



## Presenting a Model for Predicting Marital Burnout Based on Experiential Avoidance and Relationship Beliefs with the Mediation of Forgiveness in Married Women Referring to Counseling Centers in Tehran

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to present a predictive model of marital burnout based on experiential avoidance and relationship beliefs with the mediating role of forgiveness in married women.

**Methods and Materials:** The research employed a descriptive-correlational design using structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population consisted of married women living in Tehran who had been married between 5 and 15 years and referred to counseling centers. A sample of 300 women was selected using available sampling. Data collection instruments included the Couple Burnout Measure (Pines, 1996), the Multidimensional Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (Gámez et al., 2011), the Relationship Beliefs Inventory (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982), and the Family Forgiveness Scale (Pollard et al., 1998). Reliability and validity of the instruments were confirmed in prior studies. Data analysis was performed using AMOS-24 with maximum likelihood estimation.

**Findings:** The results indicated that experiential avoidance positively predicted marital burnout ( $\beta = 0.364, p < .001$ ). Relationship beliefs also showed a positive and significant effect on marital burnout ( $\beta = 0.291, p < .001$ ). Forgiveness had a negative and significant effect on marital burnout ( $\beta = -0.478, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, forgiveness mediated the relationship between experiential avoidance and marital burnout ( $\beta = 0.129, p < .001$ ), as well as between relationship beliefs and marital burnout ( $\beta = 0.118, p < .001$ ). The model demonstrated acceptable fit indices ( $\chi^2/df = 2.45$ , CFI = 0.923, RMSEA = 0.07). Overall, experiential avoidance, relationship beliefs, and forgiveness explained 45% of the variance in marital burnout among participants.

**Conclusion:** The findings suggest that dysfunctional relationship beliefs and higher levels of experiential avoidance increase the risk of marital burnout, while forgiveness plays a protective role by reducing its intensity. Designing interventions that strengthen forgiveness and restructure irrational relationship beliefs can help reduce marital burnout and promote marital satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Marital burnout; Experiential avoidance; Relationship beliefs; Forgiveness; Structural equation modeling; Married women

## 1. Introduction

Marital relationships are among the most significant and complex interpersonal bonds, providing a foundation for emotional, social, and psychological well-being across the lifespan. While marriage has traditionally been associated with stability and intimacy, contemporary challenges such as shifting family structures, evolving gender roles, and heightened life stressors have introduced vulnerabilities that increase the likelihood of marital dissatisfaction and burnout. Marital burnout, conceptualized as a multidimensional syndrome encompassing emotional, physical, and psychological exhaustion, represents one of the critical threats to marital stability and family health (Hosseini et al., 2024).

One of the key psychological processes implicated in marital burnout is experiential avoidance, which refers to the tendency to evade, suppress, or disengage from unpleasant internal experiences such as thoughts, emotions, or bodily sensations. Experiential avoidance has been linked to heightened vulnerability across various domains of mental health, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Bardeen & Fergus, 2016; Roush et al., 2019). In intimate relationships, the persistent avoidance of difficult emotions or relational conflicts may erode effective communication and intimacy, thereby exacerbating marital stress. Empirical evidence underscores that experiential avoidance is a significant predictor of relational dissatisfaction and can act as a barrier to adaptive coping mechanisms within marriages (Karimi et al., 2019; Seçer & Ulaş, 2021).

Another prominent determinant of marital burnout is the constellation of relationship beliefs held by individuals. Relationship beliefs encompass cognitive schemas and expectations about the nature of marital interactions, conflict resolution, gender roles, and partner changeability. Dysfunctional beliefs—such as perceiving disagreement as destructive, expecting mindreading, or endorsing unrealistic sexual perfectionism—are strongly associated with maladaptive communication patterns and relational distress (Vahedinia et al., 2019; Yaghoutian et al., 2015). Such irrational or rigid beliefs amplify the likelihood of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and ultimately burnout (Dehghan Abolfazl, 2018). For example, studies have demonstrated that communication beliefs not only predict marital burnout directly but also shape the degree of emotional regulation and conflict resolution strategies

employed by couples (Hosseini et al., 2024; Nemati et al., 2015).

