



Original Article

# Moderating role of insecure attachment styles in the relationship between spiritual compatibility with spiritual growth and psychological distress in university students who experienced emotional failure

\*Abbas Amanuelahi<sup>1</sup>; Safa Safaei Moghadam<sup>2</sup>; Manochehr Taghipour<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate professor, Department of Counseling, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran

<sup>2</sup>MA. in counseling, Department of Counseling, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran

<sup>3</sup>MA, Instructor, Department of Counseling, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran.

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** This study aimed to determine mediating role of insecure attachment styles on relationship between spiritual compatibility with spiritual growth and psychological distress in university students who experienced emotional failure.

**Materials and Methods:** The statistical community of this study consisted of all male students in Ahvaz universities who experienced emotional failure in their relationships with girls. Among them, 200 men were selected by the purposeful sampling method. The research instruments included spiritual compatibility questionnaire, spiritual assessment inventory, revised attachment styles questionnaire, and psychological distress questionnaire. Data analyzed through SPSS-21, regression, and simple correlation method.

**Results:** The results showed that there is a significant relation between spiritual compatibility with spiritual growth ( $P= 0.001$ ,  $r= 0.58$ ) and also there is a negative relation between spiritual compatibility and psychological distress ( $P= 0.001$ ,  $r= -0.17$ ). Also the results of mediating regression showed that insecure attachment style mediate the relation between spiritual compatibility with spiritual growth ( $P= 0.05$ ,  $\beta= -1.12$ ) but insecure attachment style does not mediate the relation between spiritual compatibility and psychological distress ( $P= 0.96$ ,  $\beta= 0.03$ ).

**Conclusion:** According to the results, spiritual compatibility plays a role in spiritual growth and mental health. Insecure attachment style has a moderating role in the relationship between spiritual compatibility and spiritual growth.

**Keywords:** Attachment styles, Psychological distress, Spiritual compatibility, Spiritual growth

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## Introduction

The evidence indicates that females and males marry at older ages than before. This tendency to

delay marriage may increase an emotional relationship and provide them with an opportunity to choose a lifelong partner (1).

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## \*Corresponding Author:

Department of Counseling, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran.

a.amanelahi@scu.ac.ir

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Upon entering the university, the relationship between females and males finds a new dimension. By changing the situation and distance from the family, the emotional needs will be more specific, and the possibility of a relationship with another gender will be provided. The quality of romantic relationships has a much stronger effect on people's self-confidence than in other relationships. As the beginning of a relationship is generally accompanied by a sense of acceptance and positive emotions such as joy, euphoria, love, and pleasure, the end of a relationship also is generally accompanied by a feeling of rejection and lack of excitement, such as anxiety, anger, jealousy, hopeless, and lonely.

One of the most comprehensive and challenging experiences of loss and mourning can be observed in emotional failure. Emotional failure refers to cases in which the emotional relationship between two people (husband and wife, females and males) has been broken and separated from each other. After emotional failure, people try to cope with this experience. For example, Perilloux and Buss found that students seek positive strategies, including converting to spiritual practices and spirituality, to adapt to this experience. Therefore, spirituality is one of the manifestations of human existence in dealing with these situations (2).

Spirituality is a state of being that examines humans with qualities such as nature, capacity for inner knowledge and the source of reinforcement, religious mental experience, individual excellence toward the capacity to love, and search for meaning for the human entity, which is the centerpiece of any creature (3).

In the last few decades, psychologists and mental health professionals have increasingly considered the topic of spirituality and its development in humans.

On the one hand, the advancement of psychology and, on the other hand, the complex nature of societies in the third millennium made human spiritual needs to be more important than material needs and demands. Therefore, spiritual growth is an attempt to understand the responses associated with the foundation of existence and life, and the most important one is an inner relationship with the supernatural or God Almighty (4).

One of the basic concepts of emotional failures is spiritual consistency. This structure involves cognitive and behavioral techniques derived from religious and spiritual beliefs that are used to adapt to emotional failures and stressful life events. Researchers have carefully examined religious and spiritual coping methods for managing the stress experienced by premarital love failure; these studies have shown that spiritual and religious compatibility in post-failure adjustment is better than non-religious and non-spiritual methods to cope with failure (5).

