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Exploring Communication Breakdowns in Marriages Affected by Emotional Neglect

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of communication breakdowns in marital relationships affected by emotional neglect.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 21 adult participants (12 women and 9 men) residing in Bulgaria. Participants were purposively selected based on self-reported experiences of emotional neglect in current or past marriages of at least five years. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework to identify recurring patterns related to emotional neglect and communication dynamics.

Findings: Four major themes emerged from the data: emotional unavailability, ineffective communication patterns, psychosocial impact of neglect, and barriers to reconnection. Participants consistently reported emotional detachment, disengaged listening, and suppression of emotional expression as core aspects of emotional neglect. Communication breakdowns included verbal withdrawal, misinterpretation of intent, and conflict escalation. Emotional neglect was linked to psychological consequences such as self-blame, isolation, diminished self-esteem, and hopelessness about the relationship. Fear of vulnerability, lack of emotional skills, and cultural norms emerged as key barriers to emotional repair. The results highlight emotional neglect as a relational process that undermines emotional safety and communicative trust.

Conclusion: Emotional neglect in marriage is a pervasive and underrecognized dynamic that contributes significantly to communication breakdowns and psychological distress. This study underscores the importance of identifying emotional neglect in therapeutic settings and developing interventions that focus on emotional literacy, attunement, and trust-building.

Keywords: *Emotional neglect; Marital communication; Qualitative research; Relationship breakdown; Emotional intimacy*

1 Introduction

Marital relationships, by their very nature, are built on a foundation of emotional exchange, mutual understanding, and reciprocal communication. When these emotional processes are disrupted—particularly through chronic neglect—the relational structure may deteriorate silently and profoundly. Emotional neglect, a subtle but damaging form of relational disconnection, refers to the consistent failure of one partner to respond adequately to the emotional needs of the other. Unlike overt abuse, emotional neglect often operates in quiet, invisible ways, yet it leaves behind profound psychological and interpersonal consequences (Bharati & Daka, 2025; Shafique et al., 2025). In marriages, where ongoing emotional reciprocity is crucial to satisfaction and longevity, such neglect can result in persistent communication breakdowns, relational dissatisfaction, and, ultimately, emotional withdrawal and dissolution.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the pervasiveness and underreporting of emotional neglect in intimate relationships, often due to its non-physical, ambiguous presentation (Shafique et al., 2025; Venugopal & Rastogi, 2024). One partner may withdraw emotionally, avoid deep conversations, ignore emotional bids, or display indifference in moments that require empathy or support. Over time, this chronic lack of emotional attunement can lead the neglected partner to internalize feelings of unworthiness, loneliness, and disconnection, creating a feedback loop of emotional silence and frustration (Lin et al., 2024; Nart & Erinç, 2024). The existing literature points to emotional neglect not only as a precursor to marital distress but also as a key determinant in reduced communication frequency, emotional avoidance, and eventual emotional divorce (Mehmood et al., 2025; Xu, 2023).

The psychological ramifications of emotional neglect within marriage are vast. Studies link chronic neglect with depressive symptoms, lowered self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, and impaired relational functioning (Huzaimah et al., 2023; Paola et al., 2022; Sarhammami et al., 2024). For instance, individuals experiencing emotional neglect often report increased psychological vulnerability, particularly when they lack the emotional intelligence or social resources to interpret or respond to neglectful patterns in constructive ways (Sarhammami et al., 2024). Moreover, the neglect often undermines attachment security and exacerbates sensitivity to rejection, further impairing partners' ability to express needs or assert relational boundaries. In such contexts, communication becomes not only strained but also inherently unsafe, and many individuals resort to suppression or disengagement as coping mechanisms (Avneesh Kumar & Apeksha, 2024; Venugopal & Rastogi, 2024).

Communication in emotionally neglectful marriages typically breaks down through both overt and covert patterns. Couples may cease engaging in emotionally intimate dialogue, rely on functional or surface-level exchanges, and exhibit misattunement during emotionally charged interactions (Bharati & Daka, 2025; Muthamsetty Lakshmana Siva, 2025). These patterns are often perpetuated by unspoken rules of emotional silence, internalized from earlier developmental contexts or reinforced through repeated relational failure. In some cases, as scholars have noted, individuals who were exposed to emotional neglect in childhood may reenact or tolerate similar dynamics in adulthood, having normalized emotional unavailability as part of intimate relating (Tao, 2022; Trang & Ngọc, 2024). This intergenerational continuity suggests that childhood experiences of neglect, trauma, or emotional suppression may impair later capacity for emotional intimacy, conflict resolution, and authentic expression in marital contexts (Nart & Erinç, 2024; Zhou & Zhou, 2023).

