

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Couples Experiencing Emotional Divorce: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of couples experiencing emotional divorce and to identify the principal dimensions through which this phenomenon is perceived and experienced.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological design based on Colaizzi's approach. Twelve participants with lived experience of emotional divorce were selected through purposive sampling and participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Following verbatim transcription, the interview data were systematically coded and analyzed according to Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method to identify significant statements, formulated meanings, thematic clusters, and overarching themes. MAXQDA 2020 software was used for data management and coding. To enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings, several rigor-enhancing strategies were applied, including member checking with 10 participants, review and evaluation of the findings by three experts, and the involvement of 24 individuals in different stages of the data analysis and validation process.

Findings: The phenomenological analysis yielded five overarching themes representing the core dimensions of emotional divorce: cognitive factors, emotional-regulatory factors, affective factors, communicational factors, and sexual factors. The participants' accounts indicated that emotional divorce was experienced not as an abrupt relational rupture but as a progressive and multidimensional process involving the gradual erosion of cognitive engagement, emotional connection, affection, constructive communication, and sexual intimacy. These dimensions appeared to interact dynamically, generating a self-reinforcing cycle characterized by increasing emotional coldness, psychological distancing, relational disengagement, and declining hope for restoration of the marital relationship.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the importance of developing multidimensional couple-centered interventions and integrating communication skills training, emotion regulation, and emotional-sexual literacy into culturally sensitive preventive and therapeutic programs for Iranian couples.

Keywords: Emotional Divorce; Lived Experience; Couples; Phenomenology; Marital Relationships; Emotional Intimacy

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most significant interpersonal and social institutions through which individuals experience intimacy, attachment, emotional security, mutual support, identity development, and family formation. The quality of marital relationships therefore has substantial implications not only for the psychological well-being of spouses but also for family functioning and the broader social environment. Nevertheless, continuity of a legal marital bond does not necessarily indicate the persistence of emotional connection, affection, intimacy, or relational commitment. In some marriages, spouses remain legally and physically together while their emotional relationship progressively deteriorates to the point that the marriage becomes characterized by detachment, indifference, loneliness, and a loss of meaningful interpersonal connection. This condition is commonly conceptualized as emotional divorce. Emotional divorce can be understood as a relational state in which the formal structure of marriage persists while its affective and psychological foundations have substantially eroded. Research on marital processes has long demonstrated that relational deterioration is generally cumulative rather than instantaneous and may develop through repeated patterns of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, emotional withdrawal, unresolved conflict, and declining responsiveness between partners (Gottman, 2023). From this perspective, emotional divorce represents not merely dissatisfaction with marriage but a progressive relational process involving disengagement from the emotional, cognitive, communicative, and intimate dimensions of married life. Studies specifically examining emotional divorce similarly suggest that individuals may occupy the same marital structure while experiencing the relationship differently depending on their position, expectations, responsibilities, and interpretations of the marital bond (Damo & Cenci, 2021). In the Iranian context, emotional divorce has also been conceptualized as an important family and social issue situated at the intersection of psychological processes, social structures, and family law (Mohammadi Araghi & Kazemi Najafabadi, 2024). A systematic examination of its consequences further indicates that emotional divorce may disrupt multiple dimensions of family functioning and relational well-being, reinforcing its importance as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a narrowly defined marital problem (Najafi et al., 2025).

One of the most concerning characteristics of emotional divorce is that its consequences may extend well beyond

dissatisfaction between spouses. When the emotional bond between partners deteriorates while the formal marital relationship continues, individuals may experience chronic loneliness, hopelessness, emotional deprivation, insecurity, and psychological distress. Evidence from married women has shown that emotional divorce can be associated with adverse mental health outcomes, demonstrating that the erosion of emotional connection within marriage may become a substantial psychological burden (Al-Shahrani & Hammad, 2023). The consequences may also extend to other members of the family system. Research concerning parental divorce has demonstrated associations with emotional and psychological difficulties among children and adolescents, including difficulties in emotional regulation and adaptation (Mulyati et al., 2026). Similarly, network-based evidence indicates that parental divorce may contribute to the co-occurrence and interaction of depressive and social anxiety symptoms among adolescents and young adults (Zou et al., 2026). Although legal divorce and emotional divorce are conceptually distinct, these findings underscore a broader family-systems principle: severe deterioration in the parental relationship can influence the psychological environment in which family members function. Emotional divorce may therefore constitute a particularly complex condition because relational rupture occurs without necessarily producing physical separation, potentially exposing spouses and children to prolonged emotional tension, relational ambiguity, and chronic interpersonal disengagement. The consequences identified in systematic research on emotional divorce similarly suggest that its effects encompass personal, marital, familial, and social domains (Najafi et al., 2025). Understanding emotional divorce consequently requires attention not only to the observable condition of marital dissatisfaction but also to the subjective processes through which spouses experience the gradual loss of connection while remaining within the marriage.

Emotional processes occupy a central position in this deterioration. Emotions influence attention, judgment, interpersonal interpretation, memory, behavioral tendencies, and the way individuals understand both themselves and others within close relationships (Niedenthal & Ric, 2017). In distressed marriages, persistent negative affect, emotional reactivity, ineffective regulation, and reduced positive emotional exchange may gradually transform ordinary disagreements into stable relational patterns of withdrawal and alienation. Research on couples has demonstrated that emotional reactivity is meaningfully associated with marital quality and that perceived partner responsiveness can

function as an important mechanism through which emotional experiences influence the relationship (Yuan et al., 2022). When one partner perceives the other as unavailable, dismissive, or unresponsive, emotional expression may increasingly become associated with disappointment rather than intimacy, eventually encouraging suppression, withdrawal, or defensive responses. Emotional intelligence may also be relevant to the capacity to perceive, understand, regulate, and respond constructively to emotional experiences within marriage. Evidence from marital research has linked emotional intelligence to marital quality, suggesting that emotional competencies may contribute to more adaptive interaction between spouses (Kamau et al., 2021). More broadly, research on emotional regulation demonstrates that developmental and relational experiences are associated with the cognitive strategies individuals use to manage emotions (Beyazit et al., 2024). These findings are particularly relevant to emotional divorce because individuals experiencing chronic marital strain may gradually rely on maladaptive cognitive-emotional strategies such as rumination, catastrophizing, blame, emotional suppression, negative interpretation, or disengagement. Emotional divorce may therefore be sustained through reciprocal cycles in which negative emotions alter cognitions about the spouse and relationship, while increasingly negative cognitions intensify emotional withdrawal and hopelessness.

