




# The Mediating Role of Forgiveness and Marital Self-Regulation in the Relationship Between Experiential Avoidance and Marital Burnout in Married Women

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to investigate the mediating roles of forgiveness and marital self-regulation in the relationship between experiential avoidance and marital burnout among married women.

**Methods and Materials:** The research employed an applied, descriptive-correlational design. The statistical population consisted of married women in Tehran with 5–15 years of marital life who had not remarried and voluntarily agreed to participate. Using convenience sampling, 300 participants were recruited from counseling centers. The instruments included the Marital Burnout Questionnaire (Pines, 1996), the Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (Gámez et al., 2011), the Marital Self-Regulation Scale (Wilson et al., 2009), and the Family Forgiveness Scale (Pollard et al., 1998). After eliminating invalid responses, data were analyzed using Pearson correlation coefficients and structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation in AMOS 26.

**Findings:** Experiential avoidance was found to be a positive and significant predictor of marital burnout. However, forgiveness and marital self-regulation significantly and negatively mediated this relationship. The direct path between experiential avoidance and marital burnout was nonsignificant ( $\beta = .123$ ,  $p = .069$ ), while the indirect effects through forgiveness ( $\beta = .137$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and marital self-regulation ( $\beta = .188$ ,  $p = .001$ ) were both positive and significant. The total effect of experiential avoidance on marital burnout ( $\beta = .447$ ,  $p = .001$ ) indicated a substantial contribution, with the overall model explaining 52% of the variance in marital burnout. Model fit indices demonstrated acceptable fit ( $\chi^2/df = 2.74$ ,  $GFI = .921$ ,  $CFI = .945$ ,  $RMSEA = .076$ ).

**Conclusion:** The findings highlight that forgiveness and marital self-regulation act as protective mechanisms that mitigate the negative impact of experiential avoidance on marital burnout.

**Keywords:** marital burnout, experiential avoidance, forgiveness, self-regulation

## 1. Introduction

Marital relationships constitute one of the most significant domains of human life, exerting profound influences on psychological well-being, social stability, and family cohesion. The quality of marriage not only affects the health of partners but also has long-term implications for children's adjustment and broader community functioning (Dollahite et al., 2019; Walsh, 2019). Despite its central role, marriage is increasingly threatened by relational stressors, communication problems, and psychological vulnerabilities that may lead to marital dissatisfaction and eventually to marital burnout (Hosseini et al., 2024; Nazeran et al., 2023). Marital burnout, defined as a state of emotional, psychological, and physical exhaustion resulting from chronic relational strain, has emerged as a central concern in family psychology (Dehghan et al., 2018; Elmimanesh & Zhaleh, 2018). Understanding its antecedents and protective mechanisms is therefore critical for both theory and practice.

One of the central risk factors linked to marital burnout is experiential avoidance—a psychological construct denoting the unwillingness to remain in contact with unwanted internal experiences, such as emotions, memories, or bodily sensations, and the efforts to alter or escape from them (Roush et al., 2019; Seçer & Ulaş, 2021). Experiential avoidance has been found to exacerbate maladaptive coping strategies, interpersonal withdrawal, and cognitive fusion, thereby reducing emotional availability and communication quality in intimate relationships (Sultanali Zadeh et al., 2019; Yousefi et al., 2018). Studies indicate that individuals with high experiential avoidance are more vulnerable to relational dissatisfaction and boredom, as they are less able to tolerate negative affect and engage in constructive conflict resolution (Karimi et al., 2019; Moradi et al., 2017). This aligns with broader evidence suggesting that avoidance processes not only maintain psychopathology but also undermine relational bonds and increase the risk of separation or divorce (Neal & Lemay, 2019).

Another critical variable in the dynamics of marital burnout is forgiveness. Forgiveness represents a relational and intrapersonal process that reduces negative affect and fosters positive emotions toward one's partner following transgressions (Braithwaite et al., 2019; Wong, 2020). The literature emphasizes that forgiveness operates as a crucial mediator between relational stressors and marital outcomes. For instance, forgiveness has been associated with higher relationship satisfaction, greater intimacy, and reduced

levels of relational boredom and distress (Fatehi et al., 2021; Nazeran et al., 2023; Zali et al., 2019). Forgiveness is not only a psychological coping strategy but also a moral and social act that sustains relational commitment and resilience (Li & Lu, 2017; Ragabi et al., 2017). Neuropsychological evidence further supports its importance, showing associations between forgiveness tendencies and patterns of brain activity related to emotion regulation and empathy (Li & Lu, 2017).

