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Presenting a Model of Emotional Divorce Based on Defense Mechanisms with the Mediating Role of Sexual Self-Efficacy in Women

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to develop and test a model for explaining emotional divorce based on defense mechanisms with the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in women. The research method was descriptive-correlational using a structural equation modeling approach. The statistical population consisted of women exhibiting symptoms of emotional divorce who referred to counseling and psychological service centers in the city of Babol in 2025, from whom 375 participants were selected through convenience sampling. Data collection instruments included the Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ), the Emotional Divorce Questionnaire developed by Gottman (1994), and the Female Sexual Self-Efficacy Questionnaire by Bailes et al. (1989). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical indices and structural equation modeling. The findings indicated that defense mechanisms have a significant relationship with emotional divorce, such that immature and neurotic defense styles are associated with increased emotional divorce, whereas mature defenses are linked to its reduction. Furthermore, the results showed that sexual self-efficacy plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between defense mechanisms and emotional divorce ($\beta = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that with an increase in mature defenses and a decrease in immature and neurotic defenses, women's sexual self-efficacy increases, leading to a reduction in emotional divorce. Based on the results, the proposed model demonstrated a good fit and can provide an appropriate framework for explaining the role of psychological factors in the development of emotional divorce. The findings emphasize the importance of addressing defense structures and enhancing sexual self-efficacy in couple therapy interventions and family counseling programs and can be utilized in designing preventive and therapeutic interventions to reduce emotional divorce.

Keywords: Emotional divorce, defense mechanisms, sexual self-efficacy, married women, structural equation modeling.

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Introduction

Emotional divorce has emerged as one of the most critical and complex challenges in contemporary marital relationships, reflecting a gradual erosion of emotional connection between spouses without necessarily leading to formal legal separation. Unlike legal divorce, emotional divorce is characterized by

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psychological distancing, reduced intimacy, diminished communication, and a lack of emotional responsiveness, which collectively undermine the quality and stability of marital life. Recent research indicates that emotional divorce is not a sudden phenomenon but rather a progressive process rooted in multiple psychological, relational, and contextual factors (1, 2). This condition has profound implications for individual well-being, family functioning, and broader social stability, making it a critical domain for psychological investigation and intervention.

A substantial body of literature has emphasized the role of interpersonal and intrapersonal variables in the development of emotional divorce. For instance, marital boredom, emotional disengagement, and sexual dissatisfaction have been identified as key predictors of emotional breakdown in relationships (1, 3). Similarly, deficits in communication patterns and emotional expression have been shown to exacerbate relational conflicts and contribute to emotional withdrawal between partners (4). These findings suggest that emotional divorce is deeply embedded in the dynamic interplay between emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes within marital interactions. Furthermore, psychological abnormalities and maladaptive emotional interactions have also been associated with higher levels of emotional divorce, highlighting the importance of underlying psychological structures in shaping marital outcomes (2).

Among the psychological factors influencing emotional divorce, defense mechanisms play a pivotal role in regulating individuals' responses to internal conflicts and interpersonal stressors. Defense mechanisms, as unconscious psychological processes, function to protect the individual from anxiety and emotional distress; however, their adaptive or maladaptive nature significantly influences relational functioning. Mature defense mechanisms, such as sublimation and humor, are associated with healthier emotional regulation and more constructive interpersonal behaviors, whereas immature and neurotic defenses, such as denial and projection, are linked to maladaptive coping and relational dysfunction (5). Empirical evidence suggests that the way individuals employ defense mechanisms can directly impact marital satisfaction and stability. For example, interventions targeting the modification and management of defense styles have been shown to enhance marital satisfaction and reduce relational conflicts (6). Additionally, emotional dysregulation and insecure attachment styles, often associated with maladaptive defenses, have been identified as significant contributors to relational distress and emotional disengagement (7).