Forgiveness has emerged as a central mediating variable in understanding marital functioning. Defined as the deliberate process of replacing negative emotions such as resentment and anger with more constructive responses such as empathy and reconciliation, forgiveness plays a pivotal role in mitigating marital distress (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Empirical research consistently highlights the protective function of forgiveness in buffering the adverse effects of conflict, relational transgressions, and maladaptive beliefs (Braithwaite et al., 2019; Fatehi et al., 2021). Forgiveness is not merely the absence of negative affect but represents an active cognitive-emotional transformation that restores relational harmony (Li & Lu, 2017; Ragabi et al., 2017). Studies in Iranian and international contexts reveal that higher levels of forgiveness are strongly associated with marital satisfaction, intimacy, and resilience against burnout (Najibzadegan et al., 2024; Zali et al., 2019).

The dynamics of marital burnout must also be contextualized within broader socio-cultural frameworks. Cross-cultural evidence indicates that variables such as religiosity, cultural expectations, and economic stressors shape the extent to which couples experience and cope with marital challenges (Dollahite et al., 2019; Walsh, 2019). For instance, generative devotion in faith-based families has been shown to foster resilience and relational care, buffering against disaffection (Dollahite et al., 2019). Similarly, emotional capital and positive moments in relational exchanges provide resources that protect against psychological exhaustion (Walsh, 2019). However, cultural scripts such as “you stay, no matter how bad” in certain societies contribute to prolonged exposure to marital disaffection, intensifying the risk of burnout (Liceaga, 2021).

Research also emphasizes the bidirectional nature of marital burnout and psychological health. On the one hand, burnout can exacerbate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, while on the other hand, pre-existing vulnerabilities in emotional regulation and cognitive fusion intensify burnout (Harasymchuk et al., 2021; Hershenberg et al., 2017). For example, relational boredom—defined as the experience of monotony, stagnation, and unmet expectations—has been directly linked to relational judgments and decreased marital satisfaction (Harasymchuk et al., 2021). Likewise, emotional dysregulation and experiential avoidance have been shown to significantly predict marital boredom and disaffection in couples facing

high relational stress (Sultanali Zadeh et al., 2019; Yousefi et al., 2018).

The literature further highlights the role of mindfulness, self-compassion, and meaning in life as protective factors in marital dynamics. Mindfulness facilitates nonjudgmental awareness of relational experiences, thereby reducing the destructive influence of irrational beliefs (Dehghan Abolfazl, 2018). Self-compassion, meanwhile, enhances forgiveness and decreases self-criticism, mediating its influence on marital burnout (Sharifi et al., 2024). The presence of meaning in life and differentiation of self have also been identified as predictors of marital satisfaction and buffers against burnout (Kazemian Moghadam et al., 2017; Kazemian Moghaddam et al., 2021). These findings align with evolutionary perspectives suggesting that individual differences, such as intelligence and personality, predict both the likelihood of entering marriage and the ability to sustain it (Aspara et al., 2018).

Marital flourishing and satisfaction also depend on the interplay between demographic and psychosocial factors. Cross-sectional evidence from Asian contexts highlights determinants such as emotional support, commitment, and socio-economic stability in predicting flourishing marriages (Fahd & Hanif, 2019). Conversely, maladaptive relational patterns such as projection of attraction to alternative partners can elicit jealousy, anger, and negative relational behaviors, further deteriorating marital bonds (Neal & Lemay, 2019). Research among Iranian populations confirms these findings, noting that rumination, attachment insecurity, and communication deficits are among the strongest predictors of burnout (Moradi et al., 2017; Sadati et al., 2015).

Recent clinical and experimental interventions have sought to address marital burnout by targeting forgiveness and emotion regulation. For example, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has shown significant efficacy in enhancing marital forgiveness and reducing burnout among women affected by extramarital relationships (Najibzadegan et al., 2024). Similarly, interventions focused on positive psychotherapy, mindfulness, and ACT principles have been effective in reducing psychological distress and marital burnout (Elmimanesh & Zhaleh, 2018; Seğer & Ulaş, 2021). These approaches operate by fostering experiential acceptance, cognitive flexibility, and enhanced relational empathy, counteracting the negative cycle of avoidance and maladaptive beliefs.

Moreover, findings suggest that family-of-origin dynamics play a crucial role in shaping forgiveness capacity

and marital functioning. Studies have documented intergenerational patterns where unresolved parental conflicts and communication deficits predict lower forgiveness and higher burnout in the offspring's marriages (Nemati et al., 2015; Piri & Shirazi, 2018). Conversely, secure attachment and relational empathy significantly mediate the link between stress and marital outcomes (Ragabi et al., 2017). These results indicate that interventions must adopt systemic perspectives, incorporating not only individual and couple factors but also family and cultural influences.

