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The Mediating Role of Resilience and Self-Compassion in the Relationship Between Perceived Stress and Psychological Distress with Marital Adjustment During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this study was to examine the mediating role of resilience and self-compassion in the relationship between perceived stress and psychological distress with marital adjustment among individuals attending counseling centers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: This research was conducted using a descriptive-correlational methodology through the structural equation modeling approach. The population included all individuals with marital discord attending private counseling centers in Isfahan during the winter of 2021, who were experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 150 people were selected through convenience sampling and responded to the research instruments. Research Instruments: The instruments included the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2003), the Spanier Marital Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), the Self-Compassion Scale by Neff et al. (2011), the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003), and the Perceived COVID-19 Stress Scale by Campo-Arias et al. (2020). Data were analyzed using PLS software and structural equation modeling.

Findings: The results indicated that the effect of stress on resilience was significant ($t=7.61$), stress on self-compassion ($t=3.91$), resilience on adjustment ($t=9.34$), compassion on marital adjustment ($t=2.09$), psychological distress on resilience ($t=5.4$), and psychological distress on self-compassion ($t=2.56$) were significant ($p \leq 0.05$), and resilience and self-compassion played mediating roles between the variables.

Conclusion: According to the findings of this study, reducing perceived stress and psychological distress impacts increasing resilience and self-compassion, and with the enhancement of self-compassion and resilience, marital adjustment improves.

Keywords: Resilience, Self-compassion, Perceived stress, Psychological distress, Adjustment

1. Introduction

With the emergence of the coronavirus, the lives and health of millions of people were threatened within weeks. This pandemic not only caused a high death rate from viral infection but also led to a psychological disaster across the globe. The uncertainty and unpredictability of the outbreak of infectious diseases have a high potential for psychological fear of disease transmission and often lead to many psychological problems (Aydin et al., 2023; Farahmati, 2020). Additionally, the rapid spread of the deadly and unknown coronavirus has led to numerous social crises, impacting various sectors, including families (Ariapooran & Hajimoradi, 2022). Marital adjustment examines the similarity and agreement between spouses (Kendrick & Drentea, 2016). It is a process in which there is a general feeling of satisfaction and happiness among couples regarding their marriage and each other. Spousal relationships play a unique role to the extent that most intimate interactions occur in relation to the spouse (Kendrick & Drentea, 2016). During quarantine conditions, due to the extended time spent at home and the increased duration of couples' interactions with each other, conflicts, domestic violence, and marital tensions and disputes have increased. Some people grow more hateful of each other the more time they spend together, and family conflicts and disputes are reported as consequences of the outbreak of this disease (Ariapooran & Hajimoradi, 2022). Ariapooran and Haji Moradi (2022) demonstrated in a study that among couples, the average marital adjustment (agreement, satisfaction, and cohesion) decreased during the coronavirus outbreak, and marital disputes (shouting, verbal aggression, physical fights, sulking, threatening, insulting, and belittling) increased (Ariapooran & Hajimoradi, 2022). Chung et al. (2023) stated that work-family conflict was significantly associated with marital conflict during the COVID-19 period. One of the abilities and skills that can help couples increase adjustment and resolve problems is resilience (Chung et al., 2023). It seems that resilience mediates the relationship between some psychological variables (Serrão et al., 2021). Resilience is the process and ability to successfully adapt to challenges or threatening conditions, and this successful adaptation prevents problematic behaviors in individuals and leads to a return to the original state and successful adjustment despite significant stress and adverse conditions (Darbani & Parsakia, 2023; Golparvar & Parsakia, 2023). Carbonell et al. (2015) showed in their research that individuals with

resilience reported higher levels of family cohesion, more effective communications, and fewer problems in family functioning, but those with low resilience had more issues and problems in family communications (Carbonell et al., 1998). The results of the research by Ahmaditabar et al. (2019) showed that with increased resilience in couples, marital adjustment also increased (Ahmaditabar et al., 2019).

