. This uncertainty can increase attention to the caregiver's emotional state. The child may learn to watch facial expressions, tone, and behaviour closely. Strong emotional expression may also become a way to gain attention. Crying, clinging, or repeated requests for comfort may work at some times but fail at others. The child receives the message that closeness is possible, but it is not secure.

These early experiences do not directly decide how every later relationship will develop. They can still shape basic expectations about closeness. A person may enter an adult relationship with the belief that care can disappear quickly and that emotional security requires constant effort.

Previous experiences of rejection can also increase attachment anxiety. A sudden breakup may create fear that another relationship will end in the same way. Being left without an explanation can make silence especially threatening. The person may connect current distance with the earlier loss even when the situations are different.

Betrayal can have a similar effect. A partner may have lied, hidden another relationship, or continued to act normally while preparing to leave. After such an experience, ordinary signs of privacy or distance may seem dangerous. The person may believe that important changes can happen without their knowledge.

Emotional neglect can also leave a lasting effect. A person may have remained in a relationship where feelings were often ignored. They may have asked for support and received indifference. This can create the belief that emotional needs are too heavy or that love must be earned through patience and self-sacrifice.

Public rejection or humiliation may affect later trust as well. If a previous partner ended a relationship in a hurtful way, shared private information, or compared the person with someone else, fear may continue after the event. New conflicts can activate shame as well as anxiety.

Repeated insecurity in the current relationship may strengthen attachment anxiety even when it was not strong at the beginning. A partner may often threaten separation during arguments, disappear without explanation, or change between warmth and distance. These patterns make the relationship difficult to predict.

Unstable contact can be especially powerful. The partner may be caring after a period of withdrawal and then become distant again. The anxious person receives relief when closeness returns, but this relief is mixed with fear that it will disappear. The person may then invest more effort in keeping the partner close.

Repeated cold wars can train the anxious partner to expect withdrawal after conflict. Even a small disagreement may create fear because it has often been followed by silence. The person begins to react not only to the present issue but also to earlier cold wars in the same relationship.

Promises that are not kept can also weaken security. A partner may agree to communicate more clearly but return to silence during the next conflict. The anxious person may stop trusting verbal reassurance. More proof is then required before the relationship feels safe.

Inconsistent affection may create similar uncertainty. A partner may show strong love during good periods but become completely unavailable when problems appear. The anxious person may not

know which side reflects the partner's true feelings. This question can keep attention fixed on every emotional change.

Attachment anxiety may also be affected by low self-esteem, social isolation, and heavy dependence on the relationship. When a person has few sources of support, the partner may become the main source of comfort, belonging, and recognition. Any threat to the relationship then carries greater emotional weight.

A person who has a stable social network may still feel hurt by a cold war, but support from friends, family, work, or personal interests can reduce total dependence on the partner's response. Without these supports, silence may feel like the loss of the person's whole emotional world.

3.3 Attachment Needs in Intimate Relationships

Emotional availability is a basic attachment need. It means that a partner is willing to notice emotional signals and respond when support is needed. The person does not need to solve every problem. Listening, showing concern, and remaining emotionally present can already create a sense of safety.

Availability also means that emotional contact does not disappear whenever conflict occurs. Partners may feel angry or disappointed, but they can still show that the relationship has not been abandoned. A simple statement such as "I am upset, but I still care about us" can separate the conflict from the value of the relationship.

People with attachment anxiety often need this separation to be made clear. Without it, they may believe that anger means loss of love. They may see the partner's wish for space as a wish to leave. Clear emotional availability can reduce this confusion.

Stable responses are also important. Stability does not mean that a person must always be calm, warm, or ready to talk. It means that the general pattern of response is predictable. The partner explains when space is needed, avoids sudden disappearance, and returns to the conversation as promised.

Predictability helps a person manage temporary distance. A partner may say that they need two hours to calm down and will talk later. The other person may still feel uncomfortable, but there is a clear structure. The pause has a reason and an expected end.

Cold wars remove this structure. The partner may stop communicating without saying when contact will resume. The anxious person cannot prepare for the length or meaning of the silence. Waiting becomes harder because there is no clear point at which the issue will be discussed.

Stable responses also require some consistency between words and actions. A partner may say that the relationship matters but repeatedly use silence as punishment. This difference weakens trust. The anxious person may rely less on verbal reassurance and watch behaviour more closely.

Clear signs of care and commitment help maintain security during conflict. These signs can include direct statements, respectful behaviour, physical closeness, shared plans, and willingness to solve problems. They show that conflict has occurred within the relationship, not that the relationship has disappeared.

Commitment is especially important when emotions are negative. It is easy to show care when both partners are calm. Security depends more on how care is handled during stress. A partner who remains respectful during conflict sends the message that anger does not remove basic concern.

This does not require immediate agreement. Partners can disagree strongly and still avoid threats, insults, disappearance, or emotional punishment. They can state that more time is needed while confirming that the issue will be addressed.

For a person with attachment anxiety, signs of commitment reduce the need to search constantly for hidden meanings. The person does not have to judge the whole relationship through one delayed reply or one change in tone. The basic bond remains visible even when the problem has not been solved.

The need for reassurance should not be treated as shameful, but it also cannot depend entirely on one partner's constant response. A secure relationship allows needs to be expressed directly. It also gives

both people room to manage emotions without making temporary distance feel like abandonment. Clear communication supports this balance. A person can say, "I need some time alone," while also saying, "I will contact you tonight." The message protects personal space and keeps the relationship emotionally present. When such communication is absent, attachment needs remain active but have no reliable way to receive an answer.

4. Threat Perception during Relational Cold Wars

Attachment anxiety often becomes stronger when a person believes that an important relationship is under threat. The threat does not need to be clearly stated. A change in communication, a cold reply, or a period of silence may be enough to create fear. People with attachment anxiety are often sensitive to signs of rejection, so they may notice relational changes earlier and react to them more strongly.

A cold war provides many possible threat signals but little clear information. The withdrawing partner may not explain why communication has stopped. The anxious partner then has to judge the meaning of silence through small details. These details may include message length, reply speed, facial expression, body position, online activity, and changes in daily routines.

The anxious person does not examine these signals from a neutral position. Fear of abandonment is already present. This fear affects what the person notices and how each detail is explained. Behaviour that could have several meanings is often linked to rejection. The person may know that the partner is tired, busy, or angry, but the possibility of losing the relationship receives more attention.

Threat perception is not the same as the actual condition of the relationship. A partner's silence may reflect anger, emotional overload, or poor communication skills. The anxious person may still experience it as evidence that love is disappearing. The emotional reaction is based on the meaning given to the silence, not only on the silence itself.

4.1 Silence as a Sign of Possible Rejection

Silence can be understood in many ways. A person may be trying to calm down, avoid saying something hurtful, or think about the conflict. The same silence can also be used to punish or control a partner. During a cold war, the purpose is often not stated. The anxious partner may then choose the most threatening explanation.

Withdrawal is often interpreted as dislike. The person may believe that the partner no longer wants to listen, communicate, or spend time together. A refusal to discuss the conflict may be read as a refusal of the person as a whole. The difference between rejecting a conversation and rejecting a partner becomes unclear.

This interpretation can appear quickly. The anxious person may not wait for more information before deciding what the silence means. A partner who turns away, leaves the room, or stops replying may seem to be showing dislike directly. The person may think that the partner feels tired of them or regrets entering the relationship.

These thoughts often contain a judgment about personal value. The anxious partner may ask what is wrong with them rather than what is happening between the two people. Silence may lead to thoughts such as "I am too difficult," "I have become a burden," or "My partner does not enjoy being with me anymore." The person moves from observing the partner's behaviour to making a negative judgment about the self.

This shift increases emotional pain. Anger about poor communication becomes mixed with shame and fear. The person is not only waiting for a reply. They are also waiting to learn whether they are still accepted. Each moment of silence may feel like a delay in receiving that answer. Delayed responses can also be connected with loss of love. In ordinary situations, a late reply may have little meaning. During a cold war, reply time becomes an important emotional sign. The anxious person may remember how quickly the partner replied before the conflict and compare it with the current delay.

A longer delay may be treated as proof that the partner's feelings have changed. The person may

think that someone who still cared would answer sooner. This belief turns reply speed into a direct measure of love, even though communication habits can change for many reasons.

The anxious partner may watch the phone closely after sending a message. A few minutes without a reply may create discomfort. As more time passes, discomfort can turn into fear. The person may begin to imagine that the partner has decided to ignore them completely.

Read receipts and online status can make this experience more difficult. When a message has been read but not answered, the anxious person may see the silence as a deliberate choice. If the partner is active on another platform, the sense of rejection may become stronger. The person may think, "There is time for everyone else, but not for me."

This comparison gives the delay a personal meaning. The issue is no longer that the partner is not ready to talk. It appears that the partner is willing to communicate but has chosen to exclude the anxious person. That belief can create anger, humiliation, and a strong need to demand an explanation.

The partner may later give a simple reason for the delay, but the anxious person may find it hard to accept. Once the delay has been connected with loss of love, a practical explanation can seem weak. The person may continue to ask why the partner did not send even a short reply.

Emotional distance may also be treated as a sign of breakup. A cold war often changes the normal pattern of closeness. Shared activities stop, physical contact decreases, and conversation becomes limited. The anxious person may see these changes as preparation for separation.

The partner may not mention ending the relationship. The anxious person may still believe that the decision has already been made. Silence then seems like the period before a final breakup. The person may expect the partner to leave once practical matters are arranged or once enough emotional distance has been created.

This fear can be linked to earlier experiences. A previous partner may have become distant before ending the relationship. A caregiver may have withdrawn affection during conflict. The current silence can bring back the same expectation. The person may feel that they already know what will happen next, even when the present relationship is different.

The anxious partner may also treat emotional distance as evidence of another relationship. Reduced contact, private phone use, or a change in routine may create suspicion. There may be no direct evidence of betrayal, but the person may connect several unclear details and form a threatening explanation.

The possibility of betrayal may feel more believable when the partner refuses to talk. Silence prevents the anxious person from checking whether the fear is reasonable. The lack of explanation itself may then be treated as proof that something is being hidden.

Fear of breakup can lead to urgent attempts to restore closeness. The person may send long messages, apologize repeatedly, or ask for a direct answer about the relationship. These actions are often attempts to stop the feared loss before it happens.

The urgency may make calm communication difficult. The anxious person may ask many questions at once or demand immediate reassurance. The withdrawing partner may feel pressured and provide even less information. The resulting silence appears to confirm the original fear of rejection.

4.2 Increased Attention to Negative Signals

Attachment anxiety changes the way attention is used during a cold war. The anxious person becomes highly alert to any sign that may show the partner's feelings. Attention stays focused on the relationship even when the person is working, studying, resting, or talking with others.

Repeated message checking is a common sign of this state. The person may open the same conversation many times, even when there is no new notification. They may check whether a message has been delivered, read, or deleted. They may also review

older messages to compare the partner's earlier tone with the current one.

Each check is linked to the hope of receiving reassurance. The person expects that a reply may reduce fear. When no reply appears, anxiety remains. The person may check again after a few minutes because the need for certainty has not been met.

This behaviour can continue for hours. The anxious person may keep the phone nearby during meals, work, or sleep. A notification from another app may cause a quick emotional reaction because it is mistaken for the partner's reply. Relief disappears when the person sees that the message came from someone else.

Repeated checking does not solve the uncertainty. It keeps the person's attention on the absence of a response. Each check becomes another reminder that communication has not resumed. The person may feel unable to stop because not checking also creates fear that an important message will be missed.

The anxious partner may also monitor online activity. They may notice when the partner was last active, what content was liked, or whether new people were followed. These details become material for judging the relationship.

Online activity can be especially confusing because it shows behaviour without explaining its meaning. A partner may like a post without thinking deeply about it. The anxious person may see the same action as proof that the partner is relaxed and happy while ignoring the relationship.

A new follower, comment, or photograph may also receive strong attention. The person may search for a connection between the online action and the cold war. A normal social interaction can then appear to be a sign of replacement, betrayal, or loss of interest.

Changes in tone and behaviour are watched closely as well. The anxious partner may notice whether the other person uses a usual nickname, adds an emoji, makes eye contact, or sits nearby. A small change can seem important because direct emotional communication has stopped.

A short sentence may be examined many times. The person may ask whether the reply sounds angry, final, or uninterested. Punctuation may also be given emotional meaning. A full stop, missing emoji, or formal word may seem to show distance.

Face-to-face behaviour receives the same close attention. The anxious person may watch how the partner enters the room, places personal items, eats, or prepares to leave. They may look for signs that the partner is avoiding contact on purpose.

This close observation can create a state of constant tension. The person is always waiting for the next relational signal. Ordinary actions are no longer ordinary because each one may answer the question of whether the relationship is safe.

Negative details often receive more weight than positive ones. A partner may complete a helpful task, remain at home, or show small signs of care. The anxious person may notice these actions but still focus on one cold reply. The negative signal seems more truthful because it matches the fear already present.

Positive signs may be explained away. A kind action may be treated as habit, politeness, or guilt rather than love. A brief conversation may be seen as practical rather than emotional. The person may think that the partner is only keeping peace until the relationship ends.

Negative signals are treated differently. A delayed reply or distant expression may be viewed as direct evidence of rejection. The person rarely asks whether the detail has a neutral explanation. Fear makes the threatening meaning feel more convincing.

This imbalance can affect memory. The anxious person may remember the partner's cold words clearly but have difficulty recalling recent signs of commitment. Earlier conflicts may also return to mind. The present silence begins to look like part of a long pattern, even when earlier events were resolved.

The person may collect negative details as if building a case. A delayed reply, an avoided glance, and a change in plans may be placed together. Each

detail seems to support the others. The combined picture appears more certain than any single fact.

This process can make reassurance difficult. When the partner says that the relationship is not ending, the anxious person may compare the statement with the negative details already collected. Words may be seen as less reliable than observed behaviour.

Close attention to negative signals can also affect the anxious partner's own behaviour. The person may become quiet, angry, or suspicious before receiving a clear explanation. The partner then notices this tension and may respond defensively. A reaction based on a possible threat can create new conflict in the real relationship.

The anxious person may also test the partner's feelings. They may stop messaging to see whether the partner notices, post something online to attract attention, or mention another person to create jealousy. These tests are meant to gain information, but their meaning is often unclear to the other partner.

When the expected response does not appear, the person may treat the failed test as proof of rejection. The partner may not know that a test was taking place. The anxious person still reads the lack of response as a meaningful choice.

4.3 Unclear Situations and Imagined Threats

A cold war creates gaps in information. The anxious partner does not know what the other person is thinking, how long the silence will continue, or whether the relationship is still secure. The mind often tries to fill these gaps because uncertainty is difficult to tolerate.

Missing information is commonly filled with negative explanations. The person may think that the partner is planning to leave, talking to someone else, or waiting for a chance to end the relationship. These explanations are not based on a direct statement. They are formed from fear, past experience, and unclear signs.

The negative explanation may begin as one possible answer. Repeated thinking can make it feel more certain. The person imagines the same outcome many times and becomes emotionally used to treating it as real. The fear then shapes later interpretations.

For example, a partner may ask for time alone. The anxious person may first wonder whether the partner needs to calm down. Later, the person may think that the partner is reconsidering the whole relationship. After more rumination, the person may become convinced that a breakup decision has already been made.

The facts have not changed, but the meaning has become more threatening. The person's own thoughts create a sense of movement toward loss. This can happen without any new information from the partner. Assuming the worst may feel protective. The anxious person may believe that expecting rejection will reduce the shock if it happens. They may think it is safer to prepare for loss than to trust a positive outcome.

This form of preparation rarely brings calm. The person experiences the pain of rejection before rejection has occurred. They may cry, lose sleep, or become unable to concentrate because the imagined event feels close and real. The person may also begin to act according to the worst possible outcome. They may demand a final answer, accuse the partner of betrayal, or threaten to leave before being left. These actions are attempts to gain control over a feared event.

Acting early can create the conflict that the person fears. A partner who only wanted time to calm down may feel attacked by accusations. The partner may then withdraw further or question the future of the relationship. The imagined threat begins to affect actual behaviour between the couple.

Past experience often provides the content of imagined threats. A person who was cheated on may imagine another betrayal. A person who was suddenly abandoned may expect the same type of breakup. Someone who grew up with unstable care may believe that affection can disappear after any mistake.

The current cold war gives these older fears a place to return. The person may react to the present partner as if the earlier event is happening again.

Emotional memory can be stronger than the clear differences between the two situations.

Uncertainty becomes emotional danger when it is treated as proof that the relationship is unsafe. Not knowing why the partner is silent is different from knowing that the partner wants to leave. Attachment anxiety can weaken this difference.

The person may believe that a secure partner would never create uncertainty. Since uncertainty exists, the relationship must already be in danger. This belief turns a lack of information into negative information.

Physical reactions can make the threat feel even more real. The person may experience a fast heartbeat, chest pressure, stomach discomfort, shaking, or difficulty sleeping. These reactions show that the body is under stress, but the person may interpret them as proof that something serious must be happening.

The stronger the physical reaction becomes, the more convincing the imagined threat may feel. The person may think, "I would not feel this afraid unless the relationship was truly ending." Emotion is then used as evidence about the partner's intention.

