

# The Structural Model for Predicting Marital Burnout Based on Attachment Styles with the Mediating Role of Marital Self-Regulation and Marital Intimacy in Married Individuals

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The present study aimed to predict marital burnout in individuals married for 5 to 10 years based on attachment styles, with the mediating roles of marital self-regulation and marital intimacy.

**Methods and Materials:** This study was analytical-correlational in nature, employing path analysis. The sample consisted of 384 married individuals (164 men and 220 women) who were selected through convenience sampling. The participants were aged between 25 and 45, with a marriage duration of 5 to 10 years. Data were collected using validated questionnaires, including the Marital Burnout Scale (Kayser, 1996), the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990), the Behavioral Self-Regulation for Effective Relationships Scale (Wilson et al., 2005), and the Intimacy Scale (Walker & Thompson, 1983). SPSS and Amos software were used for data analysis, applying structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine direct and indirect effects.

**Findings:** The results indicated that marital self-regulation and intimacy mediated the relationship between attachment styles and marital burnout. Avoidant and anxious attachment styles positively predicted marital burnout, while secure attachment negatively predicted it. Additionally, self-regulation and intimacy were significant mediators, with higher levels of self-regulation and intimacy associated with lower marital burnout. Avoidant and anxious attachment styles negatively influenced self-regulation and intimacy, which in turn increased marital burnout.

**Conclusion:** The study concluded that attachment styles significantly impact marital burnout, with self-regulation and intimacy playing crucial mediating roles. Individuals with insecure attachment styles (avoidant and anxious) are more prone to marital burnout, whereas secure attachment leads to lower burnout. Interventions aimed at improving self-regulation and intimacy in couples may help mitigate the effects of insecure attachment styles on marital burnout.

**Keywords:** Marital Self-Regulation, Attachment, Marital Burnout, Marital Intimacy, Married Individuals.

## 1. Introduction

Marriage is generally recognized as a relatively stable relationship between a man and a woman, identified as husband and wife, which is established through a religious, social, and legal bond that creates mutual obligations between the couple (Jahan et al., 2017). Most people marry during their lifetime and seek marital satisfaction in their marriages. When marriages are stable and satisfying, spouses tend to be healthier, happier, and live longer. Marital happiness depends on spouse selection, and an ideal choice means that the spouse's temperament aligns with one's own and is emotionally compatible. Marital adjustment, as a subjective concept, is a significant indicator of quality of life, reflecting the perceived costs and benefits of marriage. Individuals are satisfied with their marriage when they feel the benefits outweigh the costs (Atapour & Darbani, 2024). One of the most important issues in couples' lives is marital burnout. Marital burnout results from the discrepancy between the realities and expectations of the spouses, and its severity depends on the couple's compatibility and beliefs (Babaei et al., 2024).

One of the most significant factors that cause dissatisfaction and communication problems in couples' relationships is attachment styles, which result in a lack of appropriate communication skills for establishing healthy, proper, and intimate interactions (Ghafourian Mohebbi & Karbalaee Mohammad Migouni, 2019). Attachment is a key framework for interpersonal functioning, adult attachment orientations, and corresponding mental representations of the self and others (internal working models) that are formed as a result of early social experiences. These mental representations are believed to be shaped by primary figures in life, such as parents, but they are also influenced by significant relationships, life partners, or even more abstract representations learned later in life (Gruda et al., 2024). According to attachment theory, a child's early interactions with their caregiver lead to the development of cognitive representations or "internal working models" about the self and others, which help guide the assessment of their own behaviors and expectations of others in close relationships (Marchand-Reilly, 2012). Disruption in the sense of attachment security leads to two attachment styles: anxious attachment (craving intimacy and fear of rejection and abandonment by the spouse) and avoidant attachment (beliefs rooted in distrust and emotional detachment from the spouse), which are risk factors for emotional problems (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Overall, 2019).

In this regard, research has shown that one of the significant factors influencing marital burnout and other variables related to marital life is early childhood experiences with parents. For example, Afshari et al. (2015) concluded that individuals with a secure attachment style, likely due to having a more positive perception of themselves and others and possessing fewer maladaptive schemas, exhibit more adaptive behaviors in marital relationships and, as a result, experience greater marital satisfaction. In contrast, individuals with ambivalent attachment styles have a negative self-image and more maladaptive schemas about themselves, leading to more maladaptive behaviors and lower marital satisfaction (Afshari et al., 2015).