Self-compassion is defined as a three-component construct consisting of self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification (Neff et al., 2007). Individuals with high self-compassion have better psychological health than those with little self-compassion because they do not perpetuate the inevitable pain and feeling of failure experienced by all individuals through ruthless self-blame, a sense of isolation, and over-identification with thoughts and emotions (Saeedi et al., 2013). In a study among Pakistani adults, a positive and significant relationship was found between self-compassion and marital adjustment. In this study, dimensions of self-compassion including self-kindness, self-judgment, and over-identification had the predictive power for marital adjustment (Bibi et al., 2017). Life's psychological stressors, including health-related stresses and financial problems, can disrupt marital adjustment (Timmons et al., 2017). Perceived stress is considered as a result of the mutual interaction between the individual and their surrounding environment (Rosmond, 2005). In a study conducted on couples undergoing infertility treatment in Tehran, the results showed that perceived stress had a negative and significant relationship with marital adjustment and its components (adjustment, couple cohesion, agreement, and affection expression) (Razavi & Salehiyan, 2022). Perceived stress negatively affects marital adjustment, and couples who perceive and experience life's stressful events negatively have less marital adjustment (Li & Wickrama, 2014). Perceived stress affects resilience and marital adjustment (Cihan & Var, 2023). Also, perceived stress experienced by individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected their marital adjustment and sexual life, and was effective in exposing them to spouse violence, in addition to reducing marital adjustment during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period (Aydin et al., 2023). In a study conducted by Izadi and Sajjadian (2017), with the goal of examining the relationship between marital adjustment and infertility-related stress, the mediating role of self-compassion and self-judgment was performed, showing a significant relationship between perceived stress and marital adjustment with the mediating

role of self-compassion (Izadi & Sajjadian, 2017). Psychological distress is a specific discomfort and emotional state experienced by individuals temporarily or permanently in response to specific stresses and harmful demands (Ridner, 2004). In addition to this, psychological distress includes unpleasant mental states of depression and anxiety, which have both emotional and physiological symptoms (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002). Study results indicate that psychological distress, as an emotional disorder, may affect individuals' social functioning and daily life (Wheaton, 2007). In a study conducted by Gongora and colleagues (2022) on individuals with advanced cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant negative relationship was found between psychological distress and resilience. In a study conducted during the coronavirus pandemic on healthcare workers, the results showed that resilience may protect workers from the negative consequences of chronic stress. Psychological resilience represents the process of good adjustment in the face of adversities (Serrão et al., 2021).

The results of the study by Yasin and Nasir (2016) indicated a significant relationship between psychological distress and resilience in rescue forces. They stated that resilience could be an important resource for reducing the level of psychological distress. Yildirim, Arslan, and Ozaslan (2020) examined the mediating role of resilience and fear of the coronavirus in the relationship between perceived stress and mental health problems among healthcare professionals, including doctors and nurses actively treating COVID-19 patients (Yildirim et al., 2022). The results showed that resilience negatively predicts mental health problems and should be considered in the face of stress during the coronavirus pandemic. Ozbay and colleagues (2007) in a review study considering the role of social support and resilience in facing stress examined the brain mechanisms in dealing with stress. They stated that resilience to stress is associated with the ability and capability to maintain optimal activity of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, the noradrenergic system, and the main oxytocin pathways during stress exposure and leads to ending the stress response against the stressor (Ozbay et al., 2007).

Considering the increase in marital problems and couple adjustment during the pandemic and the lack of research in this area and considering the protective role of resilience and self-compassion in most studies as a mediating variable, the present study seeks to answer the question of whether resilience and self-compassion mediate the relationship

between psychological distress and perceived stress with marital adjustment.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

The methodology used in this study was based on its objective to investigate the mediating role of resilience and self-compassion in the relationship between perceived stress and psychological distress with marital adjustment among individuals attending counseling centers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a descriptive-correlational study conducted through structural equation modeling. The study population included all individuals with marital conflicts attending private family counseling centers in Isfahan during the winter of 2021 who were willing to participate in the research and responded to the research questionnaires on psychological distress, marital adjustment, self-compassion, resilience, and perceived stress. Participants were assured that their responses would be analyzed collectively and that the information obtained from the questionnaires would remain confidential.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Psychological Distress

This scale, designed by Kessler et al. (2003), consists of 10 items that assess the mental state of patients over the past month. The responses range on a five-point scale (from "never" to "all the time"), scored from zero to four, with a maximum score of 40 (Kessler et al., 2003). Andrews and Slade (2001) confirmed the validity and reliability of this questionnaire (Andrews & Slade, 2001). Vaziri and Lotfi Kashani (2012) reported its Cronbach's alpha reliability at 0.83 (Vaziri & Lotfi, 2013). Yaqoubi (2015) confirmed its unidimensionality through confirmatory factor analysis in a study on 500 students, where the Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.93, and the Spearman-Brown reliability coefficient was 0.91 (Yaghobi, 2016). In the current study, the overall reliability of this questionnaire was determined as 0.95 based on Cronbach's alpha.