The mediating role of forgiveness in marital adjustment has been confirmed across diverse cultural contexts. For example, research has shown that forgiveness buffers the impact of irrational beliefs, rumination, and experiential avoidance on marital boredom and burnout (Kazemian Moghadam et al., 2017; Sultanali Zadeh et al., 2019; Vahedinia et al., 2019). Similarly, forgiveness facilitates emotional healing and decreases the long-term effects of unresolved conflict, which are among the most consistent predictors of marital burnout (Harasymchuk et al., 2020; Hosseini et al., 2024). In religious and cultural traditions, forgiveness is considered a fundamental relational virtue, enhancing not only marital quality but also family resilience and intergenerational cohesion (Dollahite et al., 2019; Fahd & Hanif, 2019).

Closely linked to forgiveness is the construct of marital self-regulation, defined as individuals' capacity to monitor, control, and adapt their behaviors and emotions in order to maintain relational harmony and achieve long-term marital goals (Pouya et al., 2025; Yousefi et al., 2024). Marital self-regulation reflects a proactive orientation to relational challenges, enabling spouses to exercise patience, empathy, and constructive problem-solving. Empirical studies suggest that self-regulation is inversely associated with experiential avoidance and directly linked to marital intimacy and satisfaction (Kazemian Moghaddam et al., 2021; Sharifi et al., 2024). By fostering adaptive emotional regulation and communication patterns, marital self-regulation serves as a protective factor against emotional exhaustion and marital disaffection (Elmimanesh & Zhaleh, 2018; Piri & Shirazi, 2018).

The complexity of marital burnout becomes more evident when examining its multidimensional nature. Scholars describe burnout as encompassing emotional fatigue, psychological disillusionment, and physical depletion (Dehghan et al., 2018; Elmimanesh & Zhaleh, 2018). This triadic structure reflects the cumulative impact of unresolved conflict, unmet expectations, and lack of relational novelty, all of which erode marital satisfaction over time

(Harasymchuk et al., 2020; Liceaga, 2021). In fact, boredom in close relationships has been found to strongly predict emotional detachment and relational breakdown (Harasymchuk et al., 2020), emphasizing the importance of mechanisms such as forgiveness and self-regulation that can renew relational vitality (Walsh, 2019).

From an evolutionary perspective, marital quality and stability have been linked to individual traits such as intelligence, empathy, and self-regulatory capacity. Evidence suggests that individuals with higher cognitive and emotional resources are more likely to form stable unions and maintain marital satisfaction (Aspara et al., 2018). This highlights the interplay between dispositional factors and relational processes, where forgiveness and self-regulation may mediate the influence of underlying psychological vulnerabilities, such as experiential avoidance, on marital burnout (Riaz et al., 2024). In this sense, the study of marital burnout contributes not only to family psychology but also to broader theories of human adaptation and relational dynamics.

Cultural and social factors further complicate the dynamics of marital burnout. In collectivist societies, for instance, the emphasis on family cohesion and social reputation may influence the expression of marital dissatisfaction and the practice of forgiveness (Fahd & Hanif, 2019; Liceaga, 2021). Studies conducted in Iran highlight the role of irrational beliefs, communication patterns, and attachment styles in predicting marital boredom and burnout (Moradi et al., 2017; Vahedinia et al., 2019). Research also shows that forgiveness acts as a mediator between self-compassion, empathy, and depression in marital contexts, demonstrating its central role in psychological and relational adjustment (Ragabi et al., 2017; Sharifi et al., 2024). These findings align with the broader literature suggesting that interventions aimed at enhancing forgiveness and self-regulation can significantly reduce marital burnout (Pouya et al., 2025; Yousefi et al., 2024).

At the same time, experiential avoidance has gained attention in recent years as an important predictor of relational dysfunction. Individuals with high levels of avoidance may engage in rumination, withdrawal, or maladaptive coping, which exacerbates communication difficulties and undermines intimacy (Sultanali Zadeh et al., 2019; Yousefi et al., 2018). The negative effects of experiential avoidance are not limited to marital burnout but extend to mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation (Roush et al., 2019; Seçer & Ulaş, 2021). This reinforces the importance of

studying experiential avoidance within relational contexts, where its detrimental effects may be buffered by forgiveness and marital self-regulation.