Cognitive processes are closely intertwined with these emotional dynamics. Spouses enter marriage with beliefs, expectations, assumptions, values, role perceptions, and anticipated models of reciprocity. When such expectations remain inflexible, unrealistic, or chronically unmet, relational dissatisfaction may deepen. Research has demonstrated that marital expectations may mediate the relationship between basic psychological needs and emotional divorce, highlighting the significance of interpretive frameworks through which individuals evaluate whether the relationship satisfies their needs and expectations (Habibi et al., 2022). Cognitive appraisals concerning fairness, respect, responsibility, sacrifice, partner intentions, and the future of the relationship may become progressively more negative as conflicts remain unresolved. Once spouses develop persistent beliefs that communication is useless, change is impossible, the partner cannot be trusted, or the relationship no longer has a meaningful future, the motivation to engage in relational repair may decline considerably. Research in other decision-making contexts

likewise illustrates how goals and future-oriented motivations can shape intentions to remain in or leave important social environments, emphasizing the broader psychological importance of perceived goals and future possibilities in major life decisions (Gordeeva et al., 2024). In marital relationships, the absence of shared goals and a coherent sense of relational future may similarly contribute to meaninglessness and psychological distancing. Thus, emotional divorce may involve a cognitive transformation in which marriage is no longer perceived as a shared project but instead as a structure maintained through habit, obligation, social pressure, concern for children, economic constraints, or fear of formal separation.

Communication constitutes another central mechanism through which emotional divorce develops and becomes stabilized. Marital relationships depend substantially on partners' capacity to express needs, listen actively, interpret messages accurately, negotiate differences, resolve disagreements, repair emotional injuries, and maintain everyday interpersonal engagement. Long-term research on marital stability has repeatedly emphasized the predictive importance of interaction patterns in determining marital outcomes (Gottman, 2023). When communication becomes dominated by avoidance, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, silence, misunderstanding, or escalating conflict, opportunities for repair become increasingly limited. Empirical evidence indicates that family communication patterns can predict emotional divorce and that marital burnout may function as an important intermediary process in this association (Faraji et al., 2024). Conflict-management processes are similarly important. The relationship between marital conflict and emotional divorce may differ according to the conflict-resolution styles spouses employ, indicating that conflict itself may be less decisive than the manner in which partners respond to and manage disagreement (Afkhani Poustchi & Alidousti, 2022). Structural research among couples at risk of divorce further suggests that communication skills and marital conflict are embedded within a broader network involving personality characteristics, attachment styles, and early maladaptive schemas (Rahiman et al., 2023). In addition, emotional divorce has been modeled in relation to conflict-resolution styles, personality characteristics, and marital burnout, further emphasizing its complex and interactive nature (Sadeghkhani et al., 2023). Collectively, these findings suggest that communication dysfunction is not simply a symptom of emotional divorce; rather, repeated failures of

communication and conflict repair may actively accelerate emotional disengagement.

Marital burnout provides another useful framework for understanding the gradual nature of emotional divorce. Burnout in close relationships may emerge when persistent relational demands are accompanied by repeated disappointment, inadequate reciprocity, unmet needs, and a declining expectation that the relationship can improve. Over time, individuals may reduce emotional investment as a means of protecting themselves from further disappointment. Research among women experiencing emotional divorce has shown that interventions targeting emotional processes can reduce marital burnout, suggesting that emotional schemas and emotion-focused mechanisms are closely related to the maintenance of marital disengagement (Pourabbas Vafa et al., 2022). Schema therapy has likewise demonstrated beneficial effects on quality of life and marital satisfaction among men experiencing emotional divorce, indicating that deeply rooted beliefs and relational schemas may constitute meaningful intervention targets (Kavosh Melli & Moheb, 2022). Interpersonal research among women has further identified a range of relational factors associated with emotional divorce, reinforcing the importance of everyday interpersonal experiences in the development of emotional detachment (Rashid et al., 2019). These findings indicate that emotional divorce is unlikely to result from a single conflict, personality characteristic, or unmet need. Rather, it may emerge through the accumulation of relational disappointments in which emotional needs remain unrecognized, personal sacrifices are perceived as unequal, appreciation declines, and spouses increasingly experience themselves as psychologically alone within the relationship.

The social and cultural context in which couples live also shapes how emotional divorce develops, is interpreted, and is managed. Marriage is embedded within cultural expectations concerning gender roles, family obligations, parenthood, social reputation, economic responsibilities, sexuality, and the legitimacy of separation. Consequently, spouses may remain in emotionally depleted marriages for reasons that cannot be understood exclusively through intrapsychic or interpersonal variables. Research conducted among couples attending counseling centers has identified social and cultural factors associated with tendencies toward emotional divorce, emphasizing the contextual nature of the phenomenon (Aghajani et al., 2025). In Iran, emotional divorce has also attracted attention from perspectives integrating social sciences and family law, particularly

because the persistence of the legal marriage alongside the deterioration of the relational bond creates complicated questions concerning family functioning, rights, obligations, and social welfare (Mohammadi Araghi & Kazemi Najafabadi, 2024). Social expectations may therefore simultaneously contribute to marital continuity and emotional disconnection. For example, concerns regarding children, economic dependence, stigma associated with formal divorce, extended-family pressures, or culturally prescribed gender roles may encourage partners to preserve the external form of marriage despite profound internal relational deterioration. Such contextual dynamics are particularly important for understanding women's experiences, as unequal expectations concerning domestic labor, emotional caregiving, sacrifice, obedience, or responsibility for preserving family cohesion may influence how emotional divorce is perceived and endured.

Intimacy represents another essential dimension of the marital relationship and includes emotional, affectionate, communicative, physical, and sexual components. Sexual intimacy is not isolated from other aspects of marital functioning; rather, it is embedded within feelings of trust, emotional safety, responsiveness, affection, and mutual recognition. When relational distress becomes chronic, declining sexual intimacy may operate simultaneously as an outcome and a reinforcing mechanism of emotional distance. Evidence indicates that sexual education can improve the quality of marital relationships, illustrating the contribution of sexual knowledge and communication to broader relational functioning (Navidian et al., 2016). Couple-oriented interventions have also demonstrated that addressing relational processes can improve marital quality even in contexts involving substantial health-related stress, such as gynecological cancer (Zhang et al., 2022). These findings highlight the capacity of couple-focused approaches to address relational quality through mutual communication, support, and engagement. Similarly, qualitative research examining couples with a history of unsuccessful mutual-consent divorce has highlighted processes involved in reconstructing emotional bonds, suggesting that emotional connection can be understood as a dynamic relational process that may deteriorate but may also, under appropriate conditions, be rebuilt (Mousavikia et al., 2024). Therefore, reduced sexual intimacy, avoidance of physical closeness, and experiences of sexual rejection in emotional divorce should be understood within the wider relational system rather than interpreted solely as sexual dysfunction.