2.2.2. Marital Adjustment

This scale, developed by Spanier (1976), consists of 32 items intended to assess the compatibility of a couple (husband and wife). It features a Likert scale from 0 (always disagree) to 5 (always agree), with 0 representing "always

disagree" and 5 representing "always agree." This scale measures the quality of the marital relationship and factor analysis has shown that it assesses four dimensions: marital satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, dyadic consensus, and affection expression. Spanier developed this scale based on the differences in scores between compatible and incompatible couples, where the total score ranges from zero to 151, with scores above the mean (101) indicating greater compatibility and better relationships, and lower scores indicating less compatibility. Spanier (1976) achieved a Cronbach's alpha reliability of 0.96 and reported concurrent validity with the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Questionnaire at 0.86 for married individuals and 0.88 for divorced individuals (Spanier, 1976). In the current study, the overall reliability of this questionnaire was obtained as 0.85 based on Cronbach's alpha.

2.2.3. Resilience

This scale, developed by Connor and Davidson (2003), consists of 25 statements rated on a Likert scale from zero (completely false) to five (always true). The reliability of the questionnaire as reported by them was 0.89. In a study by Keyhani, Taghvaei, and Rajabi (2014), to achieve concurrent validity, the correlations between self-efficacy, aggression, and life satisfaction scores with resilience were considered. The results indicated a significant negative correlation between resilience and aggression and a significant positive correlation with self-efficacy and life satisfaction. The reliability of the questionnaire based on Cronbach's alpha was 0.87. In the study by Asadi and Jafari Roshan (2014), the validity and reliability of the Connor Resilience Scale were acceptable, and the Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was 0.88. Construct validity indicated five factors (Ghasem & Hosseinihari, 2012; Keyhani et al., 2015). In the current study, the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.89 based on Cronbach's alpha.

2.2.4. Perceived Stress

The COVID-19 Perceived Stress Scale was developed by Campo-Arias and colleagues (2020) and consists of 10 items rated on a Likert scale from never (0) to always (4). This questionnaire was designed to assess the level of perceived stress among individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia. Campo-Arias and colleagues reported the Cronbach's alpha for this scale between 0.65 and 0.86. Construct validity of this tool was calculated using exploratory factor analysis, and the results of the KMO

Bartlett's test were 0.82, identifying a single factor with an eigenvalue of 4.42 explaining 44.2% of the total variance (Campo-Arias et al., 2020). In the current study, the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.92 based on Cronbach's alpha.

2.2.5. Self-Compassion

The short form of the Self-Compassion Scale was used to measure self-compassion. This scale, created by Neff et al. (2011), consists of 12 items and features six two-facet factors: self-kindness, self-criticism, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. Respondents are to answer on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). Neff and colleagues reported the internal consistency of this scale as 0.86. The sub-scale of self-compassion includes self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, while the sub-scale of self-judgment includes self-criticism, isolation, and over-identification. The total score is the sum of all item scores. In a study by Shahbazi et al. (2015), the Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale score was 0.91. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the sub-scales of self-kindness, self-judgment, common human experiences, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification were reported respectively as 0.83, 0.87, 0.91, 0.88, 0.92, and 0.77, and both convergent and concurrent validity of this questionnaire were reported as favorable (Shahbazi et al., 2015). In the current study, the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.92 based on Cronbach's alpha.

2.3. Data Analysis

In this study, data collection was field-based, and sampling was conducted by visiting private psychology centers and clinics using a convenience sampling method, distributing 150 questionnaires that included resilience, self-compassion, perceived stress, psychological distress, and marital adjustment questionnaires. Participants were assured that all information would remain confidential and that the research results would be analyzed collectively. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 23 and PLS software packages.