Recent Iranian studies have also emphasized the mediating mechanisms that explain how relational and psychological variables interact. For example, forgiveness and mindfulness have been identified as mediators linking irrational beliefs and marital burnout (Dehghan et al., 2018), while differentiation and meaning in life were shown to predict marital boredom through forgiveness (Kazemian Moghadam et al., 2017; Kazemian Moghaddam et al., 2021). Likewise, communication skills training has been proven to enhance marital satisfaction and reduce burnout (Yousefi et al., 2024). Together, these findings point to a consistent pattern: forgiveness and self-regulation serve as critical relational competencies that can mitigate the negative impact of experiential avoidance on marital well-being.

This body of evidence highlights the necessity of developing integrative models that account for both risk and protective factors in marital relationships. By examining the interplay between experiential avoidance, forgiveness, and marital self-regulation, researchers can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying marital burnout (Pouya et al., 2025; Sharifi et al., 2024). Such models are particularly relevant in cultural contexts where marital stability is highly valued, yet psychological vulnerabilities and relational strains remain widespread (Hosseini et al., 2024; Nazeran et al., 2023).

In sum, marital burnout is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by psychological vulnerabilities such as experiential avoidance, protective factors such as forgiveness and self-regulation, and broader cultural and evolutionary processes. The literature consistently demonstrates that forgiveness and marital self-regulation mediate the effects of experiential avoidance on marital satisfaction and burnout (Elmimanesh & Zhaleh, 2018; Fatehi et al., 2021; Zali et al., 2019). Building on these insights, the present study seeks to investigate the mediating roles of forgiveness and marital self-regulation in the relationship between experiential avoidance and marital burnout among married women.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

This study was applied in nature and employed a descriptive (non-experimental) research design of the correlational type. Correlational research examines the relationship between variables based on the objectives of the

study. For conducting this research, among married women in Tehran whose marital life ranged between 5 to 15 years, who had not remarried, and who voluntarily agreed to cooperate and complete the questionnaires, a sample of 300 participants was selected through convenience sampling from counseling centers in Tehran. The minimum sample size in correlational studies is determined based on Green's formula (Green, 1991) ( $8M+50<N$ ), where M represents the total number of predictor variables and N indicates the minimum sample size. In this study, in order to increase research validity and to account for potential attrition or response errors, 300 participants were selected as the sample size.

## 2.2. Measures

**Marital Burnout Scale:** This instrument was designed by Pines (1996). The Marital Burnout Scale consists of 21 items that indicate physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms of burnout. The response format is a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The minimum possible score is 21, and the maximum possible score is 147. The emotional dimension of marital burnout: The score obtained from items related to depression, having a good day, emotional exhaustion, sadness, entrapment, feeling empty, having nothing to forgive, and hopelessness, measured by items 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 13, and 17. The minimum possible score is 7, and the maximum possible score is 49. The psychological dimension of marital burnout: The score obtained from items related to happiness, loss of patience, worthlessness, being trapped in problems, feelings of anger and frustration toward the spouse, rejection by the spouse, optimism, and anxiety, measured by items 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19, and 21. The minimum possible score is 8, and the maximum possible score is 56. The physical dimension of marital burnout: The score obtained from items related to fatigue, physical exhaustion, emptiness, bodily pain, fatigue and decline, susceptibility to illness, weakness, sleep disturbance, and being energetic, measured by items 1, 4, 7, 10, 16, and 20. The minimum possible score is 6, and the maximum possible score is 42. The validity assessment of this instrument indicated internal consistency between the variables ranging from .84 to .90. Its validity has been confirmed through negative correlations with positive relational characteristics such as quality of conversation, sense of security, sense of purpose, emotional attraction to the spouse, and quality of sexual relationship. In another study, test-retest reliability coefficients were reported as .89

for a one-month interval, .76 for a two-month interval, and .66 for a four-month interval. Internal consistency for most participants, measured with Cronbach's alpha, ranged between .91 and .93.

**Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire:** The Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (Gámez, Chmielewski, Kotov, Ruggero, & Watson, 2011) consists of 62 items and evaluates six subscales: behavioral avoidance, distress aversion, procrastination, distraction/suppression, denial/repression, and distress endurance, using a 6-point Likert scale. In this questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficients in different samples ranged from .91 to .95, and the correlation of this instrument with the Commitment and Action Questionnaire was reported as  $r = .74$ , indicating suitable validity. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were .77 (behavioral avoidance), .70 (distress aversion), .55 (procrastination), .80 (distraction/suppression), .78 (denial/repression), and .79 (distress endurance). For the validation of this questionnaire in the Iranian population, the instrument was first translated into Persian by the authors. After verifying the accuracy of the translation and the readability and comprehensibility of the items by experts, it was confirmed. The obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .89, which indicates desirable reliability of the questionnaire.