Despite the growing body of quantitative research identifying predictors, correlates, mediators, and consequences of emotional divorce, statistical associations alone cannot fully capture how individuals subjectively experience the gradual erosion of a marital bond. Emotional divorce is fundamentally experiential: spouses interpret silence, rejection, failed conversations, unmet needs, habitual routines, relational sacrifices, and sexual distance through meanings developed over time. The same observable marital behavior may hold very different meanings for different individuals depending on personal history, expectations, attachment experiences, cultural context, and previous interactions within the relationship. Qualitative phenomenological inquiry is particularly valuable when the objective is to understand how individuals make sense of complex experiences that involve multiple overlapping emotional and relational processes. Interpretative phenomenological research among couples experiencing traumatic birth, for example, has demonstrated the value of investigating the psychosocial meanings that partners construct around intense shared experiences rather than reducing such experiences to isolated variables (Gregory & Maddern, 2025). Likewise, hermeneutic-phenomenological research on relationship quality among couples living with dementia illustrates the value of phenomenological approaches for revealing nuanced relational experiences, interpersonal meanings, and processes that may remain obscured in standardized measurement (Stedje et al., 2026). Earlier qualitative research on emotional divorce has similarly demonstrated that the phenomenon may be perceived differently according to the relational position occupied by the individual, further supporting the need to examine emotional divorce from the standpoint of lived experience (Damo & Cenci, 2021).

A phenomenological perspective is particularly appropriate because emotional divorce cannot be adequately represented as a simple dichotomy between intact and dissolved marriages. It is better conceptualized as a process involving changes in perception, meaning, emotion, communication, intimacy, and expectations about the future. Existing evidence separately identifies marital conflict, communication patterns, emotional responsiveness, schemas, expectations, marital burnout, psychological needs, emotional intelligence, conflict-resolution styles, and social-cultural conditions as relevant to marital quality or emotional divorce (Afkhami Poustchi & Alidousti, 2022; Faraji et al., 2024; Habibi et al., 2022; Sadeghkhanian et al., 2023). However, couples do not ordinarily experience these

variables as separate constructs. In everyday marital life, a partner's failure to listen may simultaneously be experienced as disrespect, emotional rejection, evidence of inequality, and confirmation that the relationship has no future. Similarly, declining sexual intimacy may be interpreted as lack of affection, diminished attraction, emotional abandonment, or loss of personal worth. Understanding the phenomenon therefore requires an integrative examination of how cognitive, emotional, affective, communicational, and sexual experiences intersect within the lived reality of the relationship. Such knowledge is also clinically important because interventions targeting only a single dimension may overlook the reciprocal processes that sustain emotional disengagement. The effectiveness of emotional, schema-based, couple-oriented, and relational interventions reported in previous studies indicates that multiple components of marital functioning are potentially modifiable (Kavosh Melli & Moheb, 2022; Pourabbas Vafa et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022), but intervention development can be strengthened by first clarifying how individuals themselves understand the pathways through which emotional divorce develops and persists.

Accordingly, although existing studies have substantially advanced knowledge regarding the predictors and consequences of emotional divorce, important gaps remain concerning the integrated subjective experience of the phenomenon, particularly within the Iranian sociocultural context. Quantitative studies can identify statistically significant relationships, but they provide limited access to the meanings individuals assign to emotional withdrawal, perceived rejection, loss of intimacy, communication breakdown, unmet relational needs, hopelessness, and continuation of an emotionally depleted marriage. Moreover, evidence concerning mental health consequences (Al-Shahrani & Hammad, 2023), interpersonal determinants (Rashid et al., 2019), communication and conflict processes (Faraji et al., 2024; Rahiman et al., 2023), and sociocultural influences (Aghajani et al., 2025) suggests that emotional divorce should be examined as a multidimensional relational process rather than as a single psychological outcome. An in-depth exploration of lived experience may therefore help identify not only what difficulties occur but how they are interconnected in participants' perceptions, how emotional distance accumulates over time, and how spouses interpret their own position within a marriage whose legal structure remains intact while its emotional foundation progressively deteriorates. Such knowledge may contribute to culturally responsive assessment, prevention, couple counseling, and

therapeutic intervention by identifying the domains that are most salient to individuals who directly experience emotional divorce.

Therefore, the present study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of couples experiencing emotional divorce through a descriptive phenomenological approach.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study adopted a qualitative approach and employed Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method to achieve an in-depth and multidimensional understanding of the lived experiences of couples experiencing emotional divorce. The primary objective was to elucidate the meaning and conceptual structure of emotional divorce from the couples' perspectives. This phenomenological approach enabled the exploration of deeper layers of perceptions, emotions, and meanings that individuals construct within the context of their lived experiences.

The study population consisted of couples with experience of emotional divorce residing in Yazd, Iran. In descriptive qualitative research, sample size is determined based on "thematic saturation," meaning that sampling continues until no substantial new themes emerge from subsequent interviews compared with previous interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Sampling was therefore continued until thematic and data saturation was achieved. Following interviews with 12 participants, the researcher determined that saturation had been reached. The participants' mean age was 34.5 years (range: 27–41 years), and their mean duration of marriage was 13.8 years (range: 5–18 years). Regarding educational attainment, five participants held bachelor's degrees, four had high school diplomas, two had completed middle school education, and one held a master's degree. This diversity in demographic characteristics facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Prior to conducting the interviews, an interview protocol was carefully developed to ensure that the main questions addressed key dimensions of emotional divorce and the factors contributing to its development. The interview questions focused primarily on eliciting the participants' lived experiences and their perceptions of the meaning of emotional divorce. Several probing questions were also developed to deepen participants' responses and

obtain richer and more detailed information. Depending on the opportunities available to participants, each interview lasted between 50 and 75 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online according to participant preference.

The inclusion criteria for the qualitative phase included obtaining a score above the mean on Gottman's (1998) 20-item unidimensional questionnaire, willingness to participate and provision of informed consent to respond to the questions, adequate cognitive functioning and literacy to understand and appropriately respond to the interview questions, and the absence of acute or chronic physical or psychological disorders based on a self-report form. The exclusion criteria included the presence of an acute or chronic physical or psychological disorder, withdrawal from continued participation in the study, and lack of sufficient readiness to engage in the research process.

Adherence to ethical principles was a primary priority throughout the study. Accordingly, before each interview, the research objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any stage, and the commitment to maintaining complete confidentiality of participants' information were explained in detail. Written or electronic informed consent was subsequently obtained. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission, and the audio files were deleted after accurate transcription. To protect participant identity, numerical codes were used instead of participants' real names, and all potentially identifying information was removed.

