

Emotional expression as a mediator between rumination and marital quality: Evidence from a collectivist society

Elham Taheri¹; Zahra Saedi¹; *Mahdi Amiri¹

¹Department of Clinical Psychology, School of Medicine, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran.

Abstract

Introduction: Marital quality is vital for psychological well-being. Rumination is linked to poorer interpersonal functioning, while emotional expression fosters intimacy and relationship satisfaction. This study aimed to examine whether emotional expression mediates the relationship between rumination and marital quality among Iranian married adults.

Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted between March and September 2023. A total of 384 married adults from Mashhad, Iran, were selected via purposive convenience sampling. Participants completed Persian-validated versions of the Rumination Scale, the Emotional Expression Scale, and the Marital Relationship Quality Scale. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and bootstrapped mediation analysis with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals in AMOS v24.

Results: Rumination negatively predicted emotional expression ($\beta = -0.56$, $P < 0.001$) and marital quality ($\beta = -0.29$, $P < 0.001$). Emotional expression positively predicted marital quality ($\beta = 0.49$, $P < 0.001$). Bootstrapping revealed a significant indirect effect ($\beta = -0.27$, 95% CI $[-0.38, -0.18]$), indicating that emotional expression partially mediated the relationship between rumination and marital quality. The model demonstrated good fit (CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.045).

Conclusion: Emotional expression serves as a partial mediator between rumination and marital quality. These findings underscore the value of culturally sensitive, emotion-focused interventions in collectivist societies like Iran, where emotional suppression is normative. However, due to the cross-sectional design of study and use of self-report measures, causal interpretations are limited, and longitudinal research is recommended.

Keywords: Emotional expression, Marital satisfaction, Rumination

Please cite this paper as:

Taheri E, Saedi Z, Amiri M. Emotional expression as a mediator between rumination and marital quality: Evidence from a collectivist society. *Journal of Fundamentals of Mental Health* 2026 Mar-Apr; 28(2): 109-115.
DOI:10.22038/jfmh.2025.89339.3258

Introduction

Marital quality is a cornerstone of individual well-being and relational health, carrying particular significance in collectivist societies

that prioritize family cohesion and social harmony over individual autonomy (1,2). This cultural distinction in predictors of marital satisfaction is well-documented (1).

*Corresponding Author:

Department of Clinical Psychology, School of Medicine, Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Mashhad, Iran.

amirime@mums.ac.ir

Received: Jul. 07, 2025

Accepted: Dec. 06, 2025



Copyright©2026 Mashhad University of Medical Sciences. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.en>

In cultural contexts such as Iran, interpersonal relationships are often guided by norms of emotional restraint, filial duty, and conformity to social roles (2-4), where strong family ties are a fundamental social structure (5). These values are deeply embedded in Iran's sociocultural and religious fabric, where principles like *sabr* (patience) and *haya* (modesty) encourage emotional moderation for the preservation of family and social order (6,7). The profound influence of modesty on family strength further underscores this cultural framework (8). Consequently, research indicates that Iranian couples frequently avoid direct emotional confrontation, which can be linked to increased psychological distress and reduced marital satisfaction (9,10). This highlights the critical need to examine marital dynamics within their specific cultural framework.

Rumination, defined as a repetitive and passive focus on negative emotions and their causes, is a key intrapersonal factor that can severely disrupt relational functioning (11,12). It is consistently associated with emotional dysregulation, interpersonal withdrawal, and lower relationship satisfaction (13,14). Within marriage, rumination is theorized to undermine intimacy and effective conflict resolution, key components of marital quality (6). Cognitive emotion regulation strategies, which are often compromised by rumination, play a significant mediating role in marital satisfaction (15). Qualitative studies further reveal how rumination directly fuels marital conflict among Iranian women (16). However, the specific mechanisms through which rumination impairs marital outcomes, especially in contexts where emotional expression is socially constrained, remain inadequately explored.