The relationship between husband and wife is one of the most important close relationships in life. It seems that dissatisfaction in the marital relationship is harmful to both physical and mental health (Constant et al., 2020). The way couples interact through communication networks, which they use to engage with each other and with other family members, is a significant indicator of marital adjustment (Fatemi et al., 2016). Couples must manage a wide range of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and this requires marital self-regulation (Constant et al., 2020). Some studies have found a reciprocal relationship between self-regulation and marital relationships. Some researchers conceptualize self-regulation as an intrapsychic process, while others define it in the context of interpersonal and marital relationships (Girgždė et al., 2014). The goal of marital self-regulation is to improve individuals' relationships in the short and long term, and evidence suggests that couples with higher marital self-regulation are more stable, happier in their relationships, and communicate better with each other (Constant et al., 2020).

Among the factors influencing marital burnout, the level of marital intimacy in the relationship between husband and wife plays a decisive role (Minou Sepehr et al., 2022). Intimacy is the main motivation for forming a marital relationship and encompasses the degree of closeness and care that each spouse feels and expresses toward the other (Khodaadadi Sangdeh et al., 2016). Intimacy is a fundamental need that requires awareness, deep understanding, and acceptance. It also refers to closeness, similarity, and a loving relationship with another person. Intimacy in marital relationships is accompanied by emotional, affective, and social aspects, which are based on acceptance, satisfaction, and love (Hawrilenko et al., 2016).

By identifying the factors influencing marital satisfaction, effective steps can be taken to strengthen and stabilize the foundations of the family, and programs can be developed to reduce the issues and problems faced by married men and women. Overall, it appears that very few studies, both in Iran and abroad, have addressed the issue of marital burnout, highlighting the importance of focusing on this critical topic. In conclusion, based on previous findings and theoretical frameworks regarding marital burnout, the study aims to answer the question: Can marital burnout be predicted based on attachment styles, with the mediating role of marital self-regulation and marital intimacy?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research method was analytical-correlational, using path analysis. The statistical population of the present study included all married men and women who visited the Delphi Clinic in Tehran in 2023. Since structural equations generally require a minimum sample size of 300 to 400 participants, considering the possibility of sample dropout, 384 participants were selected through convenience sampling. The inclusion criteria for this study included ages 25 to 45, a marriage duration of 5 to 10 years, no simultaneous use of psychiatric medications or psychotherapy, and no chronic physical illnesses or hospitalizations in the past year.

For data collection, after obtaining permission from the Islamic Azad University and preparing the questionnaires online, a call for participation in the study was posted at the Delphi Clinic. All individuals interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher and responded to the questionnaires via an online link. Once the required number of participants was reached, the data were extracted and prepared for analysis.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Marital Burnout

The Marital Burnout Scale, developed by Kayser (1996), consists of 21 items scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "Does not apply to me at all" = 1 to "Completely applies to me" = 4. Kayser (1996) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.97 for this instrument. In this study, Kayser (1996) reported a negative correlation between marital burnout scores and the perceived marital happiness scale ( $r = -0.56$ ) and the marital intimacy scale ( $r = -0.86$ ),

indicating the divergent validity of this instrument. Sadati et al. (2014), in a sample of 300 teachers in Ahvaz, reported convergent validity by calculating the correlation with the "Marital Exhaustion Scale" at  $r = 0.54$ , and internal consistency reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79 for a sample of 300 teachers (Sadati et al., 2014).

#### 2.2.2. Behavioral Self-Regulation for Effective Relationships

The Behavioral Self-Regulation for Effective Relationships Scale, developed by Wilson et al. in 2005, consists of 16 items assessing two components: communication strategies (items 1-10) and communication engagement (items 11-16) on a 5-point Likert scale from "Completely true" = 5 to "Completely false" = 1. A higher score in communication self-regulation indicates better marital performance, while a lower score in communication engagement indicates better performance. The total score range for the questionnaire is 16 to 80, with communication self-regulation ranging from 10 to 50 and communication engagement ranging from 6 to 30. Wilson et al. (2005) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73 as a measure of internal consistency and reported convergent validity based on correlations between the dimensions of behavioral self-regulation and the dimensions of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (ranging from 0.27 to 0.65) and marital adjustment (ranging from 0.34 to 0.45). The scale was standardized in Iran by Eisa Nejad et al. (2017), who reported Cronbach's alphas of 0.88 and 0.83 for the communication strategies and engagement subscales, respectively. Using confirmatory factor analysis, they reported satisfactory construct validity for the two-factor model of this questionnaire (Eisa Nejad et al., 2017).