**Emotional Self-Regulation Scale:** Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Halford, and Kimlin (2009) developed this scale, which includes 16 items measuring two components: relational self-regulation and relational striving. The relational self-regulation subscale includes items 1 to 10, while the relational striving subscale includes items 11 to 16. Scoring is based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 (completely true) to 1 (completely false), with intermediate points for somewhat true (4), neutral (3), and somewhat false (2). In Iran, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were reported as .73 for relational self-regulation and .72 for relational striving, with a Guttman reliability of .72. For validity assessment, Cronbach's alpha was used, with coefficients of .81 for relational self-regulation and .83 for relational striving. In another study, Cronbach's alpha was reported as .86 for relational self-regulation and .83 for relational striving.

**Family Forgiveness Scale:** To assess marital forgiveness, the Family Forgiveness Scale (Pollard, Anderson, Anderson, & Jennings, 1998) was used. This scale consists of 40 items in two sections (nuclear family and spouses) and evaluates five components with dichotomous (yes/no) responses: realistic understanding,

acknowledgment, compensation, remorse, and improvement. This scale was standardized for Iranian families by Seif and Behari in 2001, with a reported reliability of .84.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The data in this study were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis, were first calculated to evaluate the distribution of variables and demographic characteristics of participants. Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed to examine the bivariate relationships between experiential avoidance, forgiveness, marital self-regulation, and marital burnout. To test the research model and assess direct, indirect, and total effects among variables, structural equation modeling (SEM) with the maximum likelihood (ML) estimation method was conducted using AMOS version 26.0. Model fit

was evaluated through indices such as  $\chi^2/df$ , GFI, AGFI, CFI, and RMSEA, and the significance of mediating effects was assessed following Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedure.

### 3. Findings and Results

In the present study, 300 married women attending counseling centers participated. The mean and standard deviation of participants' age were 38.28 and 4.08 years, respectively, and the mean and standard deviation of marital duration were 12.98 and 2.66 years, respectively. Regarding educational level, 26 participants (8.7%) had a high school diploma, 146 participants (48.7%) had a bachelor's degree, 112 participants (37.3%) had a master's degree, and 16 participants (5.3%) had a doctoral degree. Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficients of the study variables.

**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Matrix Among Research Variables*

| Variables | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4      | 5      | 6      | 7      | 8      | 9      | 10     | 11  | 12  | 13 | M     | SD   |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-----|-----|----|-------|------|
| 1         | –      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |     |     |    | 34.40 | 7.98 |
| 2         | .67    | –      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |     |     |    | 37.63 | 8.77 |
| 3         | .46    | .53    | –      |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |     |     |    | 19.67 | 4.48 |
| 4         | .55    | .48    | .39    | –      |        |        |        |        |        |        |     |     |    | 22.51 | 5.63 |
| 5         | .49    | .54    | .52    | .42    | –      |        |        |        |        |        |     |     |    | 25.61 | 6.13 |
| 6         | .50    | .41    | .36    | .37    | .49    | –      |        |        |        |        |     |     |    | 34.79 | 7.17 |
| 7         | –.21** | –.23** | –.21** | –.25** | –.14*  | –.09   | –      |        |        |        |     |     |    | 40.33 | 8.05 |
| 8         | –.24** | –.19** | –.24** | –.24** | –.20** | –.15** | .68    | –      |        |        |     |     |    | 45.84 | 9.78 |
| 9         | –.07   | –.22** | –.14*  | –.13*  | –.18** | –.01   | .31    | .34    | –      |        |     |     |    | 40.30 | 7.28 |
| 10        | –.20** | –.36** | –.27** | –.22** | –.35** | –.16** | .34    | .38    | .66    | –      |     |     |    | 15.84 | 4.33 |
| 11        | .14*   | .27    | .32    | .23    | .28    | .09    | –.29** | –.40** | –.39** | –.44** | –   |     |    | 20.82 | 5.04 |
| 12        | .24    | .31    | .28    | .16    | .24    | .20    | –.47** | –.45** | –.37** | –.47** | .41 | –   |    | 28.41 | 6.13 |
| 13        | .23    | .39    | .31    | .18    | .29    | .11    | –.46** | –.49** | –.42** | –.58** | .54 | .65 | –  | 22.43 | 6.61 |

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; 1. Experiential Avoidance – Behavioral Avoidance; 2. Experiential Avoidance – Distress Aversion; 3. Experiential Avoidance – Procrastination; 4. Experiential Avoidance – Distraction/Suppression; 5. Experiential Avoidance – Denial/Repression; 6. Experiential Avoidance – Distress Endurance; 7. Forgiveness – Family of Origin; 8. Forgiveness – Nuclear Family; 9. Marital Self-Regulation – Relational Self-Regulation; 10. Marital Self-Regulation – Relational Striving; 11. Marital Burnout – Emotional; 12. Marital Burnout – Psychological; 13. Marital Burnout – Physical

Table 1 shows the correlation coefficients among the research variables. The direction of correlations between variables was consistent with the researcher's expectations and the theoretical framework of the study. To evaluate the assumption of univariate normal distribution, skewness and

kurtosis of each variable were examined, and to test the assumption of multicollinearity, tolerance coefficients and variance inflation factor (VIF) were analyzed. The results are presented in Table 2.



