

The Relationship of Emotional Flexibility and Kindness with Marital Burnout: The Chain Mediating Role of "We-ness" and Couples' Flourishing

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Abstract

Introduction: The current research investigates the chain mediating role of we-ness and couple flourishing in the relationship of emotional flexibility and kindness with marital burnout.

Method: This investigation is a correlational one conducted through structural equation modeling. The statistical population consisted of the married students at the University of Kashan. Based on Soper's formula, 297 participants were selected using convenience sampling. They completed the Emotional Flexibility Scale, Marital Burnout Measure, We-ness Scale, and Flourishing Scale. The data analysis was performed with the SPSS-28 and AMOS-28 software.

Results: The results of the analysis revealed that the correlations of emotional flexibility, kindness, we-ness, and flourishing with marital burnout were negative and significant. Also, the correlation of emotional flexibility and kindness with we-ness and that of we-ness with flourishing were positive and significant ($p < .01$). Furthermore, the indirect effects of emotional flexibility and kindness on marital burnout, mediated by we-ness and flourishing, were negative and significant ($p < .001$).

Conclusion: Emotional flexibility and kindness, as personality strengths, can efficiently contribute to the prevention of marital burnout by enhancing we-ness and couple flourishing.

Keywords: Marital Burnout, Emotional Flexibility, Kindness, We-ness, Flourishing

Introduction

Spouses face numerous challenges in their married life that may disturb the meeting of their needs. They may also encounter various difficulties on the path to an ideal life, which require significant effort and mutual cooperation to overcome. However, if the process of managing these challenges is not properly executed and the couple's demands are not adequately satisfied, marital burnout might be inevitable [1]. Marital burnout refers to physical, emotional, and psychological fatigue due to the mismatch between expectations and the realities of marital life. Marital burnout decreases love, affection, and intimacy between spouses over time, leading to psychological issues, emotional divorce, and ultimately formal separation [2]. Hence, identifying the factors associated with marital burnout is of great importance, notably in contexts where the breakdown of marital relationships and the rate of divorce are rising. Research findings have revealed that narcissistic personality traits, desire for power [3], perfectionism in romantic relationships, self-righteousness [4], internet addiction [5], and neglect or lack of adequate support from one's spouse [6] are the pivotal factors in marital burnout. Conversely, psychological flexibility [7], marital forgiveness [8], and effective communication skills [9] contribute to decreasing or preventing the occurrence of marital burnout.

One factor that can prevent marital burnout is emotional flexibility. It can be defined as an individual's ability to regulate his or her emotions depending on situational and environmental requirements. This regulation occurs through experiencing or avoiding emotions, as well as expressing or controlling them [10]. There is a wide range of emotion regulation strategies, typically categorized into adaptive and maladaptive strategies. Maladaptive strategies are characterized by the rigid use of approaches that obstruct achieving goals. In contrast, adaptive strategies are employed to achieve goals more effectively and realize personal values [11]. Challenges in distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies have resulted in the emergence of the concept of emotional flexibility [12], which basically refers to the ability to regulate emotional responses adaptively based on situational needs. An emotionally flexible individual will be capable of adaptively selecting and applying the most suitable approach from his or her repertoire of possible strategies for each specific situation [13]. Studies suggest that adaptive emotion regulation strategies are associated with well-being [14], healthy development [15], psychological adjustment [16], and a reduction in marital burnout [17, 18].

Another factor that may be effective in preventing or reducing marital burnout is kindness. Although various definitions have been proposed for kindness, it can generally be said that the concept of kindness concerns a range of interpersonal tendencies and behaviors aimed at benefiting others [19]. Essentially, kindness involves extending attention, consideration, and care toward others, along with the motivation to support and improve their well-being and growth. Thus, kindness requires the capacity to transcend self-focus and move beyond self-centeredness toward a broader focus on societal good [20]. Research has demonstrated that kindness is associated with well-being [21], happiness [22], healthy social relationships [23], marital intimacy [24], and marital satisfaction [25], and it can decrease marital problems and conflicts [26].