Rumination keeps the imagined threat active (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). The person repeatedly asks what the silence means, what mistake was made, and what will happen next. No clear answer is available, so the same questions return. Each round of thinking may produce a more negative explanation. The person may start with concern about one conflict and end with doubts about the whole relationship. Past disagreements, personal weaknesses, and possible future losses become connected.

Attempts to gain certainty can also create new uncertainty. The anxious partner may send a message and then worry about whether it was too emotional. They may delete a message and wonder whether the partner saw it. They may apologize and then fear that the apology made them appear guilty. Every action becomes another object of analysis. The person no longer thinks only about the partner's silence. They also examine their own attempts to repair the relationship. This expands the number of details that can be given a threatening meaning.

The unclear state may continue even after communication resumes. The anxious person may still question whether the partner's warmth is real or temporary. They may fear that the conflict has caused hidden damage. A normal reply may reduce anxiety for a short time but may not restore full security.

The person may then seek stronger proof of commitment. They may ask for promises, repeated explanations, or more frequent contact. When the partner cannot provide constant reassurance, uncertainty returns. The need to remove every doubt becomes difficult to satisfy.

Cold wars are especially likely to produce imagined threats when there are no shared rules for handling conflict. The partners may not know how long a cooling-off period should last or how contact will resume. Each conflict is handled through personal habits rather than a clear agreement.

The anxious partner may see any pause as abandonment, while the other partner sees silence as a normal way to manage anger. Neither person clearly explains this difference. The same behaviour then has two very different meanings inside the relationship.

The withdrawing partner may believe that silence prevents harm. The anxious partner experiences the silence as harm itself. Without direct discussion, both people continue to act according to their own understanding. The gap between these meanings leaves more room for fear, guessing, and imagined loss.

5. Negative Cognition and Emotional Amplification

A relational cold war does not produce attachment anxiety only through silence itself. The anxious partner also gives meaning to that silence. When communication is limited, the person may rely on personal beliefs, past experiences, and emotional guesses to explain what is happening. These explanations are often negative.

The person may blame themselves for the conflict, imagine the worst result, or review the same details many times. These thoughts increase fear and make the partner's withdrawal feel more serious. Strong emotions then make negative thoughts appear more believable. Thought and emotion begin to support each other.

A person who feels afraid may pay more attention to signs of rejection. These signs create more fear. Anger may lead to harsh messages, while shame may stop the person from expressing real needs. Sadness can make the relationship appear hopeless. Helplessness can create a strong need for the partner to end the pain through immediate contact.

5.1 Self-Blame

Self-blame often appears when the anxious partner cannot obtain a clear explanation for the cold war. The person knows that the partner has withdrawn but does not fully understand why. To fill this gap, the person may assume that they caused the problem.

The conflict is then treated as proof of personal failure. The person may believe that a good partner would have prevented the disagreement or known how to repair it quickly. Since the cold war continues, the person may decide that they have failed in the relationship.

This view places too much responsibility on one person. Conflict usually comes from the words, needs, habits, and reactions of both partners. The anxious person may still review only their own behaviour. They may ask what they said wrong, why they reacted emotionally, or why they could not keep the partner happy.

The person may turn a single mistake into a general judgment about the self. Saying something hurtful during an argument may become "I always ruin everything." Asking for more attention may become "I am too demanding." Feeling upset may become "I am difficult to love."

These judgments do not stay connected to the specific event. They affect the person's full sense of value. The anxious partner may believe that the conflict reveals who they really are. A temporary communication problem then becomes evidence of a permanent personal weakness.

This pattern can be linked to the belief that love must be earned. Some people feel secure only when they are helpful, calm, attractive, or easy to satisfy. They may believe that showing anger, disappointment, or need will make the partner lose interest.

When conflict occurs, the person may think that they have broken the conditions for being loved. They may believe that the partner's silence is a reasonable response to their failure. This belief can make unfair withdrawal seem deserved.

Self-blame may also focus on physical appearance or personal attraction. The anxious partner may think that they are not attractive enough to keep the partner interested. A period of emotional distance can then lead to comparison with other people.

The person may examine photographs, clothing, body shape, age, or other parts of appearance. They may compare themselves with people the partner follows online or meets in daily life. The conflict may have little connection with appearance, but insecurity gives the silence this meaning.

The person may also question their social value. They may believe that they are not interesting, successful, confident, or independent enough. If the partner appears relaxed with friends but remains silent in the relationship, the anxious person may think that other people are easier to enjoy.

These comparisons can deepen the fear of replacement. The person may believe that the partner has many better choices. The relationship then feels unstable because personal worth is measured against imagined competitors.

Self-blame can also appear through repeated apology. The anxious partner may apologize before understanding what happened. They may accept responsibility for matters that were shared or mainly caused by the other partner. The purpose of the apology is often to restore communication rather than admit a clear mistake.

Repeated apology can provide a sense of action. The person cannot control the partner's silence, but they can offer another apology, promise to change, or

give up a personal request. These actions may feel like possible ways to bring the partner back.

The person may apologize for having emotional needs. They may say sorry for asking to talk, feeling hurt, or wanting a reply. Their real concern is then pushed aside. The cold war ends only when the anxious partner gives up the issue that caused discomfort.

This pattern weakens personal boundaries. The person learns that expressing dissatisfaction may lead to emotional withdrawal. To avoid another cold war, they may remain silent about future problems. Fear of abandonment becomes stronger than the wish to be treated fairly.

Taking full responsibility for the partner's withdrawal also hides the partner's role in the conflict. The anxious person may think that the partner would communicate well if they had behaved better. This explanation treats withdrawal as an automatic result of personal failure.

The withdrawing partner still makes a choice about how to handle conflict. Anger does not require prolonged silence, unclear punishment, or refusal to communicate. A person can ask for space and give a time for later discussion. When this does not happen, the communication problem cannot be placed on the anxious partner alone.

Self-blame may continue after the partner resumes contact. The anxious person may feel relieved and decide not to discuss the cold war. They may believe that raising the issue will cause another period of silence. The original problem remains, and the person carries more fear into the next conflict.

5.2 Catastrophic Thinking

Catastrophic thinking occurs when a person moves quickly from a limited problem to the worst possible outcome. During a cold war, the anxious partner may move from silence to fear of abandonment without enough information between these two points.

A partner may stop speaking after an argument. The anxious person may soon believe that the partner wants to end the relationship. The thought can appear before the partner has mentioned separation or shown any clear plan to leave.

The person may recognize that other explanations are possible. The partner may need time, feel angry, or lack the skills to discuss conflict. The feared explanation still feels more urgent. The possibility of abandonment receives more attention because it carries the greatest emotional risk.

Catastrophic thinking often follows a fast chain. The partner does not reply. The anxious person thinks that the partner no longer cares. Loss of care becomes a possible breakup. The breakup becomes permanent loneliness. One silent period is then linked to a much larger fear about the future.

This chain may happen within a short time. Each step feels connected to the one before it, even when there is little evidence. The final outcome begins to seem likely because the person has mentally travelled through the full sequence.

The anxious partner may also view one conflict as proof that the entire relationship is failing. A disagreement about time, communication, or daily habits can become evidence that the couple is not suitable for each other. Positive parts of the relationship receive less attention.

The person may think that healthy couples do not have this type of conflict. Since the cold war has occurred, the relationship must be unhealthy or close to ending. This belief leaves little space for repair, learning, or change.

Past conflicts may be brought into the present. The person may connect several disagreements and treat them as one continuous pattern. Each earlier problem becomes evidence that the current cold war is part of a larger decline.

Some earlier conflicts may have been discussed and resolved. Under strong anxiety, they return as proof that nothing was truly repaired. The person may believe that the partner has secretly carried dissatisfaction for a long time.

Temporary emotional distance may also be seen as permanent damage. The anxious partner may think that the relationship can never return to its earlier state. A hurtful word or period of silence is treated as something that has changed the bond forever.

This expectation can create despair before the couple has tried to repair the conflict. The person may believe that trust, closeness, or attraction has already been lost. Attempts at communication may seem pointless because the damage is assumed to be complete.

Catastrophic thinking may also concern the partner's hidden intentions. The anxious person may imagine that the partner is using the cold war to prepare for departure. The partner may be thinking, making plans, or seeking advice from others about ending the relationship.

There may be no evidence of these actions. Silence makes them possible because it gives no clear information. The anxious person may treat possibility as probability and later treat probability as certainty.

The person may mentally prepare for practical losses. They may imagine losing shared friends, housing, routines, plans, or future goals. A current conflict then becomes connected with many possible changes. The emotional size of the cold war grows far beyond the original issue.

Catastrophic thinking can change behaviour. A person who believes that abandonment is close may demand an immediate answer. They may ask whether the relationship is over, threaten to leave, or insist that the partner prove commitment.

Such questions may be difficult for the withdrawing partner to answer during strong emotion. A delayed or uncertain reply can then be taken as further proof that the feared outcome is real.

The person may also try to prevent permanent damage through excessive promises. They may agree to change important parts of themselves, stop seeing certain friends, or accept unreasonable conditions. The fear of future loss reduces their ability to judge what is fair.

A short sign of warmth may lower catastrophic thinking for a while. The person may feel that the relationship is safe again. This relief can disappear after another cold reply. The mind moves back to the worst result because basic security has not been restored.

5.3 Rumination

Rumination refers to repeated thinking about the same distressing event without reaching a clear answer. During a cold war, the anxious partner may replay the conflict, examine the partner's behaviour, and imagine different outcomes. The thinking feels useful because the person is searching for certainty. It often keeps the emotional pain active.

The person may replay the conversation that came before the silence. They remember what each partner said, the order of the words, and the tone used. A small detail may be reviewed many times.

The anxious partner may ask whether a different sentence could have prevented the conflict. They may imagine giving another reply, remaining quiet, or leaving the room earlier. These imagined versions create the feeling that the cold war could have been avoided through perfect behaviour.

The person may focus on one hurtful statement. They repeat it mentally and search for its real meaning. A sentence spoken in anger may be treated as a full expression of the partner's hidden beliefs.

The context of the argument may receive less attention. The person may believe that angry words are more honest than calm ones. This makes the statement difficult to dismiss even when the partner later explains or apologizes.

Rumination also includes repeated analysis of current behaviour. The person may ask why the partner entered a room without speaking, why a message had no emoji, or why an online post appeared during the cold war. Each detail becomes a problem that needs an answer.

One explanation rarely feels enough. The person may think that the partner is angry, then wonder whether the partner has lost interest, then fear that someone else is involved. The mind moves among these answers without settling on any of them.

This repeated analysis creates more uncertainty rather than less. Every explanation introduces another possible threat. The person may begin with one unanswered question and end with many.

Rumination can also take the form of imagined conversations. The person may plan what to say when communication resumes. They prepare

explanations, apologies, questions, and responses to possible criticism.

This planning may continue for a long time because the actual conversation has not happened. The person tries to prepare for every possible reaction. Each imagined negative reply creates a new need for preparation.

Some imagined conversations end in repair. Others end in rejection or breakup. The person may feel temporary comfort when imagining a good outcome and strong fear when imagining a bad one. Emotional changes occur even though no real interaction has taken place.

It can become difficult to shift attention away from the relationship. Work may take longer because the person repeatedly checks messages or returns to the conflict in thought. Reading, studying, and other tasks may feel hard because the mind remains focused on possible rejection.

Social contact may also be affected. The person may talk about the conflict repeatedly with friends. They may ask others to interpret the partner's messages or behaviour. Each opinion creates another explanation to consider.

Support from friends can be helpful, but repeated discussion may keep the conflict active. The person may seek a clear answer that friends cannot provide. Different opinions can increase confusion rather than reduce it.

Rumination often becomes stronger at night. There are fewer tasks to distract attention, and the person may expect a message before sleeping. The silence feels more noticeable when the day ends without contact.

The person may remain awake reviewing the conflict or checking the phone. Poor sleep then reduces emotional control the next day. Fear, anger, and sadness become harder to manage when the body is tired.

The anxious partner may know that repeated thinking is causing pain but still find it difficult to stop. Ending the analysis can feel like giving up control. The person may fear that an important clue will be missed or that they will be unprepared for the partner's next action.

Rumination gives the impression of active problem-solving. Real problem-solving requires new information, a clear goal, and possible action. Repeated thinking during a cold war often uses the same limited information. The thoughts continue because no new answer is available.

The process can strengthen negative memory. Each time the conflict is replayed, its emotional effect may return. The person experiences the hurt many times instead of only once. The event becomes easier to recall and more closely linked with fear.

Later conflicts may activate the same memories. A new period of silence can bring back earlier cold wars in detail. The current situation then carries the emotional weight of several past events.

5.4 Emotional Reactions

Anxiety is the most direct emotional reaction to possible rejection. The person feels unsure about the partner's intentions and cannot predict what will happen next. This uncertainty may produce mental and physical tension.

The anxious partner may feel restless and unable to remain still. The person may check the phone, walk around, or have difficulty completing ordinary tasks. The body may react through a fast heartbeat, chest tightness, stomach discomfort, shaking, or changes in appetite.

The person may become highly alert to any sound or notification. A message tone can create immediate hope and fear. When the message is not from the partner, disappointment follows.

Anxiety may rise and fall according to small signs. A brief reply can create relief. A cold tone or another delay can bring the fear back. The person's emotional state becomes closely tied to the partner's communication.

Anger can appear together with anxiety. The person may feel ignored, disrespected, or punished. They may believe that the partner has control over the situation because only the partner can decide when communication will resume.

This lack of control can make anger stronger. The anxious partner may feel that their emotional pain is

visible but is being ignored on purpose. Silence then seems cruel rather than simply avoidant.

Anger may be expressed through repeated messages, accusations, sarcasm, or emotional outbursts. The person may say things that are meant to force a response. Even a negative reply can feel better than continued silence because it confirms that the partner is still engaged.

Some angry behaviour has a protest function. The person is not only trying to hurt the partner. They are trying to make the partner notice the relationship and restore contact. The behaviour may look rejecting while its hidden purpose is to regain closeness.

This expression can create a new problem. The withdrawing partner may focus on the anger and ignore the fear beneath it. The person may then withdraw further, which increases both anger and anxiety.

Sadness often appears when the person experiences emotional distance as loss. The relationship has not formally ended, but the usual warmth is absent. The anxious partner may feel that something important has already been taken away.

Daily reminders can increase sadness. An empty seat, an unanswered message, or a broken routine may show the absence of normal closeness. The person may miss the partner even when they are physically nearby.

Sadness may lead to crying, low energy, poor concentration, or loss of interest in other activities. The person may stop enjoying time with friends because attention remains on the damaged connection.

Hope can make sadness unstable. A small sign of care may improve the person's mood quickly. When the sign is followed by more distance, sadness returns. This repeated rise and fall can be tiring.

Shame develops when the person links the conflict with personal weakness. The anxious partner may feel embarrassed about needing reassurance or sending many messages. They may judge themselves for reacting strongly.

The person may believe that a confident or mature partner would not feel this upset. Emotional need is then treated as a personal defect. The person experiences anxiety and also feels ashamed of having anxiety.

Shame may increase after an emotional outburst. Once the person calms down, they may regret the messages, calls, accusations, or threats made during the cold war. They may fear that this behaviour has made the partner even more likely to leave.

This fear can produce more apology and self-blame. The person may try to repair both the original conflict and the later emotional reaction. The number of problems seems to grow.

The person may hide the situation from friends because they feel embarrassed about being ignored. They may also hide their own behaviour because they fear being judged as dependent or unstable. This reduces access to support.

Helplessness appears when the person believes that nothing they do can restore safety. Messages receive no answer, apologies do not end the silence, and waiting does not provide information. The person feels unable to influence the relationship.

This state can be painful because the partner remains the expected source of relief. The anxious person may believe that only a reply, call, or sign of affection can stop the distress. Personal methods of calming down seem weak compared with direct reassurance.

Repeated failed attempts at contact can deepen helplessness. The person may feel trapped between acting and waiting. Sending another message may create regret, while remaining silent may feel impossible.

Helplessness can lead to emotional surrender. The person may accept all blame, give up personal needs, or agree to any condition that restores contact. The main aim is to end the uncertainty.

It can also lead to sudden withdrawal. After trying repeatedly to gain a response, the anxious partner may stop communicating and act as if they no longer care. This change may appear calm, but it can reflect exhaustion rather than real emotional distance.

Anxiety, anger, sadness, shame, and helplessness rarely appear separately. The person may move among them within a short period. Fear of loss can

become anger at being ignored. Anger can be followed by shame. Continued silence may then produce sadness and helplessness.

These emotional changes affect how the person interprets later events. Anger makes neutral actions seem disrespectful. Shame supports self-blame. Sadness makes the future look hopeless. Helplessness makes the partner's response seem like the only possible source of safety.

6. Hyperactivation of the Attachment System

The attachment system activates when a relationship feels unsafe. It pushes the person to seek closeness and support. In a stable relationship, simple contact can reduce fear.

During a cold war, contact is limited. The partner may stay silent or avoid discussion. The anxious person cannot confirm if the relationship is safe. The system stays active for longer.

The person tries harder to restore closeness. They may send many messages, ask repeated questions, or demand quick replies. They may also show anger or make accusations. These actions come from fear of loss.

Attention becomes fixed on the partner. Mood, sleep, and daily tasks depend on the partner's response. The person may know their behavior is not helpful but still feel unable to stop.