The consequences of such breakdowns are not confined to the psychological health of the individual but extend to the relational climate and family system at large. Marriages affected by emotional neglect often exhibit dysfunctional communication cycles marked by avoidance, hostility, or misinterpretation of intent (Corneo, 2025; Taplak & Yılmaz, 2022). Furthermore, when neglected partners attempt to restore emotional closeness, they may be met with defensiveness or stonewalling, further discouraging vulnerability and trust. This pattern becomes a self-perpetuating loop in which silence begets silence, gradually eroding the emotional architecture of the marriage (Đerlek, 2023; Musyrifin & Hanifah, 2022). In extreme cases, prolonged emotional neglect can lead to forms of silent separation, where spouses continue to cohabit but operate as emotionally disconnected individuals—an experience often described by participants as "being married but alone."

Social and cultural shifts have further complicated emotional communication in marriages. In particular, digital saturation, shifting gender expectations, and work–life imbalances have been identified as contributors to emotional distance between spouses (Kumar, 2023; Mehmood et al., 2025). The use of digital technologies has sometimes fostered distraction or avoidance rather than emotional

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engagement, while changing norms around emotional expression and mental health have not always been internalized by both partners equally. Moreover, in many socio-cultural contexts, emotional literacy remains underdeveloped, and partners may lack the language or tools to articulate their needs, respond empathetically, or resolve conflict constructively (Iwan et al., 2024; Muthamsetty Lakshmana Siva, 2025). These cultural, generational, and educational gaps create asymmetries in emotional competence, which further obstruct communication.

While studies on early marriage and polygamous dynamics have shown how structural inequalities or power asymmetries can reinforce emotional neglect, especially for women and marginalized individuals (Buhari et al., 2024; Kombat et al., 2023; Suardi & Fida, 2023), fewer investigations have focused on long-term monogamous marriages and the specific communicative patterns that arise in emotionally neglectful unions. In particular, the silent suffering experienced by many spouses in such relationships remains under-theorized and under-documented. Prior research has explored the psychological impact of neglect and the outcomes of marital distress, but there is a noticeable gap in understanding the lived experiences of communication breakdowns as a central mechanism linking emotional neglect with relational dissatisfaction (Lin et al., 2024; Trang & Ngọc, 2024).

Furthermore, emerging scholarship has begun to recognize that emotional neglect is not merely the absence of warmth but a form of active emotional deprivation that can have similar effects to emotional abuse (Sarhammami et al., 2024; Shafique et al., 2025). In this view, neglect is a relational act of omission that erodes the partner's emotional security and damages the quality of dyadic interaction. Indeed, emotional neglect and emotional abuse often coexist or alternate in cyclical patterns, reinforcing dysfunctional communication behaviors and further destabilizing the marriage (Huzaimah et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2024). However, while emotional abuse tends to be more visible and acknowledged, emotional neglect often remains unaddressed due to its subtlety and the cultural tendency to downplay its seriousness.

Informed by this growing body of literature, the present study aims to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of communication breakdowns in marriages affected by emotional neglect.

2 Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design using a constructivist paradigm to explore communication breakdowns in marriages affected by emotional neglect. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who self-identified as having experienced emotional neglect within their marital relationships. The final sample included 21 adult participants (12 women and 9 men) residing in various urban and suburban areas of Bulgaria. Eligibility criteria required participants to be currently or previously married for a minimum of five years and to report ongoing or historical experiences of emotional neglect. Recruitment occurred through referrals from counseling centers, online support forums, and social media outreach. The sample size was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation, which was achieved when no new themes emerged from the interview data.

2.2 Measure

2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between February and May 2025. The interviews were guided by an open-ended question protocol designed to explore participants' perceptions, emotional experiences, and communicative dynamics within their marital relationships. Questions focused on themes such as the expression and reception of emotional needs, conflict resolution, and perceived silence or disconnection in the marriage. Interviews were conducted in person or via secure video calls, depending on participants' preferences and geographical accessibility. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. All participants were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

2.3 Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data coding and analysis were facilitated using NVivo qualitative analysis software (version 14). Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, followed by a process of pattern recognition, theme development, and refinement. The research team engaged in reflexive discussions throughout the analysis to ensure consistency and credibility. To

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enhance trustworthiness, member checking was performed with five randomly selected participants, and peer debriefing was conducted among qualitative researchers unaffiliated with the project.