Another factor helping to prevent or reduce marital burnout is we-ness. Research on relationships has long focused on the perception of mutual interdependence. To refer to the nature of this interdependence, researchers have used concepts such as "mutuality" and "couple identity", all of which finally lead to a sense of "we-ness" in relationships [27]. We-ness refers to the formation of a single identity with others within the context of mutual influence to achieve shared goals [28]. A sense of we-ness encourages spouses to develop specific cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns in their relationship. In addition, it diminishes the distinction between one's self and spouse, leading to higher levels of perceived similarity with each other [27]. Findings have revealed that a sense of we-ness enables spouses to better manage the challenges of life [29] and experience greater satisfaction in their relationships [30]. Moreover, we-ness can promote the quality of components related to flourishing [31, 32] and reduce marital burnout [33]. Empirical

evidence indicates that character strengths such as emotional flexibility and kindness may effectively enhance we-ness in marital relationships [24, 20, 34].

Flourishing is another factor that can prevent the occurrence of marital burnout. Flourishing, or complete well-being, refers to living in a state where all aspects of an individual's life are good [35]. Researchers have defined flourishing as a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively [36]. This definition stems from a comprehensive and integrative perspective that combines the hedonic and eudemonic approaches in well-being studies, which have served as the foundation for the concept of flourishing proposed by researchers [37].

Research demonstrates that factors such as religion and spirituality [38], intimate social relationships [39], social support, and resilience [40] can improve individuals' levels of flourishing. Flourishing can also boost occupational and academic performance [41, 42], increase positive personality traits [43], and reduce psychological disorders [44]. In this regard, studies suggest that various components of flourishing can decrease marital burnout [45, 46, 47].

Marital burnout plays a significant role in the decline of family functioning, the breakdown of relationships, and the exacerbation of social harms [48]. It is considered as a major factor contributing to divorce [6]. Accordingly, examining the factors that can prevent marital burnout is of great importance. This research is inspired by the theory of flourishing developed by Seligman [49]. He believes that personal strengths promote the quality of social relationships, and positive social relationships are considered as a main component of flourishing. Consequently, the hypothesis of this study is that emotional flexibility and kindness, as two character strengths, can lay the groundwork for fostering the quality of couples' relationships and improving a sense of we-ness between them, and we-ness, in turn, facilitates the flourishing of couples. Each component of flourishing may also play a role in preventing or reducing marital burnout. Considering these points, the present study seeks to investigate the chain mediating role of we-ness and couple flourishing in the relationship between emotional flexibility, kindness, and marital burnout.

Method

This investigation is quantitative and descriptive, employing a correlational design within the framework of structural equation modeling (SEM). The study population consisted of the married students at the University of Kashan (N = 934). Using Soper's formula [50], the minimum sample size was determined to be 232 participants. Accounting for potential data attrition, 297 participants were selected through convenience sampling to complete the research-related questionnaires. After the incomplete or outlier data were excluded, the responses of three participants were included in the final analysis. During implementation, the confidentiality of the questionnaires was strictly maintained, ensuring anonymity and adherence to privacy principles. Implicit and verbal consent was also obtained from all the

participants prior to their involvement in the study. The data analysis was conducted with the SPSS-28 and AMOS-28 software.

The tools used in this study were as follows:

Emotional Flexibility Scale: The Emotional Flexibility Scale was developed by Rashid and Bayat [10]. It consists of the three components of positive emotional regulation, negative emotional regulation, and emotional communication. The scale includes 24 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6). The total score ranges from 24 to 144, with higher scores indicating greater emotional flexibility. In the study by Rashid and Bayat [10], the content, face, and criterion validities of the scale were assessed and found to be appropriate. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire scale was 0.866, showing high reliability for the Emotional Flexibility Scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficients calculated in the present study were 0.82 for positive emotion regulation, 0.90 for negative emotion regulation, 0.84 for emotional communication, and 0.91 for the overall scale.