Overall, the accumulated evidence points toward a multifaceted model in which experiential avoidance and dysfunctional relationship beliefs serve as proximal predictors of marital burnout, while forgiveness operates as a key mediating mechanism that can either exacerbate or mitigate this outcome. Contemporary research underscores the urgent need to address marital burnout, given its far-reaching implications for psychological well-being, family stability, and even broader societal outcomes (Pouya et al., 2025). Specifically, by identifying the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral pathways that underlie burnout, interventions can be tailored to foster resilience, promote forgiveness, and reframe maladaptive beliefs, thereby reducing the prevalence and severity of marital burnout (Hosseini et al., 2024; Nazeran et al., 2023).

In sum, marital burnout represents a pressing challenge within modern marriages, fueled by experiential avoidance, maladaptive beliefs, and emotional dysregulation. Yet, forgiveness, mindfulness, and relational empathy emerge as powerful protective factors capable of restoring marital harmony. Building on prior evidence, the present study seeks to advance the field by empirically testing a structural model in which experiential avoidance and relationship beliefs predict marital burnout, with forgiveness as a mediating variable.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study was applied in nature and employed a descriptive (non-experimental) correlational research design. Correlational research examines the relationships among variables based on the study objectives. Regression analysis is one type of correlational research, with the aim of predicting one or more criterion variables based on one or more predictor variables. If the purpose is to examine one criterion variable from one predictor variable, simple

regression is used. If the purpose is to examine one criterion variable from several predictor variables, multiple regression is applied. If several criterion variables are simultaneously examined based on several predictor variables, multivariate regression is used.

For conducting the present study, among married women in Tehran whose length of marriage was between 5 and 15 years, had not remarried, and voluntarily agreed to participate and complete the questionnaires, a sample of 300 participants was selected using 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 number of predictor variable components and N represents the minimum sample size. In this study, the predictor variables included six components of experiential avoidance and five components of relationship beliefs, totaling eleven. Therefore, according to Green's formula, the minimum sample size should be 138. To enhance the validity of the research and account for potential attrition or participant error, a sample of 300 individuals was selected.

The researcher visited counseling centers in Tehran, provided necessary explanations to administrators, and obtained their cooperation and approval. After explaining the research objectives to married women attending the centers, questionnaires were distributed to those who voluntarily consented to participate and were collected on-site. Data were then recorded and analyzed.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Marital Burnout

This instrument was developed by Pines (1996). The Marital Burnout Measure includes 21 items assessing physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms of burnout.

The response format is Likert-type, ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The minimum score obtainable is 21, and the maximum score is 147.

- *Emotional dimension of marital burnout:* This dimension includes scores from items assessing depression, not having a good day, emotional exhaustion, sadness, feeling trapped, feeling empty, having nothing left to give, and hopelessness. Items 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 13, and 17 measure this dimension, with a possible range of 7 to 49.
- *Psychological dimension of marital burnout:* This includes scores from items assessing happiness,

irritability, worthlessness, being overwhelmed by problems, anger and frustration toward the spouse, rejection by the spouse, optimism, and anxiety. Items 6, 8, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19, and 21 measure this dimension, with a possible range of 8 to 56.

- *Physical dimension of marital burnout:* This includes scores from items assessing fatigue, physical exhaustion, emptiness, generalized body pain, weakness, vulnerability to illness, and sleep disturbances. Items 1, 4, 7, 10, 16, and 20 measure this dimension, with a possible range of 6 to 42.

Reliability assessment indicated internal consistency between .84 and .90. Validity was demonstrated through negative correlations with positive relational qualities such as conversation quality, sense of security, sense of purpose, emotional attraction to the spouse, and sexual relationship quality. In the study by Adibrad and Adibrad (2005), test-retest reliability was reported as .89 over one month, .76 over two months, and .66 over four months. Internal consistency for most participants, measured by Cronbach's alpha, ranged from .91 to .93.

### 2.2.2. Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire

The Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (Gámez, Chmielewski, Kotov, Ruggero, & Watson, 2011) consists of 62 items across six subscales: behavioral avoidance, distress aversion, procrastination, distraction/suppression, denial/suppression, and distress endurance, measured on a 6-point Likert scale.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients in various samples ranged from .91 to .95, and its correlation with the Commitment and Action Questionnaire ( $r = .74$ ) indicated adequate 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/suppression), and .79 (distress endurance).