Data analysis was conducted using the seven stages of Colaizzi's (1978) method, including: (1) repeated reading of the interview transcripts to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences; (2) extraction of significant and meaningful statements; (3) formulation of meanings; (4) clustering the formulated meanings into organized themes; (5) development of an exhaustive description of the phenomenon; (6) identification of the fundamental structure of the experience; and (7) finalization and validation of the findings. Throughout these stages, MAXQDA 2020 software was used for the management, coding, and organization of the qualitative data.

To enhance the credibility and dependability of the qualitative findings, several established strategies commonly employed in qualitative research were implemented. First, member checking was conducted with 10 of the original participants. A summary of the preliminary findings and the researcher's interpretations was provided to these participants so that they could confirm the extent to

which the findings corresponded with their lived experiences and suggest necessary revisions in the event of any misunderstanding or inaccurate interpretation. Subsequently, for independent evaluation, the extracted data, codes, and themes, together with a report describing the analytical process, were provided to three experts in qualitative psychology and couple therapy, each with at least 10 years of research and professional experience. These experts carefully reviewed the research design, analytical procedures, and final findings and provided their assessments regarding the accuracy, depth, and practical

relevance of the results. In addition, comprehensive documentation of the research process, including all stages of data collection, coding procedures, analytical decisions made by the researcher, and evidence supporting the analyses, was systematically recorded and maintained. This documentation provided an audit trail that could be reviewed by independent researchers or reviewers and contributed to the transparency, traceability, and overall trustworthiness of the study findings. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees in the Qualitative Phase

No.	Age	Duration of Marriage (Years)	Occupation	Number of Children	Education
1	32	8	Homemaker	1	High school diploma
2	38	12	Employed	2	Bachelor's degree
3	29	16	Homemaker	0	Middle school
4	41	15	Employed	2	Bachelor's degree
5	35	10	Homemaker	1	High school diploma
6	41	18	Homemaker	3	Master's degree
7	27	7	Homemaker	1	High school diploma
8	29	14	Employed	2	Bachelor's degree
9	32	18	Homemaker	4	Middle school
10	36	12	Employed	1	Bachelor's degree
11	34	9	Homemaker	2	High school diploma
12	40	26	Homemaker	3	Bachelor's degree

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 12 women who participated in the qualitative phase. The participants' mean age was 34.5 years (range: 27–41 years), and their mean duration of marriage was 13.75 years (range: 7–26 years). Based on the data presented, the distribution of educational attainment among the 12 participants indicated that a bachelor's degree was the most frequent educational level, reported by five participants (41.67%). This was followed by a high school diploma among four participants (33.33%), middle school education among two participants (16.67%), and a master's degree among one participant (8.33%). This distribution indicates diversity in educational attainment, with a greater concentration of participants holding high school diplomas and bachelor's degrees. The number of children ranged from 0 to 4, and the majority of participants, eight women (66.67%), were homemakers, while four (33.33%) were employed.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, the findings were extracted and organized based on an in-depth analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. The analytical process involved repeated examination of the interview transcripts and identification of meaningful statements, which were subsequently organized into conceptual clusters and overarching themes representing the lived experiences of couples experiencing emotional divorce. The findings indicate that these factors could be organized into several major themes and associated subthemes that represent different dimensions of the lived experiences of emotional divorce and provide a comprehensive and multidimensional representation of the participants' experiences. A summary of the qualitative findings and the coding of concepts derived from the in-depth analysis of the semi-structured interviews is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of Themes Extracted from the Lived Experiences of Couples Experiencing Emotional Divorce

Theme	Cluster	Formulated Meanings (Initial Codes)	Frequency
Cognitive Factors	Cognitive Distortions	Belief in stereotypical roles	8
		Unrealistic expectations	6
		Belief in one's own superiority	7
		Disparagement of opinions	6
		Distorted expectations	5
	Meaninglessness in the Relationship	Lack of shared goals	7
		Feeling of purposelessness	6
		Feeling that the relationship has become habitual	6
		Lack of authenticity in the relationship	5
		Avoidance of future planning	6
	Decision-Making Dysfunction	Inability to solve problems	6
	Negative Beliefs	Pessimism about the future of the relationship	7
		Total	67
Emotional Factors	Psychological Distress	Hopelessness about the relationship	9
		Feeling of emotional isolation	8
		Lack of happiness in life	7
		Reduced positive emotions	6
		Feeling compelled to tolerate the relationship	6
		Regret for the past of the relationship	5
		Lack of sustained happiness	6
	Affective Distortions	Persistent blaming	7
		Perceived inequality in effort	6
		Perceived inequality in sacrifice	6
		Disparagement of sensitivities	5
		Feeling of compulsory self-sacrifice	5
	Negative Self-Perception	Feeling worthless	6
		Loss of identity within the relationship	6
		Lack of freedom in self-expression	5
		Self-destructive behavior within the relationship	5
		Total	88
Affective Factors	Lack of Intimacy	Reduced emotional intimacy	10
		Reduced shared happiness	8
		Reduced time spent together	7
		Reduced shared activities	6
		Need for shared positive experiences	6
	Emotional Needs	Need for affection and attention	9
		Need for attention and appreciation	7
		Need for respect	7
		Need for trust	6
		Need for mutual respect	6
	Affective Dysfunction	Need for affection to build trust	6
		Lack of empathy	8
		Inability to express emotions	6
		Disparagement of emotions	6
		Neglect of needs	6
	Feelings of Rejection	Spousal self-centeredness	5
		Neglect of feelings	5
		Feeling rejected	7
		Feeling ignored	7
		Lack of emotional support	7
		Lack of appreciation	6
		Feeling unloved	6
		Lack of emotional security	6
		Feeling of having no place in the relationship	5

		Total	151
Communication Factors	Communication Dysfunction	Lack of active listening	10
		Avoidance of conversation	8
		Lack of responsiveness in conversation	7
		Misunderstandings in interactions	6
		Termination of conversations	6
		Fear of judgment	6
		Misunderstandings during conversation	5
		Fear of escalating conflict	5
		Misunderstandings related to humor	5
		Postponement of conversation	5
		Misunderstandings related to criticism	5
	Conflict-Resolution Dysfunction	Inability to resolve conflict	9
		Use of nonconstructive strategies	7
		Exhaustion from recurrent conflicts	6
		Inequality in conflict resolution	6
Lack of Communication Skills	Lack of Communication Skills	Nonconstructive emotional reactions	5
		Inability to communicate effectively	8
		Need for effective communication	7
Communication Isolation	Communication Isolation	Reduced daily interactions	7
		Indifference toward shared responsibilities	6
		Lack of shared aspirations	6
		Indifference toward daily interactions	6
		Lack of shared happiness	5
		Total	133
Sexual Factors	Sexual Dysfunction	Reduced sexual intimacy	9
		Avoidance of sexual intimacy	7
		Rejection in intimate situations	6
		Total	22

According to the results presented in Table 2, the lived experiences of couples experiencing emotional divorce were organized into five overarching themes and 14 meaning clusters.