Emotional expression—the verbal and non-verbal communication of emotional states—is a potential mechanism linking cognition to relational outcomes (17). Open emotional expression is known to foster mutual understanding, closeness, and better conflict management, thereby strengthening marital bonds (18,19). In contrast, emotional suppression, while often culturally sanctioned in collectivist settings, may intensify the relational deficits associated with rumination (20,21). This cultural nuance in the use of emotional display rules is empirically supported by Novin et al. who found distinct sociocultural patterns in emotional expression between Iran and Western countries (22), a finding echoed in comparative

analyses of Iranian personal relationships (3). An individual prone to rumination may struggle to express emotions constructively, leading to emotional disconnection and diminished marital quality (23,24). This creates a complex tension: while emotional expression and emotional skillfulness are generally beneficial in Western models of couples therapy (25,26), its role in a culture that values restraint, like Iran's, is more ambiguous and potentially double-edged (27,28). Despite the theoretical relevance, a significant gap exists in the empirical literature. Few studies have directly tested whether emotional expression serves as a mediating pathway between rumination and marital quality in a collectivist context. Most established models of emotion and relationships have been developed in Western societies, limiting their generalizability (29).

Furthermore, while recent research in Iran has begun to explore related mediators such as resilience and cognitive emotion regulation in marital contexts (15,30), and the broader link between marital quality and well-being is acknowledged (31), the specific pathway from rumination through emotional expression to marital quality remains unexamined. This gap is particularly salient given the documented challenges with emotion dysregulation in Iranian couples (32,33) and the proven efficacy of emotion-focused interventions in this population (34,35). Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap by investigating the potential mediating role of emotional expression in the relationship between rumination and marital quality among married adults in Iran. The city of Mashhad was selected as the research setting due to its status as a major religious and cultural center, where traditional values are prominently upheld, making it an ideal context for examining these cultural dynamics. By integrating cognitive and emotional processes within a specific cultural context, this research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of marital functioning and inform the development of culturally sensitive interventions.

Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted between March and September 2023 in Mashhad, Iran. The study population consisted of married adults residing in Mashhad. Using purposive convenience sampling, participants were recruited from community health centers, public spaces, and through social media

platforms in Mashhad. A total of 384 individuals who met the inclusion criteria—including legal marriage for at least one year, Persian language proficiency, and provision of informed consent—were selected. Individuals with a history of diagnosed psychiatric disorders or those undergoing divorce or separation were excluded from the study. Out of 420 individuals approached, 384 completed the questionnaires and met the eligibility criteria (response rate= 91.4%).

Research instruments

A) Rumination Response Scale: This scale has 22 items and demonstrates strong psychometric properties, with a test-retest reliability of 0.67 and convergent validity with depression measures ($r= 0.75$) (6,27). The Persian version has shown excellent reliability in previous Iranian studies, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.87 to 0.92 and a confirmed factor structure through confirmatory factor analysis (CFI= 0.94, RMSEA= 0.06) (11).

B) Emotional Expressiveness Scale: The original 16-item scale has established cross-cultural validity, with internal consistency of $\alpha= 0.85-0.91$ and demonstrated discriminant validity from related constructs (16,26). In Iranian validation studies, the scale has shown good psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.82–0.87 and adequate test-retest reliability ($r= 0.79$) over a four-week period (23).

C) Marital Relationship Quality Scale: The original instrument has 28 items and well-documented construct validity with marital satisfaction measures ($r= 0.76$) and demonstrates high internal consistency ($\alpha= 0.92$) (29). The Persian version has shown appropriate psychometric properties in Iranian samples, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.89-0.93 and good convergent validity with relationship satisfaction measures ($r= 0.81$) (8,9). In the current study, these scales demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.89, 0.84, and 0.91, respectively. Confirmatory Factor Analysis results confirmed

the robust factor structure of all scales, with all factor loadings exceeding 0.5 and adequate model fit indices (CFI> 0.90, RMSEA< 0.08). Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 25 and AMOS version 26 software. Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) and Pearson correlation coefficients to examine relationships among study variables. Normality of data distribution was assessed using skewness and kurtosis indices, with all values falling within acceptable ranges (± 2). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to examine the validity of the measurement model and its factor structure. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation was used to test the hypothesized mediation model. Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices with standard cutoff criteria: χ^2/df (< 3 acceptable), Comparative Fit Index (CFI> 0.90 good), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI> 0.90 good), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA< 0.06 good), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR< 0.08 good). The significance of indirect effects was tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples and 95% confidence intervals. Multi-group analysis was conducted to examine potential gender differences in the structural paths of the model.