#### 2.2.3. Marital Intimacy

The Intimacy Scale, developed by Walker and Thompson in 1983, was designed to measure affection, self-sacrifice, contentment, and marital satisfaction. The scale includes 17 items scored on a 7-point Likert scale from "Never" = 1, "Rarely" = 2, "Sometimes" = 3, "Often" = 4, "Usually" = 5, "Almost always" = 6, and "Always" = 7. Walker and Thompson (1983) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.91 to 0.97 for this scale. Mohebi et al. (2014) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.97 for this instrument and reported its validity through a correlation of 0.88 with a general satisfaction question (Mohebi et al., 2014).

2.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential methods were used for data analysis. In the descriptive section, demographic information and indices such as mean and standard deviation were presented. In the inferential statistics section, after calculating Pearson's correlation coefficient and examining the assumptions of structural equation modeling (SEM), including normality of data distribution (assessed by skewness, kurtosis, and Mahalanobis distance), linearity of relationships (assessed by the scatter plot of standardized residuals), and multicollinearity (assessed by tolerance and variance inflation factor), the model fit was evaluated using fit indices such as chi-square, normed chi-square, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), maximum likelihood estimation, and beta regression coefficients using SPSS and Amos software.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, 164 participants (42.71%) were men and 220 participants (57.29%) were women. The age distribution

was as follows: 88 participants (22.92%) were aged 25 to 30, 32 participants (8.33%) were aged 31 to 35, 92 participants (23.96%) were aged 36 to 40, 60 participants (15.62%) were aged 41 to 45, 56 participants (14.58%) were aged 46 to 50, 16 participants (4.17%) were aged 51 to 55, and 4 participants (1.04%) were aged 56 to 60. The mean and standard deviation of participants' age were  $34.98 \pm 10.19$  years. Regarding education level, 48 participants (12.5%) had an associate degree, 280 participants (72.92%) had a bachelor's degree, 44 participants (11.46%) had a master's degree, and 12 participants (3.12%) had a doctoral degree. Additionally, 198 participants (51.56%) were employed, and 186 participants (48.44%) were unemployed. The length of marriage was as follows: 88 participants (22.92%) had been married for 5 years, 36 participants (9.38%) for 6 years, 42 participants (10.94%) for 7 years, 100 participants (26.04%) for 8 years, 60 participants (15.62%) for 9 years, and 58 participants (15.10%) for 10 years. The mean and standard deviation of the length of marriage were  $7.47 \pm 1.47$  years. In this study, 96 participants (25%) had no children, 92 participants (23.96%) had 1 child, 138 participants (35.93%) had 2 children, and 58 participants (15.10%) had more than 2 children.

Table 1

Correlation Matrix of Research Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Avoidant Attachment	-						
2. Secure Attachment	-.208**	-					
3. Anxious Attachment	.375**	-.272**	-				
4. Communication Strategies	-.379**	.318**	-.631**	-			
5. Communication Engagement	-.289**	.227**	-.620**	.816**	-		
6. Marital Intimacy	-.345**	.229**	-.709**	.861**	.898**	-	
7. Marital Burnout	.232**	-.162**	.426**	-.317**	-.389**	-.432**	-

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01

Table 1 shows that secure attachment style, communication strategies, communication engagement, and marital intimacy were negatively correlated with marital burnout at the 0.01 level. Avoidant and anxious attachment styles were positively correlated with marital burnout at the 0.01 level. Communication strategies, engagement, and

marital intimacy were positively correlated with secure attachment at the 0.01 level. Communication strategies, engagement, and marital intimacy were negatively correlated with avoidant and anxious attachment styles at the 0.01 level.

**Table 2**

*Fit Indices for the Structural Model Predicting Marital Burnout Based on Standardized Data*

Fit Indices	Structural Model
Chi-square	39.70
Degrees of freedom	5
Normed Chi-square	3.94
Goodness-of-fit index (GFI)	0.976
Adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI)	0.827
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.984
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.035

Table 2 shows that the structural model predicting marital burnout based on attachment styles, with the mediating roles of marital self-regulation and marital intimacy, in married

individuals with 5 to 10 years of marriage in Tehran, was well-fitted with the collected data.