Theme 1: Cognitive Factors

This theme reflects participants' experiences of the emergence and persistence of emotional divorce within a context of distorted cognitive patterns, perceived meaninglessness, and dysfunctional decision-making; patterns that gradually render the individual's perceptions of the self, the spouse, and the future of the relationship increasingly negative, rigid, and hopeless. This theme was categorized into four meaning clusters. Within the cognitive distortions cluster, participants referred to stereotypical roles and one-sided judgments. Participant 7 stated, "My husband thinks that I should only do the housework and that my opinion does not matter," while Participant 12 remarked, "Whenever I want to express my opinion, he says, 'You don't understand; let me make the decision.'" These beliefs reinforce feelings of inequality and a lack of cognitive autonomy within the relationship. Within the meaninglessness in the relationship cluster, participants described marriage as having become devoid of purpose and

authenticity. Participant 2 stated, "I feel like I have no purpose in this life; I'm just getting through the days," while Participant 9 said, "I feel like our life has just become a habit, not a real relationship," accompanied by the perception that "We never make plans together anymore; it is as if we have no future." The decision-making dysfunction cluster was characterized by an inability to address problems jointly and becoming trapped in decision-making impasses. Participants 1 and 6 reported, respectively, "Whenever a problem comes up, he just stays silent and nothing gets resolved," and "Whenever I try to talk to him about the future, he changes the subject." Within the negative beliefs cluster, pessimism regarding the future of the relationship and the possibility of change was particularly prominent. Participant 10 stated, "I can't even feel hopeful about our future anymore," while Participant 4 remarked, "I think I would feel more at ease if we separated, but I tolerate it because of the children." Overall, this theme indicates that emotional divorce is not merely a form of emotional coldness but rather the outcome of a network of cognitive distortions, meaninglessness, and hopelessness shaping women's perceptions of their marital relationships.

Theme 2: Emotional Factors

This theme reflects participants' experiences of emotional exhaustion, psychological distress, and the development of a negative self-image in the context of emotional divorce, a condition in which married life becomes a source of fatigue, hopelessness, and diminished self-worth rather than a source of psychological comfort. This theme was categorized into three meaning clusters. Within the psychological distress cluster, women expressed distress related to a lack of happiness, hopelessness, and feeling compelled to tolerate the relationship. Participant 7 stated, "I feel like I'm never happy in this life," and Participant 2 added, "I haven't experienced real happiness for a long time," while Participant 11 described her experience by saying, "I feel like I am just enduring this life." Within the affective distortions cluster, emotions were primarily experienced in the form of blame, inequality, and one-sided sacrifice. Participant 1 stated, "I always feel like he blames me, even when I haven't done anything wrong." Participant 11 said, "I feel like I am always the one who has to give in in this relationship," while Participant 8 stated, "When I talk to him about my feelings, he makes fun of me." Within the negative self-perception cluster, participants described the gradual erosion of their personal worth and identity within the relationship. Participant 1 stated, "I feel like I can never recognize my own value in this relationship." Participant 4 said, "I feel like I can never find myself in this life," and Participant 5 remarked, "I feel like I am simply losing myself in this relationship." This theme indicates that, for women, emotional divorce is associated with chronic emotional exhaustion and a progressive disconnection from the self.

Theme 3: Affective Factors

This theme reflects the affective essence of emotional divorce in the form of the deterioration of intimacy, chronic frustration of emotional needs, and a profound experience of rejection within the marital relationship. This theme was categorized into four meaning clusters. Within the lack of intimacy cluster, women described the gradual cooling of the emotional bond and the depletion of warmth and intimacy from married life. Participant 3 stated, "I don't have any feelings for him anymore; we just live beside each other," while Participant 6 said, "We don't even laugh together anymore; everything has become repetitive and lifeless." Participant 8 stated, "Since we had children, we have never spent time alone together." Within the emotional needs cluster, unmet needs for affection, attention, and respect were prominent. Participant 2 stated, "I think if he showed

me affection, I would feel closer to him too," and Participant 3 said, "I think if he respected me a little more, things would be different," while Participant 4 remarked, "He never says, 'I love you,' even when I say it myself." Within the affective dysfunction cluster, the absence of empathy and responsiveness to feelings was emphasized. Participant 10 stated, "I can't even talk to him about my problems anymore because he doesn't understand me at all," while Participant 7 said, "My husband never understands that I also need support." Participant 1 similarly stated, "When I talk about my feelings, he makes fun of me." The feelings of rejection cluster represented another dimension of this theme. Participant 3 stated, "I feel lonely even when I am beside him; it is as if I live alone," while Participant 6 said, "I feel like I am never seen in this relationship, as if I am invisible." This theme demonstrates that, in women's lived experiences, emotional divorce essentially represents living in a relationship in which physical presence coexists with emotional absence.

Theme 4: Communication Factors

This theme reflects pervasive dysfunction within the couples' communication system, encompassing listening, dialogue, conflict resolution, and everyday interactions, thereby contributing to the continuation of emotional divorce. This theme was categorized into four meaning clusters. Within the communication dysfunction cluster, women described a lack of active listening and avoidance of conversation. For example, Participant 6 stated, "My husband doesn't listen to me at all; it is as if I don't matter to him," while Participant 2 said, "Whenever I want to talk to him, he is either on his phone or says he is tired." Within the conflict-resolution dysfunction cluster, recurrent and unresolved conflicts were particularly prominent. For example, Participant 11 stated, "I am tired of these repetitive arguments; we never reach any resolution," while Participant 12 said, "When we argue, he never apologizes; it is as if I am always the one at fault." Within the lack of communication skills cluster, participants described an inability to communicate effectively and recurrent misunderstandings. For example, Participant 4 stated, "I don't know how to communicate with him anymore because he just doesn't understand," and Participant 7 remarked, "Whenever I try to joke with him, he always takes it the wrong way." The communication isolation cluster reflected a reduction in everyday interactions and withdrawal from shared life. For example, Participant 2 stated, "We never go anywhere together anymore; it is as if we are just stuck at home," while Participant 10 said, "I can't even talk to him

about my day anymore because he is indifferent.” This theme indicates that emotional divorce develops within a deteriorated communication structure in which dialogue and conflict resolution, rather than serving restorative functions, themselves become sources of distance and emotional coldness.