**Table 2**
*Assessment of Normality and Multicollinearity Assumptions*

| Variable   | Skewness | Kurtosis | Tolerance | VIF  |
|--|----------|----------|-----------|------|
| Experiential Avoidance – Behavioral Avoidance        | –0.64    | –0.35    | 0.42      | 2.41 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Distress Aversion           | –0.23    | –0.96    | 0.41      | 2.38 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Procrastination             | –0.20    | –0.85    | 0.60      | 1.66 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Distraction/Suppression     | –0.41    | –0.67    | 0.58      | 1.72 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Denial/Repression           | 0.23     | –0.88    | 0.53      | 1.90 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Distress Endurance          | –0.32    | –0.97    | 0.64      | 1.57 |
| Forgiveness – Family of Origin                       | 0.21     | –1.17    | 0.38      | 2.66 |
| Forgiveness – Nuclear Family                         | –0.69    | –0.98    | 0.34      | 2.96 |
| Marital Self-Regulation – Relational Self-Regulation | –0.60    | –0.42    | 0.50      | 2.02 |
| Marital Self-Regulation – Relational Striving        | –0.49    | –0.23    | 0.44      | 2.27 |
| Marital Burnout – Emotional                          | –0.37    | –0.26    | –         | –    |
| Marital Burnout – Psychological                      | 0.32     | –0.34    | –         | –    |
| Marital Burnout – Physical                           | 0.44     | –0.72    | –         | –    |

According to the findings in Table 2, the skewness and kurtosis values of all components were within the  $\pm 2$  range. This indicates that the assumption of univariate normal distribution was met (see Kline, 2016). Table 2 also shows that the assumption of multicollinearity was not violated, since tolerance values of predictor variables were greater than .10 and VIF values were less than 10. According to Meyers et al. (2006), tolerance values below .10 and VIF values greater than 10 indicate the violation of the multicollinearity assumption.

In this study, to assess the assumption of multivariate normality, Mahalanobis distance values were examined. The skewness and kurtosis of Mahalanobis distance data were .59 and .83, respectively, which fell within the  $\pm 2$  range. This indicates that the assumption of multivariate normality was also satisfied. Finally, to test the homogeneity of variances, a scatterplot of standardized residuals was examined, and the results confirmed that the assumption was met.

After verifying the assumptions, data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). For this purpose, AMOS version 26.0 and maximum likelihood estimation were applied. The proposed model hypothesized that experiential avoidance predicts marital burnout through the mediating roles of forgiveness and marital self-regulation among married women attending counseling centers. As shown in Figure 1, behavioral avoidance, distress aversion, procrastination, distraction/suppression, denial/repression, and distress endurance were indicators of the latent construct of experiential avoidance. Forgiveness related to family of origin and forgiveness related to nuclear family were indicators of the latent construct of forgiveness. Relational self-regulation and relational striving were indicators of the latent construct of marital self-regulation. Emotional burnout, psychological burnout, and physical burnout were indicators of the latent construct of marital burnout. Table 3 presents the model fit indices.

**Table 3**
*Assessment of Normality and Multicollinearity Assumptions*

| Variable   | Skewness | Kurtosis | Tolerance | VIF  |
|--|----------|----------|-----------|------|
| Experiential Avoidance – Behavioral Avoidance        | –0.64    | –0.35    | 0.42      | 2.41 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Distress Aversion           | –0.23    | –0.96    | 0.41      | 2.38 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Procrastination             | –0.20    | –0.85    | 0.60      | 1.66 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Distraction/Suppression     | –0.41    | –0.67    | 0.58      | 1.72 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Denial/Repression           | 0.23     | –0.88    | 0.53      | 1.90 |
| Experiential Avoidance – Distress Endurance          | –0.32    | –0.97    | 0.64      | 1.57 |
| Forgiveness – Family of Origin                       | 0.21     | –1.17    | 0.38      | 2.66 |
| Forgiveness – Nuclear Family                         | –0.69    | –0.98    | 0.34      | 2.96 |
| Marital Self-Regulation – Relational Self-Regulation | –0.60    | –0.42    | 0.50      | 2.02 |
| Marital Self-Regulation – Relational Striving        | –0.49    | –0.23    | 0.44      | 2.27 |
| Marital Burnout – Emotional                          | –0.37    | –0.26    | –         | –    |
| Marital Burnout – Psychological                      | 0.32     | –0.34    | –         | –    |
| Marital Burnout – Physical                           | 0.44     | –0.72    | –         | –    |