3 Findings and Results

The study included 21 participants (12 women and 9 men) ranging in age from 31 to 58 years (M = 43.6). Most participants (n = 17) were currently married, while the remaining four (n = 4) were recently divorced or separated within the past two years. The majority identified as ethnically Bulgarian (n = 19), with two participants (n = 2) identifying as members of ethnic minority groups. In terms of education, 7 participants held a university degree, 9 had completed secondary education, and 5 had vocational or technical training. Regarding employment status, 13 participants were employed full-time, 4 were self-employed, 2 were unemployed, and 2 were homemakers. The average length of the participants' marriages was 14.2 years, with a range from 6 to 29 years. All participants reported experiencing emotional neglect within their marital relationship as a core criterion for inclusion.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts Related to Communication Breakdowns in Emotionally Neglectful Marriages

Main Theme (Category)	Subtheme (Subcategory)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Unavailability	Withholding Emotional Support	Lack of empathy, avoidance of vulnerability, absence of comfort, dismissing emotional expression
	Inconsistent Responsiveness	Ignoring emotional cues, delayed replies, prioritizing tasks over spouse, unpredictability in affection
	Emotional Detachment	Absence of shared joy, lack of eye contact, no physical closeness, silences in conflict, no emotional check-ins
	Suppressed Emotional Expression	Fear of expressing needs, minimization of feelings, internalization, emotional numbness
	Low Emotional Intimacy	No deep conversations, surface-level dialogue, absence of emotional bonding, loneliness in presence
	Disengaged Listening	Passive responses, distracted attention, interrupting, looking away, non-verbal indifference
	Avoidance of Conflict Resolution	Escaping discussions, changing subjects, emotional shutdown, fear of confrontation
2. Ineffective Communication Patterns	Misinterpretation of Intentions	Reading negativity into neutral remarks, assuming criticism, hypersensitivity, sarcasm misunderstood
	Frequent Miscommunication	Incomplete messages, poor timing, vague language, contradiction, assumptions, non-clarified meanings
	One-Sided Conversations	Monologues, dominance in talk, lack of turn-taking, passive silence
	Escalation During Disagreements	Raised voices, blaming, rehashing past, emotional flooding, threats
	Verbal Withdrawal	Stonewalling, muteness, silence as punishment, evading interaction
3. Psychosocial Impact of Emotional Neglect	Emotional Distress	Anxiety, sadness, insecurity, rejection sensitivity, grief, emotional exhaustion
	Self-Blame and Doubt	Internalizing problems, guilt, negative self-talk, second-guessing, shame
	Isolation and Loneliness	Feeling abandoned, emotional invisibility, disconnection, alienation
	Diminished Self-Esteem	Feeling unworthy, lack of affirmation, body image issues, reduced confidence
	Hopelessness About Relationship	Feeling stuck, contemplating divorce, absence of change, giving up emotionally
4. Barriers to Reconnection and Repair	Fear of Vulnerability	Risk of rejection, emotional exposure anxiety, distrust, embarrassment
	Lack of Communication Skills	Inability to express needs, difficulty in listening, no model of healthy talk, awkwardness
	Unmet Expectations	Disillusionment, idealized marriage shattered, feelings of betrayal, imbalance of effort
	Absence of Shared Meaning	Different emotional languages, unshared values, drifting apart, no common narrative
	Resistance to Change	Denial, minimizing issues, habitual behavior, learned helplessness
	Emotional Burnout	Exhaustion from trying, feeling numb, detachment as coping, loss of motivation to engage

Theme 1: Emotional Unavailability

Withholding Emotional Support. Participants frequently described their spouses as emotionally absent,

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particularly during moments of distress. The absence of comfort, empathy, or emotional validation emerged as a core pattern. One participant stated, *"When I cried, he just looked at me like I was speaking another language. He never asked what was wrong."* Others noted that even mild expressions of need were met with indifference or dismissal.

Inconsistent Responsiveness. Emotional neglect often manifested through unpredictable attention and care. Participants shared that their partners were selectively responsive, sometimes affectionate but often emotionally unavailable. *"Sometimes she'd be warm, but most days it felt like I didn't exist,"* one interviewee explained. Such inconsistency contributed to chronic emotional insecurity within the marriage.

