

# Relationship between Self-Control and Forgiveness with Duration of Marriage in Couples

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This study aims to investigate the relationship between self-control and forgiveness with the duration of marriage in couples living in Zanjan, Iran.

**Method:** For this purpose, 384 individuals who had been married for one to four years were selected by available sampling method during 2021. Tangney Self-Control (2004) and Ehteshamzadeh Interpersonal Forgiveness (2009) Questionnaires were used to collect the data. Pearson correlation coefficient (R), one-way analysis of variance, and LSD post hoc test were utilized for data analysis.

**Results:** Findings revealed a significant relationship between self-control and forgiveness in couples with one, two, three and four years ( $r = 0.29, 0.44, 0.47, 0.53$ ) of marriage duration. Considering this, as the duration of marriage increases, the relationship between self-control and forgiveness also increases in couples. Therefore, self-control and forgiveness are effective in increasing the duration of marriage. In addition, in terms of marriage duration, there is no significant difference between couples' self-control, while in terms of marriage duration, a significant difference was observed between couples' forgiveness.

**Conclusion:** According to the findings of this study, paying attention to the self-control and forgiveness skills of couples and empowering them to increase these skills can provide a good basis for experiencing a durable marriage.

**Keywords:** Self-Control, Forgiveness, Marriage Durability

## Introduction

Marriage is one of the essential sources of support and stress in adulthood, which has always been considered [1, 2]. Couples are less exposed to psychological distress in long-lasting and successful marriages and experience more well-being [3]. In turn, inadequate knowledge of marital skills and constructive interactions among couples can lead to reducing the duration of marriage, dissolution and divorce [4, 5]. Thus, how couples communicate with each other and what skills they have are important factors that can determine the quality and duration of their marriage [6]. As long as couples can establish a good relationship with each other, they can enjoy being together and avoid frequent and traumatic conflicts [7]. A previous research [8] stated that the appropriate interaction of couples play an important role in solving problems and maintaining the durability of marriage. One of the factors affecting the durability of the marriage is self-control. Self-Control enables individuals to ignore the tendency to act on destructive motives and instead respond to long-term relationship-oriented goals [9]. Various studies have shown that self-control is an effective method for mental health and having difficulty in regulating emotions is associated with a range of psychological problems [10]. Also, evolutionary psychologists have stated that people have an innate tendency to increase

their self-control because it facilitates goal-oriented behavior [11]. The concept of self-control, introduced by Schneider in 1974, means how flexible or stable a person is in their position. Schneider indicated that people with low self-control tend to express their thoughts and feelings in the moment, but people with high self-control can organize their behavior according to the situation [12].

In addition to the effect of self-control on the duration of marriage, according to previous research, forgiveness is strongly correlated with the duration of marriage. Given the relationships in the family, and especially the relationship between couples, forgiveness is a new topic in the field of family therapy studies. What makes forgiveness important is its healing nature in therapeutic interventions [13]. Forgiveness is defined as the process of reducing anger, reducing dissatisfaction or hatred of others, freedom from past judgments and perceptions, freedom from learned responses to situations, and striving to heal past wounds [14]. Briefly, forgiveness can eliminate the use of ineffective conflict resolution strategies resulting from the unforgivable transgressions and aggressions of the other party and increase the longevity of the relationship [15]. It should be noted that forgiveness is different from compromise and reconciliation. Forgiveness is one person's moral response to another's injustice, while compromise requires that both parties respect each other [16]. Recent studies have shown that more forgiving couples are less likely to experience stressful marriages and less likely to end in a divorce [17]. In addition to the explanations given about self-control and forgiveness, the importance of the permanence of a marriage and its strength is not hidden from anyone. There has been many research on the causes of marriage breakdown and less research has paid attention to its durability. Stable and durable marriage is often considered as the main goal of life and is a key indicator not only for marital success but also for the welfare and health of every society [18].

Enjoying an effective and stable marital relationship is the desire of every couple, but cohabitation is affected by several factors, some of which may lead the couple to disagreement, emotional separation and reduced marriage duration [19].

Other studies have examined the role of self-control and forgiveness in various fields. Sarlak and Heidari's [20] indicated that married couples with three to ten years of marriage had better personal forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness and quality of life than married couples with one to two years of marriage. In a study conducted by Pronk et al. [21] the results showed a significant increase in self-control and forgiveness as well as a positive correlation between these two variables, though the evolution of these two variables was different. Therefore, although people have more control over themselves and forgive each other more during their marriage, these two variables did not happen at the same time. Liu and Li [22] observed a significant positive correlation between participants' forgiveness scores and self-control, which showed that self-control modulates interpersonal forgiveness responses. People with high self-control expressed more social responses than people who had

previously hurt them. In the study of He et al. [23], the results of factor-partner interdependence tests showed that decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness had a direct effect on the current quality of marital stability in men. The current and future quality of marital stability for both parties is related. Also Kong et al. [24] stated that self-control may impair individuals' rumination, in this case less rumination restrain anger and ultimately increase forgiveness. In addition, the results of a previous study [25] indicated that the normal group in terms of marital satisfaction, marital conflict and forgiveness were more than the divorced group and the components of family strength and forgiveness components in normal couples were more than divorced couples.