Table 3 shows that all fit indices obtained from the analysis supported acceptable model fit with the collected

data. Table 4 presents the path coefficients in the research model.

**Table 4**

*Direct, Indirect, and Total Path Coefficients Between Variables in the Research Model*

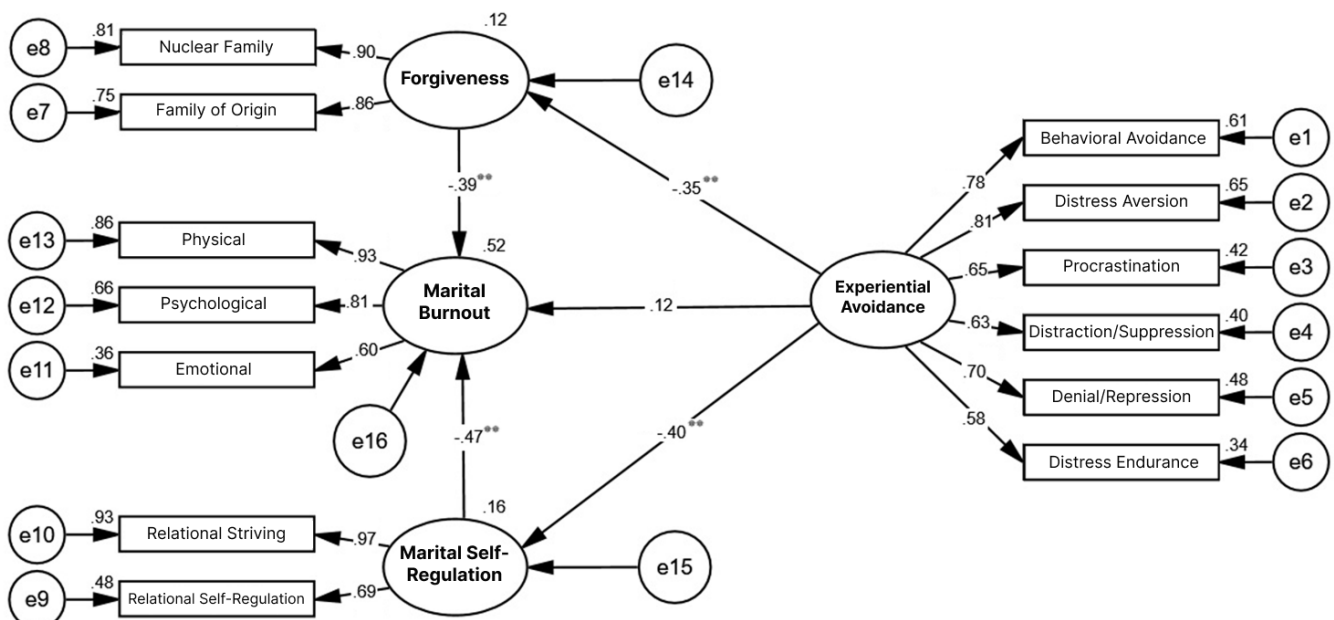
| Path  | b      | S.E   | $\beta$ | p    |
|---|--------|-------|---------|------|
| Experiential Avoidance → Marital Self-Regulation        | −0.276 | 0.062 | −0.399  | .001 |
| Experiential Avoidance → Forgiveness                    | −0.387 | 0.071 | −0.348  | .001 |
| Marital Self-Regulation → Marital Burnout               | −0.321 | 0.059 | −0.469  | .001 |
| Forgiveness → Marital Burnout                           | −0.168 | 0.033 | −0.394  | .001 |
| Direct Path: Experiential Avoidance → Marital Burnout   | 0.058  | 0.034 | 0.123   | .069 |
| Indirect Path: Experiential Avoidance → Marital Burnout | 0.154  | 0.038 | 0.324   | .001 |
| Total Path: Experiential Avoidance → Marital Burnout    | 0.212  | 0.047 | 0.447   | .001 |

