

# The Relationship between Insecure Attachment and Psychological Distress: The Mediating Role of Caregiver Grief

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## Introduction

➤ Insecure attachment, most commonly characterized as anxious or avoidant attachment, is a significant positive correlate of psychological distress (i.e., depression, anxiety, traumatic stress etc.) (Tamannaiefar et al., 2026; Imran et al., 2022). Additionally, research has posited one’s attachment as a vulnerability to developing complicated grief following bereavement (Russ et al., 2024). This association is particularly critical in the context of caregivers and their manifestations of grief and psychological distress following the loss of the one being cared for, as research has examined clinically elevated levels of depression and anxiety in caregivers following the loss of a patient or family member as soon as three months following the loss. Additionally, bereaved caregivers have been shown to be at risk for the development of symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (El-Jawahri et al., 2021; Malhotra et al., 2025). Limited research explores caregiver grief within the context of both insecure attachment and psychological distress.

## Present Study

➤ The recent study seeks to further examine the relationship between insecure attachment and psychological distress, while clarifying the influential role of caregiver grief. The findings of this study will help inform interventions and protective factors for at-risk informal caregivers.

## Hypotheses

- Higher levels of insecure attachment predict higher levels of psychological distress
- Higher levels of insecure attachment will predict higher levels of caregivers grief
- Higher levels of caregiver grief will predict higher levels of psychological distress
- Caregiver grief will mediate the relationship between insecure attachment and psychological distress.

## Method

### ➤ Procedure

Participants completed the research questionnaire in-person in a designated location on campus which took about 20-30 minutes.

### ➤ Demographics

- **Gender**
  - Women (71.1%)
  - Men (28.2%)
- **Race/Ethnicity**
  - White American (29.6%)
  - Black/African American (27.5%)
  - Hispanic/Latin American (29.6%)

### ➤ Measures

#### 1. The Marwit-Meuser Caregiver Grief Inventory

- The measure comprised of 18-item ( $\alpha = .94$ ) that range from 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).
- Sample item: “I have this empty, sick feeling knowing that my loved one is “gone.”

#### 2. The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale

- The measure comprised of 21-item ( $\alpha = .95$ ) that range from 0 (Did not apply to me at all) to 3 (Applied to me very much or most of the time).
- Sample item: “I couldn’t seem to experience any positive feeling at all.”

#### 3. The Experiences in Close Relationships

- The measure comprised of 36-item ( $\alpha = .94$ ) that range from 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).
- Sample item: “I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings.”

A mediation analysis was conducted using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022), with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence to examine the relationships between Insecure Attachment and psychological distress, while considering the potential mechanisms of caregiver grief (see Figure 1).

## Results

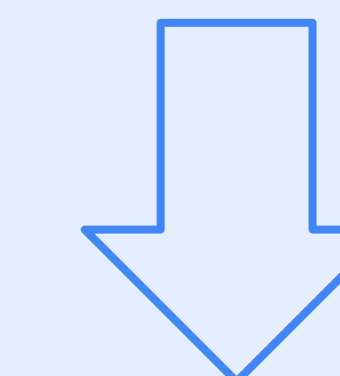
Descriptive statistics showed that participants most commonly reported providing care for another family member, such as a grandparent or in-law (60.7%), and that the majority provided care in the home (76.7%).

**Hypothesis 1:** Attachment insecurity significantly predicted grief severity,  $\beta = .23$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .0097$ , 95% bootstrap CI [.057, .404].

**Hypothesis 2:** Grief significantly predicted psychological distress,  $\beta = .51$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% bootstrap CI [.320, .704].