Today, tensions and conflicts between couples have become an important and inevitable part of life, and the ability to self-control at different levels of emotional, intellectual and behavioral in today's community plays a key role for mental health, especially in marital relationships [26]. In the last two decades, several studies have begun to examine long-term marriages [27]. Most studies have evaluated the duration of marriage, but the factors affecting its duration and quality have been neglected in this period [28].

Now, with the knowledge that various factors play a role in the durability of a marriage, and among them, self-control and forgiveness are considered effective factors in marital relationships, the present study tried to answer the fundamental question of whether there is any relationship between self-control and forgiveness with the duration of marriage.

## Method

The method which was utilized in the present study was correlational. The statistical population was couples living in Zanjan, Iran in 2022. The method of classifying couples based on the duration of the marriage contract was done according to the question at the beginning of the questionnaire. In addition, in this study, the available sampling method was used.

In estimating the sample size of the statistical population of couples living in Zanjan, due to the very large size of the statistical population, the Cochran's formula was used as follows:

$$n = \left(\frac{z}{e}\right)^2 \times p(1-p) = \left(\frac{1.96}{0.05}\right)^2 \times 0.5(1-0.5) = 384$$

A value of 384 was obtained for the sample size and finally 384 questionnaires were distributed among the statistical population via an online questionnaire. Social networks such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Instagram were the main platforms for distributing the questionnaires. The selection criteria were: 1. willingness to cooperate to fill out the questionnaires, 2. having the duration of marriage between one and four years.

The following instruments were used in the present study.

**Tangney Self-Control Scale (SCS):** The Self-Control Scale (SCS) is a self-report questionnaire developed by Tangney et al. [9] and consists of 13 items. The items of this questionnaire are in a 5-point Likert scale (never = 1 to very high = 5). A higher or lower score indicates higher or lower self-control. The results of Tangney's et al.'s study

[9] provide strong support for the reliability and validity of the SCS. Its reliability on two statistical samples was obtained using Cronbach's alpha test of 0.83 and 0.85. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.85, which is in the acceptable range. Therefore, this questionnaire has the necessary reliability.

#### **Ehteshamzadeh Interpersonal Forgiveness Inventory (IFI):**

The Interpersonal Forgiveness Inventory (IFI) has been developed by Ehteshamzadeh. This inventory has three subscales; 1- reconnection and revenge control, 2- resentment control, 3- realistic perception [29]. The scoring of this 25-item scale is based on 1-4 Likert scale (strongly disagree = 4 to strongly agree = 1). Ehteshamzadeh et al. [30] used the test-retest method to measure the reliability of IFI. The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha), Spearman-Brown, and Gottman were calculated for the whole scale and its subscales. For reconnection and revenge control; Cronbach's alpha was 0.77, Spearman-Brown was 0.71, and Gottman was 0.70. For resentment control; Cronbach's alpha was 0.66, Spearman-Brown was 0.65, and Gottman was 0.65. For realistic perception; Cronbach's alpha was 0.57, Spearman-Brown was 0.57, and Gottman was 0.56. Finally for the whole scale of interpersonal forgiveness Cronbach's alpha was 0.80, Spearman-Brown was 0.73, and Gottman was 0.73. Thus, it is clear that this scale has the desired reliability. In the present study, the reliability coefficients of the general questionnaire and its subscales were calculated by Cronbach's alpha method for reconnection and revenge control 0.83, resentment control 0.94, realistic perception 0.88 and the whole questionnaire 0.86.

Each questionnaire and internal consistency of the questions was examined. The results showed that if any of the questions are removed, the validity coefficient decreases and as a result, these questions have a high value, which indicates the internal consistency of the questions. Thus, the questionnaires used in this research have the required validity to be used in studies.

## **Results**

After data collection, 254 women and 130 men participated in this study. Accordingly, 66% were female and 34% were male. Most of the subjects were 20-30 years old. Most of them had been married for four years. The most frequent level of education was bachelor's degree. In terms of income, most of them were at an average level. In terms of number of children, most of them had no children. Descriptive statistics related to the variables of self-control, interpersonal forgiveness and its subscales were calculated separately in terms of the duration of marriage which are presented in Table 1. Considering that in this study, the sample size was large enough ( $n = 384$ ), therefore, according to the central limit theorem, it can be accepted that the average of the samples has a normal distribution. Also, the values of skewness and kurtosis coefficients have been calculated and in all the cases these coefficients were in the range of -2 to +2. So it can be accepted that the data curves are symmetric and the assumption of normality is confirmed.