6.1 Strong Reassurance-Seeking

Reassurance-seeking means trying to confirm that the partner still cares. During a cold war, this need becomes frequent. The person may send many messages. Each message tries to fix uncertainty. New worries appear after each message, which leads to more messages. Messages may change in tone. Some are calm, others angry or apologetic. These shifts reflect unstable emotions. The person may promise to stop but contact the partner again soon. Silence feels too hard to tolerate. Unanswered messages increase the feeling of rejection. The person may think their pain is ignored. Some messages become very long. The person explains everything in detail to avoid misunderstanding. This can feel overwhelming to the partner and lead to more silence. Repeated calls serve the same purpose. The person wants quick reassurance. Missed calls increase urgency. Direct questions are common, such as asking if the partner still cares. Even after receiving answers, doubt returns. The person may focus on small changes in tone. A colder reply can increase fear. They may also ask indirect questions or compare themselves to others. These questions reflect fear of losing value. The person often wants immediate answers. Delay feels dangerous. They may set deadlines or threaten to leave to force a reply. Reassurance brings quick relief, but it does not last. The cycle repeats if the conflict remains.

6.2 Protest Behaviour

Protest behavior aims to get attention when direct attempts fail. It may look hostile but comes from fear. Accusations are common. The person may say the partner does not care or wants to leave. These claims often lack clear evidence. Accusations can force a response. Even conflict feels better than silence. The person may bring up past issues. The focus shifts away from the original problem. Emotional outbursts may happen after long frustration. The person may cry, shout, or send angry messages. This can trigger a response but often leads to regret. Threats of separation are another form. The person may say they will leave to test the partner's reaction. This can backfire if the partner takes it seriously. Some actions make loss visible, such as removing photos or blocking the partner. These acts aim to provoke a response. Jealousy can also be used. The person may mention others or post content to attract attention. If the partner reacts, it brings short relief. If not, fear increases. Silence can also be used as protest. The person stops contacting but still watches closely for a response. Both partners may wait, which prolongs the cold war.

6.3 Overdependence on the Partner's Response

The person's mood becomes tied to the partner's behavior. A message can quickly improve mood. Silence can cause distress. Message frequency

becomes a sign of safety. Frequent replies mean care. Delays mean rejection. Daily life is affected. The person checks the phone often and struggles to focus on tasks. Work and study may suffer. Attention shifts back to the partner again and again. Social life becomes less important. The person may avoid activities to stay available for contact. Sleep is often disturbed. The person may stay awake waiting for a message or wake up to check the phone.

Eating habits may change. Some lose appetite, others eat more. The partner becomes the main source of emotional stability. Other coping methods feel less effective. The person may stop trusting their own judgment. They rely on the partner to feel secure. Even negative contact can feel better than silence. The need for any response becomes strong.

6.4 Reduced Self-Regulation

Self-regulation weakens during a cold war. The person struggles to manage emotions alone. Distraction does not work well. Attention returns to the partner quickly. Support from others may feel unhelpful. The person believes only the partner can provide answers. Calming methods give short relief. The person may stop using them. Impulsive actions become common. Messages are sent without thinking. Later, the person may regret them. The person may send multiple versions of the same message or delete and rewrite them. Social media may be used to express feelings or gain attention. These actions can create more stress later. The person may try different ways to contact the partner, including calls, emails, or other accounts. They may go to places where the partner is likely to be. This can create new conflict. The person feels that delay increases risk. Immediate contact seems necessary. Waiting feels unsafe. The person fears the partner will move on. This urgency leads to poor timing. Conversations may happen when the partner is not ready. Emotions quickly turn into actions. There is little pause between feeling and behavior. Over time, this pattern becomes automatic. Even small signs of distance can trigger strong reactions.

7. The Interaction Cycle between Anxiety and Withdrawal

Attachment anxiety in a cold war is shaped by both partners' responses. One seeks closeness to feel safe, while the other seeks distance to reduce pressure. These opposing needs create a cycle where pursuit increases withdrawal, and withdrawal increases anxiety.

7.1 The Anxious Partner's Pursuit

Pursuit involves repeated attempts to gain contact, reassurance, or explanation. It may include frequent questions, messages, calls, or emotional appeals. The anxious partner believes that restoring contact will reduce distress.

Questions often escalate when answers are unclear or absent, shifting from practical concerns to deeper fears about love or separation. Even when the partner responds, the anxious person may feel unsatisfied if the reply lacks warmth or clarity.

As anxiety grows, demands may become stronger, including requests for immediate replies, emotional reassurance, or physical closeness. These behaviors aim to restore security but may feel overwhelming to the other partner.

Pursuit can intensify over time, especially if persistence has previously led to a response. It may also shift from calm requests to criticism, anger, or guilt, which can further push the partner away.

7.2 The Withdrawing Partner's Avoidance

Withdrawal often begins as a way to reduce emotional pressure or avoid conflict. The partner may need time to process feelings or fear making the situation worse.

Problems arise when withdrawal lacks clear communication or time limits. Silence leaves the anxious partner uncertain and increases insecurity.

Repeated questions and emotional demands can feel overwhelming, leading the withdrawing partner to reduce communication further. Silence, avoidance, or delayed responses become ways to regain control.

Withdrawal may also reflect discomfort with emotional discussion, fear of conflict, or a desire to

protect independence. In some cases, silence can carry anger or act as a form of indirect control.

Over time, avoidance can become habitual, making communication harder and increasing emotional distance.

7.3 The Pursuit-Withdrawal Cycle

The cycle begins when one partner seeks reassurance and the other responds with distance. Each reaction reinforces the other: pursuit feels like pressure, and withdrawal feels like rejection.

Both partners often blame each other—one for not responding, the other for being too demanding—while missing how their behaviors are connected.

The original issue may be replaced by conflict about communication itself. Repeated cycles strengthen expectations: the anxious partner anticipates silence, and the withdrawing partner anticipates pressure.

Over time, trust decreases, reactions become faster and stronger, and the pattern spreads to other areas of the relationship. Conflicts may end without real resolution, leaving both partners more sensitive and less secure in future interactions.

8. Factors That Strengthen Attachment Anxiety

People respond differently during relational cold wars, and these differences are shaped by personal experiences, self-worth, communication styles, and power dynamics within the relationship. When an individual is highly dependent on the relationship but lacks control over communication, attachment anxiety is more likely to intensify. Missing information, past trauma, digital interaction cues, low self-esteem, and weak support systems can all make a partner's response the sole source of emotional security.

8.1 Unequal Emotional Investment

When one partner places the relationship at the center of their life while the other is more comfortable with distance, imbalance during a cold war can heighten anxiety. The more invested partner not only fears the breakdown of communication but also worries about the collapse of future plans, identity, and emotional belonging. They may be more likely to compromise, apologize, or tolerate unfair behavior to preserve the relationship. Meanwhile, the less dependent partner may unintentionally gain more control through silence, leaving the anxious partner in a passive waiting position and reinforcing feelings of helplessness.

8.2 Poor Conflict Communication

A lack of clear communication forces anxious individuals to fill in informational gaps with worst-case interpretations. Vague expressions, avoidance of explanation, or the use of silence make problems harder to understand and resolve. Without clear time limits or emotional boundaries, waiting becomes indefinite, allowing anxiety to accumulate. The use of absolute language or threats of breakup further weakens the sense of security, making each conflict feel like it could end the relationship.

8.3 Past Relationship Trauma

Individuals who have experienced betrayal, sudden breakups, or emotional neglect are more likely to associate current silence with past pain. Delayed responses or behavioral changes may be interpreted as signs of hidden problems or impending abandonment. Trauma increases the need for reassurance, such as frequent checking or constant contact, which may be perceived by the partner as distrust, potentially triggering new conflicts.

8.4 Impact of Digital Communication

Online status indicators, read receipts, and social media activity provide abundant details that can be interpreted during a cold war. Anxious individuals may repeatedly check these signals, viewing delays or lack of response as intentional. A partner's activity on social platforms may be seen as indifference toward the relationship, intensifying insecurity. The digital environment amplifies uncertainty and keeps the cold war constantly present in one's attention.

8.5 Low Self-Esteem and Weak Support Systems

Low self-esteem leads individuals to rely on the relationship as a primary source of self-worth, making a partner's silence feel like a reflection of personal inadequacy. When there is a lack of support from friends or family, the relationship becomes the sole emotional anchor, increasing the impact of a cold war. Without external perspectives, individuals are more likely to fall into cycles of rumination and self-blame, further deepening attachment anxiety.

9. Reducing Attachment Anxiety during Cold Wars

Attachment anxiety cannot be reduced simply by telling the anxious partner to worry less. It is shaped by how both partners handle conflict. Clear communication reduces uncertainty, while emotional regulation prevents fear from turning into impulsive behaviour (Gross, 1998; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). Couples need to distinguish temporary distance from rejection and create rules that protect the relationship during conflict.

After an argument, a partner may need time alone, but this should be stated clearly. Explaining that the pause is for emotional regulation, not rejection, helps reduce anxiety. The couple should also agree on when communication will resume. For example, a partner may say they need a few hours and will talk later. If more time is needed, a brief update should be given. Silence should not be used as punishment. Ignoring the partner until they apologize or give in creates fear and imbalance. A cooling-off period should support communication, not control. Even during a pause, basic respect and minimal contact should be maintained.

Anxious individuals often confuse facts with assumptions. A delayed reply is a fact, but believing it means loss of love is an interpretation. Writing down facts and possible explanations can reduce negative thinking. Silence may result from stress, fatigue, or a need for space, not necessarily rejection. Catastrophic thinking should be avoided. One conflict does not mean the relationship will end. Self-blame also needs correction. Conflict involves both partners, and wanting respectful communication is not a personal failure.

Strong emotions can lead to repeated messages, accusations, or threats, which often worsen distance. Delaying responses allows time to think clearly. Writing messages without sending them immediately can help remove blame and express needs more calmly. Physical methods such as breathing, walking, or exercise can reduce stress. Maintaining regular routines like sleep and meals also helps stabilize emotions. Limiting phone checking and seeking support from trusted friends can prevent overfocus on the conflict.

A secure sense of self does not rely entirely on a partner's reassurance. Temporary distance should not define personal worth. Instead of repeated reassurance-seeking, the anxious partner can express needs directly and clearly. Maintaining friendships, interests, and personal goals provides emotional balance. Confidence also involves setting boundaries. Fear of abandonment should not lead to accepting harmful behaviour. When individuals can manage their emotions independently, they gain more control over their reactions.

Couples should agree on rules before conflicts arise. Disappearance without explanation should not be accepted. If space is needed, it should be communicated with a clear time frame. Threats of separation and insults should be avoided. Cooling-off periods should have limits, and discussions should resume when both partners are calm. Ignoring issues may create temporary peace but leads to repeated conflict. Healthy rules balance both needs: the need for space and the need for reassurance that the relationship remains secure.

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Parental Expectations, Guilt, and Autonomy in Young Adults' Life Choices

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Abstract: Young adults are often expected to make independent choices about education, career, marriage, residence, and lifestyle, yet these decisions remain closely connected to family relationships. Parental expectations may be expressed through advice, concern, comparison, disappointment, or references to sacrifice and responsibility. Over time, these expectations can become internal standards that shape how young adults judge their own choices. This paper examines how parental concern develops into personal obligation and how guilt narrows the range of life options that feel acceptable. It focuses on anticipated guilt, compliance, resistance, and indecision, and distinguishes guilt linked to real family responsibilities from guilt produced mainly by disagreement or emotional pressure. The paper argues that autonomy should not be understood as rejecting parental influence or breaking family ties. A more realistic form of autonomy involves recognising parental concerns, examining inherited standards, tolerating disagreement, and accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's own decisions. Financial dependence, family duty, and emotional attachment can make this process difficult, but they do not remove the need for personal judgment. Young adults can remain connected to their families while gradually learning to separate care from obedience and parental disappointment from moral failure.

Keywords: parental expectations; guilt; young adults; autonomy; life choices; family relationships

1. Introduction

Young adulthood is usually associated with increasing independence. At this stage, people begin to take greater responsibility for decisions about education, employment, relationships, marriage, residence, and lifestyle. Legal adulthood may arrive at a fixed age, but psychological and practical independence often develops more slowly. Many young adults continue to rely on their parents for tuition, housing, financial support, advice, or family connections. Even after this dependence has weakened, parental approval may still influence major life choices.

Parental involvement is not necessarily harmful. Parents often have greater experience with employment, financial risk, and long-term family responsibilities. Their advice may help young adults recognise difficulties that are easy to overlook, while family support can provide the resources needed to explore new opportunities.

Problems arise when parental advice becomes a standard that the young adult feels unable to reject. Parents may regard stable employment, marriage, home ownership, or remaining near the family as basic signs of maturity. These expectations may be expressed directly, but they may also appear through comparison, repeated concern, disappointment, silence, or references to parental sacrifice.

Indirect expectations can be especially difficult to manage. Parents may say that the final choice belongs to the young adult while continuing to show which outcome they consider acceptable. The young person remains formally free, but disagreement carries an emotional cost. A different career, partner, or place of residence may feel selfish or ungrateful even when the choice is reasonable.

Guilt plays an important role in this process. Young adults may imagine parental disappointment before announcing a decision and remove certain possibilities from consideration. A career change may feel like wasting the family's investment. Moving away may feel like abandoning parental responsibilities. Delaying marriage may be understood as causing anxiety or embarrassment. In this way, guilt can narrow personal choice without the use of direct control.

Young adults may respond by complying, resisting, or delaying the decision. Compliance can protect family harmony but may later produce regret or resentment. Resistance may support independence while leaving the young adult emotionally troubled by parental disappointment. Indecision can develop when neither obedience nor disagreement feels acceptable.

Guilt should not always be treated as unhealthy. Family members have real responsibilities toward one another, and personal decisions may affect parents in practical ways. The important distinction is between guilt connected to actual neglect and guilt produced mainly by disagreement. Parental disappointment does not automatically mean that the young adult has acted wrongly.

Autonomy in this context does not require rejecting family influence or cutting emotional ties. It involves listening to parental concerns, recognising reasonable responsibilities, and still using personal judgment. This paper examines how family expectations become personal obligations, how guilt narrows young adults' life choices, and how autonomy can develop without breaking close family relationships.

2. From Family Expectations to Personal Obligation

2.1 Parental Concern and the Idea of a "Good Life"

Parents often have a fairly clear idea of what a successful adult life should look like. Stable employment, regular income, marriage, and the ability to support the family are commonly treated as signs of maturity. The details differ across families, but the basic concern is often similar. Parents want their children to avoid hardship and build a life that appears secure and sustainable.

These expectations are usually expressed as care rather than control. Parents may believe that they are helping young adults make realistic choices in an uncertain environment. A stable job is recommended because income and long-term security matter. Marriage is encouraged because companionship and family continuity are valued. Living near the family may be preferred because parents and adult children are expected to support one another.

Employment often occupies a central place in this idea of a good life. Parents may prefer occupations with predictable income, social benefits, and clear career paths. Jobs in public institutions, established companies, education, medicine, law, and finance may appear safer than freelance, creative, or entrepreneurial work. A recognised occupation also

provides visible evidence that years of education have produced a worthwhile result.

This preference is understandable when parents have experienced financial uncertainty themselves. Stable employment may represent protection from unemployment, illness, housing costs, and future family expenses. When a young adult wants to leave a secure position, parents may see the decision as giving up more than a salary. It may appear to threaten the stability that the family has spent years trying to create.

Young adults may judge work through a different set of concerns. Interest, meaning, flexibility, working conditions, and personal development may matter as much as income or occupational status. A position that appears secure from the outside can still feel exhausting or unsuitable in daily life. These experiences are not always easy to explain to parents who mainly see the salary, reputation, and long-term benefits of the job.

A disagreement about employment can therefore become a disagreement about maturity (Leung et al., 2011). Parents may interpret the wish to leave a stable position as impatience or an unwillingness to tolerate difficulty. The young adult may feel that the parents are ignoring the personal cost of remaining in unsuitable work. Both sides may care about the future, but they understand a good future in different ways.

Education is closely connected to the same family model. Parents may regard academic achievement as one of the most reliable routes to upward mobility. Considerable time, money, and emotional energy may be invested in examinations, university education, and postgraduate study. Education can then become a family project rather than a purely individual experience.

Later choices may be expected to justify this investment. A graduate who wants to work outside the field of study may be asked why so many years were spent obtaining the degree. A student who considers leaving postgraduate study may be told that stopping would waste earlier effort. The young adult may share this concern and feel that changing direction would disappoint the family.

Parental pride can make this pressure stronger. Entry into a respected university or recognised profession gives the family a clear story of success. This pride may reflect genuine affection and recognition of the young adult's effort. Yet when family identity becomes closely tied to a particular achievement, choosing another path becomes more difficult.

Marriage forms another important part of the parental image of adult life. Parents may view it as a source of companionship, emotional security, and future family support. They may also believe that marriage should occur within a suitable period. Questions about relationships can therefore become more frequent when a young adult reaches an age that the family regards as appropriate.

The disagreement may concern timing rather than marriage itself. Parents may worry that waiting will reduce future opportunities, while the young adult may care more about emotional readiness and compatibility. A partner who appears suitable to the family may still be unsuitable in the private reality of the relationship. Parents can offer useful observations, but their knowledge is necessarily limited.

Social comparison may strengthen marriage and career expectations. Parents hear about relatives, neighbours, or former classmates whose children have married, obtained stable work, or purchased homes. These visible milestones provide a simple way of measuring progress. The young adult may then feel that life is moving too slowly, even when personal circumstances are very different.