Theme 5: Sexual Factors

This theme represents the sexual dimension of the relationship as one of the important domains in which emotional divorce becomes manifest and is further intensified; a domain characterized simultaneously by reduced sexual intimacy, avoidance of sexual relations, and experiences of sexual rejection. This theme was categorized within a single cluster, namely sexual dysfunction. Participants described declining sexual desire and their spouses’ avoidance of sexual intimacy. Participant 12 stated, “Whenever I want to be intimate with him, he says, ‘Not now, maybe later,’” while Participant 7 stated, “Whenever I want to be intimate with him, I feel like he has no desire at all.” This condition was accompanied by the experience of sexual rejection. Participant 4 stated, “I can’t get close to him anymore because he always pushes me away,” and, as a consequence of this experience, Participant 8 remarked, “I can’t show him affection anymore because I feel like it is pointless.” This theme indicates that sexual dysfunction is both a consequence of emotional coldness and a factor that further intensifies feelings of worthlessness, insecurity, and physical-emotional distance within the marital relationship, thereby constituting one of the major points at which the emotional and physical bond between spouses becomes disrupted.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of couples experiencing emotional divorce using a descriptive phenomenological approach. Analysis of the participants’ narratives revealed five overarching themes: cognitive factors, emotional factors, affective factors, communication factors, and sexual factors. Collectively, these findings indicate that emotional divorce is not experienced as a single event or an abrupt disappearance of affection; rather, it develops as a progressive and multidimensional process in which dysfunctional beliefs, emotional exhaustion, unmet affective needs, deteriorating communication, and declining sexual intimacy interact with one another. Participants described a gradual transition from dissatisfaction to psychological disengagement, in which the

marital relationship remained formally intact while its emotional and relational foundations progressively weakened. This interpretation is consistent with conceptualizations of emotional divorce as a condition in which spouses continue to occupy the marital relationship while becoming psychologically and emotionally disconnected from one another (Damo & Cenci, 2021). It is also compatible with Gottman’s view that marital deterioration develops through recurring negative interaction patterns, unresolved conflicts, criticism, withdrawal, and failures of relational repair rather than through a single isolated incident (Gottman, 2023). The present findings therefore extend previous quantitative evidence by showing how these processes are subjectively experienced and interconnected in the everyday lives of individuals undergoing emotional divorce.

The first major theme concerned cognitive factors and included cognitive distortions, meaninglessness in the relationship, dysfunctional decision-making, and negative beliefs about the future of the marriage. Participants described stereotypical expectations regarding marital roles, perceived superiority of one spouse, dismissal of personal opinions, unrealistic expectations, lack of common goals, inability to solve problems jointly, and pessimism about the possibility of relational improvement. These findings suggest that emotional divorce is partly sustained by a cognitive system through which the relationship, spouse, and future are increasingly interpreted in rigid and negative ways. This interpretation is consistent with findings showing that marital expectations play an important role in emotional divorce and may mediate the association between psychological needs and relational disengagement (Habibi et al., 2022). When expectations regarding affection, responsibility, support, reciprocity, or marital roles are repeatedly violated, partners may progressively interpret the relationship as unfair, meaningless, or incapable of satisfying fundamental needs. The present results are also consistent with research showing that early maladaptive schemas and related cognitive structures are involved in communication problems and marital conflict among couples at risk of divorce (Rahiman et al., 2023). Similarly, the reported effectiveness of schema therapy in improving marital satisfaction and quality of life among individuals experiencing emotional divorce suggests that underlying beliefs and cognitive schemas constitute important mechanisms in the persistence of marital disengagement (Kavosh Melli & Moheb, 2022).

The experience of meaninglessness identified in the present study appears particularly important because several participants described their marital lives as repetitive, habitual, purposeless, and disconnected from a shared future. In this condition, marriage no longer seemed to be experienced as a jointly constructed life project but instead as an arrangement sustained through routine, necessity, concern for children, or perceived obligation. Although research examining goal-related processes has often been conducted in contexts other than marriage, evidence indicates that personally meaningful, relational, and future-oriented goals influence major decisions regarding whether individuals remain in or leave important social contexts (Gordeeva et al., 2024). Applied to marriage, the absence of shared goals and a believable common future may reduce commitment to relational repair and reinforce the perception that continued investment is futile. Moreover, social and cultural factors can contribute to emotional divorce by shaping expectations regarding marriage, gender roles, family responsibilities, and the perceived acceptability of separation (Aghajani et al., 2025). This may explain why participants could simultaneously perceive their marriage as emotionally meaningless while continuing to remain within it. In the Iranian sociocultural context, emotional divorce may therefore involve a tension between psychological disengagement and structural or social continuity, a phenomenon also recognized in analyses of emotional divorce from social-scientific and family-law perspectives (Mohammadi Araghi & Kazemi Najafabadi, 2024).

The second major theme, emotional factors, included psychological distress, affective distortions, and negative self-perception. Participants reported hopelessness, emotional isolation, lack of happiness, diminished positive emotions, feelings of compulsory endurance, persistent blaming, perceived inequality in sacrifice, diminished self-worth, and loss of personal identity within the marital relationship. These experiences indicate that emotional divorce may gradually transform marriage from a source of emotional security into a source of psychological strain. This finding is directly consistent with evidence demonstrating an adverse association between emotional divorce and the mental health of married women (Al-Shahrani & Hammad, 2023). Emotional deterioration within intimate relationships is likely to influence not only mood but also the individual's interpretation of personal value, relational competence, and emotional safety. From an emotion psychology perspective, emotions influence cognition, judgment, memory, interpersonal perception, and behavioral tendencies;

consequently, chronic negative emotional experiences can contribute to increasingly negative appraisals of both the self and the relationship (Niedenthal & Ric, 2017). This may explain the reciprocal process observed in participants' accounts: repeated disappointment and emotional invalidation generated negative feelings, while those feelings reinforced hopeless interpretations of the marriage and motivated further withdrawal.