Table 2 shows the correlation tests between self-control and forgiveness in terms of duration of marriage. As it is evident, the correlation coefficient between self-control variable and forgiveness dimensions was positive and significant for the subscales of resentment control and realistic perception ( $p < 0.05$ ), but the correlation coefficient between self-control and reconnection dimension was 0.138 and the significance level was 0.14. The result shows that there is no significant relationship between self-control and the reconnection dimension ( $p > 0.05$ ). The correlation between self-control and forgiveness in the second, third and fourth years is positive and significant according to the level of significance which is less than 0.05. Actually, when a variable increases, the other variable also increases. Therefore, it can be accepted that there is a significant relationship between self-control and the dimensions of forgiveness in couples with one, two, three and four years of marriage.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Indicators of Self-control and Forgiveness Variables and their Subscales

Variables and subscales	Duration of marriage	Number	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Self-control	1 year	115	41.79	7.22	23	57
	2 years	70	42.11	8.07	24	61
	3 years	67	42.98	6.34	25	62
	4 years	132	43.28	7.27	23	59
Total Self-control		384	42.57	7.26	23	62
Reconnecting and Controlling Revenge	1 year	115	29.86	4.82	17	46
	2 years	70	30.62	4.91	19	40
	3 years	67	32.46	5.48	16	47
	4 years	132	30.87	5.49	15	43
Irritation Control	1 year	115	16.47	3.84	7	27
	2 years	70	17.57	3.25	12	24
	3 years	67	17.44	2.97	8	24
	4 years	132	16.35	3.77	6	24
Realistic Understanding	1 year	115	18.83	2.99	12	28
	2 years	70	19.51	3.38	12	28
	3 years	67	19.34	2.69	12	26
	4 years	132	19.06	2.81	10	26
Total Forgiveness	1 year	115	65.18	8.95	42	95
	2 years	70	66.28	10.02	50	87
	3 years	67	67.71	9.51	41	87
	4 years	132	69.25	9.26	36	89

Table 3 shows the comparison of the correlation coefficient by duration of marriage, which only in the third line (i.e. in the comparison of the correlation coefficient between the duration of marriage of one year and four years) a significant difference exists.

Table 4, which is related to the results of one-way analysis of variance comparing the mean of self-control and the dimensions of forgiveness by marriage duration, shows that the result of analysis of variance is not significant for the self-control variable. In other words, in terms of marriage duration, there is no significant difference between the couple's self-control ( $p > 0.05$ ).

However, the result of analysis of variance is significant for the forgiveness variable. In other words, in terms of the duration of marriage, there is a significant difference between the forgiveness of couples ( $p < 0.05$ ).

In order to identify groups that have significant differences with each other, the LSD post hoc test was used and the results have been displayed in Table 5, according to which there is a significant difference, in terms of forgiveness, between couples with marriage duration of one year and four years, and couples with two years and four years.

**Table 2.** Correlation Tests between Self-control and Forgiveness by Marriage Duration

Duration of marriage		Variables	No.	Correlation coefficient R	P	Test Result
1 year	Self-control	Reconnecting and Controlling Revenge	115	0.13	0.14	Not correlated
		Irritation Control	115	0.33	0.0001	correlated
		Realistic Understanding	115	0.21	0.02	correlated
		Total Forgiveness	115	0.28	0.002	correlated
2 years	Self-control	Reconnecting and Controlling Revenge	70	0.41	0.0001	correlated
		Irritation Control	70	0.33	0.005	correlated
		Realistic Understanding	70	0.30	0.011	correlated
		Total Forgiveness	70	0.43	0.0001	correlated
3 years	Self-control	Reconnecting and Controlling Revenge	67	0.49	0.0001	correlated
		Irritation Control	67	0.27	0.022	correlated
		Realistic Understanding	67	0.31	0.009	correlated
		Total Forgiveness	67	0.47	0.0001	correlated
4 years	Self-control	Reconnecting and Controlling Revenge	132	0.42	0.0001	correlated
		Irritation Control	132	0.50	0.0001	correlated
		Realistic Understanding	132	0.39	0.0001	correlated
		Total Forgiveness	132	0.53	0.0001	correlated

**Table 3.** Comparison of Correlation Coefficient by Duration of Marriage

Comparison of two correlation coefficient	$r_i$	$r_j$	$Z_i$	$Z_j$	$Z_c$	Test Result
$r_1, r_2$	0.28	0.43	0.29	0.46	- 1.11	not Sig.
$r_1, r_3$	0.28	0.43	0.29	0.51	- 1.39	not Sig.
$r_1, r_4$	0.28	0.53	0.29	0.59	- 2.31	Sig.
$r_2, r_3$	0.43	0.47	0.46	0.51	- 0.26	not Sig.
$r_2, r_4$	0.43	0.53	0.46	0.59	- 0.85	not Sig.
$r_3, r_4$	0.47	0.53	0.51	0.59	- 0.53	not Sig.