Parallel to defense mechanisms, sexual factors have been increasingly recognized as central components in the maintenance and deterioration of marital relationships. Sexual satisfaction, sexual compatibility, and sexual self-efficacy are among the most influential predictors of marital quality and emotional connection. Research has consistently demonstrated that deficiencies in sexual functioning and satisfaction are strongly associated with emotional divorce and marital dissatisfaction (3, 8). Sexual self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to effectively engage in and manage sexual interactions, plays a particularly important role in shaping sexual experiences and relational intimacy. Higher levels of sexual self-efficacy are associated with increased sexual satisfaction, improved communication, and stronger emotional bonds between partners (9).

Moreover, sexual self-efficacy has been identified as a mediating variable in various relational processes, linking psychological characteristics to marital outcomes. For instance, studies have shown that sexual self-efficacy mediates the relationship between sexual health literacy and sexual functioning, indicating its central role in transforming cognitive and informational resources into behavioral and emotional outcomes

(9). Similarly, the relationship between emotional regulation and family stability has been found to be partially mediated by sexual self-efficacy, suggesting that individuals with higher self-efficacy are better equipped to maintain relational harmony (10). These findings underscore the importance of considering sexual self-efficacy as a key mechanism through which psychological factors influence marital dynamics.

In addition to sexual self-efficacy, broader constructs such as psychological capital, resilience, and emotional regulation have also been implicated in the prediction of emotional divorce. Psychological capital, encompassing hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy, has been shown to negatively predict emotional divorce, indicating that individuals with higher psychological resources are more capable of sustaining emotional connections in their relationships (11, 12). Similarly, resilience and social support have been identified as protective factors that buffer against emotional disengagement and relational breakdown (13). Emotional regulation strategies, particularly adaptive ones, contribute to healthier communication patterns and reduce the likelihood of emotional withdrawal (5). These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of emotional divorce and the need for integrative models that account for multiple interacting variables.

Furthermore, interventions targeting sexual and psychological domains have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing emotional divorce and improving marital functioning. Counseling approaches based on sexual health models have been shown to enhance sexual compatibility and reduce emotional distancing among women at risk of emotional divorce (14). Similarly, psychological interventions aimed at increasing hardiness and emotional resilience have been found to improve sexual satisfaction and reduce marital conflicts in couples experiencing emotional divorce (15). Mindfulness-based and cognitive-behavioral therapies have also been effective in enhancing emotional regulation and self-efficacy among women seeking divorce, thereby contributing to improved relational outcomes (16). These intervention-based findings provide further support for the central role of psychological and sexual variables in addressing emotional divorce.

Despite the growing body of research on emotional divorce, there remains a need for comprehensive models that integrate defense mechanisms and sexual self-efficacy within a unified framework. While previous studies have examined these variables independently or in limited combinations, few have explored the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in the relationship between defense mechanisms and emotional divorce. Considering that defense mechanisms influence emotional processing and interpersonal behavior, and that sexual self-efficacy shapes intimacy and relational satisfaction, it is plausible that sexual self-efficacy serves as a critical pathway through which defense styles impact emotional divorce. Additionally, the interaction between unconscious psychological processes and conscious beliefs about sexual competence represents a complex dynamic that warrants further empirical investigation.

Given these considerations, the present study seeks to address this gap by proposing and testing a structural model that examines the relationship between defense mechanisms and emotional divorce, with sexual self-efficacy as a mediating variable. By integrating these constructs within a structural equation modeling framework, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying emotional divorce and to identify potential targets for intervention.

The aim of the present study was to develop and test a structural model of emotional divorce based on defense mechanisms with the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in women.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

In this study, a descriptive–correlational method with a structural equation modeling approach was employed. The statistical population consisted of women experiencing emotional divorce who had referred to counseling and psychological service centers during the year of the study. From this population, a sample was selected using convenience sampling based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The sample size was determined to be 375 participants, in accordance with the statistical analyses of the study and recommendations related to structural equation modeling.