Table 4 indicates that the total path coefficient between experiential avoidance and marital burnout ( $\beta = .447$ ,  $p = .001$ ) was positive and significant. The path coefficient between forgiveness ( $\beta = -.394$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and marital burnout, as well as between marital self-regulation ( $\beta = -.469$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and marital burnout, were negative and significant. Given the presence of two mediating variables, forgiveness and marital self-regulation, the Baron and Kenny method (1986, as cited in Mallinckrodt et al., 2006) was applied to test mediation effects. Results showed that

the indirect path coefficient between experiential avoidance and marital burnout through forgiveness ( $\beta = .137$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and through marital self-regulation ( $\beta = .188$ ,  $p = .001$ ) was positive and significant. Therefore, it was concluded that forgiveness and marital self-regulation positively and significantly mediate the relationship between experiential avoidance and marital burnout in married women attending counseling centers. Figure 1 displays the standardized parameters in the structural model of the study.

**Figure 1**

*Final Model of the Study*



#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the mediating roles of forgiveness and marital self-regulation in the

relationship between experiential avoidance and marital burnout among married women attending counseling centers. The results showed that experiential avoidance positively predicted marital burnout, while forgiveness and

marital self-regulation negatively mediated this relationship. More specifically, experiential avoidance was associated with higher levels of emotional, psychological, and physical exhaustion in marriage, but this effect was significantly reduced when forgiveness and marital self-regulation were included as mediators. The findings confirmed that these two relational mechanisms play central roles in buffering the negative impact of avoidance-based processes on marital well-being.

These results are consistent with theoretical models of burnout in close relationships, which emphasize that maladaptive cognitive and emotional regulation patterns contribute to relational exhaustion (Harasymchuk et al., 2020; Hosseini et al., 2024). The positive association between experiential avoidance and marital burnout aligns with previous research demonstrating that individuals who habitually avoid negative thoughts and emotions are more prone to boredom, dissatisfaction, and relational detachment (Sultanali Zadeh et al., 2019; Yousefi et al., 2018). Avoidance prevents couples from addressing conflicts constructively, leading to the accumulation of unresolved issues, emotional distance, and ultimately burnout (Karimi et al., 2019; Moradi et al., 2017). Similar findings have been reported in studies linking experiential avoidance to heightened emotional reactivity and maladaptive coping strategies in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Roush et al., 2019; Seçer & Ulaş, 2021).

The mediating effect of forgiveness underscores its importance as a relational healing process that reduces the destructive consequences of unresolved transgressions. In this study, forgiveness significantly decreased the direct impact of experiential avoidance on burnout, supporting the claim that forgiveness can restore emotional balance and relational commitment (Braithwaite et al., 2019; Fatehi et al., 2021). Previous findings have shown that forgiveness mediates the relationship between irrational thoughts, mindfulness, and marital satisfaction (Dehghan et al., 2018; Zali et al., 2019), and that it reduces the long-term effects of relational offenses on emotional exhaustion (Nazeran et al., 2023; Ragabi et al., 2017). Neuropsychological evidence further suggests that forgiveness is associated with activation in brain regions linked to emotion regulation and empathy, demonstrating its centrality as a psychological and relational process (Li & Lu, 2017).

The mediating role of marital self-regulation also emerged as a critical mechanism in this study. Participants with higher levels of relational self-regulation and striving reported lower levels of marital burnout, even in the

presence of experiential avoidance. This finding supports the notion that proactive regulation of emotions and behaviors enables spouses to manage conflicts constructively and sustain long-term relational goals (Pouya et al., 2025; Yousefi et al., 2024). Prior research has shown that self-regulation mitigates the effects of negative communication patterns and irrational beliefs on marital dissatisfaction (Kazemian Moghaddam et al., 2021; Sharifi et al., 2024). Moreover, self-regulation fosters adaptive coping strategies that counteract the detrimental influence of avoidance processes (Elmimanesh & Zhaleh, 2018; Piri & Shirazi, 2018). By enabling individuals to tolerate distress and pursue constructive dialogue, marital self-regulation plays a central role in maintaining relationship quality.

The combined explanatory power of experiential avoidance, forgiveness, and self-regulation accounted for over half of the variance in marital burnout, highlighting the robustness of the proposed model. This aligns with the findings of studies that emphasize the multifaceted nature of marital burnout, where risk factors such as avoidance and irrational thoughts interact with protective factors such as forgiveness, self-compassion, and differentiation (Kazemian Moghaddam et al., 2017; Vahedinia et al., 2019). From an evolutionary perspective, traits such as emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-regulation have been linked to marital stability and long-term relational satisfaction (Aspara et al., 2018), reinforcing the centrality of these mechanisms in marital functioning.