Emotional Detachment. Many participants characterized their relationships as emotionally hollow, marked by a lack of shared joy, physical closeness, or affective reciprocity. *"We live in the same house but in different worlds,"* one participant described. Eye contact, spontaneous affection, and emotional check-ins were rarely present, resulting in a profound sense of distance.

Suppressed Emotional Expression. A recurring theme was the suppression of emotional needs due to fear of invalidation or conflict. Several participants spoke about censoring themselves. *"I learned not to say anything because every time I did, it became a fight or I was told I was too sensitive."* Over time, this suppression led to emotional numbness and disconnection.

Low Emotional Intimacy. Conversations were described as functional rather than emotionally meaningful. Participants reported a lack of deep dialogue or emotional bonding. One woman shared, *"We talk about bills, kids, and groceries—but never about us."* This absence of intimacy often fostered loneliness even in the presence of the partner.

Disengaged Listening. Spouses were frequently described as inattentive listeners. Participants recounted instances of being interrupted, ignored, or met with blank stares. *"He'd be on his phone while I'm pouring my heart out,"* noted one respondent. The lack of active listening deepened feelings of emotional abandonment.

Avoidance of Conflict Resolution. Several participants identified emotional neglect as being closely tied to conflict avoidance. Rather than confronting issues, spouses would disengage, often walking away or changing the subject. *"Whenever I brought up a concern, he'd just say, 'not now,' and leave the room,"* one participant reported.

Theme 2: Ineffective Communication Patterns

Misinterpretation of Intentions. Participants revealed that many of their attempts at communication were misread or twisted, leading to defensiveness or conflict. *"I'd ask a simple question, and she'd accuse me of attacking her,"* said one husband. Misreading neutral statements as criticism was common, contributing to escalating tension.

Frequent Miscommunication. Participants described a pattern of unclear, incomplete, or confusing exchanges. This often included vague language, poor timing, or contradictory statements. *"I never knew what she really meant—it was like guessing in the dark,"* one man explained. These breakdowns fueled misunderstandings and unresolved frustrations.

One-Sided Conversations. Many interviews highlighted unbalanced dialogue, where one partner dominated conversations or the other remained silent. One participant remarked, *"It was like talking to a wall. I'd speak, and all I got back was silence."* Others shared the exhaustion of carrying conversations alone.

Escalation During Disagreements. Participants recounted that when conflict did arise, it often escalated quickly due to poor regulation and blaming. *"He'd bring up things from years ago and yell—I just shut down,"* one woman noted. Rather than resolution, disagreements often led to emotional harm and withdrawal.

Verbal Withdrawal. A prominent communication pattern involved stonewalling and emotional shut-off. Spouses would go silent for hours or days. *"She wouldn't speak to me after a disagreement—just silence, cold and heavy,"* one man recalled. This behavior was interpreted as punishment and further alienated participants.

Theme 3: Psychosocial Impact of Emotional Neglect

Emotional Distress. Participants frequently expressed ongoing emotional pain, anxiety, and feelings of rejection as a result of neglect. *"I was always walking on eggshells—scared, sad, unsure if I mattered,"* described one respondent. The chronic absence of emotional connection left individuals feeling psychologically unsafe.

Self-Blame and Doubt. Many internalized the neglect, believing they were the cause of the emotional void. *"I thought maybe I wasn't good enough, maybe I was too needy,"* said one woman. Feelings of guilt and shame were pervasive and often shaped their self-concept.

Isolation and Loneliness. A dominant experience was that of emotional solitude despite cohabitation. *"It felt lonelier than being alone—because I knew someone was there, but I couldn't reach them,"* one participant reflected.

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Emotional invisibility became a painful theme in their narratives.

Diminished Self-Esteem. A number of participants reported a gradual erosion of self-worth. They described feeling unattractive, irrelevant, or unvalued. *"He never complimented me or showed interest—I stopped believing I was desirable,"* noted one participant.

Hopelessness About Relationship. As neglect persisted, many lost hope in the potential for marital repair. *"I started to think this was it—just surviving, not living,"* one respondent said. Several participants had contemplated separation or emotional disengagement as a coping mechanism.

Theme 4: Barriers to Reconnection and Repair

Fear of Vulnerability. Despite a desire for intimacy, many participants hesitated to open up due to fear of rejection or past hurt. *"I wanted to say how much I missed him, but I was terrified he'd mock me or ignore me,"* shared one woman. This fear often kept partners emotionally distant.