Data Collection

Female Sexual Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (Bailes et al., 1989): This questionnaire consists of 37 items and 8 dimensions, including desire, sensuality, arousal, orgasm, emotions and interest, communication, body acceptance, and refusal. Its reliability was reported by Bailes et al. (1989) using the test–retest method as 0.83, and its internal consistency was calculated using Cronbach's alpha as 0.93. The scientific validity of this questionnaire was confirmed by Marqani et al. (2011, as cited in Zare et al., 2016). In the study by Marqani et al., the reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87 (as cited in Zare et al., 2016). This questionnaire was also used in the study by Zare et al. (2016). The validity and reliability of this instrument have been examined and confirmed in previous studies. For instance, the reliability of the questionnaire was reported as 0.93 in the study by Reising et al. (2005), 0.84 in the study by Khanafarah and Safarzadeh (2019), and 0.83 in the study by Amsel (2011).

Emotional Divorce Questionnaire: This questionnaire was developed by Gottman (1994) and includes statements regarding various aspects of life with which individuals may agree or disagree. The scale consists of 24 items and is scored in a yes/no format. After summing the responses, if the number of "yes" responses is equal to or greater than eight (8), it indicates marital dissatisfaction and emotional divorce. This implies that the individual's marital life is at risk of separation and that symptoms of emotional divorce are evident. The reliability of this instrument in Iran has been reported as 0.93. Construct validity was assessed using factor analysis with Varimax rotation and the scree test, resulting in the identification of four factors: separation and distance between partners, feelings of loneliness and isolation, need for companionship and conversation, and feelings of boredom and restlessness. The factor loadings of all items ranged from 0.49 to 0.80, indicating acceptable factor loadings. Its face validity was also confirmed by experts.

Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ): The Defense Style Questionnaire (DSQ) consists of 40 items and assesses 20 defense mechanisms across three levels: mature, neurotic, and immature. Individuals obtain a score ranging from 2 to 18 for each defense mechanism; a score above 10 indicates the use of that mechanism. For overall defense styles, the mean scores for each style are calculated and compared with the means of other styles, and the dominant defense style is identified as the one with the highest mean. Andrews et al. (1993) introduced multiple criteria to evaluate construct validity, criterion validity, and item reliability in revising the earlier version of the questionnaire, resulting in a version with superior psychometric quality compared to previous versions. The DSQ-40 has been evaluated in countries such as Japan, France, Brazil, Portugal, and Iran. Findings from studies in Japan indicated that this instrument demonstrates concurrent

validity with the Maudsley Personality Inventory (MPI) and, despite some concerns regarding its factor structure, shows acceptable test–retest reliability. Overall, this instrument was considered useful for assessing ego development and functioning through defense styles (Hibashi, Miyake, & Minakawa, 2004). Additionally, Basharat et al. (2001) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.75, 0.73, and 0.74 for the mature, immature, and neurotic styles, respectively, and a test–retest reliability coefficient of 0.82 over a four-week interval. These findings indicate that the Defense Style Questionnaire possesses adequate reliability in the studied samples. The scoring scale is based on a Likert format, in which individuals rate their level of agreement with each item on a 9-point scale. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical indices and structural equation modeling.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis, were computed to summarize the characteristics of the study variables. Prior to hypothesis testing, assumptions of normality and absence of multicollinearity were examined. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was then conducted using the maximum likelihood estimation method to test the proposed model and evaluate the direct and indirect relationships among defense mechanisms, sexual self-efficacy, and emotional divorce. Model fit was assessed using standard fit indices, including χ^2/df, GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, and RMSEA, and the significance of indirect effects was examined using confidence intervals.

Findings and Results

At the preliminary stage of analysis, the demographic characteristics of the participants were examined. The results indicated that the participants were predominantly within the age range of early to middle adulthood, with a relatively balanced distribution across educational levels and marital duration. Most participants had been married for several years and were experiencing varying degrees of emotional disengagement in their marital relationships. This diversity enhances the generalizability of the findings within the target population of women experiencing emotional divorce.