Results

Initial analysis of participants' demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1. The sample consisted of 384 married adults with a mean age of 39.21 years ($SD= 7.14$), comprising 197 females (51.3%) and 187 males (48.7%). All measurement scales demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.84 to 0.91, composite reliability values exceeding 0.86, and average variance extracted values above 0.54, confirming adequate convergent validity.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and psychometric properties of research variables (N= 384)

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α	CR	AVE
Rumination	55.32	10.47	0.12	-0.45	0.89	0.90	0.54
Emotional expression	44.89	7.12	-0.25	0.10	0.84	0.86	0.58
Marital quality	92.13	11.85	-0.10	-0.30	0.91	0.92	0.62

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant relationships among all study

variables ($P< 0.01$), as detailed in Table 2. Rumination showed strong negative

correlations with both emotional expression ($r = -0.58$, $P < 0.01$) and marital quality ($r = -0.61$, $P < 0.01$). Conversely, emotional expression

demonstrated a strong positive correlation with marital quality ($r = 0.64$, $P < 0.01$).

Table 2. Correlation matrix of research variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Rumination	1		
2. Emotional Expression	-0.58**	1	
3. Marital Quality	-0.61**	0.64**	1

** $P < 0.01$

Harman's single-factor test indicated that the first unrotated factor accounted for 31.6% of the total variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50%. This suggests that common method bias was not a substantial concern in the present study.

The hypothesized mediation model demonstrated excellent fit to the data: $\chi^2/df = 1.89$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.045 (90% CI: 0.037-0.052), SRMR = 0.039. Analysis of path coefficients revealed that rumination significantly negatively predicted emotional expression ($\beta = -0.56$, $P < 0.001$) and marital quality ($\beta = -0.29$, $P < 0.001$). Emotional expression, in turn, significantly positively predicted marital quality ($\beta = 0.49$, $P < 0.001$).

Bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 resamples confirmed a significant indirect effect of rumination on marital quality through emotional expression ($\beta = -0.27$, 95% CI: -0.38 to -0.18). The direct effect remained significant ($\beta = -0.29$, $P < .001$), indicating partial mediation. The total effect of rumination on marital quality was $\beta = -0.56$ ($P < .001$), with emotional expression accounting for approximately 48.2% of this total effect.

Multi-group analysis examining gender differences in the structural paths showed no significant moderation effect, as indicated by minimal changes in fit indices ($\Delta CFI = 0.004$, $\Delta RMSEA = 0.002$). This demonstrates that the mediation model was invariant across genders, suggesting that the relationships among rumination, emotional expression, and marital quality function similarly for both male and female participants.

Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence that emotional expression serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between rumination and marital quality among Iranian married adults. The findings demonstrate that individuals with higher levels of rumination

tend to exhibit lower emotional expression, which in turn is associated with diminished marital quality. These results align with previous research conducted in Western contexts (14,26) while offering unique insights into these dynamics within Iran's collectivist cultural framework, where emotional restraint is deeply embedded in religious and social norms (3,5,22). Recent studies in the Iranian context similarly highlight the complex interplay between cognitive processes and marital outcomes (11,20,30), underscoring the cultural specificity of these relationships (1).

The strong negative association between rumination and emotional expression ($\beta = -0.56$, representing a large effect size) suggests that repetitive negative thinking significantly impairs individuals' capacity for emotional disclosure. This relationship appears particularly meaningful in Iranian society, where cultural values such as *sabr* (patience) and *haya* (modesty) often discourage overt emotional expression (5,8). The suppression of emotional expression may therefore represent not only an individual coping mechanism but also compliance with culturally sanctioned norms, potentially exacerbating marital distress. Cross-cultural research supports this finding, demonstrating that emotional suppression consistently predicts poorer marital outcomes across diverse cultural contexts (16,32). The mediation analysis revealed that emotional expression explains a substantial portion (approximately 48%) of the total effect of rumination on marital quality. However, the persistence of a significant direct effect ($\beta = -0.29$) indicates that other mechanisms likely contribute to this relationship. Future research should investigate additional potential mediators, including emotion regulation strategies (17,20), conflict resolution abilities (10), and perceived partner responsiveness patterns (15). The significant role of other cognitive-emotional factors is supported by

Iranian studies showing that cognitive emotion regulation mediates the path to marital satisfaction (20,30) and that dysfunctional attitudes predict marital conflict through emotion regulation (11). Several limitations warrant consideration. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, necessitating longitudinal investigations to establish temporal precedence. The exclusive recruitment from Mashhad may limit generalizability to other Iranian populations. Although gender moderation analyses were non-significant, more nuanced examinations of gender-specific pathways remain valuable. The reliance on self-report measures and single-informant data represents another limitation that could be addressed through dyadic designs and multimethod assessments in future studies, as informant discrepancies often reveal meaningful clinical information beyond mere measurement error (33).

