

## Prediction of marital satisfaction based on the early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia

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### Abstract

**Introduction and Objective:** Family is one of society's main pillars. A healthy society is definitely subject to the health of the family, and the realization of a sound family depends on its members' mental health and good relationships with each other. The extant study aims to examine the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia and the marital satisfaction of couples.

**Method:** The method of this study is modeling, which is done sectionally and descriptively. The statistical society of this study comprises all couples in Tehran who were referred to Salamat Afarin, Rasam, and Behdad clinics for consultation. The sample of this study includes 240 members who were chosen based on convenient sampling. They answered the questions of Young Schema Questionnaire-Short Form, Enriching and Nurturing Relationship Issues Communication and Happiness (ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale), and Toronto Alexithymia Scale. The collected data were analyzed through SPSS26 Software and Pearson Correlation and Regression tests.

**Results:** Findings indicate a negative and significant relationship between alexithymia and its subscales (identifying, describing, and externally oriented thinking) and marital satisfaction with coefficients of -0.215, -0.110, and -0.059, respectively. Also, there is a negative and significant relationship between early maladaptive schemas and its subscales (Emotional Deprivation, Abandonment, Mistrust, Social Isolation, Defectiveness/Shame, Failure, Dependence, Vulnerability to Harm or Illness, Enmeshment, Subjugation, Self Sacrifice, Inhibition, Unrelenting Standards, Entitlement, Self-Control, Approval-seeking, Negativity, Punitiveness) with marital satisfaction based on the coefficients 0.01, -0.01, 0.00, -0.214, -0.04, -0.03, -0.05, 0.03, -0.11, 0.06, 0.07, -0.02, -0.04, -0.04, -0.163, -0.05, -0.1, -0.1, respectively.

**Conclusion:** According to the results of this study, early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia play a vital role in marital satisfaction. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to some variables, such as early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia when working on a couple of cases.

**Key words:** *Early Maladaptive Schemas, Alexithymia, Marital Satisfaction of Couples.*

### Introduction

Family can be considered the most substantial social institute in human life, and access to a successful and healthy

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society depends on a successful family (Mamsharifi et al., 2021). Families are shaped by marriage and life and marriage processes depend on various factors, including marital life satisfaction (Tahan, Saleem, Moshtagh, Fattahi & Rahimi, 2020). Marital life satisfaction plays a valuable role in mental health and has an underlying role in the continuation and success of a relationship (Hou, Jiang, & Wang, 2019). Marital satisfaction is achieved when some needs, such as sexual and emotional ones are met, and couples' expectations from each other are fulfilled (Bogdan et al., 2022). Being satisfied in marital life would result in a high sense of intimacy, sense of empathy, commitment, mutual respect, and sacrifice (Whisman et al., 2018). Studies indicate marital dissatisfactions, incompatibilities, disagreements, and dissatisfactions of couples not only reduce the physical health and mental hygiene of spouses but also result in a sense of loneliness, low self-esteem, emptiness, and difficulty doing paternal duties (Whisman et al., 2018), as well as disruption in relationships and social performance of spouses, and also the marital boredom (Wang, X., & Zhao, 2023). Early maladaptive schemas are among the variables that affect marital satisfaction and serve as predictors for satisfaction with the relationship (Rodriguez, Ratanasiripong, Hardaway, Barron, & Toyama, 2020), so increased early maladaptive schemas would lead to a lower level of satisfaction among couples (Dumitrescu, & Rusu, 2021).

Early maladaptive schemas are emotional and cognitive self-harm patterns formed at the beginning of the growth period and mind evolution and are repeated in life, and play a significant role in shaping psychological disorders and creating self-harm life patterns, cognitive distortions, dysfunctional coping styles, and their continuity. These schemas are mainly permanent and inefficient (Bishop et al., 2022). The maladaptive nature of schemas usually appears when clients behave in their lives and relationships with others, especially marital relationships in a way to makes their schemas approved even if their early understanding is incorrect (Kover et al.,