**Table 4.** Results of One-way Analysis of Variance to Compare the Mean of Self-control and Forgiveness by Marriage Duration

Variable	Duration of Marriage	Number	Mean	SD	F	P	Result
Self-control	1 year	115	41.79	7.22	1.03	0.37	Not significant
	2 years	70	42.11	8.07			
	3 years	67	42.98	6.34			
	4 years	132	43.28	7.21			
Forgiveness	1 year	115	65.18	8.95	2.95	0.03	significant
	2 years	70	66.28	10.02			
	3 years	67	67.71	9.51			
	4 years	132	69.25	9.26			

**Table 5.** LSD Post Hoc Test Results

Duration of Marriage (I)	Duration of Marriage (J)	Means Difference (I-J)	P
1 year	2.00	-1.05	0.362
	3.00	-2.52	0.079
	4.00	-4.07*	0.006
2 years	1.00	1.10	0.362
	3.00	-1.42	0.310
	4.00	-2.9*	0.038
3 years	1.00	2.5	0.079
	2.00	1.4	0.310
	4.00	-1.5	0.342
4 years	1.00	4.07*	0.006
	2.00	2.9*	0.038
	3.00	1.5	0.343

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between self-control and forgiveness with the duration of marriage in couples in Zanjan. The results showed that with increasing the duration of marriage, the correlation between the variables of self-control and forgiveness increases. However, this trend does not apply to the degree of self-control with increasing the duration of marriage. The results showed that there was no significant difference between the levels of self-control of couples in terms of their duration of marriage.

The results of this study are in some cases consistent with previous studies [20-25].

According to the significant correlation of self-control in the current research and previous research, the rationale behind these findings is that forgiveness, like self-control, requires a transformation process, in which negative feelings, cognitions, and motivations are reduced and instead of them, positive emotions are restored to improve the relationship [29]. This can however be a difficult process, as humans have an automatic desire to take revenge and prevent further harm [31]. However because self-control and forgiveness prevent impulsive and destructive responses and establish a healthier marriage, it is logical that these skills are considered attractive and desirable in emotional partners and make them strive to increase their level of self-control and forgiveness [32].

Couples who deny occasional frustrations and conflicts and avoid conflict resolution, become accustomed to this withdrawal. This issue does not only help to increase the stability and durability of their marriage, but also exposes it to harm. It is important for couples to be able to communicate properly in the tortuous path of married life by increasing their self-control and forgiveness skills in order to resolve unavoidable problems and conflicts. When negative emotions arise during conflicts in a marriage, sometimes taking a step back tending to maintain self-control is actually a step forward in increasing the duration of the marriage and maintaining its health.

Several limitations of the research need to be acknowledged. First, as this study used correlational, self-report data it is critical to use experimental methods for further investigations. Second, in the current study, effort was made to measure the majority of different strata of the society. However, most of the participants were educated and had a middle income class. Thus, the generalizability of the findings for samples beyond our study is unclear and more research is needed to examine self-control and forgiveness in couples at different stages of marriage and socioeconomic status level. Since self-control and forgiveness are skills that can be taught to people from childhood, by placing the training of these skills in the agenda of education and parenting, a better future can be established for their marriage. Also, it is suggested that therapists pay attention to the level of self-control and forgiveness of couples in pre-marriage counseling as well as in couple counseling, so that couples can increase these two skills in order to maintain the

durability of their marriage. This is while, according to previous studies these two variables are not the only ones that affect the durability of marriage. Therefore, it is suggested to examine the relationship or effectiveness of these variables along with other variables in maintaining the durability of marriage.

## Conclusion

These findings shed light on two marital skills that affect the durability of marriage; self-control and forgiveness. Therefore, the results of this study can be useful for working with incompatible couples in the field of self-control and forgiveness. According to the concepts derived from self-control descriptions, this factor can help a person's success in most aspects of life, especially marital life. Also, being forgiving toward one's spouse can bring the joy of a lasting marriage. Therefore, it makes sense for couples to work to increase their level of self-control and improve their forgiveness performance in order to achieve a lasting marriage.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

## Ethical Approval

This article has been extracted from the master's thesis of the first author. The participants completed the questionnaires with informed consent and they were assured that no personal information would be collected or recorded from them.

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