Kindness Scale: In his study, Çevik [51] examined the Kindness Scale. This scale has four components including perception of kindness, fear of kindness, self-kindness, and kindness toward others. It consists of 24 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from does not describe me at all (1) to completely describes me (5). In this research, two subscales, perception of kindness and kindness toward others, were used, comprising a total of 11 items. In Çevik's study, the reliability of the subscales for attitudes toward kindness and kindness toward others was reported to be 0.64, and their validity was confirmed through factor analysis. The analysis in the present study also indicated that this scale has appropriate reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.81 for the perception of kindness, 0.83 for kindness toward others, and 0.90 for the overall scale. Additionally, the validity of the scale was confirmed using confirmatory factor analysis.

Couple Burnout Measure (CBM): The Couple Burnout Scale is a self-report questionnaire developed by Pines in 1996 [52]. This scale measures the three components of burnout, namely physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. The questionnaire consists of 21 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from never (1) to always (7). The total score ranges from 21 to 147, with higher scores revealing greater marital burnout. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale has been reported to be in a range from 0.91 to 0.93. In terms of convergent validity, the scale has shown significant correlations with positive relational characteristics [53]. Naim [54] examined the reliability of this scale and reported a Cronbach alpha of 0.85. In addition, scores on this scale have shown a significant negative correlation with the Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale [55]. In this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficients for the components were 0.85, 0.90, and 0.85, respectively, and 0.90 for the overall scale.

We-ness Scale: The We-ness Scale, developed by Topcu-Uzer et al. [56], is a 17-item self-report measure that examines couples' perceptions through cognitive, emotional and behavioral components. It is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (5). The total score ranges from 17 to 85, with higher scores showing greater we-ness between couples. Topcu-Uzer's team reported a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.95 for this scale, along with appropriate convergent and discriminant validity. In a study by Afshani and Yousefi [33], the Cronbach alpha for the scale was 0.95, demonstrating high internal consistency among the items. Factor analysis was also used to examine validity, indicating that the model had excellent fit. Convergent validity was also assessed using the Busby Marital Quality scale, and a significant positive correlation was found between the two scales. In the present study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.94.

Flourishing Scale: This scale was developed by Butler and Kern [57] to measure flourishing. It consists of 23 items. In the present research, there were five questions related to the five main components of flourishing, as introduced in Seligman's theory. The scale is scored on an 11-point Likert scale, ranging from never (0) to always (10). Each of the five main components involves three items. The minimum possible score for each component is 0, and the maximum possible score is 30. The overall flourishing score is calculated as the mean of 15 items, with a maximum possible score of 10. In the study by Butler and Kern [57], the reliability of this scale ranged from 0.59 to 0.94. Construct validity was examined through factor analysis, which confirmed the five components of Seligman's flourishing model. In a study by Sohaili et al. [58], the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be 0.728, showing the strong explanatory power of the scale. Construct validity was also confirmed through factor analysis. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.91 for positive emotion, 0.80 for engagement, 0.81 for relationships, 0.87 for meaning, 0.84 for accomplishment, and 0.93 for the overall scale.

Results

The participants in the present study were 294 married students from the University of Kashan, of whom 201 were female and 93 were male. In addition, 132 participants (44.9%) were in the age group of 20-30 years, and 93 (31.6%) were in the age group of 31-40 years. A total of 148 participants (50.3%) had children, while the remaining participants were childless. The duration of marriage for 52.1% of the participants ranged between 5 and 20 years. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Regarding the correlations between the variables, Table 2 presents a correlation matrix based on Pearson's correlation coefficients and the significance levels for the research variables. In this study, skewness and kurtosis were calculated for the distribution of the scores on variables. As the results showed, none of the skewness and kurtosis values exceeded the range of ± 2 , confirming the normality of the data.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants

Variable	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Age of participants	Less than 20 years	20	6.8%
	20–30 years	132	44.9%
	31–40 years	93	31.6%
	41–50 years	42	14.3%
	More than 50 years	7	2.4%
Spouse's age	Less than 20 years	8	2.7%
	20–30 years	133	45.2%
	31–40 years	103	35.1%
	41–50 years	39	13.3%
	More than 50 years	11	3.7%
Having children	No	146	49.7%
	Yes	148	50.3%
Number of children	No children	146	49.7%
	One child	88	29.9%
	Two children	49	16.7%
	Three children	10	3.4%
	Four children	1	0.3%
Duration of marriage	Less than 5 years	115	39%
	5–10 years	79	26.9%
	11–15 years	45	15.3%
	16–20 years	29	9.9%
	21–25 years	12	4.1%
	More than 25 years	14	4.8%
Gender	Female	201	68.4%
	Male	93	31.6%
Participant's education	Bachelor's degree	89	30.2%
	Master's degree	129	43.9%
	PhD or higher	76	25.9%
Spouse's education	Below high school	68	23.1%
	High school diploma	37	12.6%
	Associate degree	10	3.4%
	Bachelor's degree	89	30.3%
	Master's degree	79	26.9%
	PhD or higher	11	3.7%
Spouse's occupation	Homemaker	34	11.6%
	Employee	104	35.4%
	Student	56	19%
	Self-employed	100	34%

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of the Research Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Emotional flexibility	1				
2. Kindness	0.20**	1			
3. We-ness	0.12**	0.39**	1		
4. Flourishing	0.23**	0.42**	0.69**	1	
5. Marital burnout	-0.12**	-0.33**	-0.49**	-0.361**	1
mean	97.8	32.01	67.71	97.63	1.31
Standard deviation	7.04	5.61	10.79	22.87	0.59
Skewness	1.68	-0.64	-1.11	-0.17	1.28
Kurtosis	1.39	0.40	1.56	-0.06	1.81

**p < .01, *p < .05

As observed, the correlations of emotional flexibility, kindness, we-ness, and flourishing with marital burnout are negative and significant. However, the correlations of emotional flexibility and kindness with we-ness, and we-ness with flourishing, are positive and significant ($p < .01$). To evaluate the fit of the proposed structural model, several goodness-of-fit indices were examined. The results showed a chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) of 1.736, an Incremental Fit Index (IFI) of 0.937, a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of 0.936, and a Root Mean

Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.050. These values collectively suggest an acceptable fit for the proposed theoretical model. Notably, a χ^2/df ratio below 3, IFI, CFI, and the other normed fit indices exceeding 0.90 are the commonly used benchmarks indicating the adequate fit of the model [59]. An RMSEA value closer to zero reflects better approximate fit of the model to the data. The direct and indirect relationships in the structural model were also examined. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Estimates of Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients for Direct and Indirect Effects in the Model, along with their Significance Levels

Direct relationships					
	Unstandardized estimate (B)	Standardized estimate (β)	Standard error	Critical ratio (t)	p
Emotional flexibility \rightarrow We-ness	0.15	0.29	0.05	2.75	0.015
We-ness \rightarrow Flourishing	4.61	0.75	0.44	10.34	$p < .001$
Flourishing \rightarrow Marital burnout	-0.41	-0.35	0.08	-5.22	$p < .001$
Emotional flexibility \rightarrow Marital burnout	-0.20	-0.09	0.23	-0.87	0.381
Kindness \rightarrow We-ness	0.19	0.54	0.03	5.58	$p < .001$
Kindness \rightarrow Marital burnout	-1.08	-0.42	0.22	-4.89	$p < .001$
Indirect relationships (bootstrap)					
	Unstandardized estimate (B)	Standardized estimate (β)	p	Resampling count	Confidence interval
Emotional flexibility \rightarrow We-ness \rightarrow Flourishing \rightarrow Marital burnout	-0.11	-0.05	$p < .001$	1000	95%
Kindness \rightarrow We-ness \rightarrow Flourishing \rightarrow Marital burnout	-0.37	-0.14	$p < .001$	1000	95%