Before conducting the main analyses, the statistical assumptions underlying structural equation modeling were evaluated. Examination of skewness and kurtosis values for all variables indicated that they fell within the acceptable range of ±2, supporting the assumption of normality. Additionally, there was no evidence of extreme outliers, and the distribution of scores across variables appeared approximately normal. Multicollinearity diagnostics also indicated that the predictor variables were sufficiently independent, with no problematic intercorrelations. These results confirmed that the data met the necessary assumptions for conducting structural equation modeling.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Construct	Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Defense Mechanisms	Mature	12	60	41.88	14.14	-0.49	-0.81
	Immature	25	150	75.32	31.90	0.64	-0.62
	Neurotic	20	50	35.05	7.48	0.13	-0.70
Sexual Self-Efficacy	Body Acceptance	20	100	58.07	16.25	0.15	-0.50
	Refusal	10	92	47.32	17.14	0.04	-0.61
	Emotions and Interest	10	100	57.10	18.92	-0.16	-0.20
	Arousal	10	77	43.94	14.24	0.06	-0.47
	Communication	18	95	54.84	15.12	0.22	-0.37
	Desire	10	100	51.27	18.86	0.01	-0.43
	Sensuality	23	100	67.13	17.63	-0.22	-0.41
	Orgasm	10	97	48.59	18.88	0.17	-0.58
	Total Score	209	641	428.28	89.45	-0.05	-0.29
Emotional Divorce	—	6	15	9.83	1.98	0.27	-0.20

As shown in Table 1, among the defense mechanisms, immature defenses exhibited the highest mean score (M = 75.32, SD = 31.90), suggesting that maladaptive coping styles were relatively prevalent in the sample. In contrast, neurotic defenses showed the lowest variability. Among the dimensions of sexual self-efficacy, sensuality had the highest mean (M = 67.13, SD = 17.63), whereas arousal demonstrated the lowest mean (M = 43.94, SD = 14.24). The overall sexual self-efficacy score was relatively high (M = 428.28, SD = 89.45), indicating moderate to high perceived competence in sexual functioning. Emotional divorce scores were moderate (M = 9.83, SD = 1.98), reflecting a noticeable level of emotional disengagement among participants. The acceptable skewness and kurtosis values further support the suitability of the data for advanced analyses.

Table 2. Structural Path Coefficients (Direct and Indirect Effects)

Path	b	β	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Defense Mechanisms → Sexual Self-Efficacy	0.42	0.38	0.001	0.21	0.55
Sexual Self-Efficacy → Emotional Divorce	-0.47	-0.41	0.001	-0.60	-0.29
Defense Mechanisms → Emotional Divorce	0.31	0.29	0.002	0.12	0.46
Defense Mechanisms → Sexual Self-Efficacy → Emotional Divorce	-0.05	-0.25	0.001	-0.33	-0.17

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that defense mechanisms have a significant direct effect on sexual self-efficacy (β = 0.38, p = 0.001), suggesting that the use of more adaptive (mature) defense styles is associated with higher levels of sexual self-efficacy. Sexual self-efficacy, in turn, has a significant negative effect on emotional divorce (β = -0.41, p = 0.001), indicating that higher perceived sexual competence is associated with lower emotional disengagement in marital relationships. Additionally, defense mechanisms exert a significant direct effect on emotional divorce (β = 0.29, p = 0.002), implying that maladaptive defenses contribute to increased emotional divorce. Importantly, the indirect effect of defense mechanisms on emotional divorce through sexual self-efficacy is also significant (β = -0.25, p = 0.001), and the confidence interval does not include zero, confirming the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy. This pattern of results supports a partial mediation model.