Studies have shown that early attachment experience is a powerful predictor of romantic relationships in adulthood. People with secure attachments easily build sincere relationships and rarely worry about getting intimated or rejected by someone. Conversely, people with insecure attachment accept that others do not like them, and romantic relationship is hardly found and rarely survive (6).

The studies show that those with emotional failure during these relationships will suffer from psychological distress such as depression and negative thoughts (7), therefore, one of the basic psychological structures in such relationships is psychological distress, which is defined as a set of symptoms of psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, restlessness, and sleep disorder (8).

One of the signs of psychological distress is the crisis in emotional failure, which includes severe emotional attacks, severe negative thoughts, distressing desires, infinite loneliness and emptiness, and loss of interest in activities. In addition, psychological distress leads to inflicting pressure on people's acquaintances with emotional failure by asking for help from people around them and social networks and creating tensions in the relationship between females and males. Psychological distress in people with emotional failure is due to mental disorders such as thought disorder, including extra thought, abstract thought, content thought disorder, perception disorder, mood disorders, emotional disorders, and depression (9).

Therefore, this study aimed to assess the moderating role of insecure attachment style in the relationship between spiritual compatibility with spiritual growth and psychological distress in university students with emotional failure.

## Materials and Methods

The statistical population of this study was male students of Ahvaz universities in 2015 experienced an emotional failure in the past year. Therefore, the inclusion criteria included being a university student and the experience of emotional failure over the past year. Those who divorced and ended their marital relationships were excluded. Other exclusion criteria were: having a psychological disorder, being treated (counseling and psychotherapy), and taking medication. Two hundred male students were selected through the targeted sampling method.

At first, it was essential to find students with emotional failure in a good position to acknowledge their failure and fill out the questionnaire. So it was referred to the student dormitories. Then, after gaining trust and explaining the confidentiality of their information, the participants were asked to respond to questionnaires if they had an emotional failure over the past year. Participation in this study was also completely free, and they could withdraw from completing the questionnaires voluntarily. Finally, the data were analyzed at the end by maintaining the confidentiality of the responses.

### Research instruments

*A) Spiritual Compatibility Questionnaire:* This questionnaire was a self-report tool for assessing the level of spiritual compatibility developed by Rasouli, Yaghmaei, Alavi Majd, and Saeed Alzakirin. Due to the cultural features of Iranian society, quantitative and qualitative methods were used to construct and validate the questionnaire above. This questionnaire consists of 39 questions, with three subscales: 1- meaning of life, 2- relationship with God, and 3- seeking spiritual support (10). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients in the subscales are 0.94, 0.91, and 0.89, respectively. The total Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.96. The scoring of each question on a continuum is from 1 (I completely disagree) to 5 (I completely agree). In Rasouli et al. study, the validity of the Spiritual Compatibility Questionnaire by correlating it with the adolescent's spiritual attitude scale was 0.89, and the re-test correlation coefficient was 0.71 with a three-week time interval also, the reliability of this questionnaire was 0.96 through Cronbach's

alpha coefficient (10). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total score of this questionnaire was 0.76, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for subscales of the meaning of life, relationship with God, and seeking spiritual support were 0.70, 0.82, and 0.68, respectively.

*B) Revised Attachment Style Questionnaire (Collins, 1966):* This questionnaire consists of a self-assessment in the self-descriptive relationship-building skills of the formation of close attachments and consists of 18 items assessed by a 5-point scale of Likert type for each substance (which is from -1 it is not my attribute to 5- it is quite my attribute). The analysis of factors indicates three subscales of 6 substances:

1. Dependence: The extent to which the subjects trust others and rely on them (it measures due to be available, if necessary).

2. Closeness: Measures the individual's comfort in a relationship with intimacy and emotional closeness.

3. Anxiety: Measures fear of having relationships in relations (11). Pakdaman has examined the construct validity of this questionnaire. Construct validity was measured using divergent validity (diagnostic). The results showed that the correlation coefficient between the subscales at the significance level of 0.001 is -0.313 and -0.336, respectively. The correlation coefficient between subscales of dependence and closeness at the significance level of 0.014 was 0.246 (12). Collins and Read showed that closeness, dependence, and anxiety subscales remained stable over two months and eight months. In addition, Collins has reported that the Cronbach's alpha in two samples of 173 and 100 students were 0.81 and 0.82 in the subscale of closeness, 0.78 and 0.80 in the subscale of dependence, 0.83 and 0.85 for the subscale of anxiety, respectively. In the present study, the reliability of subscales of anxiety and avoidant attachment styles and the whole questionnaire by Cronbach's alpha method were 0.64, 0.73, and 0.69, respectively (11,13).