The role of boredom and unmet expectations in marital burnout has also been documented, with studies showing that relational novelty and emotional engagement are essential for sustaining intimacy (Harasymchuk et al., 2020; Liceaga, 2021). When experiential avoidance dominates, couples may disengage from renewal strategies, leading to higher boredom and eventual burnout. Conversely, forgiveness and self-regulation provide avenues for rejuvenation by fostering acceptance, commitment, and constructive problem-solving (Dollahite et al., 2019; Walsh, 2019). The cultural context may further influence these processes. In collectivist societies, where family stability and cohesion are highly valued, forgiveness may be more strongly endorsed as a relational virtue, serving as both a psychological and social strategy for preserving marriages (Fahd & Hanif, 2019; Liceaga, 2021).

The findings of this study also contribute to the growing evidence that marital burnout should not be understood solely as an individual phenomenon but rather as a relational and systemic process (Hosseini et al., 2024; Zali et al.,



2019). Psychological vulnerabilities such as experiential avoidance interact with relational dynamics and cultural expectations, producing complex pathways toward burnout. Forgiveness and self-regulation act as key protective mechanisms within this systemic framework, buffering individuals from the destructive spiral of avoidance and relational disaffection (Nazeran et al., 2023; Sharifi et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the results align with the literature emphasizing the link between forgiveness and well-being. Forgiveness has been shown to reduce negative affect, foster relational intimacy, and enhance psychological resilience (Braithwaite et al., 2019; Riaz et al., 2024). This suggests that interventions aimed at promoting forgiveness may not only prevent marital burnout but also improve individual mental health outcomes. Similarly, marital self-regulation interventions may equip couples with the skills to manage conflict constructively, sustain intimacy, and prevent relational exhaustion (Pouya et al., 2025; Yousefi et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the present study confirms the central hypothesis that experiential avoidance predicts marital burnout, and that forgiveness and marital self-regulation serve as significant mediators in this relationship. These findings contribute to theoretical models of relational functioning by clarifying the mechanisms through which psychological vulnerabilities translate into relational exhaustion. They also provide practical guidance for interventions targeting marital health, emphasizing the importance of cultivating forgiveness and self-regulation to counteract avoidance-based processes.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. Although the structural equation modeling provided evidence for mediation, longitudinal data are needed to establish temporal precedence and clarify the directionality of effects. Second, the sample consisted exclusively of married women from counseling centers in Tehran, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other populations, including men, couples from different cultural contexts, and individuals not seeking counseling services. Third, the reliance on self-report questionnaires raises the possibility of response biases, such as social desirability or recall bias, which may have influenced participants' responses. Fourth, the study focused only on

forgiveness and self-regulation as mediators, while other potentially important mechanisms, such as attachment security, communication skills, or mindfulness, were not examined. Finally, although the model explained a substantial proportion of the variance in marital burnout, other unmeasured variables—such as socioeconomic status, cultural norms, or personality traits—may also play significant roles.

Future studies should adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to better establish causal relationships between experiential avoidance, forgiveness, self-regulation, and marital burnout. Comparative studies across genders, cultures, and different types of couples (e.g., remarried, cohabiting, or divorced) would also enhance generalizability and shed light on cultural variations in the processes under study. Incorporating multi-method assessments, such as behavioral observations, partner reports, or physiological measures, could provide a richer and more objective understanding of relational dynamics. Additionally, future research could expand the model by including other mediating or moderating variables, such as attachment styles, resilience, religious beliefs, or communication training. Finally, intervention-based research evaluating the effectiveness of forgiveness- and self-regulation-focused programs in reducing marital burnout would offer valuable insights for clinical practice.

The findings of this study hold important practical implications for counselors, psychologists, and practitioners working with couples. First, therapeutic interventions should address experiential avoidance by helping individuals develop greater tolerance for negative emotions and experiences, reducing the tendency to withdraw or disengage in the face of relational stress. Second, forgiveness can be cultivated through structured interventions that emphasize empathy, perspective-taking, and cognitive reframing, enabling couples to move beyond transgressions and restore intimacy. Third, marital self-regulation should be fostered by training individuals in emotional regulation, problem-solving, and proactive communication strategies. Such interventions can equip couples with the tools necessary to manage conflict constructively, sustain emotional connection, and prevent burnout. Finally, community-based education programs that promote forgiveness, empathy, and self-regulation as relational virtues could strengthen marital resilience at the societal level.

## 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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## 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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