3. Findings and Results

According to the results obtained, descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation and the correlation matrix of the research variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Marital Adjustment	Stress	Psychological Distress	Resilience
Marital Adjustment	102.49	19.86	-	-	-	-
Stress	19.22	7.13	-0.621**	-	-	-
Psychological Distress	15.83	9.35	-0.647**	0.702**	-	-
Resilience	87.87	19.2	0.769**	-0.768**	-0.733**	-
Self-Compassion	39.91	5.8	0.582**	-0.548**	-0.514**	0.631**

*p<0.05; **p<0.01

The results in Table 1 indicate that the mean scores for stress and psychological distress as predictor variables are respectively 19.22 and 15.83. The mean scores for marital adjustment as the criterion variable is 102.49, and for resilience and self-compassion as mediating variables are

respectively 87.87 and 39.91. The correlation matrix for the research variables showed significant internal correlations among most research variables ($p < .01$). Additionally, model fit indices are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Fit Indices for the Model Relating Perceived Stress and Psychological Distress with Marital Adjustment Considering the Mediating Role of Resilience and Self-Compassion

Index	Perceived Stress	Resilience	Marital Adjustment	Self-Compassion	Psychological Distress
Multiple Correlation Coefficient Squared	-	0.68	0.596	0.427	-
Adjusted Multiple Correlation Coefficient Squared	-	0.675	0.591	0.419	-
Composite Reliability	0.876	1.000	0.898	0.721	0.949
Cronbach's Alpha	0.783	1.000	0.848	0.705	0.941
Average Variance Extracted	0.542	1.000	0.688	0.508	0.652
Fornell-Larcker Criterion	0.736	1.000	0.829	0.614	0.808
VIF	2.11	2.07	-	2.07	2.11

As observed in Table 2, each of the indices for composite reliability and Cronbach's Alpha in the research variables is higher than 0.7, which is acceptable. Also, the average variance extracted for all variables is higher than 0.5. The discriminant validity index, or Fornell-Larcker Criterion, is also higher than the correlations among the variables in the model for all five variables. Thus, the measurement models are well-fitted. In examining the structural model fit, the

determination coefficient for resilience (0.68), marital adjustment (0.596), and self-compassion (0.427) indicates the percentage of variance in the dependent variable dependent on the independent variables, achieved respectively at 68%, 60%, and 43%. Additionally, the effect size for the variables resilience (0.359), marital adjustment (0.508), and self-compassion (0.145) was obtained. The collinearity index is also less than 2.5.

Table 3

Direct Effects of Model Variables

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Standardized Coefficient	Mean	Standard Error	T	Significance
Stress	Resilience	-0.517	-0.515	0.068	7.61	0.001
Stress	Self-Compassion	-0.418	-0.42	0.107	3.91	0.001
Resilience	Marital Adjustment	0.652	0.65	0.07	9.34	0.001
Compassion	Marital Adjustment	0.157	0.162	0.075	2.09	0.037
Psychological Distress	Resilience	-0.369	-0.373	0.068	5.4	0.001
Psychological Distress	Self-Compassion	-0.283	-0.29	0.11	2.56	0.011

Based on the results in Table 3 from the structural equation modeling, the impact of stress on resilience is significant (-0.517, $t=7.61$), stress on self-compassion (-0.418, $t=3.91$), resilience on marital adjustment (0.652, $t=9.34$), compassion on marital adjustment (0.157, $t=2.09$), psychological distress on resilience (-0.369, $t=5.4$), and

psychological distress on self-compassion (-0.283, $t=2.56$) ($p \leq 0.05$). The results suggest that with a reduction in perceived stress and psychological distress, both resilience and self-compassion increase. Similarly, with an increase in self-compassion and resilience, marital adjustment improves.

Table 4

Indirect Effects of Stress and Psychological Distress on Marital Adjustment through the Mediating Role of Resilience and Self-Compassion