2024). These schemas are used in the function of family members as a whole and as a pattern (Bishop et al., 2022). The available studies imply that early maladaptive schemas have a relationship with marital incompatibility and lower marital intimacy. The reason is that maladaptive schemas would result in our bias in the interpretation of events, and this bias may disturb married life (Damiris, I. K., & Allen, 2023). Therefore, early maladaptive schemas are effective in the marital instability of couples (Damiris, I. K., & Allen, 2023; Marinov, 2023). Alexithymia is another variable that highly affects the marital satisfaction of couples (Gudarzi et al., 2024). Luca et al. (2024) studied the relationship between emotional skills, marital satisfaction, and intimacy. The results showed that emotional skills can be reliably effective in the relationships between couples and marital satisfaction. Also, Robles et al.<sup>1</sup> (2014) found a relationship between detection ability and emotion expression with marital compatibility.

As emotional expression can enhance the enrichment of marital relationships, alexithymia, and non-expression of emotions have negative effects on this relationship and decrease the couples' life satisfaction. Alexithymia means inability in cognitive processing of emotion regulation and emotional information and involves components of difficulty identifying emotions and distinguishing feelings and somatic emotions related to emotional arousal, difficulty describing emotions, objective cognitive style, weakness in imagination, and externally oriented thinking (Luca et al., 2024). Fasdi et al. (2024) describe individuals with alexithymia as people who exaggerate abnormal somatic emotions, interpret the emotional somatic symptoms badly, show emotional distress through somatic complaints, and look for somatic symptoms in therapeutical measures. Those individuals with alexithymia have indeed fewer underlying characteristics that are required for making an intimate relationship (Joel et al.<sup>2</sup>, 2020). Individuals with alexithymia strongly need dependence, which results in doubt and mistrust in others, and various interpersonal problems are seen among individuals having alexithymia due to their non-interest in and indifference to others (Romeo et al., 2024). They

<sup>1</sup> Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn

<sup>2</sup> Joel, Eastwick, Allison, Arriaga, Baker

have difficulty expressing their needs and cannot cope with interpersonal challenges in social situations (Khaje & Khezri Moghadam, 2016; Lyvers et al.<sup>3</sup>, 2020). The mental well-being of individuals is highly affected by interpersonal intimate relationships, and the potential for creating and keeping a romantic and satisfying relationship requires the ability to express and identify their emotions (Connolly et al.<sup>4</sup>, 2020), and attention and perceiving others' feelings (Wachs, & Cordova, 2007). Along with interpersonal problems such as problematic decisiveness, obedience, sociability, intimacy, control, and responsibility, alexithymia can result in mental distress (Najarian & Abdi, 2020). Lyvers, Cutinho, and Thorberg (2022) explain in the study on the stability and change in relationships that interpersonal communications play a significant role in marital satisfaction. In the study on enriching couples relationships, Yooefi (2021) explains that interpersonal relationship affects marital life satisfaction. Various studies have shown that alexithymia affects and decreases the rate of couples' marital satisfaction (Lyvers et al., 2022; Joel et al., 2020).

According to this description, early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia may provide the field for couples' interpersonal problems, intensifying them. Hence, these two variables play a role in mental well-being, durability of relationships, and couples' marital satisfaction. Since no study on this case was found, this study investigates the relationship between early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia with couples' marital satisfaction.

## Method

This study is descriptive with the correlational method. The statistical society of this study comprises all couples (men and women) in Tehran City, 2022-2023. They were first referred to consultation centers to cooperate with the study. According to the inclusion criteria (informed consent for participation in research, full awareness, and being able to speak physical and mental readiness), the required eligibility for answering the question was assessed for those couples who referred to (Salamat Afarin, Resam,

Behdad Clinic) centers for marital consultation. Of them, 240 couples were selected through convenient sampling, and research questionnaires were distributed among subjects. The data collection method is a structured questionnaire, and the questionnaires mentioned below were given to couples, information obtained after data collection was analyzed by using SPSS (version 26) Software.