**Table 3**

*Direct and Indirect Path Coefficients between Attachment Styles, Marital Self-Regulation, Marital Intimacy, and Marital Burnout*

Path	Predictor-Criterion Variables	Unstandardized Effect Estimate	Standard Error	Standardized Effect Estimate	p-value
<b>Direct Paths</b>					
Avoidant Attachment → Marital Burnout	0.497	0.117	0.380	0.010	
Secure Attachment → Marital Burnout	-0.398	0.077	-0.325	0.010	
Anxious Attachment → Marital Burnout	0.388	0.073	0.381	0.010	
Marital Intimacy → Marital Burnout	-0.288	0.094	-0.296	0.010	
Marital Self-Regulation → Marital Burnout	-0.486	0.084	-0.425	0.010	
Avoidant Attachment → Marital Intimacy	-0.498	0.097	-0.476	0.010	
Secure Attachment → Marital Intimacy	0.648	0.093	0.499	0.010	
Anxious Attachment → Marital Intimacy	-0.689	0.122	-0.664	0.010	
Avoidant Attachment → Marital Self-Regulation	-0.603	0.091	-0.550	0.010	
Secure Attachment → Marital Self-Regulation	0.486	0.097	0.427	0.010	
Anxious Attachment → Marital Self-Regulation	-0.690	0.092	-0.655	0.010	
<b>Indirect Paths</b>					
Avoidant Attachment → Marital Burnout (via Self-Regulation)	0.513	0.078	0.475	0.010	
Secure Attachment → Marital Burnout (via Self-Regulation)	-0.498	0.055	-0.329	0.010	
Anxious Attachment → Marital Burnout (via Self-Regulation)	0.718	0.055	0.374	0.010	

Table 3 shows:

Marital burnout was predicted based on avoidant attachment style in individuals married for 5 to 10 years ( $\beta = 0.380, P = 0.010$ ).

Marital burnout was negatively predicted based on secure attachment style in individuals married for 5 to 10 years ( $\beta = -0.325, P = 0.010$ ).

Marital burnout was also predicted based on anxious attachment style in this population ( $\beta = 0.381, P = 0.010$ ).

Avoidant attachment style predicted marital self-regulation ( $\beta = -0.343, P = 0.010$ ) and marital intimacy ( $\beta = -0.476, P = 0.010$ ) in individuals married for 5 to 10 years.

Secure attachment style predicted marital self-regulation ( $\beta = 0.412, P = 0.010$ ) and marital intimacy ( $\beta = 0.499, P = 0.010$ ).

Anxious attachment style predicted marital self-regulation ( $\beta = -0.634, P = 0.010$ ) and marital intimacy ( $\beta = -0.664, P = 0.010$ ).

Marital burnout was predicted based on marital self-regulation ( $\beta = -0.425, P = 0.010$ ) and marital intimacy ( $\beta = -0.296, P = 0.010$ ).

**Table 4**

*Sobel Test for Estimating the Mediating Role of Marital Self-Regulation and Marital Intimacy*

Path	Z-Statistic	p-value
Avoidant Attachment → Self-Regulation → Marital Burnout	3.87	0.001
Avoidant Attachment → Intimacy → Marital Burnout	2.73	0.006
Secure Attachment → Self-Regulation → Marital Burnout	-3.32	0.001
Secure Attachment → Intimacy → Marital Burnout	-2.71	0.006
Anxious Attachment → Self-Regulation → Marital Burnout	4.12	0.001
Anxious Attachment → Intimacy → Marital Burnout	2.72	0.006

Table 4 show:

Marital burnout in individuals married for 5 to 10 years is predicted based on avoidant ( $Z = 3.87, P = 0.001$ ), secure ( $Z = -3.32, P = 0.001$ ), and anxious ( $Z = 4.12, P = 0.001$ ) attachment styles, with the mediation of marital self-regulation.

Marital burnout in this population is also predicted based on avoidant ( $Z = 2.73, P = 0.006$ ), secure ( $Z = -2.71, P = 0.006$ ), and anxious ( $Z = 2.72, P = 0.006$ ) attachment styles, with the mediation of marital intimacy.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to predict marital burnout in individuals married for 5 to 10 years based on attachment styles, with the mediation of marital self-regulation and marital intimacy. The results showed that marital self-regulation and intimacy mediated the relationship between avoidant, secure, and anxious attachment styles and marital burnout. These findings are consistent with the prior results (Asadi et al., 2022; Barkhordari & Shahbazi, 2023; Barzegar Kahnemooi et al., 2022; Minou Sepehr et al., 2022; Okabayashi, 2020; Solt Petloo et al., 2022; Vollmann et al., 2019).