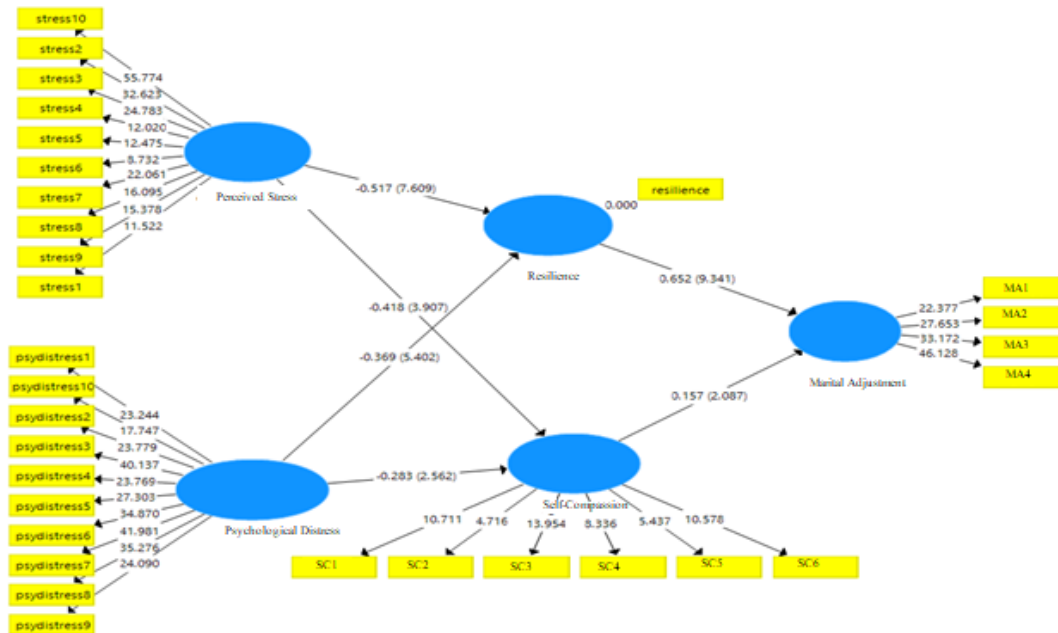
Independent Variable	Path	Mediating Variable	Coefficient	Mean	Standard Error	T	Significance	VAF
Stress	Marital Adjustment	Resilience	-0.396	-0.399	0.056	7.7	0.001	0.97
Psychological Distress	Marital Adjustment	Resilience	-0.281	-0.28	0.052	5.44	0.001	0.47
Stress	Marital Adjustment	Self-Compassion	-0.264	-0.269	0.065	4.07	0.001	0.09
Psychological Distress	Marital Adjustment	Self-Compassion	-0.177	-0.186	0.072	2.46	0.014	0.21

As observed in Table 4, the indirect effect of perceived stress on marital adjustment through resilience is significant (-0.396, $t=7.7$, $p<0.001$), and the variance accounted for (VAF) in the mediation of resilience between perceived stress and marital adjustment is 0.97, indicating a complete mediation role as it is greater than 0.8. Similarly, the indirect

effect of perceived stress on marital adjustment through self-compassion is significant (-0.264, $t=4.07$, $p<0.001$), with a VAF of 0.09, also indicating a complete mediation role since it is greater than 0.8. The structural equation modeling for the variables is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Model with Beta and T-Values



4. Discussion and Conclusion

Given that during the COVID-19 pandemic, most people's attention has been focused on the negative aspects of the disease and its significant impacts on life, paying attention to positive thoughts and emotions can greatly

influence individuals' mental, physical, and family health. Thus, this study was conducted with the aim of examining the mediating role of resilience and self-compassion in the relationship between perceived stress and psychological distress with marital adjustment among individuals visiting

counseling centers during the pandemic. Resilience and self-compassion have taken a special place in the realm of individual and family studies, and increasing levels of resilience and self-compassion in couples can likely reduce stress caused by the pandemic and improve marital adjustment.

The findings of the present study indicate the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between perceived stress and psychological distress with marital adjustment. These findings are consistent with the results of prior studies (Bibi et al., 2017; Izadi & Sajjadian, 2017). In explaining the mediating role of self-compassion among the research variables, it can be noted that self-compassion can serve as a psychological resource for coping with daily life challenges and obstacles (Dvořáková et al., 2019). When facing tough or stressful times, individuals who adopt a compassionate stance towards themselves might be better able to extend kindness, warmth, and validation to themselves to recover emotional balance (Ewert et al., 2021). These individuals, by adopting non-judgmental attitudes towards their own difficulties and normalizing their suffering through viewing it as a common human experience, may have greater flexibility to move past and recover from negative experiences (Bluth et al., 2018). Self-compassion can facilitate individuals in adapting to life's adversities and recover, ultimately enabling them to reframe adverse events as meaningful stimuli or opportunities for growth (Ferreira et al., 2021; Wong & Yeung, 2017). Self-compassion acts like a buffer against the effects of negative events and individuals with high self-compassion, as they are less harsh in judging themselves, accept life's negatives more easily, and their self-assessments and responses are more accurate and based on their actual performance rather than tending towards exaggerated self-criticism or defensive self-inflation. Research has shown that people with greater self-compassion are better able to maintain personal responsibility for negative life events and maladjustments while being kind to themselves, emphasizing self-acceptance and experiencing within the framework of kindness and mindfulness (Soysa & Wilcomb, 2015). Kindness to oneself involves understanding rather than judging oneself and providing support for one's own shortcomings and inefficiencies. Acknowledging that all humans are flawed, make mistakes, and engage in unhealthy behaviors is a hallmark of common human emotions. Mindfulness, as opposed to over-identification in self-compassion, leads to a balanced and clear awareness of present experiences, ensuring that painful aspects of an