For validation in the Iranian population, the questionnaire was first translated into Persian by the authors, and following expert approval for readability and item clarity, Cronbach's alpha was calculated at .89, indicating good reliability.

### 2.2.3. Relationship Beliefs

The Relationship Beliefs Inventory (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982) consists of 40 items across five subscales. Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 0 (completely false) to 5 (completely true). The five subscales are: belief in the

destructiveness of disagreement, mindreading expectations, belief in the unchangeability of the partner, sexual perfectionism, and beliefs about gender differences.

In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales ranged from .72 to .81. The Persian version of this inventory was prepared by Mozafari and Pour-Etemad in 2003 using back-translation, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .75.

#### 2.2.4. Family Forgiveness

To assess marital forgiveness, the Family Forgiveness Scale (Pollard, Anderson, Anderson, & Jennings, 1998) was used. This instrument contains 40 items across two domains (nuclear family and couples) and evaluates five dimensions dichotomously (yes/no): realistic understanding, acknowledgment, compensation, apology, and improvement. This scale was standardized for Iranian families by Seif and Behari in 2001, with a reported reliability coefficient of .84.

#### 2.3. Data Analysis

To test the study's hypotheses, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed using AMOS version 24 with maximum likelihood estimation. SEM consisted of two components: the measurement model, which tested the ability of indicators to measure latent variables (evaluated via factor analysis), and the structural model, which tested the hypothesized relationships among the variables.

### 3. Findings and Results

In the present study, 300 married women who referred to 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 the duration of marriage were 12.98 and 2.66 years, respectively. In terms of education, 26 participants (8.7%) had a high school diploma, 146 participants (48.7%) held a bachelor's degree, 112 participants (37.3%) had a master's degree, and 16 participants (5.3%) held a doctoral degree.

**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Coefficients between Components of Experiential Avoidance, Relationship Beliefs, and Marital Burnout*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	–															
2	0.67	–														
3	0.46	0.53	–													
4	0.55	0.48	0.39	–												
5	0.49	0.54	0.52	0.42	–											
6	0.50	0.41	0.36	0.37	0.49	–										
7	0.17	0.23	0.08	0.14	0.14	-0.13	–									
8	0.01	0.15	0.13	0.04	0.14	0.09	0.24	–								
9	0.11	0.17	0.07	0.03	0.13	0.01	0.19	0.23	–							
10	0.02	0.08	0.10	0.08	0.17	0.04	0.19	0.30	0.44	–						
11	0.07	0.13	0.15	0.022	0.07	0.11	0.31	0.29	0.42	0.41	–					
12	-0.21	-0.23	-0.21	-0.25	-0.14	-0.09	-0.04	-0.02	-0.20	-0.10	-0.12	–				
13	-0.24	-0.19	-0.24	-0.24	-0.20	-0.15	-0.07	-0.02	-0.31	-0.16	-0.18	0.68	–			
14	0.14	0.27	0.32	0.23	0.28	0.09	0.08	0.10	0.26	0.14	0.27	-0.29	-0.40	–		
15	0.24	0.31	0.28	0.16	0.24	0.20	0.19	0.13	0.21	0.05	0.24	-0.47	-0.45	0.41	–	
16	0.23	0.39	0.31	0.18	0.29	0.11	0.21	0.15	0.23	0.14	0.23	-0.46	-0.49	0.54	0.65	–
Mean	34.40	37.63	19.67	22.51	25.61	34.79	15.61	17.91	19.62	21.52	17.68	40.33	45.84	20.82	28.41	22.43
Standard Deviation	7.98	8.77	4.48	5.63	6.13	7.17	3.40	4.47	4.60	4.48	4.11	8.05	9.78	5.04	6.13	6.61

1. Experiential Avoidance – Behavioral Avoidance; 2. Experiential Avoidance – Distress Aversion; 3. Experiential Avoidance – Procrastination; 4. Experiential Avoidance – Distraction/Suppression; 5. Experiential Avoidance – Denial/Suppression; 6. Experiential Avoidance – Distress Endurance; 7. Relationship Beliefs – Destructiveness of Disagreement; 8. Relationship Beliefs – Mindreading Expectation; 9. Relationship Beliefs – Unchangeability of Partner; 10. Relationship Beliefs – Sexual Perfectionism; 11. Relationship Beliefs – Gender Differences; 12. Forgiveness – Family of Origin; 13. Forgiveness – Nuclear Family; 14. Marital Burnout – Emotional; 15. Marital Burnout – Psychological; 16. Marital Burnout – Physical.