Place of residence can produce a similar conflict. Young adults may move for education, employment, relationships, or a preferred way of life. Parents may support the opportunity while still hoping that the move will be temporary. Living nearby is often associated with emotional closeness, practical support, and future caregiving.

A decision to remain in another city may therefore have different meanings for the two generations. The young adult may see professional growth and independence. Parents may see distance and uncertainty about who will assist them as they grow

older. Their concern is not purely emotional, since ageing parents may eventually need practical help.

Financial support can further blur the line between concern and authority. Parents may help with tuition, housing, or the purchase of a home. Because this support makes certain choices possible, parents may expect a greater role in the decision. Young adults may accept the assistance while still hoping to keep control over the direction of their lives.

Conflict often develops because the meaning of support is not clearly discussed. Parents may see money and care as shared family resources that naturally involve shared decision-making. Young adults may see the same help as support for their independence. Neither side necessarily intends to create conflict, but they understand the relationship between assistance and authority differently.

The parental idea of a good life is not without value. Stability, care, and responsibility are important concerns, and parental experience may help young adults notice risks they have overlooked. The problem appears when one version of a good life is treated as the only respectable version.

A stable job is not suitable for every person. Marriage does not guarantee emotional well-being. Living close to parents does not always produce a close relationship. Visible stability may hide dissatisfaction, exhaustion, or regret. Parents often describe the risks of uncertain choices in detail, while the possible cost of compliance receives less attention.

Parents have knowledge based on experience, but young adults also possess knowledge that parents cannot fully access. They know how the job feels each day, what the relationship is like in private, and which form of life they can sustain over time. Neither side has complete information.

The important distinction is not between parental wisdom and youthful independence. It is between guidance that informs a decision and expectation that determines it. Parental concern becomes restrictive when rejecting the preferred path is treated as a failure of maturity, gratitude, or family loyalty. At that point, the parents' idea of a good life begins to function as a personal obligation.

2.2 How Expectations Become Internal Standards

Parental expectations do not remain outside the young adult. When the same ideas are repeated over many years, they can become part of the person's own way of judging success, responsibility, and failure (Bao et al., 2023). A stable job may no longer feel like something the parents prefer. It may begin to feel like the only sensible form of employment. Marriage at a certain age may appear to be a natural stage rather than a family expectation. Remaining close to home may be understood as a basic duty rather than one possible form of care.

This process often begins early. Children learn which achievements receive praise and which choices cause worry or disappointment. Good examination results may bring approval, while uncertainty about the future may lead to criticism. A child who follows advice may be described as sensible and mature. One who questions the family's preferred path may be called impulsive or unrealistic. These responses gradually connect particular choices with moral qualities.

By young adulthood, parental standards may already feel familiar and reasonable. The person may not experience them as direct pressure because they have become part of everyday thinking. When considering a career change, the young adult may immediately focus on income, security, and the reaction of the family. Personal interest may be considered only after these concerns have been addressed. The order in which options are evaluated already reflects the family's priorities.

Indirect communication can strengthen this internalization. Parents do not always need to say that a certain decision is unacceptable. Repeated comments about other people's achievements may be enough. Stories about a cousin with a stable position or a former classmate who has married can show which outcomes receive approval. The young adult learns to compare personal progress with these visible examples.

Silence and disappointment can have a similar effect. A parent may not openly forbid a decision but may respond with worry, reduced communication, or repeated questions. The young adult begins to

anticipate these reactions. Later decisions are adjusted before any discussion takes place. In this way, parental influence continues even when the parents are not directly present.

Family support can also make parental standards more difficult to question. When parents have paid for education, helped with housing, or used personal connections to create opportunities, the young adult may feel that later choices should produce a result that the family considers worthwhile. The person may believe that accepting support also means accepting the values attached to it.

This does not always come from an explicit agreement. Parents may see their support as a natural family responsibility, while the young adult later interprets it as a debt. A decision to leave a secure occupation may then feel like a rejection of the family's effort. The young adult is not only changing direction but also questioning the meaning of earlier support.

Parental standards may become closely connected with identity. A person who has long been praised for being obedient, hardworking, or dependable may find it difficult to make a choice that disappoints the family. The decision threatens more than approval. It threatens the person's image of being a good son or daughter.

This can create uncertainty about personal preference. Young adults may know what their parents want but have less confidence about what they want themselves. They may ask whether a less secure career is a genuine goal or only a temporary impulse. They may question whether reluctance toward marriage reflects personal values or emotional immaturity. Because parental standards have shaped self-evaluation for so long, separating personal judgment from family expectations becomes difficult (Luyckx et al., 2007).

Internalization does not mean that young adults simply accept everything their parents believe. Many recognise that their interests and circumstances differ from those of the previous generation. They may disagree with parental views about work, relationships, or residence. Yet disagreement at the level of thought does not always remove the internal standard. A person may believe that changing careers is reasonable while still feeling irresponsible for considering it.

This gap between personal belief and internal judgment is important. Young adults may defend autonomy in general but struggle to apply it to their own lives. They may support a friend who moves away or leaves an unsuitable job, while judging the same choice more harshly when they make it themselves. The family standard continues to shape self-criticism even when it is no longer fully accepted.

Financial and emotional dependence can make this conflict stronger. A young adult who still relies on parents may have limited room to separate personal choice from family approval. Even after financial independence is achieved, emotional dependence may remain. The person may still need reassurance that the decision is acceptable and may find it difficult to act without parental agreement.

Internal standards can also affect which choices are considered possible. Some options may be rejected before they are seriously examined because they do not fit the family's idea of adulthood. A creative occupation may be dismissed as unstable. Moving to a smaller city may be viewed as a step backward. Remaining unmarried may be treated as an incomplete life. The young adult appears to choose freely, but the range of acceptable choices has already been reduced.

The issue is not that family values should have no place in personal decisions. Values such as responsibility, stability, and care can help young adults consider the wider effects of their choices. The problem appears when these values are tied to only one life path. Stability becomes identified with a particular occupation, care with physical proximity, and maturity with marriage or home ownership.

At that point, parental expectations have become internal rules. The young adult no longer asks only which choice is suitable. The person also asks which choice proves that they are responsible, grateful, and worthy of family approval. This internal judgment

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gives guilt much of its later force. Even without a direct command, choosing differently can feel like a moral failure.

3. Guilt and the Narrowing of Life Choices

3.1 Anticipated Guilt Before the Choice

Guilt often appears before a young adult has made or announced a decision. The person imagines how the parents may react and begins to experience the emotional cost in advance. A career change may bring thoughts of wasted education. Moving to another city may raise fears about leaving ageing parents behind. Delaying marriage may be linked to parental anxiety or pressure from relatives. No open conflict has yet occurred, but the young adult already feels responsible for the disappointment the choice may cause.

This anticipated guilt affects which options receive serious consideration. A young adult may appear to have several choices, yet some are rejected almost immediately because they seem too difficult to explain to the family. The person may avoid applying for work in another city, remain in an unsuitable field, or continue a relationship that receives parental approval. The formal right to choose remains, but the range of choices that feels acceptable has already become smaller.

Expected parental reactions are often based on earlier family experience. Young adults remember how parents responded to past disagreements. They may recall repeated warnings, silence, emotional conversations, or comments about sacrifice. These memories create a likely script for future decisions. Even when parents have not yet opposed the new choice, the young adult may assume that the same pattern will return.

Family investment can make anticipated guilt stronger. Education may have required years of financial support and emotional effort. Parents may have paid tuition, helped with housing, or used personal connections to create opportunities. A young adult who wants to change direction may then feel that the decision rejects not only a career path but also the meaning of what the family has provided.

The idea of "wasting the parents' effort" often carries more emotional weight than the actual cost. Money and time have already been spent, yet the young adult may feel that gratitude requires a particular result. A degree should lead to a related occupation. A secure job should not be left. An opportunity arranged by the family should not be refused. Support from the past becomes tied to obedience in the present.

Anticipated guilt also shapes decisions about residence. A young adult may receive a valuable opportunity in another city but hesitate because distance is associated with reduced family care. The person may imagine parents becoming lonely, facing health problems, or feeling abandoned. These concerns may be reasonable, but they can also make almost any move appear morally questionable.

The future needs of parents are often uncertain. Practical care may not yet be required, and other relatives may be able to help. Still, the possibility of future need can influence a present decision. Remaining nearby begins to represent loyalty, while leaving appears selfish. The young adult may give up an opportunity not because the family currently depends on them, but because guilt has become attached to the idea of distance.

Marriage can produce a similar pattern. Parents may worry that delay will reduce future opportunities or create social pressure for the family. A young adult who does not feel ready may still feel responsible for parental anxiety. The question is no longer only whether marriage is personally suitable. It becomes whether postponement is causing unnecessary pain or embarrassment.

In these situations, disagreement is often turned into a judgment about character. The young adult may not simply think, "My parents will disagree." The thought becomes, "A good son or daughter would not make this choice." A decision about work, residence, or marriage is then judged as evidence of gratitude, loyalty, and maturity.

This moral meaning makes uncertainty harder to tolerate. Most major life choices involve risk. A new

career may fail. A move may lead to loneliness. A relationship may not last. When parents already prefer another path, ordinary uncertainty can feel like proof that choosing differently is irresponsible.

The family's preferred option often appears safer because its risks are more familiar. Remaining in a stable job may reduce financial uncertainty, but it may also create long-term dissatisfaction. Staying near the family may preserve closeness, but it may limit professional development. Entering marriage under pressure may reduce parental worry, but it may not lead to a healthy relationship. These costs are usually less visible than the immediate conflict caused by an independent choice.

Anticipated guilt can also shape how information is evaluated. Young adults may give more attention to evidence that supports the parents' preferred option. A single failed career change may seem more convincing than several successful ones. Warnings about moving away may receive more weight than the benefits of the opportunity. The person is not only assessing risk but also looking for a decision that will reduce emotional discomfort.

This process does not always reflect current parental pressure. Some parents may be more accepting than the young adult expects. Family relationships may also become more flexible over time. Yet internal standards can remain strong. A person who learned early to avoid disappointing parents may continue to predict rejection even when direct control has weakened.

Guilt can therefore limit autonomy without a present command. The young adult monitors personal choices through the imagined reaction of the family. Some options feel unavailable because they conflict with an internal image of what a responsible child should do.

The presence of guilt does not prove that a choice is wrong. It shows that the decision concerns an important relationship. Real duties, financial consequences, and family needs should be considered. Yet parental disappointment should not automatically determine the result.

Anticipated guilt narrows life choices by making some options feel morally unacceptable before they have been fully examined. Young adults may still describe themselves as free, but they approach certain choices with shame or fear before taking any action. In this way, guilt begins to restrict autonomy before compliance, resistance, or open conflict becomes visible.

3.2 Compliance, Resistance, and Indecision

When parental expectations conflict with personal wishes, young adults do not respond in the same way. Some follow the path preferred by their parents, some choose differently, and others postpone the decision. These responses may look very different, but all can be shaped by the wish to protect family relationships and avoid guilt.

Compliance often appears to be the safest option. A young adult may remain in a stable job, prepare for an examination preferred by the family, return to the home city, or accept pressure to enter a relationship. The decision reduces immediate conflict and allows daily family interaction to continue. Parents may feel relieved, and the young adult may receive approval for being sensible and responsible.

Compliance does not always mean that the choice is entirely unwanted. A person may value security while also wishing for more interesting work. Another may want marriage but feel uncertain about the timing. In such cases, parental expectations strengthen one side of an existing conflict. The young adult chooses the safer option but may never know how much the decision reflected personal preference and how much it reflected fear of disappointing the family.

The cost of compliance may appear slowly. A young adult can perform well in a career chosen partly for parental approval and still feel little connection to the work. Success may make changing direction more difficult because the family sees the result as proof that the original advice was correct. The person may also feel guilty for being dissatisfied with a life that appears stable and respectable.

Resentment can develop when the young adult feels that important possibilities were given up. This resentment is not always expressed openly. It may appear through emotional distance, frequent

arguments over small matters, or blame during later difficulties. Parents may feel confused because they believe the young adult made the final choice. The young adult, however, may feel that no other choice was emotionally acceptable.

Resistance brings a different form of strain. A young adult may leave a secure position, move to another city, choose a partner the parents do not approve of, or delay marriage despite continued pressure. Such decisions can create a stronger sense of personal direction, but they do not immediately remove guilt. After choosing differently, the young adult may feel pressure to prove that the decision was correct. A career change must succeed. A move must lead to better opportunities. A relationship must remain stable. Ordinary difficulties become harder to admit because they may be used as evidence that the parents were right. The person may hide financial stress, loneliness, or uncertainty in order to protect the decision.

This need to prove independence can create another kind of restriction. The young adult may continue on an unsuitable path because changing direction would feel like surrender. Advice that might be useful is rejected because accepting it seems to restore parental authority. Resistance then becomes less about the actual choice and more about defending the right to have made it.

Open resistance can also affect family contact. Conversations may become shorter because both sides expect disagreement. Certain topics are avoided during calls or family gatherings. The young adult may share less information to prevent further pressure, while parents may interpret this distance as rejection. A decision made in the name of autonomy can therefore weaken the support that the young adult still values.

Between compliance and resistance lies indecision. Some young adults understand their own preferences but remain unable to act. They continue preparing for a career they do not want, delay accepting an offer in another city, or avoid giving a clear answer about marriage. Postponement keeps several possibilities open and prevents immediate conflict.

Delay can be reasonable when more information or financial preparation is needed. It becomes a problem when the young adult is waiting for a choice that will satisfy everyone. Major life decisions rarely remove all uncertainty or disappointment. The wish to avoid guilt can turn careful consideration into repeated postponement.

Indecision may also appear as constant advice-seeking. The young adult asks parents, friends, teachers, and colleagues for opinions but becomes less certain after every conversation. Each new view adds another standard that the decision must meet. The person may already understand the practical advantages and risks but still hope that someone else will provide emotional permission.

In some cases, young adults choose a temporary solution. They remain in a stable job while planning to leave later, agree to meet potential partners without wanting marriage, or move away while promising to return soon. These arrangements can reduce pressure for a time, but they may also prevent an honest discussion about different expectations.

Compliance, resistance, and indecision are not fixed personal types. The same person may comply in one area and resist in another. A young adult may follow parental advice in employment but make independent choices about relationships. Another may move away for work while continuing to depend heavily on family approval in financial matters.

These responses can also change over time. Initial compliance may later become resistance when dissatisfaction grows. A young adult who once resisted may reconsider after gaining more experience. Indecision may end when practical independence improves or when delaying the choice becomes more painful than facing disagreement.

The main issue is not which response appears most independent from the outside. Compliance can be autonomous when the young adult has examined the options and genuinely accepts the family's preferred path. Resistance can remain psychologically dependent when the decision is

made only to oppose parental influence. What matters is whether the young adult can recognise personal reasons, consider family consequences, and accept responsibility for the choice.

When guilt dominates the process, all three responses become limited. Compliance protects approval at the cost of personal ownership. Resistance protects personal direction but may remain tied to the need for parental recognition. Indecision avoids immediate conflict while allowing important choices to be shaped by delay. The young adult may act, oppose, or wait, yet still struggle to experience the decision as fully their own.

3.3 Care, Responsibility, and Emotional Control

Guilt does not always mean that parental influence has become unhealthy. Young adults remain part of family relationships, and their choices may have real effects on other people. Leaving a job without financial preparation may require parents to provide further support. Moving far away may reduce the practical help available to ageing family members. In such cases, discomfort may reflect a responsibility that deserves attention.

Care and autonomy should not be treated as opposites (Yeh & Bedford, 2003). A young adult who wants greater independence does not necessarily wish to avoid family duties. The person may still provide financial support, maintain regular contact, assist with medical needs, or take part in important family decisions. The disagreement may concern the form of care rather than whether care should exist.

Physical proximity is one form of support, but it is not always the only one. Parents may prefer an adult child to remain nearby, especially when they are ageing or have health problems. Yet preference and practical need are not the same. A clear need for caregiving can create a real responsibility, while a general wish for closeness does not automatically require the young adult to give up work or study opportunities elsewhere.

Financial responsibility creates a similar distinction. Parents who continue to support an adult child may reasonably ask how a major decision will affect them. If a young adult leaves employment and expects the family to cover all living expenses, parental concern cannot be dismissed as interference. Greater freedom also requires some willingness to carry the risks and costs of personal choices.

At the same time, financial support does not give parents unlimited authority over every area of life. Paying tuition may justify discussion about education, but it does not create a right to determine the young adult's partner or marriage plans. Help with housing may involve conditions related to the property, but it should not become a permanent claim over unrelated decisions. Conflict often grows because the limits of support are never clearly defined.

A useful distinction can be made between guilt linked to actual harm and guilt linked mainly to disappointment. Actual harm may involve neglecting a dependent parent, breaking a financial agreement, or shifting an avoidable burden to other family members. Disappointment may arise because the young adult chooses another occupation, delays marriage, or moves to a city the parents do not prefer. Both can produce strong emotions, but they do not carry the same moral weight.

Parental disappointment is real, and young adults may not be able to remove it. Parents may feel hurt because a long-held hope has not been fulfilled. They may also struggle with the loss of influence that comes when a child begins to make adult decisions. These feelings deserve recognition, but emotional pain alone does not prove that the young adult has acted wrongly.