experience are not overlooked and do not continually preoccupy the mind, thus reducing inner suffering, psychological distress, and improving marital adjustment among couples.

Regarding the mediating role of resilience among the research variables, the results align with the prior findings (Cihan & Var, 2023; Mihic-Gongora et al., 2022; Ozbay et al., 2007; Soysa & Wilcomb, 2015; Yasien et al., 2016; Yıldırım et al., 2022). In elucidating this finding, it can be noted that resilience, by affecting individual feelings and emotions, increases positivity, and consequently, satisfaction and adjustment in couples. In other words, reducing psychological and emotional problems, decreasing stress, and as a result, increasing adjustment. This finding indicates the importance of the precedence of changing emotions (emotional problems) over changing attitudes (adjustment). It might be said that changes in emotions could lead to a change in an individual's attitude about life and their surroundings. Resilient individuals, capable of organizing their daily responsibilities, are more adept at adapting to life changes and can develop and expand problem-solving skills, which support them in coping with challenging situations. These characteristics enable resilient individuals to have a high adaptability in marital life, thus effectively enabling couples to cope with stressful marital life conditions, reducing tension, dissatisfaction, and improving the fitness and health of couples, which in turn strengthens their marital adjustment.

Couples with high resilience, because they can communicate well with each other, use effective strategies such as problem-solving when needed, and can seek help from others or resources that can assist them in reducing problems, resulting in greater capability and less vulnerability. Moreover, there is cohesion, bonding, and intimacy among family members, allowing them to be together in tough times and support each other (Yasien et al., 2016; Yıldırım et al., 2022). Additionally, resilient individuals, with optimism, perseverance, self-respect, purposefulness, and good relationships with others, gain the ability to overcome life's challenges, withstand stress, and increase their adjustment level from married life (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983).

Ultimately, resilience and self-compassion are important capabilities for dealing with crises and stressful situations, and the family plays a significant role in shaping them (Ghasem & Hosseinchari, 2012). Therefore, resilience and self-compassion act like a vital nutritional source reducing psychological distress in marital relationships caused by the

COVID-19 pandemic and improving couples' adjustment to each other. Looking at another perspective, the presence of resilience and self-compassion in individuals is defined as successful resistance against threatening situations and challenges, and self-kindness towards circumstances, allowing individuals to reduce the adverse effects of chronic stress and tension during the COVID-19 era and maintain their mental health. An individual possessing resilience and self-compassion is resourceful and flexible, feels kindness and gentleness towards themselves, and ultimately adapts according to environmental changes, quickly returning to a state of recovery after the pressure factors are removed. In contrast, individuals at the lower end of the resilience spectrum (on the continuum of high to low resilience) adapt minimally to new situations, and they slowly recover from stressful situations to a normal and natural state (Cihan & Var, 2023; Mihic-Gongora et al., 2022). Finally, in couples with conflict, the more resilience and self-compassion increase as a supportive-motivational resource, the less perceived stress and psychological distress occur, providing the necessary conditions for marital adjustment. Therefore, it is necessary for specialists to specifically consider actions to enhance and improve these two variables to increase marital adjustment.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Among the limitations of this research, it can be noted that the sample was limited to couples visiting private counseling centers in Isfahan and within a specific time frame, caution must be exercised in generalizing the results to other communities and time periods. It is recommended that training courses be designed and utilized by specialists with training aimed at increasing resilience and self-compassion to increase marital adjustment among couples.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

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

Transparency Statement

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

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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