*C) Spiritual Assessment Inventory:* Hall and Edwards designed this inventory to assess two dimensions of spiritual growth, which means the knowledge of God's existence and the quality of relationship with God (14). The questionnaire includes six subscales: awareness, actual acceptance, hopelessness, magnification,

inconsistency, and perception management. This questionnaire is a self-report tool consisting of 47 phrases; some of the phrases are composed of two parts.

The subject must determine his/her agreement or opposition to each phrase on a 5-point Likert scale. Hall and Edwards reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of subscales of spiritual assessment inventory as follows: awareness 0.95, hopelessness 0.90, actual acceptance 0.83, magnification 0.73, inconsistency 0.84, and perception management 0.77. The reliability of this tool was as follows: awareness 0.95, hopelessness 0.90, actual acceptance 0.83, magnification 0.73, inconsistency 0.73, and perception management 0.77 (14). Therefore, this questionnaire has desirable reliability. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the subscales were as follows: awareness 0.74, hopelessness 0.83, actual acceptance 0.63, magnification 0.73, inconsistency 0.81, and perception management 0.73. In this research, the validity coefficient of this scale by correlating it with Rasouli et al. spiritual compatibility scale was 0.82, and the re-test correlation coefficient was 0.83 with a three-week time interval (10). Therefore, the confirmatory factor analysis of this questionnaire was verified for performing this research, and the researchers were allowed to use this research.

*D) Psychological Distress Scale:* This questionnaire was first developed by Horowitz et al., and then it was translated into Persian by the authors. This tool aims to measure the psychological distress of individuals against life-threatening accidents; the tool is composed of 15 questions and includes two subscales called

penetration and avoidant. The questions are scored on a four-point scale as follows: never (0), rarely (1), sometimes (3), and often (5). Seven questions of this questionnaire are used to measure penetration, and the eight remaining questions are used to measure avoidant (15). In Iran, Cronbach's alpha coefficients in these subscales obtained 0.89 and 0.94, respectively; and the alpha coefficient of this questionnaire was obtained 0.85. Also, in this study, the reliability coefficients of penetration and avoidant subscale were 0.82 and 0.78, respectively, and the reliability coefficient of the total score was 0.86. These numbers indicate the desirable validity of this questionnaire. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this questionnaire was 0.68. Also, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the penetration and avoidant subscale were 0.68 and 0.72, respectively. The coincidence validity coefficients with the psychological distress scale by Kessler et al. obtained 0.78, and the correlation coefficient obtained 0.73 (16). Therefore, the confirmatory factor analysis of this questionnaire was verified for performing this research, and the researchers were allowed to use this research.

## Results

The participants aged  $24.77 \pm 1.50$  years. Approximately 65% were undergraduates, and 35% were master and doctoral students. In Table 1, descriptive findings regarding spiritual compatibility, insecure attachment styles, spiritual growth, and psychological distress have been presented. Table 2 shows simple correlation coefficients between predictor variables and criterion variables.

**Table 1:** Mean and standard deviation of spiritual compatibility, insecure attachment style, spiritual growth, and psychological distress

Statistical indices of variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Spiritual compatibility	152.08	17.12	120	194
Spiritual growth	178.16	28.42	128	276
Psychological distress	23.76	6.66	13	43
Insecure attachment style	55.26	6.42	41	72

**Table 2:** Simple correlation coefficients between predictor variables and criterion variables

Statistical indices of predictor variables	Criterion variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)	P
Spiritual compatibility	Psychological distress	-0.17	0.01
	Spiritual growth	0.58	0.001

As shown in Table 2, the simple correlation coefficient between spiritual compatibility and psychological distress is -0.17. Also, the simple correlation coefficient between spiritual compatibility and spiritual growth is 0.58. Table