The findings concerning emotional exhaustion and negative emotional processing are also consistent with previous evidence emphasizing emotion-regulation mechanisms in relational functioning. Emotional reactivity has been associated with marital quality, and perceived partner responsiveness has been identified as an important mechanism through which emotional experiences affect intimate relationships (Yuan et al., 2022). In the present study, participants repeatedly described their spouses as unresponsive, dismissive, or emotionally unavailable. Under such circumstances, emotional disclosure may cease to function as a means of creating intimacy and may instead become associated with ridicule, disappointment, or rejection. Emotional competencies may therefore be particularly important in preventing the progression from conflict to emotional disengagement. Research has associated emotional intelligence with marital quality (Kamau et al., 2021), while studies of cognitive emotion regulation have shown that interpersonal and developmental experiences can shape how individuals regulate negative emotions (Beyazit et al., 2024). The significance of these processes is further supported by research demonstrating that emotion-focused therapy and emotional schema therapy can reduce marital burnout among women experiencing emotional divorce (Pourabbas Vafa et al., 2022). Taken together, these findings suggest that emotional divorce may be maintained partly through maladaptive cycles of emotional reactivity, ineffective regulation, perceived nonresponsiveness, and declining emotional investment.

The third and most extensive theme concerned affective factors, including loss of intimacy, unmet emotional needs, affective dysfunction, and feelings of rejection. Participants emphasized diminished emotional closeness, reduced shared happiness and activities, insufficient affection and attention, unmet needs for respect and trust, lack of empathy, inability to express feelings, emotional neglect, insufficient support, and feelings of being invisible, unwanted, or unloved. The high frequency and diversity of codes within this theme indicate that the subjective core of emotional divorce may lie in the perceived disappearance of emotional reciprocity.

The relationship continues externally, yet partners cease to experience one another as emotionally available, responsive, and validating. This interpretation is compatible with evidence showing that perceived partner responsiveness mediates associations between emotional reactivity and marital quality (Yuan et al., 2022). When a spouse repeatedly fails to respond to emotional needs, individuals may gradually stop expressing those needs, reduce expectations, and psychologically withdraw as a protective strategy. Such withdrawal may subsequently be interpreted by the other spouse as indifference, thereby producing a self-reinforcing cycle of emotional distancing.

The present affective findings are also consistent with qualitative work on the reconstruction of emotional bonds in couples with histories of unsuccessful consensual divorce, which has highlighted the importance of restoring relational connection and emotional bonds in the process of marital recovery (Mousavikia et al., 2024). If reconstruction requires responsiveness, empathy, shared emotional experiences, and renewed relational investment, their absence can logically contribute to emotional dissolution. In addition, interventions directed toward couples have demonstrated that relationship quality can improve when partners are engaged in structured processes that strengthen mutual support and interaction, even under significant stress (Zhang et al., 2022). The importance of lived affective experience is also supported by phenomenological studies of couples facing major relational challenges, which show that relationship quality is shaped by the meanings spouses assign to mutual presence, support, vulnerability, and shared experiences (Gregory & Maddern, 2025; Stedje et al., 2026). The current findings therefore reinforce the view that emotional divorce is not simply the absence of positive feelings; it is an active experience of relational deprivation in which individuals remain physically present within marriage while perceiving themselves as emotionally abandoned.

The fourth theme concerned communication factors and comprised communication dysfunction, ineffective conflict resolution, lack of communication skills, and communication isolation. Participants described lack of active listening, avoidance and postponement of conversations, fear of judgment, recurrent misunderstandings, unresolved arguments, nonconstructive emotional reactions, and a reduction in ordinary daily communication. These findings strongly support established models of marital deterioration emphasizing the central role of communication. Gottman has consistently identified

patterns of dysfunctional interaction, withdrawal, criticism, defensiveness, and failed repair as major predictors of adverse marital outcomes (Gottman, 2023). The current participants' experiences closely resemble such processes: attempts to communicate often ended in silence, misunderstanding, dismissal, conflict, or avoidance, leading spouses to increasingly conclude that conversation itself was ineffective. Communication therefore appeared both as a domain damaged by emotional divorce and as a mechanism perpetuating it.

This finding is strongly aligned with previous Iranian research. Family communication patterns have been shown to predict emotional divorce, with marital burnout functioning as a mediating process (Faraji et al., 2024). Likewise, conflict-resolution styles can moderate the relationship between marital conflict and emotional divorce, indicating that the presence of conflict alone is insufficient to explain marital deterioration; rather, how couples manage conflict is crucial (Afkhami Poustchi & Alidousti, 2022). Structural research has also linked personality characteristics and attachment patterns to marital conflict through communication skills and maladaptive schemas (Rahiman et al., 2023), while other evidence has connected conflict-resolution styles and marital burnout with emotional divorce (Sadeghkhani et al., 2023). Interpersonal factors have similarly been identified as important contributors to emotional divorce among women (Rashid et al., 2019). The present phenomenological findings add experiential depth to these associations by showing that communication failure is lived as repeated evidence of not being heard, respected, understood, or valued. Over time, the anticipated emotional cost of conversation may become greater than its perceived potential benefit, thereby encouraging silence and withdrawal and intensifying communication isolation.

The fifth theme involved sexual factors, specifically reduced sexual intimacy, avoidance of sexual relations, and experiences of sexual rejection. Participants described sexual disengagement as both a manifestation of emotional coldness and an additional source of rejection, insecurity, and relational distance. These findings demonstrate the interconnectedness of emotional and physical intimacy in marriage. When affection, trust, empathy, and communication decline, sexual intimacy may also decrease; conversely, repeated sexual avoidance or rejection may reinforce feelings of being unwanted and intensify emotional detachment. Evidence demonstrating that sexual education can enhance the quality of marital relationships supports the importance of sexual communication, knowledge, and

responsiveness as components of broader marital functioning (Navidian et al., 2016). Similarly, couple-based interventions have been shown to improve marital quality by addressing relational processes in situations where intimacy may be challenged by significant health conditions (Zhang et al., 2022). Thus, sexual dysfunction within emotional divorce should not be viewed solely as an isolated sexual problem but rather as part of a larger relational system involving affection, safety, communication, responsiveness, and mutual acceptance.