The situation becomes more restrictive when parental emotion is used to make disagreement appear morally unacceptable. Parents may refer repeatedly to sacrifice, declining health, family reputation, or the suffering caused by the young adult's decision. Statements such as "We have done everything for you" can make an independent choice appear ungrateful. Formal freedom remains, but the emotional message is that choosing differently will harm the family (Rudy et al., 2014).

Such communication is not always deliberate. Parents may speak from fear, frustration, or genuine

sadness. Still, the effect can be controlling. The young adult becomes responsible not only for the practical consequences of the decision but also for restoring the parents' emotional comfort. Compliance then appears to be the quickest way to end tension.

Pressure may also appear through silence or withdrawal. After a disagreement, parents may become cold, reduce communication, or avoid discussing the young adult's life. Health concerns can make this pressure stronger. If a parent becomes distressed during conflict, the young adult may fear that maintaining a boundary will cause serious harm. Honest discussion becomes difficult because every disagreement begins to feel dangerous.

Family reputation can produce another form of pressure. Parents may worry about how relatives or neighbours will view an unmarried child, an uncertain career, or an unconventional lifestyle. The young adult may then feel responsible for protecting the parents from criticism. A personal decision becomes tied to the family's public image.

Emotional control is difficult to identify because it is often mixed with love. Parents may genuinely want to protect their child while also trying to secure obedience. Young adults may care deeply for their parents while also wishing to avoid heavy responsibilities. The issue cannot be reduced to whether one side is caring and the other is selfish.

A more useful question is whether disagreement is allowed. In a relationship that respects autonomy, parents can express concern, sadness, or disapproval without treating a different choice as betrayal. The young adult can listen and respond without being required to surrender the decision.

Another question is whether the obligation can be stated clearly. Real responsibilities usually involve identifiable needs, such as financial support, caregiving, shared housing, or an earlier agreement. Emotional control often relies on broad claims about loyalty, gratitude, or being a good child. Because these claims have no clear limit, almost any independent choice can be described as selfish.

Young adults also need to examine how they interpret parental emotion. Some assume that causing disappointment means they have failed morally. This belief may have developed long before the current decision. A parent may express worry without demanding obedience, but the young adult may still react as though approval must be restored. Care does not require the removal of all parental discomfort, and autonomy does not remove responsibility. The central task is to distinguish what the young adult genuinely owes the family from what belongs to the parents' preference for a particular life.

Guilt becomes less controlling when it is connected to specific responsibilities rather than general disappointment. The young adult can ask what harm is actually being caused, whether a clear duty exists, and whether that duty can be met without giving up the decision itself. This distinction allows family care to remain important without turning parental emotion into final authority.

4. Developing Autonomy Without Breaking Family Ties

Autonomy does not require young adults to ignore their parents or remove family influence from every decision. Choices about education, work, residence, relationships, and finances often affect other family members. A realistic form of autonomy allows young adults to consider these effects without making parental approval the final condition for action.

An important step is to distinguish listening from obeying. Parents may have reasonable concerns about income, job security, marriage, or distance from home. Their experience can help young adults notice risks that may otherwise be overlooked. Listening to these concerns does not mean that parents must make the final decision. A young adult can understand why the family values stability while still deciding that another path is more suitable.

This process may require an examination of inherited beliefs. Young adults often measure their choices through standards learned within the family. A stable job may feel necessary because instability has always been described as failure.

Marriage may appear compulsory because it has long been treated as a normal stage of adulthood. Remaining near the family may seem like the only acceptable form of care.

Examining these beliefs does not mean rejecting them. Young adults may decide that security, marriage, or family closeness genuinely matters to them. The difference is that these values are accepted after reflection rather than followed because other choices feel morally unacceptable. Autonomy is not shown by choosing the opposite of what parents want. It is shown by understanding the reasons for a decision and taking responsibility for it (Wei et al., 2022).

Communication is also important, although it may not produce full agreement. Young adults often try to explain a decision until their parents become completely convinced. They answer every objection and delay action in the hope of receiving approval. This can turn a personal choice into a continuing request for permission.

Some choices need to be presented as considered decisions rather than open questions. A young adult can explain the reasons, acknowledge the parents' concerns, and describe how practical risks will be managed. For example, someone planning a career change may explain the financial preparation, possible difficulties, and alternative plans. The tone can remain respectful while the decision itself remains clear.

Communication also requires limits. Parents may repeat the same warning because they believe the young adult has not understood it. The young person may need to state that the concern has been heard and considered. Repeating the same discussion does not always improve the decision. Without clear limits, every family conversation can become another attempt to reopen an issue.

Parents may need time to adjust to this change. They have often spent many years directing, protecting, and planning for their child. When the young adult begins to make different choices, parents may experience the change as a loss of closeness or influence. Their resistance may weaken after they see that the young adult can manage the consequences.

Young adults may therefore need to tolerate a period of tension. Parental disappointment may continue after the decision has been explained. Family members may remain worried or critical for some time. The wish to restore harmony can create pressure to give up the choice, but adult closeness cannot depend entirely on obedience.

Practical independence can make autonomous choice more possible. A young adult who relies heavily on parental support may have limited freedom, especially when a decision creates additional costs. Greater autonomy may require saving money, reducing expenses, finding work, or delaying a plan until some financial preparation has been made.

The meaning of parental support should also be discussed clearly. Parents may believe that paying tuition or housing costs gives them a strong role in related decisions. Young adults may view the same support as help toward independence. Clear discussion cannot remove all disagreement, but it can reduce hidden expectations about what financial assistance allows.

Autonomy does not remove family responsibility. A young adult who moves away may still need to maintain regular contact, share caregiving, provide financial support, or prepare for emergencies. A person who changes careers should avoid shifting all financial risk back to the family. Independence becomes more credible when the young adult is willing to carry the consequences of personal choices.

Guilt may remain even when the young adult has acted responsibly. This does not necessarily mean that the decision is wrong. Emotional discomfort often appears when a person moves away from a familiar family role. Someone who has long been praised for obedience may feel guilty whenever a boundary is set.

The aim is not to eliminate guilt before acting. Young adults can examine what the feeling is responding to. When guilt points to a clear responsibility, the decision may need adjustment. When it mainly

reflects parental disappointment, the feeling can be recognised without allowing it to determine the outcome.

Autonomous choices can also fail. A preferred career may not develop as expected. Moving away may bring loneliness. A relationship chosen against parental advice may end. These outcomes do not prove that the parents should have made the original decision.

Personal choice includes responsibility for responding to mistakes. Young adults should be able to revise a decision without treating the change as surrender. Some parental concerns may prove accurate, while others may not. Autonomy includes the ability to learn, reconsider, and change direction.

Parents and young adults may never share the same idea of a good life. A close family relationship does not require complete agreement about work, marriage, residence, or lifestyle. It requires enough respect for different judgments to allow the relationship to continue.

Young adults can value parental care without treating compliance as the only form of gratitude. Parents can remain important without controlling every major decision. Family ties are preserved not by avoiding disagreement, but by allowing care, responsibility, and personal judgment to exist together.

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The Relationship Between Self-Acceptance and Social Anxiety Among College Students and Strategies for Adjustment

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Abstract: Social interaction is an important part of college students' daily lives. College students need to communicate with classmates, teachers, roommates, friends, and other social groups. However, some students experience strong tension, worry, embarrassment, or avoidance when facing social situations. Social anxiety can affect interpersonal communication, participation in group activities, academic life, and psychological well-being. Self-acceptance is closely related to how individuals understand and evaluate themselves. A person with a higher level of self-acceptance is more likely to recognize both personal strengths and weaknesses without excessive self-denial. A person with a lower level of self-acceptance may be more sensitive to personal shortcomings and more concerned about how others evaluate them. Existing studies have found a significant negative relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety among college students. Fear of negative evaluation is also closely related to both variables and may provide an important psychological link between self-acceptance and social anxiety. Based on existing research, this paper discusses the meaning and characteristics of self-acceptance and social anxiety, explains their relationship among college students, and examines the role of fear of negative evaluation, self-esteem, interpersonal difficulties, and social support in this relationship. The paper argues that improving self-acceptance should not be understood as simply encouraging students to think positively about themselves. More useful adjustment should help students recognize themselves realistically, reduce excessive self-evaluation, face ordinary social mistakes, and gradually increase positive social experiences. Individual adjustment, peer support, classroom activities, and university psychological services can be combined to reduce social anxiety and improve students' interpersonal adaptation.

Keywords: college students; self-acceptance; social anxiety; fear of negative evaluation; psychological adjustment

1. Introduction

College is an important period for the development of interpersonal relationships. Students leave familiar family environments and begin to interact with people from different regions, educational backgrounds, personalities, and social experiences. They need to establish new friendships, cooperate with classmates, communicate with teachers, participate in group activities, and gradually prepare for future work and social life. These experiences provide opportunities for personal development, but they can also create psychological pressure.

Social anxiety is particularly relevant to this period of development. Some students feel uncomfortable when speaking in front of others, meeting unfamiliar people, expressing personal opinions, participating in group discussions, or becoming the focus of attention. They may worry that their appearance, speech, academic performance, or behavior will be judged negatively. In more serious situations, students may avoid social activities or reduce communication with others. Social anxiety is not limited to a single social situation. It may influence students' daily choices and gradually restrict their interpersonal experiences.

Self-acceptance provides another important perspective for understanding these difficulties. Self-acceptance refers to an individual's ability to recognize and accept different aspects of the self, including both positive and negative characteristics. It does not mean that individuals believe they have no weaknesses. Instead, it involves accepting the real self while maintaining a relatively stable and reasonable attitude toward personal strengths and limitations. Sun and Lu (2017) described self-acceptance as acceptance of both the positive and negative aspects of oneself and emphasized its close relationship with psychological health, self-esteem, emotions, interpersonal relationships, and life satisfaction.

The relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety has received increasing attention in research on college students. Wang (2024) investigated 880 college students and found that self-acceptance was negatively related to social anxiety, while fear of negative evaluation was positively related to social anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation also partially mediated the relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety. A similar relationship was reported by Chu (2023), who found that self-acceptance was associated with social anxiety and that fear of negative evaluation played an important role in the relationship. Chen and Lu (2026) also found a significant negative correlation between self-acceptance and social anxiety among 337 college students.

These findings suggest that social anxiety should not be understood only as a problem of poor communication skills. A student may know how to communicate with others but still avoid social situations because of excessive self-doubt and fear of being judged. If the student believes that making a mistake will make others dislike or reject them, ordinary social interactions may become psychologically threatening. Low self-acceptance can make this process stronger because the student may already have a negative view of the self before receiving any actual negative response.

The present discussion focuses on this psychological process. The main purpose is to clarify how self-acceptance is related to social anxiety among college students and to discuss practical ways of adjustment. The discussion pays particular attention to fear of negative evaluation because it provides a clear connection between how students view themselves and how they experience social situations. Other related factors, including self-esteem, interpersonal difficulties, social support, and mindfulness, are also considered when they help explain the main relationship.

The central view of this paper is that improving self-acceptance can provide an important starting point for reducing social anxiety, but self-acceptance should be developed together with actual social experiences. Students need opportunities to recognize their own characteristics, tolerate ordinary mistakes, reduce excessive concern about others' judgments, and gradually participate in

social activities. Psychological adjustment is more likely to be effective when changes in self-perception and changes in social behavior support each other.

2. Understanding Self-Acceptance and Social Anxiety

2.1 The Meaning of Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance is a basic concept in the study of psychological adjustment. It concerns the way individuals understand and respond to themselves. A person does not only contain qualities that are considered positive. Academic ability, appearance, personality, emotional reactions, interpersonal skills, and past experiences may all include both satisfying and unsatisfying elements. Self-acceptance involves recognizing these characteristics without rejecting the whole self because of a particular weakness.

Sun and Lu (2017) pointed out that self-acceptance means accepting all positive and negative aspects of oneself. They also noted that self-acceptance is associated with psychological health, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, emotions, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships. This definition is useful because it avoids equating self-acceptance with self-confidence. Self-confidence often focuses on whether an individual believes they can complete a particular task. Self-acceptance concerns a broader attitude toward the self.

For college students, this distinction is important. A student may be confident in academic tasks but uncertain about social relationships. Another student may perform well socially but remain dissatisfied with appearance or academic ability. Self-acceptance does not require every aspect of the self to be considered excellent. It requires the individual to avoid turning one unsatisfactory characteristic into a general negative judgment about the whole person.

Self-acceptance also includes self-evaluation. If an individual constantly compares the real self with an ideal self, dissatisfaction may become a stable psychological experience. When the gap between "who I am" and "who I should be" is viewed as unacceptable, the individual may become increasingly sensitive to failure and criticism. Self-acceptance can reduce this pressure by allowing the person to recognize limitations without interpreting them as evidence of personal worthlessness.

The concept therefore has practical value in understanding college students' social experiences. A student who accepts being somewhat shy may still participate in group discussions. A student who does not fully accept personal shyness may think, "I am bad at communication, so everyone will notice it," and choose not to speak. The difference lies not simply in personality but in the student's interpretation of that personality.

2.2 The Meaning of Social Anxiety

Social anxiety refers to anxiety experienced in social or interpersonal situations. It may involve nervousness, embarrassment, fear, self-consciousness, and avoidance. Social anxiety exists on a continuum. Temporary nervousness before a presentation is common, while persistent and strong anxiety that seriously interferes with social functioning requires greater attention.

College students encounter many situations that can activate social anxiety. Giving presentations, answering questions in class, joining a new student organization, meeting unfamiliar classmates, communicating with teachers, attending social events, and expressing opinions in groups can all become sources of anxiety. Some students may also experience anxiety in online communication, particularly when they believe that their words or images are being evaluated by others.

The important feature of social anxiety is not simply the presence of nervousness. The individual's interpretation of the social situation is also important. When a student expects embarrassment, rejection, criticism, or failure, a relatively ordinary interaction can be perceived as threatening. This expectation may increase physiological tension and encourage avoidance.

Social avoidance can then reduce opportunities for positive interpersonal experiences. A student who

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repeatedly avoids conversations may have fewer chances to discover that other people are not as critical as expected. The student may continue to believe that social situations are dangerous because there is little direct experience to challenge the belief.

Research involving college students supports the close relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety. Chen and Lu (2026) found that self-acceptance was significantly negatively correlated with social anxiety among college students. Wang (2024) reached a similar conclusion and further showed that fear of negative evaluation was involved in the relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety.

2.3 Characteristics of Social Anxiety Among College Students

College students' social anxiety can appear in different forms. Some students show obvious avoidance. They may refuse invitations, avoid speaking in groups, or spend long periods alone. Others remain socially active but experience strong internal anxiety. They may participate in activities while repeatedly worrying about how they are perceived.

Excessive self-monitoring is another common feature. Students may pay close attention to their voice, facial expression, posture, clothing, or choice of words. After a conversation, they may repeatedly recall what they said and wonder whether they behaved improperly. This type of repeated self-evaluation can increase psychological pressure.

Fear of negative evaluation is especially important. Wang (2024) found that self-acceptance was negatively related to fear of negative evaluation, while fear of negative evaluation was positively related to social anxiety. This suggests that students with low self-acceptance may be more likely to expect negative judgments from others, which can increase anxiety in social situations.

Social anxiety can also be connected with broader interpersonal difficulties. Xue et al. (2025) found a significant relationship between interpersonal difficulties and self-acceptance among college students. Although interpersonal difficulties and social anxiety are not identical concepts, the finding shows that self-acceptance is relevant to students' interpersonal functioning more broadly.

3. The Relationship Between Self-Acceptance and Social Anxiety

3.1 Low Self-Acceptance and Negative Self-Evaluation

The relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety can begin with how students evaluate themselves. A student with low self-acceptance may pay more attention to personal shortcomings and interpret them in a broad way. A poor presentation may become "I am bad at communication." A rejected invitation may become "People do not like me." A minor mistake may become "I always embarrass myself."

Such interpretations can increase anxiety before the next social interaction. The student may expect another failure and begin to prepare for it mentally. Social situations then become associated with possible threats to self-worth.

This process helps explain why social anxiety cannot be reduced simply by telling students to "be confident." Confidence may temporarily increase in a particular task, but if the individual still rejects personal weaknesses, anxiety may return when another difficult situation appears. Self-acceptance provides a more stable psychological foundation because it allows students to remain relatively accepting of themselves even when their performance is imperfect.

The findings of Wang (2024) directly support this relationship. Among 880 college students, self-acceptance was significantly negatively correlated with social anxiety. Chu (2023) also found that self-acceptance was related to social anxiety and that the relationship involved fear of negative evaluation. These results indicate that self-acceptance is not an isolated personal quality. It is connected with the way students experience interpersonal situations.

3.2 Fear of Negative Evaluation as an Important Link

Fear of negative evaluation refers to the concern that others may judge the individual negatively. It can include worries about rejection, embarrassment, criticism, or being viewed as incompetent. In social situations, this fear may become a major source of anxiety.

The cognitive behavioral view of social anxiety provides a simple way to understand this process. When a student enters a social situation, the student may form a prediction about how others will respond. If the prediction is negative, anxiety increases. The student may then focus on possible mistakes and try to avoid situations that could lead to negative evaluation.