Despite these limitations, the findings offer important practical implications for mental health professionals working with Iranian couples. Culturally adapted interventions that integrate emotion-focused techniques (14, 25) with respect for Islamic values could enhance therapeutic effectiveness, as evidenced by the success of emotionally focused therapy for Iranian couples (24). Psychoeducational programs addressing the detrimental effects of rumination (6,12) and emotional suppression, particularly for men socialized in emotionally restrictive environments, may prove beneficial. Community-based initiatives involving religious leaders could help promote healthy emotional communication while respecting cultural traditions. Recent community-based participatory research emphasizes the crucial role of religious leaders in mental health interventions within Muslim communities (35), while community empowerment approaches

highlight the importance of leveraging local resources for sustainable mental health support (34). Such collaborations could develop religiously- congruent frameworks for emotional expression that align with Islamic principles while supporting marital health.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that emotional expression partially mediates the relationship between rumination and marital quality in Iran's collectivist context. The findings highlight the complex interplay between cognitive processes, emotional communication, and cultural norms in shaping marital dynamics.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to sincerely thank all participants and research assistants who contributed to this study.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Mashhad University of Medical Sciences. All participants provided written informed consent, and confidentiality of data was maintained throughout the research process.

Code of Ethics

IR.MUMS.MEDICAL.REC.1404.182

Authors Contributions

Elham Taheri: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, and writing-original draft. Zahra Saedi: Supervision, validation, writing-review, and editing. Mahdi Amiri: Supervision, project administration, resources, writing-review, and editing.

References

1. Kazim SM, Rafique R. Predictors of marital satisfaction in individualistic and collectivist cultures: A mini review. *J Res Psychol* 2021; 3(1): 55-67.
2. Jolly-James NP. The relationship between family tie and marital stability in Ohafia Local Government Area. *Int J Integr Educ* 2023; 6(12): 214-25.
3. Zandpour F. Personal relationships in Iran: A comparative analysis. In: *Communication in personal relationships across cultures*. Sage; 1996:174-92.
4. Mazhar C. Iranian American parents influence on their adult children's mate selection and relationship. Ph.D. Dissertation. Alliant International University; 2024.
5. Hakakan M, Fayyaz Bakhsh N, Savadi E, Shahroudi MR. [Systematic review of research on the effect of modesty on family strength]. *Journal of woman and family studies* 2021; 9(4): 79-105. (Persian)
6. Nolen-Hoeksema S, Wisco BE, Lyubomirsky S. Rethinking rumination. *Perspect Psychol Sci* 2008; 3(5): 400-24.