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients between the components of

experiential avoidance, relationship beliefs, and marital burnout. The direction of correlations among the variables



was consistent with the researcher's expectations and the theoretical framework of the study.

In this study, to assess the assumption of univariate normality, skewness and kurtosis of each variable were

examined, and to assess the assumption of multicollinearity, variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance were calculated. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Examination of the Assumptions of Normality and Multicollinearity*

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Tolerance	Variance Inflation Factor (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/Suppression	0.23	-0.88	0.53	1.90
Experiential Avoidance – Distress Endurance	-0.32	-0.97	0.64	1.57
Relationship Beliefs – Destructiveness of Disagreement	-0.43	0.26	0.79	1.27
Relationship Beliefs – Mindreading Expectation	-0.06	-0.51	0.80	1.25
Relationship Beliefs – Unchangeability of Partner	0.04	-0.47	0.63	1.58
Relationship Beliefs – Sexual Perfectionism	-0.19	-0.38	0.67	1.49
Relationship Beliefs – Gender Differences	-0.22	-0.65	0.68	1.47
Forgiveness – Family of Origin	0.21	-1.17	0.38	2.66
Forgiveness – Nuclear Family	-0.69	-0.98	0.34	2.96
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 normality of the data was met. Table 2 also shows that the assumption of multicollinearity was met in the present study, since the tolerance values of the predictor variables were greater than 0.10 and the variance inflation factor values of each were less than 10. According to Myers et al. (2006), a tolerance value less than 0.10 and a variance inflation factor greater than 10 indicate a violation of the multicollinearity assumption.

In this study, to assess the assumption of multivariate normality, Mahalanobis distance was analyzed. The skewness and kurtosis values of Mahalanobis distance were 0.71 and 0.93, respectively, indicating that the distribution of multivariate data was normal. Finally, to evaluate the assumption of homogeneity of variance, the scatter plot of standardized residual variances was examined, and the results confirmed that this assumption was also met in the data.

After evaluating the assumptions, the data were analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM) method. For this purpose, AMOS version 26.0 software and maximum likelihood estimation were employed. In the research model, it was hypothesized that experiential avoidance and relationship beliefs, mediated by forgiveness, predict marital burnout among married women who referred to counseling centers. As shown in Figure 1, in the research model, the indicators of behavioral avoidance, distress aversion, procrastination, distraction/suppression, denial/suppression, and distress endurance measured the latent variable of experiential avoidance. The indicators of destructiveness of disagreement, mindreading expectation, unchangeability of partner, sexual perfectionism, and gender differences measured the latent variable of relationship beliefs. The indicators of relational self-regulation and relational striving measured the latent variable of forgiveness, and the indicators of emotional burnout, psychological burnout, and physical burnout measured the latent variable of marital burnout. Table 3 presents the model fit indices.

**Table 3**

*Model Fit Indices*

Fit Indices	Model	Cut-off Point
Chi-square	239.93	–
Degrees of freedom	98	–
$\chi^2/df$	2.45	< 3
GFI	0.908	> 0.90
AGFI	0.873	> 0.85
CFI	0.923	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.070	< 0.08

Table 3 shows that all fit indices supported an acceptable model fit with the collected data. Based on this, it was concluded that the research model had an acceptable fit with

the data. Table 4 presents the path coefficients between variables in the structural model of the research.

**Table 4**

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

Effect	b	S.E	$\beta$	p
Direct				
Relationship Beliefs → Forgiveness	-0.978	0.486	-0.249	0.004
Experiential Avoidance → Forgiveness	-0.278	0.061	-0.273	0.001
Forgiveness → Marital Burnout	-0.420	0.063	-0.478	0.001
Relationship Beliefs → Marital Burnout	0.602	0.294	0.173	0.018
Experiential Avoidance → Marital Burnout	0.211	0.057	0.234	0.012
Indirect				
Relationship Beliefs → Marital Burnout	0.410	0.182	0.118	0.001
Experiential Avoidance → Marital Burnout	0.116	0.033	0.129	0.001
Total				
Relationship Beliefs → Marital Burnout	1.012	0.393	0.291	0.001
Experiential Avoidance → Marital Burnout	0.328	0.067	0.364	0.001

In this study, to estimate the standard error of indirect paths, the bootstrap method with a sample size of 2,000 was used.