Lack of Communication Skills. Participants acknowledged that both they and their spouses lacked the tools for effective emotional dialogue. *"We never learned how to talk about feelings—our families didn't either,"* one man noted. This skill deficit hindered any attempts at reconnection.

Unmet Expectations. Several participants spoke about the disillusionment that followed idealized marital expectations. *"I thought we'd be partners, emotionally close. But that dream faded quickly,"* expressed one interviewee. The discrepancy between hopes and reality bred resentment.

Absence of Shared Meaning. Emotional disconnection was also rooted in divergent values, languages of love, or life narratives. *"We didn't see the world the same way anymore—it was like our stories no longer fit,"* one participant observed. This lack of shared meaning weakened the relational foundation.

Resistance to Change. Efforts to repair the relationship were often met with denial or deflection. *"He'd say, 'you're exaggerating' or 'you're too emotional' every time I brought it up,"* reported one woman. Such defensiveness made relational growth unlikely.

Emotional Burnout. Finally, many participants admitted to feeling emotionally drained from years of trying. *"I gave it everything—talks, therapy, patience—but I had nothing left,"* said one participant. This state of burnout often marked the end of active engagement in the relationship.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and multilayered ways in which emotional neglect contributes to communication breakdowns in marital relationships. Participants consistently described a relational environment marked by emotional unavailability, ineffective communication, psychological distress, and significant barriers to emotional reconnection. These patterns were not isolated incidents but part of enduring dynamics, shaped by both personal histories and relational contexts. Emotional neglect emerged not merely as the absence of overt abuse, but as a persistent relational condition in which partners' emotional needs were unmet, invalidated, or dismissed—leading to growing emotional distance and communicative dysfunction.

One of the most salient themes in the data was emotional unavailability, characterized by emotional detachment, disengaged listening, and the suppression of emotional expression. Participants often felt invisible or emotionally irrelevant within the marriage, a finding consistent with existing literature that conceptualizes emotional neglect as a silent relational trauma (Bharati & Daka, 2025; Shafique et al., 2025). These narratives echo studies showing that neglect often presents as chronic disconnection, where a partner may be physically present but emotionally absent (Venugopal & Rastogi, 2024; Xu, 2023). This withdrawal undermines emotional safety, which is critical for relational intimacy, and it inhibits the vulnerable dialogue necessary for resolving conflict or building emotional closeness (Sarhammami et al., 2024).

The study also identified patterns of ineffective communication, particularly around misinterpretation of intentions, verbal withdrawal, and frequent escalation of minor disagreements. These dysfunctional interactions were not just communication problems in isolation but deeply entangled with emotional neglect. For instance, many participants described how emotionally disengaged partners would misread emotional cues as criticism or complaints, resulting in defensiveness or silence. These findings align with prior research highlighting the relational consequences of unmet emotional needs, such as conflict avoidance and stonewalling behaviors (Lin et al., 2024; Nart & Erinç, 2024). Emotional misattunement not only limits the potential for meaningful conversation but also causes further frustration and emotional exhaustion—ultimately reinforcing the very neglect that fuels the breakdown.

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The psychosocial consequences of emotional neglect revealed in this study were significant. Participants described profound emotional distress, including sadness, anxiety, self-blame, and feelings of worthlessness. These psychological outcomes are consistent with existing literature showing that emotional neglect is associated with depression, diminished self-esteem, and impaired interpersonal trust (Huzaimah et al., 2023; Paola et al., 2022; Shafique et al., 2025). Several participants internalized the neglect as a reflection of their inadequacy, a pattern that has been well-documented among survivors of neglect and trauma (Sarhammami et al., 2024; Zhou & Zhou, 2023). Over time, these individuals reported feeling "emotionally numb" or "burned out," which further inhibited their willingness or ability to repair the relationship.

Another core theme centered on barriers to reconnection, which included fear of vulnerability, lack of communication skills, resistance to change, and an absence of shared emotional meaning. Even when participants desired emotional closeness, many feared that expressing such needs would be met with rejection or ridicule. This anticipatory fear aligns with research showing that emotional neglect can damage relational confidence and increase fear of emotional exposure (Avneesh Kumar & Apeksha, 2024; Trang & Ngọc, 2024). A recurring narrative was that of partners growing emotionally apart without realizing how far the disconnection had progressed. These findings resonate with prior studies noting that emotional neglect often leads to a slow, silent dissolution of emotional intimacy—what some scholars describe as "being together but emotionally alone" (Đerlek, 2023; Muthamsetty Lakshmana Siva, 2025).