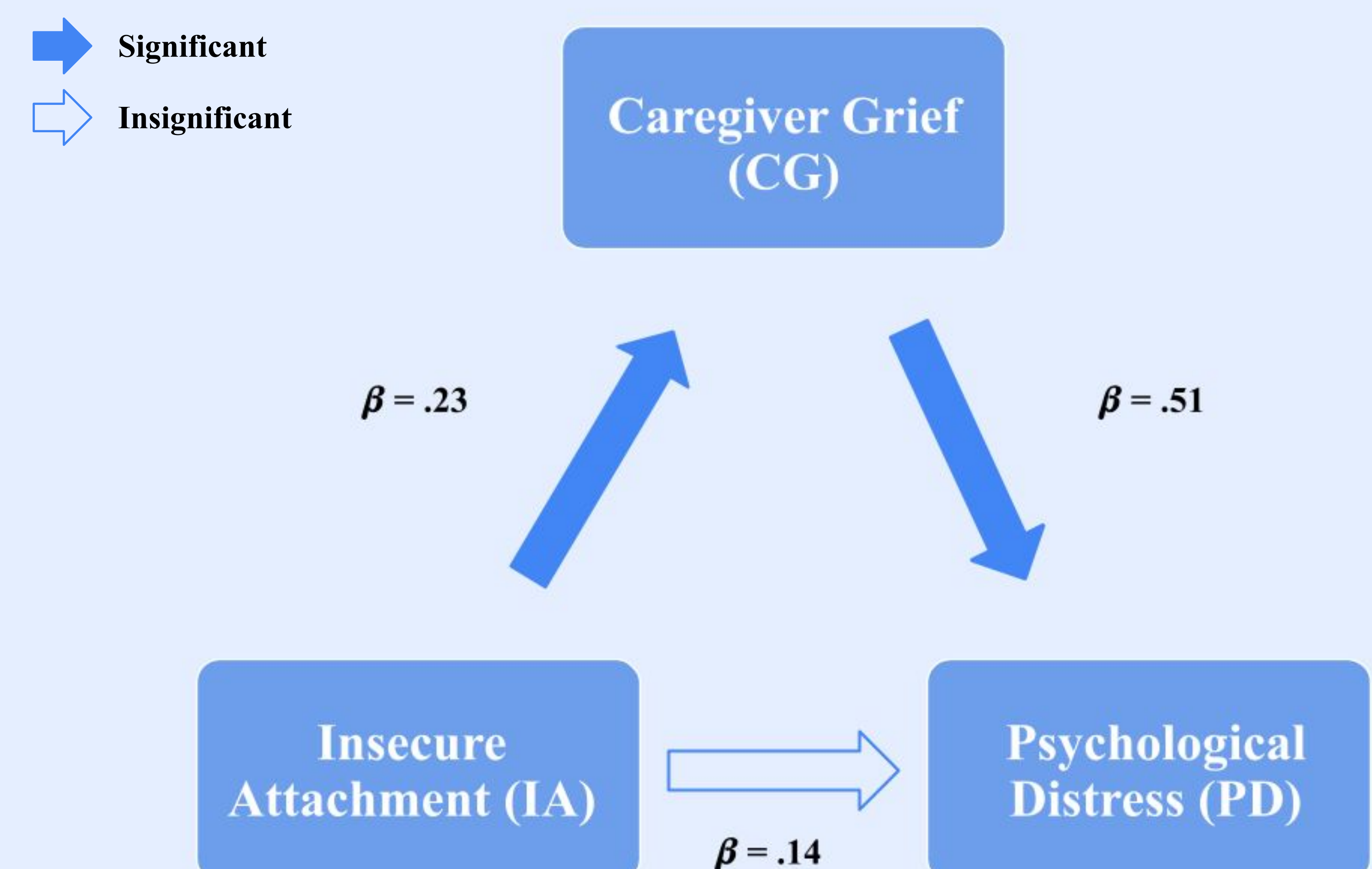
**Hypothesis 3:** Attachment insecurity does not significantly predict psychological distress,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .096$ , 95% bootstrap CI [−.03, .31].

**Hypothesis 4:** The indirect effect of attachment on distress through grief was significant,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $SE = .05$ , 95% bootstrap CI [.019, .231].



## Discussion

- Attachment insecurity was indirectly associated with psychological distress through grief. The direct effect was not significant. These results show that caregivers with more attachment insecurity reported higher grief, and higher grief was tied to higher psychological distress.
- Results may help explain why insecure attachment relates to distress in caregivers. Insecurely attached caregivers may have a harder time coping, which intensifies grief.
- **Implications:** Targeted treatment for distressed caregivers, such as screening for attachment insecurity could also help identify caregivers at higher risk for intense grief before distress escalates.
- **Limitations:** (1) Data came from one time point, therefore, no cause-and-effect conclusions can be drawn. (2) The sample size was small, which limits power to detect small effects like the direct path. (3) All measures were self-report, raising the risk of self-report bias



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