Self-acceptance may influence this process because students who accept themselves do not necessarily view negative feedback as a threat to their entire self-worth. They can think, "I made a mistake, but the mistake does not define me." A student with low self-acceptance may instead think, "If people notice my mistake, they will see that I am not good enough."

Wang (2024) found that fear of negative evaluation partially mediated the relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety. Chu (2023) also found a significant relationship between self-acceptance, fear of negative evaluation, and social anxiety among college students. Chen and Lu (2026) reported similar findings, showing that self-acceptance was negatively related to fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety, while fear of negative evaluation was positively related to social anxiety.

These results suggest that adjustment strategies should not focus only on increasing positive self-statements. Students also need to change the way they understand social evaluation. Other people's opinions are important in social life, but they do not provide a complete definition of personal value.

3.3 Self-Acceptance and Interpersonal Behavior

Self-acceptance may also influence social anxiety through behavior. Students who do not accept themselves may be more likely to avoid social situations. Avoidance provides short-term relief because the student does not need to face the feared situation. However, repeated avoidance can reduce opportunities for successful social experiences.

For example, a student may be afraid of speaking in a seminar and decide not to participate. The student feels less anxious that day, but the experience does not provide evidence that participation could have gone well. The student may become even more worried about the next seminar. The cycle can continue.

Low self-acceptance may also make students more sensitive to interpersonal setbacks. A normal disagreement may be interpreted as personal rejection. A delayed reply to a message may be interpreted as evidence that the other person dislikes them. Such interpretations can increase anxiety and encourage further avoidance.

Research on related interpersonal variables supports this interpretation. Xue et al. (2025) found that self-acceptance was negatively related to interpersonal difficulties and that self-esteem and self-acceptance were related to aggressive behavior among college students. These findings suggest that self-acceptance is connected with how students respond to interpersonal experiences rather than merely how they think about themselves.

3.4 Self-Acceptance and Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is closely related to self-acceptance, but the two concepts should not be treated as identical. Self-esteem generally reflects the value an individual assigns to the self, whereas self-acceptance emphasizes the willingness to recognize and accept the self as a whole.

This distinction matters in social anxiety adjustment. If an intervention focuses only on raising self-esteem, students may still become uncomfortable when they encounter failure. A student who believes "I must perform well to be valuable" may experience anxiety when performance is uncertain. Self-acceptance offers a different psychological position: "I want to perform

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well, but imperfect performance does not make me unacceptable."

Research has shown connections between self-acceptance, self-esteem, and other psychological characteristics. Qiu et al. (2025) found significant positive relationships among self-acceptance, general self-efficacy, self-esteem, and body image among college students. The findings indicate that self-acceptance can coexist with other positive self-related resources.

This relationship can be useful in understanding social anxiety. Students with stable self-acceptance may be less dependent on immediate social approval. They may still care about other people's responses, but negative feedback is less likely to become a complete judgment of the self.

4. Factors Related to the Relationship

4.1 Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation is one of the clearest factors connecting self-acceptance and social anxiety. A student may enter a social situation with the belief that other people are watching closely. The student may then predict criticism before anything negative actually happens.

This fear can create several changes in behavior. Students may rehearse sentences repeatedly, avoid eye contact, speak as little as possible, refuse invitations, or leave social situations early. Some may repeatedly check messages or social media responses after interacting with others.

Wang (2024) found that fear of negative evaluation partially mediated the relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety. Chen and Lu (2026) reported a similar pattern and found that self-acceptance and fear of negative evaluation were both associated with social anxiety. Ma (2025) also found that self-acceptance was negatively related to fear of negative evaluation and that fear of negative evaluation mediated the relationship between self-acceptance and interpersonal difficulties.

These findings indicate that reducing fear of negative evaluation may be an important part of social anxiety adjustment. Students do not need to become completely unconcerned about other people's opinions. A more realistic goal is to reduce the belief that negative evaluation is extremely likely or that it would have catastrophic consequences.

4.2 Body Image and Appearance Concerns

Appearance can become an important source of social anxiety, particularly when students frequently compare themselves with others. A student who is dissatisfied with appearance may assume that other people will notice and judge the same perceived weakness.

Research involving adolescents and college-related populations provides support for this relationship. Ding (2026) found that body image was related to self-acceptance and social anxiety among high school students, and that self-acceptance played a mediating role. Li (2025) also found that negative body self-perception was associated with social avoidance and distress among vocational college students, with self-acceptance playing a significant mediating role.

Although these studies do not establish that body image directly causes social anxiety among all college students, they suggest that appearance-related self-evaluation can become part of the psychological process. Students who believe that their appearance determines their social value may become more sensitive to attention from others.

This issue is especially important in an environment where photographs, short videos, and online self-presentation are common. Students may compare ordinary daily appearances with carefully selected images presented by others. Such comparison can make personal weaknesses seem larger than they are.

Improving self-acceptance can help students separate appearance from overall personal value. Appearance can be important to personal identity, but it does not need to determine whether a student deserves friendship, respect, or participation in social activities.

4.3 Social Support

Social support can influence how students experience interpersonal stress. Students who have supportive friends, classmates, or family members may receive more opportunities to experience acceptance in real relationships. Positive social experiences can gradually challenge the belief that others are constantly judging them.

Research by Zhang et al. (2024) found that self-acceptance and peer support were associated with fewer mental health problems among hearing-impaired adolescents. Although the population differs from college students, the findings still provide useful evidence for understanding the protective role of supportive relationships.

Huang (2024) also found a significant relationship between mindfulness, self-acceptance, perceived social support, and security among college students. Self-acceptance and perceived social support both played mediating roles between mindfulness and security.

For college students experiencing social anxiety, support should not mean protecting them from all social situations. Excessive protection may increase avoidance. More useful support allows students to participate while providing a relatively safe interpersonal environment. A friend who accompanies a student to a group activity, for example, may provide enough support for the student to begin participating independently.

4.4 Mindfulness

Mindfulness provides another possible way to understand and adjust self-acceptance and social anxiety. Mindfulness involves paying attention to current experiences rather than becoming completely absorbed in judgments about the past or future.

The relevance of mindfulness to self-acceptance is supported by recent research. Chen and Lu (2026) found that mindfulness was positively related to self-acceptance and negatively related to social anxiety among college students. Their findings also showed that self-acceptance and fear of negative evaluation were involved in the relationship between mindfulness and social anxiety.

This suggests that mindfulness may help students notice anxious thoughts without immediately accepting them as facts. A student may notice the thought "Everyone thinks I am awkward" and recognize it as a thought rather than evidence. This small psychological distance can reduce the need to escape from the social situation.

Mindfulness should not be treated as a quick solution. Its practical value may lie in helping students observe emotions more clearly and reduce automatic reactions. It can work together with self-acceptance rather than replacing it.

5. Main Problems in Students' Self-Adjustment

5.1 Excessive Self-Monitoring

Students with social anxiety may spend too much attention monitoring themselves. They may repeatedly consider how they look, how they speak, whether their expression is natural, and whether other people are paying attention to them.

Excessive self-monitoring reduces attention available for the actual conversation. Instead of listening to the other person, the student may be thinking about personal performance. This can make communication more difficult and may increase the chance of awkwardness.

Self-acceptance can help reduce this process. When students no longer require perfect performance, they can place more attention on the interaction itself.

5.2 Treating Mistakes as Personal Failure

A common problem is the tendency to connect a specific mistake with general self-worth. A student may make a poor presentation and conclude that they are socially incompetent. Such thinking makes future social situations more threatening.

The problem is not the desire to improve. Improvement is useful. The problem appears when improvement becomes dependent on self-rejection. A student can recognize a weakness without using it as evidence that the entire self is inadequate.

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This distinction is consistent with the broader concept of self-acceptance described by Sun and Lu (2017). Accepting negative characteristics does not mean refusing to change them. It means that change can occur without first rejecting the person who needs to change.

5.3 Avoidance as a Short-Term Solution

Avoidance often provides immediate relief. A student who does not attend a social event does not have to experience the anxiety associated with it. However, this relief can make avoidance more likely in the future.

Repeated avoidance also prevents students from collecting new social experiences. They may never discover that other people are less judgmental than expected. Over time, the student's negative prediction remains untested.

For this reason, social anxiety adjustment should include gradual behavioral participation. Students should not be forced into highly stressful situations immediately. Small and manageable interactions can provide opportunities for successful experiences.

5.4 Dependence on External Evaluation

Some students rely heavily on praise, approval, or social feedback to maintain a positive view of themselves. When positive feedback is absent, they may become uncertain about their value.

This pattern can increase social anxiety because every interaction becomes an opportunity for evaluation. The student may think, "If they like me, I am acceptable; if they dislike me, something is wrong with me."

Self-acceptance can reduce this dependence. The goal is not to ignore social feedback. Healthy interpersonal relationships require individuals to consider how their behavior affects others. The goal is to prevent every social response from becoming a judgment of personal worth.

6. Strategies for Improving Self-Acceptance and Reducing Social Anxiety

6.1 Building a More Realistic Understanding of the Self

The first step is to help students develop a balanced understanding of personal characteristics. Students can identify strengths, weaknesses, preferences, emotional patterns, and areas that need improvement. The purpose is not to produce a perfect self-description but to reduce extreme judgments.

A simple exercise is to separate "facts" from "judgments." For example:

"I did not speak during the discussion" is a fact.

"I am terrible at social interaction" is a judgment.

This distinction can help students recognize how quickly a specific event becomes a broad conclusion about the self.

Students can also write down situations in which they feel socially anxious and identify what they believe these situations say about them. The next step is to ask whether the conclusion is supported by actual evidence. This process can reduce exaggerated self-evaluation.

6.2 Reducing Fear of Negative Evaluation

Because fear of negative evaluation is closely related to social anxiety, it should be addressed directly. Students can begin by recognizing that evaluation is a normal part of social interaction. Not every person will like every individual, and disagreement cannot be completely avoided.

A healthier goal is to tolerate possible negative evaluation. Students can ask:

"What is the actual probability that the other person will judge me negatively?"

"If they do judge me negatively, what is the realistic consequence?"

"Will this opinion remain important after a week or a month?"

These questions can help students move away from catastrophic predictions.

Wang (2024) and Chu (2023) both provide evidence that fear of negative evaluation is an important mechanism associated with social anxiety and self-acceptance. This makes it a practical target for adjustment.

6.3 Gradual Exposure to Social Situations

Avoidance should be reduced gradually rather than suddenly. Students can create a list of social situations from relatively easy to difficult.

For example, the first step may be greeting a familiar classmate. The next may be starting a short conversation with an unfamiliar student. Later steps may include asking a question in class, participating in a small group discussion, or speaking in front of a larger group.

The student should remain in each situation long enough to recognize that anxiety can decline without escape. The purpose is not to perform perfectly. The purpose is to obtain new experience.

Successful experiences can also improve self-acceptance. When students discover that they can experience anxiety and still complete an interaction, they gain a more realistic understanding of themselves.

6.4 Developing Tolerance for Imperfection

Social interaction is not a performance competition. People forget words, misunderstand questions, speak too quickly, interrupt others, and make awkward comments. These events are part of ordinary communication.

Students with social anxiety may believe that mistakes must be prevented completely. This expectation is unrealistic and creates unnecessary pressure.

A useful adjustment strategy is to practice making small, harmless mistakes without immediately trying to repair them. For example, a student may accept a brief pause before answering a question rather than rushing to fill the silence.

The aim is to develop the belief that imperfection can be tolerated. This is closely connected with self-acceptance because accepting oneself requires accepting the possibility of not always performing well.

6.5 Strengthening Positive Social Experiences

Students should have opportunities to experience relationships in which they can communicate without excessive judgment. Peer activities, interest groups, cooperative learning, and student organizations can provide such opportunities.

The quality of the social environment matters. If students repeatedly encounter ridicule or exclusion, simply asking them to become more self-accepting may not solve the problem. The surrounding environment should also provide basic respect and inclusion.

Research on social support and self-acceptance suggests that supportive interpersonal relationships can contribute to psychological adjustment (Huang, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). This means that social anxiety adjustment should not place all responsibility on the individual student.

6.6 Using Mindfulness to Manage Immediate Anxiety

Mindfulness exercises can be used when students notice anxiety before or during social interaction. A simple exercise is to focus attention on breathing for several moments and notice physical sensations without trying to eliminate them immediately.

Students can also observe anxious thoughts without arguing with every thought. If the thought “They are all looking at me” appears, the student can simply notice that the thought has appeared and return attention to the conversation.

Chen and Lu (2026) found that mindfulness was positively related to self-acceptance and negatively related to social anxiety among college students. Their findings provide support for combining mindfulness with self-acceptance adjustment.

6.7 Using Group Counseling

Group counseling can provide direct opportunities to practice social interaction in a supportive environment. Students can discuss common social

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concerns, identify negative beliefs, practice communication, and receive feedback.

Existing intervention studies provide useful support for this approach. Wang (2024) reported that group counseling designed to reduce fear of negative evaluation significantly reduced fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety among college students. Chu (2023) also found that a self-acceptance-focused group counseling program improved self-acceptance and reduced social anxiety, with effects maintained during follow-up.

These findings suggest that counseling does not need to focus only on explaining social anxiety. Students can benefit from actually practicing new ways of responding to themselves and others.

6.8 Improving Psychological Services in Universities

University psychological services can provide different levels of support. Students with mild social anxiety may benefit from psychological education, group activities, or self-help materials. Students with stronger and persistent anxiety may need individual counseling.

Psychological services should also avoid creating the impression that social anxiety is a personal failure. Students may already feel ashamed of their difficulties. If seeking help is presented as evidence of weakness, they may avoid professional support.

A more appropriate approach is to make psychological support easy to access and connected with ordinary student development. Workshops on communication, emotional regulation, self-acceptance, and interpersonal relationships can provide low-pressure entry points.

7. Practical Adjustment Framework for College Students

Self-acceptance and social anxiety are related through several psychological and behavioral processes. Based on the evidence discussed above, a practical adjustment framework can be organized around four connected tasks: understanding the self, changing evaluation, increasing interaction, and maintaining support.

The first task is understanding the self. Students need to recognize both strengths and weaknesses without making extreme judgments. This creates the basis for self-acceptance. The purpose is not to convince students that everything about themselves is good. It is to help them develop a stable and realistic view of who they are.

The second task is changing the meaning of social evaluation. Students need to understand that other people's opinions are limited and changeable. Negative feedback can be useful when it points to behavior that needs improvement, but it should not automatically become a judgment of personal value.

The third task is increasing actual interaction. Psychological change becomes more stable when students have new experiences. Gradual participation can provide evidence that social situations are often less threatening than expected. It can also show students that anxiety does not prevent successful communication.

The fourth task is maintaining support. Friends, classmates, teachers, counselors, and family members can all contribute to adjustment. Support should encourage participation rather than reinforce avoidance. A supportive friend can accompany a student into a difficult situation while still allowing the student to act independently.

This framework also shows why a single intervention may not be enough. If a student improves self-acceptance but continues to avoid all social situations, the new self-understanding may not be strengthened through experience. If a student participates in many social activities but continues to believe that every mistake proves personal inadequacy, anxiety may remain high. Effective adjustment requires changes in both internal evaluation and observable behavior.

8. Discussion

Existing research provides relatively consistent evidence for a negative relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety. Studies focusing directly on college students have repeatedly

reported this pattern. Wang (2024) found that self-acceptance was negatively related to social anxiety and that fear of negative evaluation partly explained the relationship. Chu (2023) reported similar findings and further demonstrated that self-acceptance-focused group counseling could improve self-acceptance and reduce social anxiety. Chen and Lu (2026) again identified a significant negative relationship between self-acceptance and social anxiety and found that both fear of negative evaluation and self-acceptance were involved in the effects of mindfulness on social anxiety.

These studies support a relatively simple interpretation. Students who accept themselves more readily may be less likely to interpret ordinary social situations as threats to personal worth. They may still experience nervousness, but the nervousness is less likely to become strong avoidance. Students with low self-acceptance may be more vulnerable to negative self-evaluation, which increases concern about how others see them. Fear of negative evaluation appears to be particularly important. It connects internal self-evaluation with social experience. When students are afraid that others will judge them, they may monitor themselves excessively and avoid interaction. Low self-acceptance can strengthen this fear because social rejection may be interpreted as confirmation of existing negative beliefs about the self.

This interpretation also helps explain why self-acceptance should not be confused with passive self-satisfaction. A student can accept personal weaknesses and still work to improve them. In fact, self-acceptance may make improvement easier because the student does not need to protect a perfect self-image. The student can admit "I am not good at this yet" without concluding "I am a failure."

Another important point is that social anxiety is not only an individual psychological issue. Social environments influence students' experiences. Peer rejection, ridicule, excessive comparison, and poor interpersonal support may increase anxiety. Zhang et al. (2024) found that peer support was relevant to psychological health in adolescents, while Huang (2024) identified perceived social support as an important variable related to self-acceptance and security among college students. These findings suggest that universities should create interpersonal environments in which students can make mistakes without being humiliated.

The available literature also has some limitations. Many of the studies provided in the source materials use cross-sectional questionnaires. Such studies can identify relationships between variables, but they cannot fully establish causal direction. Intervention studies provide stronger evidence for adjustment strategies, but their sample sizes are often relatively small. For example, Wang (2024) used 22 college students in the intervention study, while Chu (2023) included 24 participants in the group intervention. These findings are useful for practical discussion, but they should not be generalized to every college student without caution.