Based on Table 3, emotional flexibility has a significant positive direct effect on we-ness ($\beta = 0.29$, $p = .015$). In turn, we-ness has a significant positive direct effect on flourishing ($\beta = 0.75$, $p < .001$). Flourishing also has a significant negative direct effect on marital burnout ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < .001$). However, the direct effect of emotional flexibility on marital burnout was not significant ($\beta = -0.09$, $p = .381$). Indeed, emotional flexibility has a significant negative indirect effect on marital burnout through the mediating roles of we-ness and couples' flourishing ($\beta = -0.05$, $p < .001$).

As for kindness, it has a significant positive direct effect on we-ness ($\beta = 0.544$, $p < .001$) and a significant negative direct effect on marital burnout ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of kindness on marital burnout, mediated by we-ness and couples' flourishing, is also negative and significant ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The aim of the current research was to examine the mediating role of the sequential chain of we-ness and flourishing in the relationship between emotional flexibility and kindness with marital burnout. The results of the data analysis indicated that both emotional flexibility and kindness were associated with decreased marital burnout through the mediating roles of we-ness and flourishing. This finding aligns with previous research in several ways; the relationship between emotional flexibility and we-ness is consistent with the findings of Marsiglio [34], the association between kindness and we-ness is supported by Malti [20] and Zahedi [24], the link between we-ness and flourishing is corroborated by Aydogan et al. [29] and Cruwys et al. [30], and the connection between flourishing and marital burnout is in line with the findings of Topkaya et al. [46]. To explain this relationship, it may be contended that individuals with high emotional flexibility are better able to avoid expressing negative emotions that could harm their marital relationships. This emotional regulation diminishes conflicts between couples. In addition, they effectively share positive emotions with their spouses, which promotes emotional intimacy and strengthens the

sense of cohesion and shared identity within the couple [34]. Besides, kind individuals are more attentive to their spouses and their needs, demonstrating a strong motivation to support and care for them. They exert more energy to alleviate their spouse's suffering and enhance their well-being and flourishing. Their kindness also energizes their spouse and promotes their sense of happiness. Together, these factors increase intimacy between couples and improve marital satisfaction [24]. This intimacy and relationship satisfaction foster a shared identity and strengthen the sense of "we-ness" among couples.

We-ness and the reinforcement of a shared identity among couples improve the meaning of their life, allow for marital adjustment, increase their resilience in the face of challenges, and enable them to better manage life difficulties together [29]. We-ness enhances a greater sense of responsibility between spouses and motivates them to meet each other's needs more successfully. Moreover, the sense of we-ness encourages greater and more effective collaboration in achieving shared goals, while also increasing feelings of affection and care for one another [60]. All of these factors contribute to couples' experiencing greater emotional calm, more positive emotions, and a smoother path toward success, finally leading to higher levels of flourishing. On the other hand, burnout is the antithesis of engagement. Couples who experience flourishing in their marital life are deeply engaged in collaboration and empathy to reach shared goals. This engagement and satisfaction with their marital relationships reduce their vulnerability to marital burnout. Furthermore, when spouses experience high levels of happiness and positive emotions together, they are better equipped to cope with the challenges and stressors of life, which further decreases the likelihood of marital burnout.

Conclusion

In summary, the results of this study indicated that emotional flexibility and kindness, as two character strengths, can effectively prevent marital burnout by improving we-ness and flourishing among couples. According to the results of this research, it is

recommended that researchers pay greater attention to the role of character strengths, particularly emotional flexibility and kindness, in reducing marital relationship difficulties and strengthening family foundations. Besides, counselors and couple therapists can help prevent or reduce marital burnout by promoting emotional flexibility and kindness in their clients, thereby enhancing well-being and flourishing in couples.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no competing interests regarding this study.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in compliance with national ethical guidelines and COPE regulations.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors did not use any AI tools.

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