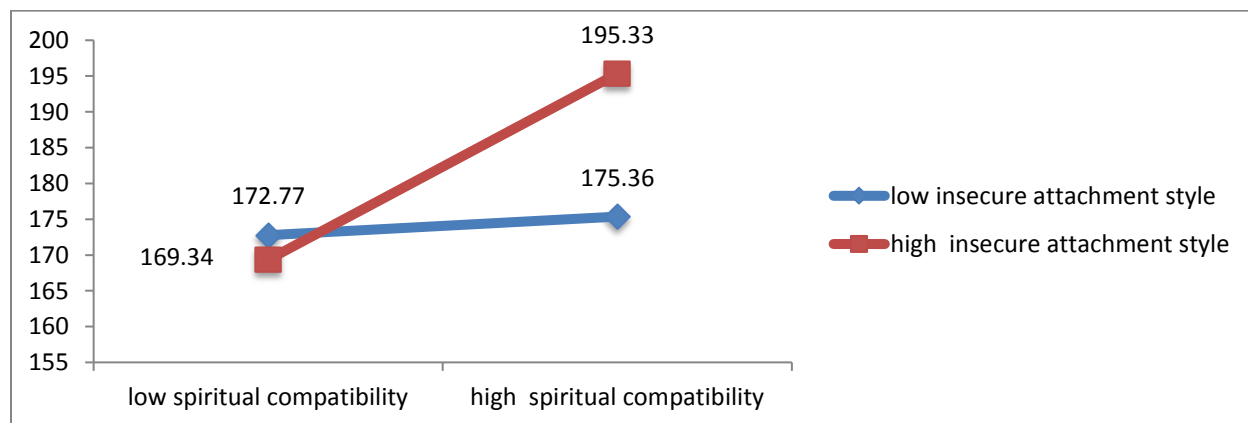
3 shows the moderator regression analysis to investigate the moderating role of insecure attachment styles in the relationship between spiritual compatibility and spiritual growth.

**Table 3:** Moderator regression analysis to investigate the moderating role of insecure attachment styles in the relationship between spiritual compatibility and spiritual growth

Statistical indices of variable	MR	RS	FP	Regression coefficients		
				1	2	3
Spiritual compatibility	0.58	0.33	100.23 P< 0.001	$\beta= 0.58$ $t= 10.01$ P< 0.001		
Insecure attachment style	0.59	0.35	53.48 P< 0.001	$\beta= 0.55$ $t= 9.44$ P< 0.001	$\beta= -1.12$ $t= -2.17$ P< 0.03	
Spiritual compatibility $\times$ Insecure attachment style	0.60	0.36	37.46 P< 0.001	$\beta= 1.42$ $t= 3.17$ P< 0.002	$\beta= 0.77$ $t= 1.66$ P< 0.09	$\beta= -1.12$ $t= 1.95$ P< 0.05

As shown in Table 3, the interaction of spiritual compatibility and insecure attachment style has increased the level of variance specified by the criterion variable, namely spiritual growth, from 0.35 to 0.36. The regression coefficients related to the interaction of these three variables

( $\beta= -1.12, P< 0.05$ ) indicate that this increase is statistically significant. It can be stated that the insecure attachment style moderates the relationship between spiritual compatibility and spiritual growth in males with emotional failure.



**Chart 1:** Interaction status of the mean of four groups created in terms of mean scores of spiritual growth

Chart 1 shows that the slope of regression lines related to spiritual compatibility and spiritual growth in people with high insecure attachment style (25.99) and low insecure attachment style (2.59) are not equal.

As observed, in people with a high insecure attachment style, those with low spiritual compatibility, their mean spiritual growth is (169.34), and in those with high spiritual compatibility, their mean spiritual growth is (195.33); in which this difference is significant. Also, in people with a low insecure attachment style, those with low spiritual compatibility, their

mean spiritual growth is (172.77), and in those with high spiritual compatibility, their mean spiritual growth is (175.36), which is very significant.

These results indicate that the positive relationship between spiritual compatibility and spiritual growth in people with an insecure attachment style is lower than in those with a low insecure attachment style. Table 4 presents the moderator regression analysis to investigate the moderating role of insecure attachment styles in the relationship between spiritual compatibility and psychological distress.