Another limitation concerns population differences. Some studies focus on high school students, vocational students, adolescents, or specific groups rather than ordinary college students. These studies can provide useful psychological explanations, but the social experiences of different populations are not identical. The conclusions are more appropriate as supporting evidence than as direct substitutes for college-student research.

Even with these limitations, the overall direction of the evidence is relatively clear. Self-acceptance is relevant to social anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation is an important psychological factor. Interventions that combine self-acceptance, cognitive adjustment, gradual social participation, mindfulness, and supportive relationships have reasonable theoretical and practical value.

9. Conclusion

Self-acceptance is closely related to social anxiety among college students. Students with lower self-acceptance may be more likely to focus on personal weaknesses, depend heavily on external evaluation, fear negative judgments, and avoid social situations. These processes can increase social anxiety and

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reduce opportunities for positive interpersonal experiences.

Fear of negative evaluation provides an important link between self-acceptance and social anxiety. When students believe that social mistakes will lead to rejection or prove that they are inadequate, ordinary communication becomes psychologically threatening. Helping students accept themselves can weaken this pattern by separating specific mistakes from overall personal value.

Adjustment should not be limited to encouraging students to think positively. More useful strategies include realistic self-understanding, reduction of excessive fear of evaluation, gradual participation in social activities, tolerance of ordinary mistakes, supportive peer relationships, mindfulness practice, group counseling, and accessible university psychological services.

The most important change is not the complete disappearance of social anxiety. A more realistic goal is for students to remain involved in social life even when some anxiety is present. When students can accept themselves, tolerate imperfection, and continue communicating despite temporary discomfort, social anxiety is less likely to control their choices. This can support healthier interpersonal relationships and a more stable psychological adjustment during college.

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Habitual Behaviors in Problematic Social Media Use and Strategies for Change

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Abstract: Social media has become an integral part of daily life, allowing individuals to obtain information, maintain interpersonal relationships, and regulate their emotions. However, when social media use develops into a fixed behavioral pattern characterized by automatic checking, aimless browsing, repeated monitoring of social feedback, and difficulty stopping, it may negatively affect learning, work, sleep, and offline interactions. Problematic social media use is not simply a matter of spending too much time online. The habitual nature of behavior and the persistent pursuit of immediate feedback also deserve attention. Existing research has examined the psychological mechanisms associated with problematic social media use from several perspectives, including usage motivation, attentional bias, fear of missing out, experiential avoidance, and self-control. These findings also provide a basis for developing behavioral change strategies. Given the characteristics of habitual behavior, interventions can focus on identifying behavioral triggers, modifying the usage environment, introducing response delays, improving emotion regulation, and developing alternative activities in everyday life. Behavioral change should not rely solely on limiting screen time or exercising short-term willpower. It also requires attention to the psychological needs fulfilled by social media use, together with continuous self-monitoring and feedback to reinforce new behavioral patterns. Combining habit identification, environmental modification, and psychological regulation may help reduce automatic social media use and improve individuals' ability to manage their behavior independently.

Keywords: problematic social media use; habitual behavior; behavioral change; self-control; emotion regulation

1. Introduction

Social media provides convenient channels for obtaining information and has changed the ways people maintain relationships and organize their daily activities. Checking messages, browsing updates, watching short videos, and participating in online discussions have become routine activities for

many people. Normal social media use can meet needs related to information exchange, entertainment, and social interaction. However, when individuals repeatedly use social media, gradually lose control over their behavior, and begin to neglect academic tasks, rest, or offline relationships, their usage patterns may become problematic.

Problematic social media use involves several factors, including personality traits, emotional experiences, social and psychological motivations, and individual cognition. It cannot be explained simply by the amount of time spent online (Jiang, 2018a). Motivations such as social interaction, presenting oneself as more popular, and passing time or seeking entertainment are associated with problematic social media use (Kircaburun et al., 2018). These factors help explain why individuals choose to use social media, but further analysis of specific behavioral processes is needed to understand why certain patterns of use continue to recur.

In everyday life, some people open social media without a clear purpose. They may reach for their phones when waiting, taking a break, feeling bored, or encountering difficulties. They may repeatedly enter an application even when no new messages are available. After realizing that they have spent a considerable amount of time online, they may regret their behavior. Yet when a similar situation occurs again, they often repeat the same actions. This pattern of repeated behavior, triggered by familiar situations and involving progressively less deliberate decision-making, reflects the habitual characteristics of problematic social media use.

Usage inertia, attentional bias, fear of missing out, and self-control provide different perspectives for understanding this phenomenon. Inertia-related motivations are positively associated with social media engagement, while individuals with problematic usage patterns may display attentional biases toward social media-related stimuli and greater difficulty disengaging their attention from them (Zheng et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2019). These findings offer important clues for understanding repetitive use. However, further consideration is needed to explain why such behaviors continue in familiar situations and how specific habits can be changed.

Habitual behavior offers a relatively concrete perspective for examining this issue. Compared with focusing exclusively on the amount of time spent online, examining when a behavior occurs, what triggers it, what immediate satisfaction it provides, and why it is difficult to stop may help identify more effective points of intervention. This paper examines habitual behaviors associated with problematic social media use, analyzes their main characteristics and underlying mechanisms, and proposes strategies involving behavioral identification, environmental modification, emotion regulation, and alternative activities. The aim is to provide practical insights into reducing unnecessary social media use.

2. Understanding Problematic Social Media Use and Habitual Behavior

2.1 The Meaning of Problematic Social Media Use

Problematic social media use refers to patterns of social media engagement characterized by difficulty controlling use, persistent or repeated engagement, and negative effects on everyday functioning. It is not necessarily the same as frequent use. Some people spend considerable time on social media every day because of academic, professional, or social demands, yet remain able to complete their tasks and stop using applications when necessary. Others repeatedly check applications without a clear purpose, struggle to stop at their intended time, or continue using social media even after recognizing its negative effects on their lives.

Problematic mobile social media use may involve increasingly persistent engagement, physical discomfort or harm, fear of missing out, cognitive difficulties, and feelings of guilt. These dimensions have been incorporated into assessment tools for problematic mobile social media use, providing a reference for understanding its different manifestations (Jiang, 2018b).

Problematic social media use should not automatically be equated with clinical addiction, nor should it be identified solely on the basis of a single episode of prolonged use. Assessment requires consideration of whether individuals lose control over their behavior, repeatedly act against their own intentions, and experience persistent interference with learning, work, sleep, or interpersonal relationships.

2.2 The Meaning of Habitual Behavior

Habitual behavior refers to an action that becomes increasingly associated with a particular context through repetition and is more likely to occur automatically in similar situations. Once a habit has developed, individuals may not need to make a deliberate decision each time. Environmental cues can trigger a familiar behavioral response.

In social media use, cues may include a phone screen lighting up, a notification sound, a brief period of free time, being alone, feeling bored, or encountering an unpleasant situation. When individuals repeatedly open social media in these circumstances, the situations themselves may become associated with checking behavior.

Habitual behavior differs in certain respects from deliberate use. Deliberate use usually involves a relatively clear purpose, such as replying to a friend's message, finding course materials, or obtaining specific information. Habitual use may lack a clear goal, with individuals simply repeating familiar actions in response to particular situations. The two forms of behavior are not entirely separate. A person may initially open an application to check a message and then continue browsing without a specific purpose.

Social media engagement is not always driven by an immediate information need. Inertia-related motivations may also encourage individuals to continue participating in social media activities (Zheng et al., 2017). Connecting this phenomenon with habitual behavior makes it possible to examine how usage inertia develops in everyday situations and how individuals can gradually reduce their reliance on automatic responses.

2.3 The Relationship Between Habitual Behavior and Problematic Use

Habitual behavior does not necessarily produce negative outcomes. Checking work messages at scheduled times, maintaining regular contact with family and friends, or browsing interesting content during a planned break can all become stable and useful daily habits. Problems arise when these behaviors lack appropriate boundaries and increasingly conflict with important personal goals. Habitual behavior may make problematic use more persistent. Individuals no longer need to make a new decision each time they open an application. Instead, they repeat the behavior in familiar situations. Even after their original entertainment or social needs have been met, they may continue using the application. The relationship between the behavior and the immediate need may become weaker, while the behavior itself remains frequent.

Habitual behavior cannot fully explain problematic social media use. Fear of missing out, loneliness, social exclusion, digital stress, and difficulties regulating emotions may also influence usage patterns (Pi & Li, 2023; Li, 2026). Some people repeatedly check social media to avoid missing information, while others use it to relieve loneliness or temporarily escape stress. Still others repeat familiar actions whenever they feel bored. Several motivations may operate simultaneously, but effective behavioral change requires identifying the most relevant ones.

Problematic social media use should therefore be understood as a behavior influenced partly by habit formation rather than as a problem caused entirely by habit or insufficient self-control. Identifying the triggers, immediate functions, and actual consequences of behavior can help determine appropriate strategies for change.

3. Main Manifestations of Habitual Behavior in Problematic Social Media Use

3.1 Automatic Checking Triggered by Everyday Situations

Automatic checking is one of the most visible manifestations of habitual behavior. After waking up, while eating, waiting for someone, taking a break from studying, or preparing for sleep, individuals may naturally reach for their phones and open social media. Such behavior is not necessarily triggered by a new message or an actual need. It may occur simply because the situation has become associated with checking the phone.

This behavior is easy to overlook. Since each episode may last only a short time, individuals may regard it as a brief check and fail to notice how frequently they repeat the action throughout the day. When these short episodes occur repeatedly, time that could otherwise be used for rest, reflection, or completing tasks may be interrupted.

Automatic checking may also occur without an obvious external prompt. For example, when students encounter a difficult problem while doing homework, they may habitually pick up their phones. They may also open social media immediately after completing a task as a form of reward. Over time, studying and checking a phone can become closely associated, making the action increasingly likely to occur without a conscious decision.

3.2 Continuous Browsing Without a Clear Purpose

Continuous browsing occurs when individuals open social media without a specific information goal but continue switching between posts, viewing recommended content, or watching one video after another. The end of one browsing episode does not necessarily provide a clear stopping point, because new content encourages continued engagement.

This pattern differs from purposeful use. When searching for specific information, individuals can usually stop after obtaining what they need. Aimless browsing lacks a clear endpoint. Even after the original purpose has been fulfilled, individuals may continue using the application.

Continuous browsing can also affect time perception. Someone who initially intends to take a short break may discover that a considerable amount of time has passed after repeatedly switching between pieces of content. The problem is not merely underestimating the duration of a single session. It also involves the absence of a clear stopping condition.

When this pattern frequently occurs during study, work, or rest, continuous browsing may develop from an occasional leisure activity into a habit that interferes with daily routines.

3.3 Repeatedly Checking Messages and Social Feedback

Social media provides immediate social feedback through likes, comments, private messages, and other forms of interaction. Individuals may repeatedly check their message lists, refresh their feeds, or verify whether their posts have received responses. They may reopen an application several times within a short period even when no new feedback is available.

This behavior is closely related to social needs. Individuals may want to understand how others perceive them or worry about missing important messages and group activities. When these concerns become strong, checking behavior may be driven less by practical needs and more by anxiety.

Fear of missing out is closely associated with problematic social media use. Fear of missing out, self-esteem, and social media use are related among university students, while loneliness may be indirectly associated with problematic mobile social media use through fear of missing out (Wang et al., 2022; Pi & Li, 2023). These relationships suggest that repeated checking serves not only to obtain information but also to reduce concerns about missing information or losing social opportunities.

If individuals can obtain temporary reassurance only by checking social media, the behavior may recur whenever their concerns return. The temporary reassurance does not necessarily resolve

the underlying worry and may instead increase reliance on checking.

3.4 Using Social Media to Avoid Uncomfortable Emotions

Some individuals open social media when they feel anxious, lonely, frustrated, or overwhelmed by academic pressure. In these situations, the main function of social media use may not be to obtain specific information but to temporarily escape an uncomfortable real-life situation.

For example, individuals facing difficult tasks may watch short videos to distract themselves. Those experiencing interpersonal frustration may turn to online interactions for comfort. People who feel lonely during their free time may repeatedly browse other people's updates. These behaviors can temporarily redirect attention away from unpleasant feelings.

However, when social media becomes the primary method of emotional coping, individuals may have fewer opportunities to address real-life problems or develop alternative regulation strategies. Unfinished tasks remain unresolved, and interpersonal difficulties persist. When the same pressures return, individuals may repeat their previous patterns of use.

Maladaptive coping and fear of missing out are associated with problematic social media use, while experiential avoidance may contribute to the relationship between stress, negative social experiences, and problematic engagement (Fan, 2023; Liu et al., 2023). These relationships provide a basis for understanding emotionally avoidant use.

Although not every emotional difficulty leads to habitual social media use, the findings highlight an important behavioral pattern. When individuals primarily use social media to avoid discomfort rather than address its underlying causes, their usage behavior may continue to recur. Effective change therefore requires developing alternative coping strategies rather than simply removing an existing source of emotional relief.

3.5 Regret After Use Followed by Repeated Behavior

Habitual behavior may also involve a recurring cycle in which individuals begin using social media without a clear plan, struggle to stop, regret their behavior afterward, and then repeat it in a similar situation.

Individuals may know before opening an application that they still have assignments to complete. They may also understand that prolonged browsing before bed can interfere with sleep. Nevertheless, their actual behavior may conflict with their original intentions. Afterward, they may blame themselves or impose stricter restrictions without changing the environmental conditions that trigger the behavior.

When individuals experience regret without identifying specific triggers and behavioral patterns, self-criticism is unlikely to produce lasting change. The next time they feel bored, stressed, or prompted by a notification, the familiar response may occur again.

Assessment tools for problematic mobile social media use include dimensions such as feelings of guilt, increased habitual engagement, and cognitive failures. These dimensions suggest that subjective experiences may not always align with actual behavior (Jiang, 2018b). Behavioral change requires more than recognizing a problem. Individuals must also be able to take a different action at the moment when the habitual response is about to occur.

4. Mechanisms Underlying Habitual Behavior in Problematic Social Media Use

4.1 The Association Between Situational Cues and Repeated Behavior

Habitual behavior is closely related to the situations in which it occurs. When individuals repeatedly open social media in similar contexts, those contexts may gradually become cues for the behavior. Subsequently, they may be more likely to repeat the action even when no clear need exists.

For example, a person who opens a short-video application whenever a study task becomes difficult may initially do so to take a brief break. After repeated experiences, the difficulty itself, a pause in studying, or even sitting at a desk may become associated with checking the phone. Whenever a similar situation occurs, the individual becomes more likely to reach for the phone without first considering whether a break is necessary.

Inertia-related motivations in social media engagement offer a useful perspective for understanding this process (Zheng et al., 2017). When an action becomes a familiar coping response, individuals may engage in less deliberate decision-making, and the action becomes easier to initiate.

However, repetition alone does not fully determine the strength of a habit. Whether the behavior occurs in relatively stable contexts and whether individuals can respond to those situations without using social media may also affect its persistence. When changing a habit, identifying and modifying frequently encountered triggers may be more effective than simply demanding that individuals reduce their usage.

4.2 The Reinforcing Effects of Immediate Feedback

Social media provides a continuous supply of new information, entertainment, and social feedback. After opening an application, individuals may immediately encounter an interesting video, a new message, or a positive comment. These immediate outcomes can provide short-term satisfaction and reinforce checking behavior.

Importantly, feedback is not always consistent. Individuals may sometimes find interesting content or receive positive responses, while at other times they find nothing new. Even so, they may continue checking because the next session could provide something worthwhile. This uncertainty may encourage further engagement.

Motivations involving social interaction, self-presentation, and entertainment are associated with problematic social media use (Kircaburun et al., 2018). Individuals with problematic usage patterns may also show attentional biases toward social media-related stimuli and difficulty disengaging their attention from them (Jiang et al., 2019).

These findings suggest that social media content and feedback may influence not only whether individuals begin using an application but also whether they can stop once they have started. When attention is repeatedly drawn to new content, individuals may overlook their original goals and continue browsing.

Immediate feedback may also influence behavior after a session ends. Individuals may experience short-term satisfaction while browsing without fully recognizing the time they have spent. Over repeated episodes, the immediate appeal of social media may become more influential than its delayed negative consequences, making continued use more likely.

4.3 Short-Term Relief Through Emotional Avoidance

Habitual social media use may also be associated with how individuals regulate their emotions. When stress, loneliness, or anxiety arises, social media offers an easily accessible way to redirect attention. Individuals can temporarily avoid a difficult task or postpone dealing with a complicated interpersonal situation by opening their phones.

This short-term relief may reinforce the behavior. If individuals turn to social media whenever they feel uncomfortable, the behavior may gradually become associated with negative emotional states. The emotion acts as a trigger, browsing becomes the response, and temporary relief makes the same response more likely to occur again.

Digital stress is positively associated with problematic social media use, and experiential avoidance partially mediates this relationship (Li, 2026). School exclusion may also be associated with problematic social media use among adolescents through experiential avoidance (Liu et al., 2023).

These relationships do not mean that all emotional difficulties lead to problematic use. They do, however, suggest that when individuals rely primarily on social media to avoid discomfort, habitual engagement may become increasingly

persistent. In such cases, behavioral change needs to help individuals develop alternative coping methods rather than simply remove their existing means of emotional escape.