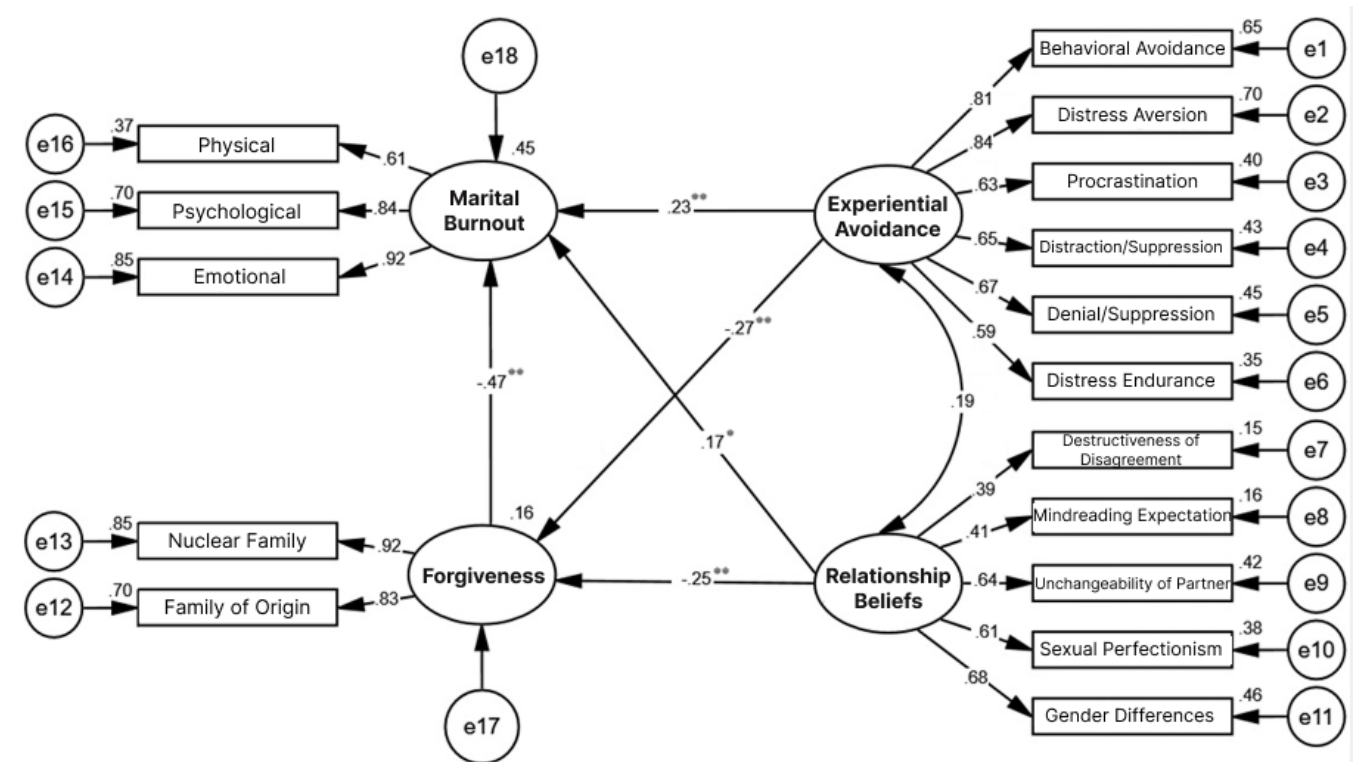
Table 4 shows that the total path coefficient between experiential avoidance ( $\beta = 0.364$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) on the one hand, and relationship beliefs ( $\beta = 0.291$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) on the other hand, with marital burnout was positive and significant. Table 4 also shows that the path coefficient between forgiveness and marital burnout ( $\beta = -0.478$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) was negative and significant. Based on the results of Table 4, the indirect path coefficient between experiential avoidance ( $\beta = 0.129$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) on the one hand, and relationship beliefs ( $\beta = 0.118$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) on the other hand, with marital burnout was positive and significant.