**Table 4.** Moderator regression analysis to investigate the moderating role of insecure attachment styles in the relationship between spiritual compatibility and psychological distress

Statistical indices of variable	MR	RS	FP	Regression coefficients		
				1	2	3
Spiritual compatibility	0.17	0.03	6.11 P<0.01	$\beta = -0.17$ $t = -2.47$ P<0.01		
Insecure attachment style	0.21	0.04	4.83 P<0.00	$\beta = -0.14$ $t = -2.05$ P<0.04	$\beta = 0.13$ $t = 1.86$ P<0.06	
Spiritual compatibility × Insecure attachment style	0.21	0.04	3.21 P<0.02	$\beta = -0.17$ $t = -0.31$ P<0.75	$\beta = 0.10$ $t = 0.18$ P<0.85	$\beta = 0.03$ $t = 0.04$ P<0.96

As seen in Table 4, the interaction of spiritual compatibility and insecure attachment style did not change the level of variance specified by the criterion variable, namely psychological distress (0.04 to 0.04).

The regression coefficients related to the interaction of these three variables ( $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $P < 0.96$ ) indicate that this increase is not statistically significant; therefore, it can be concluded that the insecure attachment style is not the moderator of the relationship between spiritual compatibility and psychological distress.

## Discussion

This study aimed to determine the moderator role of insecure attachment styles on the relationship between spiritual compatibility with spiritual growth and psychological distress. The results showed a significant positive relationship between spiritual compatibility and spiritual

growth. This finding is consistent with the conducted studies (17-19). Ano and Vasconcelles believe that spiritual compatibility can provide a set of adapted actions for a person (17). From Pargament's viewpoint, religious strategies make a person needless external support, which makes him/her feel empowered. Also, when these people turn to God to solve their problem, they believe that their problem is changeable, and this belief increases control over the situation (5).

In explaining this finding, it can be said that a spiritual path gradually leads to spiritual growth, and features associated with spiritual growth include kindness, honesty, tolerance, inner peace, and intellectual interaction in confronting the existing challenges of life; therefore, the person will feel calm. Spirituality provides people with a sense of belonging, safety, and service to the community and guides the growth of human existence forward. Therefore, when people with

emotional failure feel involved with an intolerable event, they turn to spiritual and religious practices and relieve the pain caused by their separation and failure experience; thus, these spiritual practices lead to their growth and excellence (20).

The results of moderator regression analysis showed that insecure attachment style moderates the relationship between spiritual compatibility and spiritual growth. These findings are consistent with Pargament et al. and Hawley studies (6,21). Mahoney et al. showed that secure adults feel affinity and intimacy with others. They can trust others and know themselves as lovely and valuable; on the contrary, insecure adults have various behaviors and emotions about attachment, and they are very dependent. They are often worried about being left and will experience love failure more than others. Insecure adults feel less committed than others and know their acquaintances are unreliable. As a result, individuals turn to spirituality to cope with emotional failure experiences, which leads to spiritual growth and peace. Of course, individuals with a secure attachment style are more easily confronted with failure experiences through spirituality and spiritual practices. In contrast, individuals with an insecure attachment style believe less in spirituality and try to adapt to emotional failure through non-spiritual practices (22). The results showed a negative relationship between spiritual compatibility and psychological distress. Furthermore, these findings are consistent with the research results by Desrosiers and Miller, and Pargament et al. (6,23). In explaining this finding, it can be said that feeling punished by God can lead to feelings of guilt, depression, and loneliness, and ignoring the power of God can lead to disappointment, dissatisfaction, and failure; thus, these factors lead to social isolation. Alternatively, attributing punishment to the devil can lead to fear and anxiety in people with emotional failure (24).

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Therefore, individuals with emotional failure, after experiencing it have psychological states such as feeling depressed, guilty, and distressing; if these people are involved in spirituality and religious practices, they can better get along and adapt to emotional failure. Moderator regression analysis results showed that insecure attachment style does not moderate the relationship between spiritual compatibility and psychological distress. Despite research conducted abroad, this result was not obtained in this study. This finding is inconsistent with the Hawley model (20). In explaining this finding, it can be stated that people with emotional failure experience may not want to reduce their psychological distress with spirituality and spiritual practices. Therefore, attachment style does not affect improving their psychological distress. Also, the difference in this result from previous findings may be due to different sampling methods, the sample of this study included male students with emotional failure; while in the previous studies, the students of both genders had an emotional failure. Finally, it may also be due to the different tools used in this research.

### Conclusion

According to the results, spiritual compatibility plays a role in spiritual growth and mental health. Also, insecure attachment can moderate the relationship between spiritual compatibility and spiritual growth.

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