4.4 Fear of Missing Out and the Need for Social Connection

Social media information can change rapidly. Individuals may worry that they have not seen a message in time, have missed an activity involving friends, or do not understand what their social group is discussing. For those who place great importance on social connection or are particularly sensitive to interpersonal relationships, such concerns may lead to repeated checking.

Loneliness may also influence this process. Individuals who lack stable emotional connections in everyday life may turn to social media for companionship and responses from others. Online interactions can satisfy some social needs, but excessive reliance on online feedback may gradually make usage behavior more difficult to control.

Loneliness among university students may be indirectly associated with problematic mobile social media use through fear of missing out. Social media rumination and fear of missing out have also been examined in research on the mechanisms and intervention of problematic social media use among university students (Pi & Li, 2023; Chai, 2024).

Social media rumination may involve repeatedly thinking about one's own posts, closely monitoring other people's evaluations, or wondering whether a message indicates a change in an interpersonal relationship. These thoughts may encourage individuals to reopen applications to check for confirmation. Although checking may temporarily reduce uncertainty, it can also keep attention focused on social media.

Habitual behavior is therefore not always driven by entertainment. It may be intertwined with needs for social connection, information awareness, and self-evaluation. If behavioral change strategies ignore these needs, individuals may reduce the frequency of checking while continuing to experience the same underlying psychological processes.

4.5 Attention Control and Conflicts Between Usage and Personal Goals

Problematic social media use may also involve difficulties with attention control and self-regulation. Even when individuals recognize that they are browsing content unrelated to their current tasks, they may find it difficult to redirect their attention. Frequent switching between applications can interrupt tasks and make it more difficult to resume studying or working.

Attention-related difficulties among individuals with problematic social media use may be specific to certain stimuli. Such differences do not necessarily mean that these individuals lack attentional control in every situation (Wang, 2023). Instead, social media-related cues and feedback may be particularly attention-grabbing, and the resulting difficulties need to be understood in their specific behavioral contexts.

Fear of missing out and self-control have been examined as mediating factors linking digital-native characteristics with problematic social media use. Cognitive overload on social media is also associated with problematic use and online social anxiety (Kong et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2023).

When individuals receive large amounts of information while attempting to complete academic, professional, or personal tasks, frequent attentional shifts may consume resources that could otherwise be devoted to those tasks. If social media also provides easily accessible immediate rewards, individuals may become more likely to deviate from their original plans.

Self-control should therefore not be treated as an isolated personal quality. The usage environment, psychological state, task difficulty, and attractiveness of social media may all influence actual behavior. Relying entirely on willpower overlooks the conditions under which behavior occurs. A more practical approach is to reduce unnecessary triggers, establish clear usage goals, and create simple steps for stopping and returning to the original task.

5. Strategies for Changing Habitual Behavior in Problematic Social Media Use

5.1 Identifying Behavioral Triggers and Keeping Clear Usage Records

Understanding how a behavior occurs is the starting point for changing a habit. If individuals record only their total daily screen time, they may recognize that they use social media excessively without understanding why they repeatedly open applications. Keeping simple records of triggering situations, usage purposes, and behavioral consequences can help reveal recurring patterns.

The records do not need to be complicated. Individuals can choose a one-week observation period and briefly note the situation, emotional state, and subsequent behavior whenever they notice themselves opening social media without a clear purpose. They may be responding to a notification, encountering difficulty while studying, feeling bored, or worrying about missing a message. Records should also indicate whether actual behavior matches the original plan. Individuals can distinguish purposeful use from aimless browsing, note how long they initially intended to use an application, record when they actually stopped, and observe whether the session interfered with ongoing tasks. This process can help them identify which behaviors are useful and which need adjustment.

The assessment dimensions of problematic mobile social media use include increased habitual engagement, cognitive failures, fear of missing out, and feelings of guilt. These dimensions provide a useful reference, but everyday self-monitoring should not be treated as a diagnostic procedure (Jiang, 2018b). Individuals need to focus on the situations in which they tend to lose control and the actual consequences of their behavior.

The purpose of keeping records is not to make individuals constantly monitor themselves or increase self-blame. It is to make previously unnoticed behavioral patterns more visible. Once individuals can recognize the conditions under which a behavior occurs, they have a better opportunity to make a different choice before the habitual response takes place.

5.2 Modifying the Usage Environment to Reduce Automatic Checking

If a behavior is easily triggered by environmental cues, modifying the environment can reduce opportunities for unnecessary engagement. Compared with resisting the attraction of a phone every time it is nearby, reducing distractions in advance may be easier to maintain.

Phone notifications are a useful starting point. Individuals can disable nonessential push notifications for applications that do not require immediate responses, reducing interruptions caused by screen lighting, sounds, and notification badges. This does not mean avoiding social interaction. It simply prevents irrelevant prompts from repeatedly interrupting ongoing activities. Important messages can still be received and handled appropriately.

The placement of applications can also be adjusted. Individuals may remove applications that frequently trigger aimless browsing from the home screen, log out of unnecessary accounts, or place their phones somewhere less accessible while studying or working. These measures introduce additional steps before automatic checking and give individuals an opportunity to reconsider whether they actually need to use an application.

Relatively stable usage boundaries can also be established for different situations. For example, individuals can check social media only during planned breaks while studying, avoid continuous browsing during meals, or place their phones away from the bed before sleep. Such rules should fit actual needs. Excessively strict restrictions may interfere with necessary communication and become difficult to maintain.

The purpose of environmental modification is not to eliminate social media but to restore a stronger connection between use and clear intentions. Individuals can continue obtaining information and maintaining social relationships without

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responding immediately to every notification, every period of free time, or every emotional fluctuation.

5.3 Creating a Delay Between Triggers and Behavioral Responses

One characteristic of habitual behavior is the speed of the response. Individuals may open an application almost immediately after thinking about checking their phones, leaving little time for reflection or choice. Introducing a short delay can help change this process.

When individuals notice an urge to open social media, they can pause and ask three questions: What do I want to check? Does this need to be handled immediately? What would actually happen if I waited? These questions can help distinguish genuine needs from automatic responses.

If there is information that genuinely requires attention, individuals can complete the necessary action and then exit the application. If there is no clear purpose, they can put the phone away, return to the task at hand, or take a short break. The aim is not to prohibit checking permanently but to make it a deliberate action rather than an automatic reaction.

Individuals can also develop specific behavioral plans in advance. For example, they may decide, "If I want to open social media while studying, I will finish the current part of my task before deciding whether to check it," or "If I repeatedly refresh my feed because I am worried about missing a message, I will wait until my next scheduled checking time." Such plans translate the abstract demand for self-control into a specific response to a familiar situation.

Intentional self-regulation is associated with problematic social media use and offers a potential starting point for improving related behavior (Zhang & Wang, 2025). In practice, plans should be simple, clear, and consistent with everyday routines. Overly complicated plans may require too much effort each time a trigger occurs and become difficult to maintain.

Delaying a response should also be accompanied by acceptance of the urge itself. Individuals may feel uneasy when they do not check their phones or worry that they will miss information. Rather than trying to eliminate these feelings immediately, they can observe whether the feelings diminish over time. Repeated experiences may help them recognize that not every urge to check social media needs to be satisfied immediately.

5.4 Improving Emotion Regulation and Reducing Avoidance-Based Use

When social media is mainly used to relieve stress, loneliness, or anxiety, restricting access alone may not solve the problem. Individuals need alternative ways to meet the same psychological needs so that they can manage uncomfortable emotions without relying on continuous browsing.

If individuals usually open social media when they encounter difficulties while studying, they can replace this response with taking a short break away from their desks, drinking water, organizing the steps of a task, or asking someone for help. If their use is primarily triggered by loneliness, they can contact familiar friends, participate in offline activities, or arrange regular opportunities for social interaction. If they repeatedly browse other people's updates when feeling low, they can identify the source of their emotions rather than evaluate themselves through constant comparison with others.

Cognitive reappraisal can also help individuals reconsider thoughts associated with social media. Some may believe that failing to reply to a message immediately will damage a relationship or that not following every update will lead to social exclusion. They can examine whether these beliefs accurately reflect reality. Important relationships generally do not require constant online availability, and temporarily missing an update does not necessarily mean losing an important opportunity.

Group psychological interventions involving cognitive reappraisal have provided practical reference points for reducing problematic mobile social media use among adolescents (Jiang et al., 2024). For everyday users, cognitive reappraisal can begin with specific thoughts and situations rather

than treating every urge to check social media as a need that must be satisfied.

If individuals mainly use social media to avoid stress, emotional regulation should also be combined with practical problem-solving. They can divide demanding tasks into smaller steps, communicate directly or seek appropriate support when facing interpersonal conflict, and consider professional assistance when persistent anxiety or low mood is difficult to manage.

The goal is not to eliminate negative emotions but to increase the range of available coping strategies. When social media is no longer the only or easiest response to emotional discomfort, habitual use has a greater chance of diminishing.

5.5 Using Mindfulness and Attention Training to Improve Behavioral Awareness

Mindfulness involves consciously attending to present experiences without immediately reacting to them automatically. In social media use, mindfulness practices can help individuals notice when an urge to check their phones arises, what emotions accompany it, and how their behavior is affecting their current activities.

Everyday practice can be simple. Individuals can pause before opening an application and notice their physical state and emotions. They can also check periodically during a session to determine whether they are still pursuing their original purpose. If they realize that they have shifted from checking messages to aimless browsing, they can choose to exit the application rather than continue until they become tired of it.

Mindfulness does not require individuals to suppress every thought. When an urge to check a phone arises, they can acknowledge the urge without immediately acting on it. The value of this practice lies in creating space between awareness and action, allowing behavior to become a matter of choice again.

Higher levels of dispositional mindfulness have been associated with lower problematic social media use, and mindfulness training has been used to address problematic social media use and related bedtime procrastination (Chen et al., 2023; Ren, 2025). These findings provide a basis for considering mindfulness as one component of behavioral change.

However, mindfulness should not be treated as a substitute for every other intervention. When the environment continues to provide frequent distractions, or when usage is driven by strong social anxiety and emotional distress, awareness training alone may be insufficient. Combining mindfulness with environmental modification, emotion regulation, and specific behavioral plans may provide stronger support for lasting change.

5.6 Developing Alternative Activities and Social Support in Everyday Life

Reducing problematic social media use should involve more than decreasing a particular behavior. Individuals also need alternative ways to use their time and meet their psychological needs. If the time previously spent on social media is not organized in a meaningful way, familiar usage patterns may return during periods of free time.

Alternative activities should match the motivations underlying the original behavior. Individuals who mainly browse content for entertainment or to pass time can arrange exercise, reading, hobbies, or short outdoor activities. Those who use social media primarily to maintain relationships can increase face-to-face interactions or establish regular opportunities to communicate with friends. Individuals who use browsing to escape academic pressure can reduce avoidance by breaking tasks into manageable steps, taking planned breaks, and addressing practical problems.

Alternative activities do not necessarily need to be highly engaging. Requiring every alternative to be more entertaining than social media may discourage individuals from trying. It is more important to make activities easy to begin and sustainable over time. Short daily walks, regular participation in interest groups, and scheduled conversations with friends can gradually establish a different daily rhythm.

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Social support can also facilitate behavioral change. General social support is negatively associated with problematic social media use, whereas online social support is positively associated with it. This distinction suggests that the form and context of social support deserve attention (Huang et al., 2025). Online interaction is not inherently harmful, but excessive reliance on online feedback to satisfy social needs may contribute to problematic use.

Family members, friends, and peers can provide support by understanding an individual's difficulties, arranging activities together, and offering nonjudgmental feedback. Compared with simply criticizing excessive use, helping individuals identify behavioral triggers and supporting them as they try alternative responses may be more conducive to maintaining change.

5.7 Reinforcing Change Through Ongoing Feedback and Managing Behavioral Relapse

Habit change is rarely achieved through a single decision. Individuals may follow their plans carefully during the first few days but return to previous behaviors when facing examination pressure, emotional fluctuations, or social activities. If every recurrence is regarded as a failure, individuals may become self-critical and eventually abandon their efforts.

Ongoing feedback helps individuals monitor their progress. Records can include the number of times they open applications without a clear purpose, how frequently their studying is interrupted, whether they stop browsing as planned, and how their usage affects sleep and daily tasks. Compared with total daily screen time alone, these indicators may provide a clearer picture of changes in habitual behavior.

Feedback should guide adjustments rather than determine whether an individual is sufficiently disciplined. If individuals discover that they are most likely to browse continuously at night, they can reconsider their bedtime environment. If repeated checking mainly occurs when they encounter difficulties while studying, they can adjust their task arrangements and breaks. If checking is driven by fear of missing messages, they can establish scheduled times for handling notifications.

Behavioral change should also allow reasonable flexibility. Completely prohibiting social media may conflict with academic, professional, and interpersonal needs. A more appropriate goal is to reduce purposeless, difficult-to-control use that produces negative consequences while retaining necessary and beneficial activities.

When problematic use substantially affects learning, work, sleep, or offline relationships and remains difficult to change despite repeated attempts, individuals can seek psychological counseling or other professional support. If persistent anxiety, depression, or significant difficulties with emotional regulation are also present, these concerns deserve attention rather than focusing exclusively on phone use.

6. Key Considerations for Implementing Habit-Change Strategies

6.1 Focus on Specific Behaviors Rather Than Attributing the Problem to Insufficient Self-Control

Problematic social media use involves different behavioral patterns and psychological needs. Automatic checking, continuous browsing, repeated confirmation of social feedback, and emotional avoidance may all lead to excessive use, but their underlying causes differ. If users are simply instructed to reduce their screen time without identifying why they repeatedly engage in these behaviors, they may reduce usage during one period only to resume the same patterns in another situation.

Change strategies should match the primary function of the behavior. For automatic checking triggered by notifications and visual cues, environmental modification should be a priority. For continuous browsing without a clear purpose, individuals need explicit usage goals and stopping conditions. For repeated checking driven by fear of missing out, relevant beliefs and message-handling

practices require attention. For use primarily intended to escape stress, emotion regulation and practical problem-solving should be strengthened.

This distinction can reduce unnecessary restrictions and help individuals focus on the aspects of their behavior that most need to change. Behavioral change does not require abandoning social media entirely. Instead, it should help individuals reestablish a connection between their usage and actual needs.

6.2 Recognize Individual Differences During Behavioral Change

Individuals differ in their living environments, social relationships, and psychological states. The development of habitual behavior may therefore vary across individuals. For people who experience relatively little stress and mainly browse out of boredom, adjusting notifications, setting planned breaks, and arranging alternative activities may already produce improvements. Those experiencing stronger fear of missing out, loneliness, or experiential avoidance may need to devote more attention to the associated psychological factors.

Materialism, social media rumination, and fear of missing out have been examined in research on the mechanisms and interventions of problematic social media use among university students. Interventions based on mindfulness-based cognitive approaches and insight-oriented narrative methods have also been used to address related psychological experiences and usage behaviors (Chai, 2024). Maladaptive cognition is another important target in interventions for problematic social media use among adolescents (Shi, 2026). These studies suggest that behavioral interventions can be adapted to individuals' cognitive and emotional characteristics.

Individual differences also involve the availability of practical resources. Some people can obtain stable support through exercise, offline activities, and interpersonal interaction, while others face limitations related to time, academic pressure, or their social environment. Change plans should take these conditions into account and avoid setting requirements that are difficult to implement.

6.3 Turning Short-Term Adjustments Into Stable Daily Routines

Reducing social media use in the short term does not necessarily mean that a habit has changed. Individuals may control their behavior when receiving reminders or external supervision but return to familiar patterns when those conditions disappear. Sustained change requires integrating new responses into everyday life.

Scheduled times for checking messages, relatively stable bedtime routines, fewer phone distractions during study, and alternative responses to stress can all become new daily practices. These practices do not need to cover every possible situation. It is sufficient to maintain relatively stable rules that address frequent behavioral triggers.

Behavioral change should also involve periodic evaluation. Individuals can review the situations in which they have become better at stopping automatic checking, the circumstances in which continuous browsing remains likely, and whether existing strategies need adjustment. If a strategy proves difficult to follow over time, they should consider whether it is too restrictive or overlooks an important psychological need.

Effective change does not require individuals to remain constantly alert to whether they are using their phones. Instead, it gradually reduces their dependence on continuous self-reminders. When the environment triggers less purposeless use and individuals have alternative ways to meet their psychological needs, social media can return to a more appropriate place in everyday life.

7. Conclusion

Habitual behaviors associated with problematic social media use include automatic checking, aimless browsing, repeated monitoring of social feedback, and the use of social media to avoid uncomfortable emotions. These behaviors may be influenced by situational cues, immediate feedback, fear of missing out, experiential avoidance, and

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difficulties with attention control. Habit formation does not necessarily produce negative outcomes. However, when repeated behavior becomes disconnected from actual needs and persistently interferes with learning, work, sleep, and offline relationships, targeted changes are needed.

Behavioral change should not rely solely on reducing screen time or strengthening self-discipline. Identifying behavioral triggers, modifying the usage environment, delaying automatic responses, improving emotion regulation, developing alternative activities in everyday life, and reinforcing new routines through ongoing feedback can collectively support habit change. Individuals differ in their usage motivations and psychological needs, so intervention strategies should be adjusted to their specific circumstances. Shifting attention from screen time alone to the conditions and functions of behavior may help individuals gradually regain greater control over their social media use.

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