Accordingly, it was concluded that among married women who referred to counseling centers, forgiveness positively and significantly mediated the relationship between relationship beliefs and experiential avoidance with marital burnout.

Figure 1 presents the standardized parameters in the structural model of the study.

The figure shows that the squared multiple correlations ( $R^2$ ) for the marital burnout variable was 0.45. This indicates that experiential avoidance, relationship beliefs, and forgiveness together explained 45% of the variance in marital burnout among married women who referred to counseling centers.

Model with Beta Values



## Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how experiential avoidance and relationship beliefs predict marital burnout, with forgiveness as a mediating variable.



The results confirmed that experiential avoidance and dysfunctional relationship beliefs are significant positive predictors of marital burnout, while forgiveness demonstrates a strong negative effect, reducing the likelihood of burnout. The findings also revealed that forgiveness mediates the relationship between avoidance, beliefs, and marital burnout, explaining a substantial portion of the variance.

The direct relationship between experiential avoidance and marital burnout supports the view that the inability to tolerate and process unpleasant emotions or relational tensions can erode relationship quality. Avoidance not only limits communication but also prevents constructive problem-solving, leading to emotional and psychological exhaustion (Bardeen & Fergus, 2016). Studies on emotional dysregulation similarly emphasize that avoidance amplifies distress, resulting in negative consequences for both mental health and close relationships (Roush et al., 2019). Evidence from couples facing relational strain confirms that avoidance behaviors predict burnout and disaffection (Sultanali Zadeh et al., 2019; Yousefi et al., 2018). These findings reinforce the conclusion that experiential avoidance is a maladaptive strategy undermining marital resilience.

The finding that dysfunctional relationship beliefs predict marital burnout is also consistent with prior literature. Rigid beliefs such as mindreading expectations, unchangeability of the partner, and perfectionism lead to repeated disappointments and relational strain (Vahedinia et al., 2019; Yaghoutian et al., 2015). Research has confirmed that such beliefs increase conflict and reduce marital satisfaction (Dehghan Abolfazl, 2018). Other studies further demonstrate that communication beliefs are closely tied to conflict dynamics, which are themselves predictors of marital burnout (Hosseini et al., 2024; Nemati et al., 2015). The current findings thus align with this evidence, showing that cognitive distortions form a critical pathway to burnout.

One of the most notable findings of this research is the mediating role of forgiveness. The results showed that forgiveness significantly reduced the negative effects of experiential avoidance and relationship beliefs on marital burnout. Forgiveness enables couples to overcome anger and resentment, promoting empathy and reconciliation (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Consistent findings reveal that forgiveness is associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction and reduced risk of disaffection (Braithwaite et al., 2019). Moreover, forgiveness has been shown to serve as a mediator in different relational models, including the link between psychological hardness and marital burnout

(Zali et al., 2019) and the relationship between mindfulness and sexual satisfaction (Fatehi et al., 2021). The present findings extend this body of work, reinforcing forgiveness as a protective mechanism in marriages.

The protective capacity of forgiveness is supported by studies on related constructs such as self-compassion and empathy. Evidence shows that self-compassion predicts higher levels of forgiveness and lower levels of burnout through reduced self-criticism (Sharifi et al., 2024). Other studies also emphasize that self-compassion, empathy, and depression interact through marital forgiveness as a mediating factor (Ragabi et al., 2017). The results of the current study converge with these findings, indicating that forgiveness is a crucial emotional-cognitive resource that couples can cultivate to buffer against burnout.

These results also resonate with research on relational boredom and unmet expectations. Findings show that boredom is associated with judgments of relationship stagnation and declining satisfaction (Harasymchuk et al., 2021). Other studies found that differentiation, meaning in life, and forgiveness predict marital boredom and satisfaction (Kazemian Moghadam et al., 2017; Kazemian Moghaddam et al., 2021). Such evidence underscores that forgiveness plays a role in transforming negative relational schemas, reducing monotony, and fostering marital vitality.

In addition to psychological mechanisms, broader socio-cultural dynamics shape marital burnout. Research on sacred relational care highlights forgiveness as part of generative devotion that sustains family resilience (Dollahite et al., 2019). Emotional capital similarly acts as a relational resource that reduces stress and burnout (Walsh, 2019). Yet cultural narratives of endurance can perpetuate marital disaffection, as shown in studies reporting that social scripts may pressure individuals to remain in dissatisfying marriages (Liceaga, 2021). Furthermore, determinants of marital flourishing, such as emotional support and stability, provide protective effects, particularly in Asian contexts (Fahd & Hanif, 2019). Conversely, projection of attraction toward alternative partners generates anger and maladaptive behavior, reinforcing marital dissatisfaction (Neal & Lemay, 2019). These findings highlight the necessity of situating marital burnout in both psychological and cultural frameworks.