In explaining these findings, it can be stated that when an individual has a secure attachment style, they tend to solve issues that arise. Couples with secure attachment do not become alarmed when discovering their partner's flaws. If one spouse is somewhat upset, distressed, or disruptive, the other's reaction will not be extreme. This is because, although one spouse may not behave appropriately, they can still take care of themselves or even meet some of their partner's needs. In such situations, mutual understanding increases, leading to higher marital satisfaction and intimacy, while reducing burnout. Individuals with an

insecure anxious attachment style often fear rejection in relationships. They also tend to avoid getting too close to others and worry that their partner will not reciprocate their feelings, leading to a cold and distant relationship. In other words, the anxious individual's behavioral and personality traits negatively affect marital relationships. Their constant anxiety about rejection and emotional attachment, combined with a sense of threat regarding their spouse's fidelity, can cause psychological issues for their partner. By excessively controlling and clinging to their partner, they limit their partner's autonomy, which can lead to dissatisfaction and cooling of the relationship over time. It is predictable that such characteristics negatively impact marital satisfaction, contributing to marital burnout (Birami et al., 2012).

Individuals with avoidant attachment styles see themselves as self-sufficient. They tend to ignore their needs, feel vulnerable, and claim they do not need close relationships, thus avoiding intimacy. These individuals are often indecisive in romantic relationships, leading to marital burnout (Gillath et al., 2016). Generally, insecure individuals, when faced with marital conflicts, are more likely to involve a third party outside the marital relationship rather than resolving the issue logically. These individuals are often distressed and hold negative beliefs about stressful situations, such as fights and arguments, which increases stress and reduces their ability to cope with tensions, thereby lowering marital satisfaction and leading to burnout. Thus, having an insecure anxious or avoidant attachment style causes couples to view their romantic and relational experiences negatively, leading to negative attribution and ultimately lowering marital quality and increasing burnout. In contrast, individuals with secure attachment styles have a more positive view of themselves and others, experience deeper understanding in their marital relationships, enjoy

higher levels of interpersonal connection, and are less likely to experience marital burnout.

Self-regulation is a function of attachment style. When triggered by emotionally negative situations, it prompts the individual to seek out support sources. People often seek caregivers in times of need, yet they face significant challenges like self-regulation in relationships and stressful situations, which are related to their attachment styles (Mohammadi & Saber, 2018). According to Bowlby's attachment theory, individuals with secure attachment are stable in their relationships and thus have greater access to social support, self-confidence, and optimal self-regulation, which allows them to play a dynamic and active role in addressing their problems. On the other hand, individuals with insecure avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles have difficulty regulating their emotions, which causes them to struggle in maintaining communication and social support (Marchand-Reilly, 2012).

The level of intimacy in couples' relationships reflects how much they share their perceptions of themselves and their relationship with each other. The way each spouse expresses their closeness is largely influenced by the needs and expectations they developed in their family of origin, as well as factors like the couple's communication styles and the stage of their relationship. One way to understand family structure is to look at the communication networks through which family members, especially couples, interact (Fatemi et al., 2016). Overall, it can be said that having self-regulation in marital life can be a contributing factor to improving marital intimacy. Couples who use communication self-regulation tend to have happier and more stable relationships compared to others because this factor plays a more prominent role than other communication skills. Marital burnout and unhappy marital relationships are often the result of negative communication patterns. Communication among family members is always considered a key aspect of interpersonal relationships that contributes to the dynamics of family relationships. In other words, one way to look at family structure is to pay attention to the communication patterns that couples use to interact with each other.

## 5. Suggestions and Limitations

Although every study seeks to explore the relationships between factors and their impacts, it inherently comes with limitations. In the present study, a non-random sampling method was used, which may be prone to bias. It is

recommended that future studies use random sampling methods as much as possible when selecting participants. Given the relationship between attachment styles and marital burnout, and the mediating role of self-regulation and intimacy, it is suggested that family counselors and psychologists pay attention to these variables in premarital and couples' interventions to prevent relationship issues.

## 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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