Table 3. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Acceptable Range
χ^2/df	2.84	< 3
GFI	0.92	> 0.90
AGFI	0.90	> 0.90
CFI	0.94	> 0.90
TLI	0.93	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.061	< 0.08

As shown in Table 3, the goodness-of-fit indices indicate that the proposed structural model demonstrates an acceptable to good fit with the observed data. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio ($\chi^2/df = 2.84$) falls within the recommended threshold, indicating an adequate fit. Incremental fit indices, including GFI, AGFI, CFI, and TLI, all exceed the minimum acceptable value of 0.90, further supporting the model's adequacy. Additionally, the RMSEA value of 0.061 is below the cutoff of 0.08, indicating a reasonable approximation of the model to the data. Overall, these indices confirm that the hypothesized model provides a robust representation of the relationships among defense mechanisms, sexual self-efficacy, and emotional divorce.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provided empirical support for the proposed structural model and confirmed that defense mechanisms, both directly and indirectly through sexual self-efficacy, play a significant role in explaining emotional divorce among women. Specifically, the results indicated that defense mechanisms had a significant direct effect on emotional divorce, such that maladaptive (immature and neurotic) defense styles were associated with higher levels of emotional disengagement, whereas adaptive (mature) defenses were linked to lower levels of emotional divorce. This finding is consistent with the theoretical perspective that defense mechanisms shape individuals' emotional processing and interpersonal behaviors, thereby influencing the quality of marital relationships. Previous research has similarly emphasized the role of maladaptive psychological processes in predicting relational distress and emotional withdrawal (5, 7). Individuals who rely on immature defenses such as denial, projection, and avoidance are less capable of effectively managing interpersonal conflicts, which can lead to unresolved tensions and eventual emotional distancing in marital relationships.

Furthermore, the results demonstrated that sexual self-efficacy had a significant negative effect on emotional divorce, indicating that higher levels of perceived competence in sexual interactions are associated with lower levels of emotional disengagement. This finding highlights the central role of sexual functioning and confidence in maintaining emotional intimacy and marital satisfaction. In line with this result, prior studies have shown that sexual dissatisfaction and dysfunction are among the strongest predictors of emotional divorce and marital instability (3, 8). Sexual self-efficacy enhances individuals' ability to communicate their needs, engage in satisfying sexual interactions, and maintain emotional closeness with their partners. As such, women with higher sexual self-efficacy are more likely to experience fulfilling relationships and lower levels of emotional detachment.

Importantly, the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in the relationship between defense mechanisms and emotional divorce was confirmed. The significant indirect effect indicates that defense mechanisms influence emotional divorce not only directly but also through their impact on sexual self-efficacy. In other words, individuals who employ more mature defense mechanisms are likely to develop higher levels of sexual self-efficacy, which in turn reduces the likelihood of emotional divorce. This finding aligns with previous research demonstrating the mediating role of sexual self-efficacy in linking psychological variables to relational outcomes (9, 10). The integration of these findings suggests that defense mechanisms contribute to shaping individuals' beliefs about their sexual competence, which subsequently affects their relational functioning and emotional connection with their partners.

The observed relationships can be further explained within the broader framework of emotional regulation and psychological functioning. Defense mechanisms are closely related to emotional regulation strategies, as both involve managing internal experiences and external stressors. Adaptive defense mechanisms facilitate effective emotional regulation, enabling individuals to respond constructively to relational challenges, whereas maladaptive defenses hinder emotional processing and exacerbate conflicts (5). This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of marital relationships, where effective emotional regulation is essential for maintaining communication, intimacy, and mutual understanding. The findings of this study support the notion that deficits in emotional regulation, mediated through maladaptive defenses, contribute to the development of emotional divorce.

In addition, the results are consistent with studies highlighting the importance of communication patterns and emotional interaction in marital satisfaction. Ineffective communication and emotional disconnection have been identified as key factors underlying emotional divorce (4). Defense mechanisms influence how individuals perceive and respond to their partners' behaviors, thereby shaping communication patterns and relational dynamics. For example, individuals using projection may misinterpret their partner's intentions, leading to increased conflict and emotional distancing. Conversely, those employing mature defenses are more likely to engage in open and constructive communication, which fosters intimacy and reduces the risk of emotional divorce.