The negative association between forgiveness and burnout in this study also echoes intervention research. Positive psychotherapy has been shown to enhance forgiveness and well-being while reducing marital burnout (Elmimanesh & Zhaleh, 2018). Acceptance and

Commitment Therapy interventions demonstrated significant improvements in forgiveness and reductions in burnout (Najibzadegan et al., 2024). Other evidence suggests that marital self-regulation and intimacy mediate the effects of attachment styles on burnout (Pouya et al., 2025). Together with the current results, these findings show that interventions which foster forgiveness and reduce avoidance are effective strategies to prevent marital burnout.

The present study also resonates with research connecting avoidance to psychological vulnerabilities beyond marriage. Findings suggest that experiential avoidance is implicated in anxiety, depression, and heightened distress (Hershenberg et al., 2017; Seçer & Ulaş, 2021). Other studies emphasize that avoidance limits constructive relational engagement, creating conditions for marital dissatisfaction (Karimi et al., 2019; Roush et al., 2019). These insights confirm that avoidance is not only a clinical concern but also a relational one.

Studies in Iranian contexts support these findings. Evidence shows that marital conflicts and communication beliefs predict burnout in couples applying for divorce (Hosseini et al., 2024). Other research confirms that forgiveness mediates the link between marital attributions and burnout (Nazeran et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings align with the current results, emphasizing that addressing maladaptive beliefs and avoidance while fostering forgiveness is particularly relevant in Iranian cultural settings.

Moreover, the role of forgiveness is confirmed across diverse relational processes. Evidence shows that forgiveness among mothers of children with intellectual disabilities improved psychological outcomes (Nemati et al., 2015). Forgiveness has also been identified as a mediator between neuroticism, conflict, and disaffection (Sadati et al., 2015). Studies have further emphasized the importance of offense-specific forgiveness in predicting satisfaction (Piri & Shirazi, 2018). Collectively, these findings align with the current research, suggesting that forgiveness operates across contexts to reduce the negative impact of maladaptive cognitions and emotions on relationships.

Overall, the present findings support a multidimensional view of marital burnout, where experiential avoidance and irrational beliefs act as risk factors, and forgiveness operates as a powerful protective mediator. These results are consistent with prior studies showing that forgiveness characteristics predicted marital boredom (Khademi et al., 2016) and that attachment styles and impunity predicted marital conflicts (Moradi et al., 2017). Taken together, the

evidence underscores that marital burnout is best understood as an outcome of interacting cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms, with forgiveness offering a key pathway toward resilience.

#### 4. Suggestions and Limitations

Despite its contributions, the present study is not without limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences about the relationships among experiential avoidance, beliefs, forgiveness, and burnout. Although structural equation modeling provides insights into pathways, longitudinal data are necessary to confirm temporal precedence. Second, the reliance on self-report questionnaires may have introduced biases such as social desirability or self-perception errors. Future studies may benefit from multi-method approaches, including observational data or partner reports. Third, the sample was limited to married women from counseling centers in Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations, genders, or cultural contexts.

Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs to more precisely establish causal relationships between experiential avoidance, relationship beliefs, forgiveness, and marital burnout. Comparative studies across different cultural settings would also be valuable to examine how cultural scripts and values moderate these associations. Moreover, future studies should explore additional mediators such as self-compassion, meaning in life, or relational empathy, which may further clarify the mechanisms underlying marital burnout. Expanding research to include both partners in dyadic designs would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how forgiveness operates at the couple level.

In practice, the findings of this study suggest that marital interventions should target experiential avoidance and dysfunctional beliefs while fostering forgiveness. Therapists can integrate mindfulness-based strategies and ACT principles to reduce avoidance, restructure maladaptive cognitions, and enhance forgiveness. Couple-based programs that emphasize empathy, compassion, and cognitive flexibility may also serve as protective interventions against burnout. Finally, educational workshops that challenge irrational relationship beliefs and teach adaptive conflict resolution could prevent burnout in both clinical and community populations.

#### Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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