Overall, the five themes identified in this study appear to form a reciprocal and self-reinforcing system rather than independent domains. Cognitive distortions and pessimistic expectations may reduce motivation to communicate; failed communication may intensify emotional distress; emotional invalidation may increase feelings of rejection; rejection may reduce both emotional and sexual intimacy; and declining intimacy may subsequently confirm negative beliefs that the marriage is no longer meaningful or repairable. This cyclical interpretation is consistent with previous multidimensional models connecting personality processes, maladaptive schemas, conflict-resolution styles, communication, and marital burnout to emotional divorce (Rahiman et al., 2023; Sadeghkhanian et al., 2023). It also helps explain why interventions targeting schemas, emotional processes, and couple interaction have demonstrated benefits among individuals experiencing emotional divorce or impaired marital quality (Kavosh Melli & Moheb, 2022; Pourabbas Vafa et al., 2022). Importantly, the consequences of severe marital deterioration may extend beyond the couple. Research concerning family disruption has documented difficulties in emotional regulation among children affected by parental divorce (Mulyati et al., 2026) and associations between parental divorce and interconnected depressive and social anxiety symptoms among adolescents and young adults (Zou et al., 2026). Although emotional divorce differs from formal divorce, chronic emotional disconnection within the parental relationship may similarly shape the emotional climate of the family. The systematic evidence concerning the consequences of emotional divorce likewise emphasizes its broad effects across individual and family domains (Najafi et al., 2025). Taken together, the findings of the present study support conceptualizing emotional divorce as a complex relational process characterized by the progressive erosion of cognitive, emotional, affective, communicative, and sexual resources that ordinarily sustain marital connectedness.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the qualitative design and relatively small purposively selected sample limit the statistical generalizability of the findings to all couples experiencing emotional divorce. Second, although the study was conceptualized around couples experiencing emotional divorce, the qualitative sample presented in this study consisted of women, meaning that the experiences and perspectives of husbands were not directly represented. Third, the participants were recruited from a specific geographical and sociocultural context, and experiences of emotional divorce may differ across regions, socioeconomic groups, ethnic backgrounds, and family structures. Fourth, the findings were based on self-reported lived experiences and may therefore have been influenced by retrospective interpretation, emotional state, selective recall, or social desirability. Finally, because emotional divorce is a dynamic process that may change over time, the cross-sectional nature of the interviews did not permit direct examination of how the identified themes emerged, intensified, or changed across different stages of marital deterioration.

Future studies are recommended to investigate emotional divorce using larger and more diverse qualitative samples that include both women and men and, where possible, both spouses from the same marital relationship. Dyadic qualitative designs may be particularly valuable for examining similarities and discrepancies between partners' interpretations of the same relational experiences. Longitudinal qualitative research could also clarify the temporal sequence through which cognitive distortions, emotional exhaustion, communication withdrawal, intimacy loss, and sexual distancing develop and reinforce one another. Mixed-method studies may test the relationships among the themes identified in the present study and develop valid measurement models based on lived experiences. Comparative studies across cultural, socioeconomic, and regional groups are also recommended to determine which dimensions of emotional divorce are broadly shared and which are culturally specific. Future research should additionally examine the experiences of children living in families characterized by emotional divorce and explore protective factors that enable some couples to reconstruct emotional connection despite prolonged relational disengagement.

The findings suggest that assessment and intervention for emotional divorce should be multidimensional rather than focused exclusively on marital conflict or dissatisfaction. Couple therapists and counselors should systematically

assess dysfunctional beliefs and expectations, hopelessness regarding the relationship, emotional regulation difficulties, unmet affective needs, communication and conflict-resolution patterns, and sexual intimacy. Preventive programs for couples may benefit from incorporating training in active listening, constructive dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, emotional awareness and regulation, empathy, affection, mutual appreciation, and sexual communication. Therapists should also pay particular attention to signs of chronic emotional rejection, loss of personal identity, relational meaninglessness, and withdrawal, as these experiences may indicate advanced emotional disengagement even when couples do not report intentions to formally separate. Family counseling and community-based programs should be culturally sensitive and acknowledge the social, parental, and economic factors that may contribute to couples remaining in emotionally depleted relationships. Early identification and intervention may be especially important for disrupting the reciprocal cycle through which negative beliefs, emotional exhaustion, failed communication, declining intimacy, and sexual disengagement progressively consolidate emotional divorce.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings suggest that acceptance and commitment-based parenting and choice theory-based parenting are both useful interventions for parents of children with ADHD. Choice theory appears valuable for restructuring communication, reducing external control, understanding the child's basic needs, and promoting responsible relational choices. Acceptance and commitment-based parenting appears to offer these families an additional pathway by helping parents manage their internal distress and remain emotionally present during challenging interactions. Its greater effectiveness in improving closeness and overall relationship quality indicates that interventions focused on psychological flexibility may be particularly beneficial when the clinical goal is not merely behavioral management but the development of a warmer, more accepting, and emotionally secure parent-child relationship.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

The study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The sample consisted of only 45 participants recruited through purposive sampling from counseling and psychological service centers

in Sanandaj, which limits the generalizability of the results to parents in other geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. All participants were married women, and the experiences and responses of fathers, single parents, and other caregivers were not represented. The relatively small sample size may also have reduced the statistical power to detect some interaction effects, particularly for conflict, dependency, and overall relationship quality. The outcomes were assessed using parent-reported measures, which may have been affected by social desirability, expectations regarding treatment, or participants' emotional states. The control group received no active intervention, making it impossible to separate the specific effects of the treatment models from attention, group support, or therapist contact. In addition, the two-month follow-up period was relatively brief and did not establish whether the observed improvements would persist over longer periods. Finally, the intervention was delivered by the researcher, and treatment fidelity was not independently assessed, which may have introduced therapist-related or implementation bias.

Future studies should replicate this comparison with larger and more diverse samples drawn from different regions, socioeconomic groups, and service settings. Fathers, single parents, grandparents, and other primary caregivers should be included to determine whether caregiver role or family structure influences responsiveness to each intervention. Randomized controlled trials using active comparison groups would provide stronger evidence regarding the specific therapeutic effects of the two parenting models. Future research should incorporate observational assessments of parent-child interaction, reports from children and teachers, and objective indicators of child behavior in addition to parental self-report measures. Longer follow-up periods of six months or one year are recommended to evaluate the durability of treatment gains and determine the need for booster sessions. Researchers should also examine potential mediators, such as psychological flexibility, parental self-efficacy, emotion regulation, experiential avoidance, communication patterns, and perceived parenting stress. Studies comparing combined or sequential interventions could determine whether integrating acceptance-based emotional processes with choice theory-based communication and problem-solving produces greater or more durable improvements than either approach alone.

Counseling centers, family therapists, school psychologists, and mental health professionals working with families of children with ADHD should consider

incorporating structured parenting programs into comprehensive treatment plans. Acceptance and commitment-based parenting may be prioritized when parents demonstrate high emotional reactivity, self-criticism, experiential avoidance, rigid beliefs, or difficulty maintaining warmth and closeness during challenging interactions. Choice theory-based parenting may be especially useful when family relationships are dominated by criticism, coercion, punishment, repeated power struggles, and ineffective communication. Practitioners may also combine techniques from both approaches by teaching parents to accept difficult internal experiences while replacing external control with respectful dialogue, collaborative problem-solving, and value-consistent boundaries. Programs should include regular homework, real-life practice, feedback, and follow-up or booster sessions to support the maintenance of acquired skills. Collaboration among parents, clinicians, and schools is also recommended so that relational improvements at home are reinforced by consistent behavioral and educational support across the child's daily environments.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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

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

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