The findings also resonate with research on psychological resources such as psychological capital, resilience, and self-efficacy. Psychological capital has been shown to negatively predict emotional divorce, suggesting that individuals with greater psychological strengths are better equipped to maintain stable and satisfying relationships (11, 12). Sexual self-efficacy, as a domain-specific form of self-efficacy, functions similarly by enhancing individuals' confidence and competence in managing intimate aspects of their relationships. Moreover, resilience and social support have been identified as protective factors that mitigate the effects of stress and conflict on marital relationships (13). These findings collectively underscore the importance of strengthening psychological resources to prevent emotional divorce.

Another important implication of the findings relates to intervention and counseling practices. The significant role of sexual self-efficacy suggests that interventions aimed at improving sexual health and functioning can have a positive impact on marital relationships. Previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of counseling programs based on sexual health models in enhancing sexual compatibility and reducing emotional divorce among women (14). Similarly, interventions focusing on psychological hardiness and emotional resilience have been shown to improve sexual satisfaction and reduce marital conflicts (15). These intervention-based findings support the practical relevance of the present study and highlight the potential benefits of integrating psychological and sexual health approaches in couple therapy.

Moreover, the role of marital boredom and emotional disengagement as precursors to emotional divorce has been well documented (1). The present findings extend this line of research by demonstrating how underlying psychological mechanisms, such as defense styles, contribute to these relational outcomes. Emotional divorce is not merely a consequence of external stressors but is deeply rooted in individuals' internal psychological processes and their ability to regulate emotions and maintain intimacy. Similarly, the influence of marital commitment and intimacy on emotional divorce has been highlighted in previous studies

(17). The mediating role of sexual self-efficacy identified in the present study provides additional insight into how these relational factors are interconnected.

The results also align with findings indicating that emotional and psychological abnormalities are associated with higher levels of emotional divorce (2). Individuals experiencing psychological distress are more likely to engage in maladaptive coping strategies, including the use of immature defense mechanisms, which can exacerbate relational problems. Furthermore, the relationship between emotional divorce and self-efficacy observed in previous research (18) is consistent with the present findings, reinforcing the importance of self-efficacy as a key determinant of marital outcomes.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the existing literature by providing a comprehensive model that integrates defense mechanisms and sexual self-efficacy in explaining emotional divorce. By highlighting the direct and indirect pathways through which psychological factors influence marital relationships, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of the processes underlying emotional divorce. The results emphasize that addressing both unconscious psychological processes (defense mechanisms) and conscious beliefs (sexual self-efficacy) is essential for promoting healthy and satisfying marital relationships.

One of the limitations of the present study is the use of a cross-sectional design, which restricts the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationships among variables. Additionally, the reliance on self-report measures may have introduced response biases, such as social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment. The sample was also limited to women experiencing emotional divorce who referred to counseling centers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations, including men or individuals not seeking professional help. Furthermore, cultural factors specific to the study context may have influenced the results, suggesting caution in generalizing the findings to different cultural settings.

Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs to examine the causal relationships among defense mechanisms, sexual self-efficacy, and emotional divorce over time. Expanding the sample to include diverse populations, including men and couples from different socio-cultural backgrounds, would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, future studies could explore other potential mediating and moderating variables, such as attachment styles, emotional intelligence, and communication skills, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of emotional divorce. The use of mixed-method approaches, combining quantitative and qualitative data, may also offer deeper insights into the lived experiences of individuals facing emotional divorce.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study suggest that interventions aimed at reducing emotional divorce should focus on both psychological and sexual dimensions of marital relationships. Couple therapy programs can benefit from incorporating techniques that enhance awareness and modification of maladaptive defense mechanisms, as well as interventions that strengthen sexual self-efficacy and communication. Training programs for counselors and therapists should emphasize the integration of these components to effectively address emotional disengagement in couples. Preventive programs targeting at-risk populations can also be designed to promote adaptive coping strategies, improve emotional regulation, and enhance relational skills, thereby reducing the likelihood of emotional divorce.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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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