## Measures

**Enriching and Nurturing Relationship Issues Communication and Happiness:** this questionnaire is employed to evaluate potential problematic fields or identify overloading fields of marital relationships. It is also used as a reliable tool in many studies to measure the rate of couples' marital satisfaction. This questionnaire consists of 12 subscales. The first scale is 5-item, and the rest are 10-item (Sanai, 2008). Enrich questionnaire provides strong psychometric specifications (Arnold, & Min, 2004). Its internal consistency is estimated within a range from 0.73 to 0.9 (Arnold, & Min, 2004). The validity of this test is obtained using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient and retest method, which equaled 0.93 and 0.94 for men and women, respectively (Sanai, 2008). In the case of examining the validity of this test, its correlation coefficient equals 0.41-0.6 with familial satisfaction scales and 0.32-0.41 with life satisfaction scales, indicating construct validity. All subscales of the Enrich Questionnaire would distinguish satisfied and unsatisfied couples, which indicates good criterion validity of this questionnaire (Sanai, 2008). Fowers and Olson (1989) found that Enrich could distinguish happy married couples from unhappy married couples with an accuracy rate of about 0.85-0.95. Regarding the long questions of scales, various forms have been extracted from it, and its 47-item form has been used in this study. This measure has been normalized in Iran and its internal consistency has been calculated and reported to be 0.95 (Sepahvand et al., 2014). The 115-item form was used in this research.

**Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20):** TAS was designed by Bagby, Taylor, and Parker (1994). This test includes 20 items and three subscales

<sup>3</sup> Lyvers, Cutinho, & Thorberg

<sup>4</sup> Connolly, Lefevre, Young, & Lewis

measuring difficulty identifying emotions (7 items), difficulty describing emotions (5 items), and externally oriented thinking (8 items) at a five-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree=1 to strongly agree=5). The score that persons acquire indicates their alexithymia rates (Bagby et al., 2020). The validity and reliability of TAS-20 have been examined and confirmed in many studies. In the Persian version of TAS-20, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were measured for the total alexithymia, and three subscales of difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and oriented thinking, which equaled 0.085, 0.82, 0.75, and 0.72, respectively, showing good internal consistency of this scale (Razani & Haghayegh, 2021). Retest reliability of TAS for a 67-member sample within two turns with a 4-week gap varied between 0.8 and 0.87 for alexithymia and confirmed for various subscales (Razani & Haghayegh, 2021).

**Young Schema Questionnaire-Short Form:** in this research, a 90-item form is used. This questionnaire comprises 18 fields of maladaptive schema, including Emotional Deprivation, Mistrust/Abuse, Abandonment/Instability, Social Isolation/Alienation, Defectiveness/Shame, Dependence/Practical Incompetence, Failure in Development, Enmeshment, Vulnerability to Harm or Illness, Subjugation, Inhibition, Self Sacrifice, Unrelenting Standards, Self-Control/Insufficient Discipline, Entitlement, Approval-Seeking, Punitiveness, Negativity/Pessimism. Each item is scored on a six-point scale from 1 (strongly false about me) to 6 (strongly true about me). Schmidt, Joiner, Young, and Telch (1995) measured the validity of the early maladaptive schemas questionnaire on a 564-member sample of American students using the internal consistency and retest method and reported a value of 0.95. The convergent validity of the questionnaire was assessed with tools

measuring psychological distress, self-confidence, cognitive vulnerability for depression disorder symptoms and personality disorder, and results show a negative relationship between early maladaptive schema questionnaire and some traits such as self-confidence and positive affection, and positive relationship with some traits such as personality disorder, distress, negative affection, and attitude dysfunction. The validity and reliability of the early maladaptive schema questionnaire were examined in Iran on a 579-member sample within two steps (the first and second steps comprised 394 and 185 members, respectively). The validity of the early maladaptive schema questionnaire was measured based on two methods of Cronbach's alpha and split, which equaled 0.91 and 0.86, respectively in the whole sample. These values equaled 0.87 and 0.84 for women; and 0.84 and 0.081 for men, which factors extracted from credibility had a high rate of credibility and were confirmable. Also, the convergent validity of this tool was measured using measurement tools of psychological distress, positive and negative affections, self-confidence, cognitive vulnerability for depression disorder symptoms, and personality disorder that equaled 0.37, 0.34, 0.4, 0.39, -0.35, and -0.36, respectively (Yousefi, 2011).