Moreover, participants identified cultural and generational factors as playing a role in their experiences. For some, emotionally neglectful patterns were modeled in their families of origin, where emotional expression was discouraged or stigmatized. Others noted that gendered expectations within their cultural context—such as the notion that men should be stoic and emotionally reserved—further reinforced neglectful behaviors. These findings are consistent with research on the intergenerational transmission of emotional norms and the cultural framing of emotional labor within marriage (Iwan et al., 2024; Tao, 2022). For example, emotional neglect was often normalized among participants' parents or communities, making it difficult for some to recognize or label the problem in their own marriages.

In some cases, emotional neglect co-occurred with other relational stressors, including early marriage, financial pressures, or shifting gender roles. While this study focused specifically on emotional neglect, several participants described how structural stressors exacerbated communication breakdowns. For instance, in contexts of early or forced marriage, emotional intimacy was often underdeveloped, and partners lacked the maturity or emotional literacy to navigate relational complexities (Kombat et al., 2023; Suardi & Fida, 2023; Taplak & Yılmaz, 2022). These narratives underscore the importance of contextualizing emotional neglect within broader relational and societal structures (Buhari et al., 2024; Musyrifin & Hanifah, 2022).

Furthermore, the role of digital technology and social media emerged in participants' accounts as a modern influence on communication quality. Some described how their partners used digital distractions to avoid emotional engagement or escape difficult conversations. This echoes recent findings on the negative relationship between excessive media use and interpersonal connection among married individuals (Mehmood et al., 2025). While technology can offer avenues for connection, in emotionally neglectful relationships it often served as an instrument of avoidance—reducing opportunities for face-to-face dialogue and reinforcing emotional distance.

Importantly, the results of this study offer support for the growing scholarly consensus that emotional neglect is a distinct and serious threat to marital well-being. Unlike physical violence or explicit verbal abuse, emotional neglect is subtle and often overlooked, both by partners and by professionals. Yet its long-term impact can be equally damaging, particularly when it disrupts fundamental processes such as emotional attunement, validation, and mutual regulation (Sarhammami et al., 2024; Shafique et al., 2025; Venugopal & Rastogi, 2024). By documenting the lived experience of communication breakdown in neglectful marriages, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how emotional silence can erode relational stability and individual well-being.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the sample was limited to individuals residing in Bulgaria, which may constrain the cultural generalizability of the findings. While the study sought to explore universal emotional processes, cultural norms regarding emotional expression, gender roles, and marriage may differ significantly across societies. Second, the study focused solely on participants who identified themselves as emotionally neglected; perspectives from the other partner in the marriage were not collected, which may limit the

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comprehensiveness of the relational picture. Additionally, while thematic saturation was reached, the qualitative nature of the research does not allow for causal inferences, nor does it quantify the prevalence of specific patterns across the general population.

Future studies could expand the scope of inquiry by incorporating dyadic interviews or longitudinal designs to better understand how emotional neglect develops and changes over time. Including both partners in the data collection process may reveal discrepancies in perception, motivations behind emotionally neglectful behavior, and relational blind spots. It would also be valuable to investigate the role of resilience factors—such as emotional intelligence, mindfulness, or therapeutic intervention—in mitigating the impact of emotional neglect on communication. Cross-cultural studies are recommended to explore how emotional neglect manifests in different sociocultural environments, especially in collectivist versus individualist contexts. Finally, examining emotional neglect in diverse marriage types—such as LGBTQ+ partnerships, arranged marriages, or polygamous unions—would help to extend the findings beyond the traditional monogamous framework.

Given the pervasive and silent nature of emotional neglect, clinicians and marriage counselors must be trained to identify its subtle signs and integrate emotion-focused approaches into therapy. Couples therapy should prioritize emotional literacy, validation, and attunement, offering partners concrete strategies for recognizing and responding to each other's emotional needs. Psychoeducational programs aimed at newlyweds and parents could focus on the long-term importance of emotional engagement and the risks of emotional withdrawal. Additionally, public awareness campaigns and premarital counseling initiatives should include modules on healthy emotional communication, challenging harmful gender norms that equate emotional expression with weakness or irrelevance. Cultivating a societal environment that normalizes vulnerability and affirms emotional connection may ultimately reduce the incidence and severity of emotional neglect in marital relationships.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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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Ethics 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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