## Results

According to demographic data, gender-based sample frequency in this research equaled 110 couples (220 members). Also, the frequency of couples' education level was as follows: 70 members had below-diploma degrees, 66 members had diplomas, 35 members had BA degrees, and 7 members had MA degrees. Table 1 reports the mean value and standard deviation (SD) of scores of post-test early maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, and marital satisfaction.

**Table 1. Descriptive indicators related to maladaptive schemas, alexithymia, and marital satisfaction of couples**

Variable	Mean	SD	N
Emotional Deprivation	17.16	3.37	220.00
Abandonment/Instability	13.88	3.22	220.00
Mistrust/Abuse	17.16	3.33	220.00
Social Isolation/Alienation	17.61	3.56	220.00

Defectiveness/Shame	17.39	3.32	220.00
Failure	17.69	3.76	220.00
Dependence/Incompetence	17.22	3.50	220.00
Vulnerability to Harm or Illness	17.55	3.29	220.00
Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self	17.74	3.47	220.00
Subjugation	17.86	3.34	220.00
Self-Sacrifice	17.54	3.32	220.00
Emotional Inhibition	17.59	3.45	220.00
Unrelenting Standards	17.60	3.36	220.00
Entitlement	17.53	3.17	220.00
Self-Control/Insufficient Discipline	17.14	3.37	220.00
Approval-Seeking	17.63	3.33	220.00
Negativity/Pessimism	17.54	3.05	220.00
Punitiveness	17.71	3.36	220.00
Identifying emotion	21.27	3.21	220.00
Describing emotion	14.94	2.64	220.00
Externally oriented thinking	24.36	5.71	220.00
Marital Satisfaction	345.69	13.32	220.00

As seen in Table 1, subjects show no significant difference in scores except for the abandonment component. The highest mean value is related to externally oriented thinking followed by identifying emotion. The subjects obtained a lower mean value in the component of describing

emotion and the mean value of marital satisfaction equals 345.69 with SD=13.32. Tables 2 and 3 report the results of the correlation matrix of research variables.

**Table 2. Correlation matrix of various components of maladaptive schemas with marital satisfaction**

	Marital Satisfaction	Emotional Deprivation	Abandonment/Instability	Mistrust/Abuse	Social Isolation/Alienation	Defectiveness/Shame	Failure	Dependence/Incompetence	Vulnerability to Harm or Illness	Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self	Subjugation	Self-Sacrifice	Emotional Inhibition	Unrelenting Standards	Entitlement	Self-Control/Insufficient Discipline	Approval-Seeking	Negativity/Pessimism	Punitiveness
1	1																		
2	0.01	1.00																	
3	-0.01	0.02	1.00																
4	0.00	-0.02	0.235**	1.00															
5	-0.214**	0.01	0.04	0.12	1.00														
6	-0.04	0.00	0.03	-0.02	-0.12	1.00													



7	-0.03	-0.03	-0.148*	0.05	-0.03	0.00	1.00											
8	-0.05	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.08	0.02	-0.04	1.00										
9	0.03	0.10	0.07	-0.01	0.06	0.08	0.04	-0.03	1.00									
10	-0.11	-0.08	-0.03	0.00	-0.02	-0.05	0.09	-0.06	-0.10	1.00								
11	0.06	0.00	0.06	-0.01	0.01	-0.147*	-0.06	-0.09	0.06	-0.06	1.00							
12	0.07	0.09	-0.05	-0.12	-0.07	-0.02	0.03	0.08	0.09	-0.01	-0.03	1.00						
13	-0.02	-0.06	-0.02	-0.07	-0.11	0.01	-0.13	0.09	-0.02	0.13	-0.02	-0.06	1.00					
14	-0.04	0.06	-0.01	0.00	0.09	-0.02	0.06	0.05	-0.11	0.02	0.06	-0.13	1.00					
15	-0.04	-0.12	0.06	-0.05	-0.03	0.08	0.02	0.04	0.01	-0.04	-0.03	-0.11	0.12	0.02	1.00			
16	-0.163*	0.01	0.03	0.135*	0.00	-0.02	0.04	-0.06	0.06	140.1*	0.13	-0.11	-0.11	0.02	-0.01	1.00		
17	-0.05	0.01	-0.139*	0.01	0.02	0.04	-0.02	0.03	-0.12	0.03	-0.04	-0.04	0.06	0.12	-0.01	-0.06	1.00	
18	-0.1	0.00	0.07	135.1*	0.04	0.00	-0.09	0.00	-0.09	0.01	-0.03	-0.01	0.09	16.3*	0.05	0.06	0.00	1.00
19	-0.1	-0.02	-0.04	-0.10	0.07	0.05	15.1*	0.08	-0.03	0.08	-0.04	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.07	-0.07	-0.02	0.00

As seen in Table 2, the correlation matrix of components of early maladaptive schemas is seen with marital satisfaction and their significance

levels; social isolation/alienation ( $r=-0.214$ ), self-control/insufficient self-discipline ( $r=-0.163$ ) negatively have a significant and reverse correlation with marital satisfaction.

**Table 3. Correlation matrix of alexithymia sub-components with marital satisfaction**

		Marital satisfaction	Identifying emotion	Describing emotion	Oriented thinking
Pearson Correlation	Marital satisfaction	1			
	Identifying emotion	-0.215**	1		
	Describing emotion	-0.110	0.018	1	
	Oriented thinking	-0.059	0.009	-0.04	1

As reported in Table 3, the matrix of correlation of alexithymia components with marital satisfaction

and its significance levels is seen; identifying emotion has a reverse and significant correlation with marital satisfaction ( $r=0.215$ ).

**Table 4. Stepwise regression of marital satisfaction prediction based on the subcomponents of early maladaptive schemas**

Model		Non-standard coefficients		Standard coefficients	T	Sig.	Correlations		
		B	Standard Error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Semi-partial
1	Constant	359.80	4.44		81.02	0.00			
	Social isolation/alienation	-0.80	0.25	-0.21	-0.324	0.00	-0.21	-0.21	-0.21
2	Constant	370.81	6.23		59.52	0.00			
	Social isolation/alienation	-0.80	0.24	-0.21	-3.28	0.00	-0.21	-0.22	-0.21
	Self-Control/Insufficient Discipline	-0.64	0.26	-0.16	-2.49	0.01	-0.16	-0.17	-0.16

control predicts marital satisfaction significantly and reversely ( $B= -0.16$ ,  $t=-2.49$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

As seen in Table 4, social isolation would predict marital satisfaction significantly and reversely ( $B= -0.21$ ,  $t= -3.28$ ,  $p<0.01$ ); also, insufficient self-

**Table 5. Stepwise regression of marital satisfaction prediction based on the subcomponents of alexithymia**

Model		Non-standard coefficients		Standard coefficients	T	Sig.	Correlations		
		B	Standard Error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Semi-partial
1	Constant	364.71	5.91		61.73	0.00			
	Identifying emotion	-0.89	0.27	-0.22	-0.326	0.00	-0.22	-0.22	-0.22

As seen in Table 5, identifying emotion would predict marital satisfaction significantly and reversely ( $B= -0.22$ ,  $t= -3.26$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

## Discussion

The obtained results confirmed a significant relationship between early maladaptive schemas and the marital satisfaction of couples. The results

of the extant study are matched with findings obtained by Whisman et al. (2018), Wang and Zhao (2023), Rodriguez et al. (2020), Darba et al. (2021), Marinov (2023), Damiris and Allen (2023), and Kover (2024).

The results can be explained concerning marital satisfaction that some researchers adopt psychodynamic approach and believe that unaware factors affect all marital aspects (spouse choice and so forth). According to this viewpoint, if the separation process of subjective relationships during childhood harms the person or if this process is shaped incompletely, the person will be others-dependent in adulthood. In this case, the person expects others to tell him/her what and how to do a task. However, this process and spouse choice and marital relationships are effective in the incidence of their marital disagreements (Whisman et al., 2018). On the contrary, others pay more attention to interpersonal issues rather than intrapersonal cases, and this view is more popular among behaviorist psychotherapists. According to this idea, the main problem of couples is rooted in their weak social skills, so spouses show many negative actions and reactions to each other (Kover, 2024). Schemas are mainly definite and unconditional profiles that are kept by individuals. In the opinion of Beck, early maladaptive schemas are valid samples of harmful experiences during childhood that are gradually stabilized as some patterns of distorted thoughts and dysfunctional behaviors, and since they appear at the beginning of life, they remain as a habit without any question and often shape self-concepts and human's views about the world and affects the person's relationships in the family and effective adaptability in different situations. Moreover, these schemas provide the field for marital conflicts (Kover, 2024). The results show that familial relationships during childhood would anticipate dissatisfaction and conflict in occupational and marital relationships. Activation of bad-action schemas results in biased processing and interpretation of information, and these biases appear as automotive negative thoughts in the consciousness process at the apparent level. Communicational problems of individuals are indeed influenced by imagination about self and

others. Schemas affect the thinking method, feelings, and behavior, and marital intimacy after marriage is somewhat determined based on the schemas (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Satisfaction in close relationships is gained only if the early underlying needs and adulthood needs are appropriately met. For instance, when a woman has an emotional deprivation schema, she will be mostly attracted to the relationship with those men who can activate her central schema this case is called schematic attraction. They are chronically and invasively involved in those thoughts, behaviors, emotions, and relationships that lead to the durability of their schemas. In this case, they recreate conditions unintentionally in their adult lives, and these circumstances have mostly harmed them in childhood (Rodriguez et al., 2020). The ineffective interactive styles taught in families mainly support and prevent the formation of stable intimate relationships with spouses during adulthood. People who have experienced marital conflicts and severe familial violence most likely have problems in commitment to their spouses and are afraid that their lives will be like their parents' lives. On the other hand, individuals are looking for situations in which, rewards exceed the costs. The imbalance between costs and received benefits would result in personal dissatisfaction and conflict, which may put the whole family situation in danger. Conflict originates from inflexible schemas that are caused by intellectual errors, documenting mistakes, inefficient intellectual patterns, and illogical experiences. In terms of post-modern, marital conflict appears when couples in a relationship organize and create their stories based on their experiences. Schemas are core factors in personality structure and direct a person towards various relationships, and the most obvious schema may occur in marital life and struggles between couples because they have brought many past experiences of themselves to the marital life (Darba et al., 2021).

The obtained results showed a significant relationship between alexithymia and marital satisfaction of couples. These results are consistent with findings obtained by Fasdi et al. (2024), Joel et al. (2020), Romeo et al. (2024), Lyvers et al. (2020), and Lyvers et al. (2020).

In explanation of research findings, it seems that



difficulty identifying emotions, difficulty describing emotions, and externally oriented thinking would significantly affect the marital satisfaction of couples and decrease this rate. Research has confirmed that individuals with alexithymia have problems in the accurate identification of emotions when seeing others' faces (Romeo et al., 2024). Accurate identification of emotions is an inseparable part of interpersonal relationships. Defectiveness in the accurate identification of emotions causes many problems for couples with their interpersonal relationships and reduces marital satisfaction. For example, talking to a spouse and having an intimate relationship with him/her requires the potential for identifying emotions and affections of self and spouse. The inability to identify emotions and affections causes interpersonal problems in the context of intimate relationships. Therefore, emotional defectiveness through inability and failure in the identification of emotions and affections may decrease marital satisfaction. Individuals with alexithymia have less capacity to show empathy for others' emotional moods (Romeo et al., 2024). The limitation and inability of a person to have empathy and sympathy with others would affect interpersonal relationships, particularly in the case of intimate and marital relationships, creating problems in them. Accordingly, alexithymia may decrease the marital satisfaction of couples through inability and defectiveness in showing empathy and sympathy (Joel et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that early maladaptive schemas and alexithymia play a considerable role in predicting marital satisfaction. In particular, the presence of early maladaptive schemas that are rooted in negative childhood experiences may lead to the creation of dysfunctional communicational patterns and less marital satisfaction. On the other hand, as an inability to identify and express emotions, alexithymia may prevent couples from creating an effective emotional relationship with each other. In an interaction, these two factors would intensify the emotional and communicational challenges and affect marital satisfaction. Therefore,

identification of and intervention in maladaptive schemas to moderate them and improvement of emotional skills can contribute to higher marital satisfaction and better quality of marital relationships.

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