7. Nolen-Hoeksema S. The role of rumination in depressive disorders and mixed anxiety/depressive symptoms. *J Abnorm Psychol* 2000; 109(3): 504-11.
8. Tavakol Z, Moghadam ZB, Nasrabadi AN, Salehiniya H, Rezaei E. A review of the factors associated with marital satisfaction. *Galen medical journal* 2017; 6(3): e641.
9. Zaheri F, Dolatian M, Shariati M, Simbar M, Ebadi A, Azghadi SB. Effective factors in marital satisfaction in perspective of Iranian women and men: A systematic review. *Electron Phys* 2016; 8(12): 3369-77.
10. Sokhanvar S, Shirinzadeh-Feizabadi A, Raeiyat-Doost F, Seyyedmoharrami I, Ghodrati-Torbati A. The relationship between anxiety caused by coronavirus disease and marital satisfaction mediated by empathy and conflict resolution styles in married women. *J Educ Health Promot* 2023; 12: 369.
11. Sedaghatkhan A, Kajbafnejad H, Chinaveh M, Aminimanesh S. [Predicting marital conflicts based on dysfunctional attitudes mediated by emotion regulation]. *Iranian evolutionary educational psychology journal* 2022; 4(2): 352-63. (Persian)
12. Namdarpour F, Fatehizade M, Bahrami F, Mohammadi Fesharaki R. How rumination affects marital conflict in Iranian women: A qualitative study. *Journal of divorce and remarriage* 2019; 60(3): 171-82.
13. Mohammadi S, Azemoudeh M, Shalchi B, Mesrabadi J. [Depression and life expectancy in women affected by marital infidelity: A comparison of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy]. *Journal of family research* 2024; 20(1): 125-44. (Persian)
14. Greenberg LS, Goldman RN. Emotion-focused couples therapy: The dynamics of emotion, love, and power. Washington. D.C.: American Psychological Association; 2008.
15. Butler EA, Randall AK. Emotional coregulation in close relationships. *Emot Rev* 2013; 5(2): 202-10.
16. Matsumoto D, Yoo SH, Nakagawa S. Culture, emotion regulation, and adjustment. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2008; 94(6): 925-37.
17. Ehling T, Tuschen-Caffier B, Schnülle J, Fischer S, Gross JJ. Emotion regulation and vulnerability to depression: spontaneous versus instructed use of emotion suppression and reappraisal. *Emotion* 2010; 10(4): 563-72.
18. Cordova JV, Gee CB, Warren LZ. Emotional skillfulness in marriage: Intimacy as a mediator of the relationship between emotional skillfulness and marital satisfaction. *J Soc Clin Psychol* 2005; 24(2): 218-35.
19. Moslemi M, Hatami M. Investigating the mediating role of resilience in the relationship between cognitive emotion regulation and the quality of life of young couples. *International journal of education and cognitive sciences* 2024; 5(1): 25-33.
20. Amini S, Mardanirad M, Khosravi Babadi AA, Poshane K. [The structural model of marital satisfaction based on relational beliefs with the mediating role of cognitive emotion regulation in married women]. *Shenakht Journal of psychology and psychiatry* 2024; 11(3): 99-109. (Persian)
21. Majzoobi MR, Forstmeier S. The relationship between marital reminiscence styles and psychological well-being through mediating role of marital quality. *Front Psychol* 2025; 16: 1639240.
22. Novin S, Banerjee R, Dadkhah A, Rieffe C. Self-reported use of emotional display rules in the Netherlands and Iran: Evidence for sociocultural influence. *Soc Dev* 2009; 18(2): 397-411.
23. Molaeeinezhad M, Scheidt CE, Afshar H, Jahanfar S, Sohran F, Salehi M, et al. Bodily map of emotions in Iranian people. *Health education and health promotion* 2021; 9(2): 153-64. (Persian)
24. Bazyari K, Hooman F, Shoushtari MT, Saadi ZE. Effectiveness of emotionally focused therapy for couples in improving emotion regulation and relationship distress of emotionally divorced couples. *Zahedan journal of research in medical sciences* 2024; 26(2): e67834.
25. Zamani S, Hasani J, Hatami M, Tadros E. Emotion dysregulation and alexithymia within marital burnout through an emotion-focused therapy lens. *Journal of couple and relationship therapy* 2023; 22(3): 201-26.
26. Gross JJ, John OP. Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 2003; 85(2): 348-62.
27. Treynor W, Gonzalez R, Nolen-Hoeksema S. Rumination reconsidered: A psychometric analysis. *Cognit Ther Res* 2003; 27(3): 247-59.
28. Gross JJ. Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychol Inq* 2015; 26(1): 1-26.
29. Fincham FD, Beach SR. Marriage in the new millennium: A decade in review. *J Marriage Fam* 2010; 72(3): 630-49.
30. Amini S, Mardanirad M, Khosravi Babadi AA, Poshane K. [The structural model of marital satisfaction based on relational beliefs with the mediating role of cognitive emotion regulation in married women]. *Shenakht Journal of psychology and psychiatry* 2024; 11(3): 99-109. (Persian)
31. Nobandegani ZN, Shiralinia K, Yasaminejad P. Investigation the relationship between anxiety attachment style, anger rumination, spouse forgiveness, and marital quality. *Journal of social behavior and community health* 2021; 5(4): 678-90.
32. An U, Park HG, Han DE, Kim YH. Emotional suppression and psychological well-being in marriage: The role of regulatory focus and spousal behavior. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 2022; 19(2): 973.

33. De Los Reyes A, Epkins CC. Introduction to the special issue: A dozen years of demonstrating that informant discrepancies are more than measurement error: Toward guidelines for integrating data from multi-informant assessments of youth mental health. *J Clin Child Adolesc Psychol* 2023; 52(1): 1-8.
34. Mustapha AA, Sefinat AA, Anthony O, Femi V, Nnenna O, Anestina FH. Community-based mental health interventions: Empowering local leaders and organizations. Unpublished manuscript], ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390970486_CommunityBased_Mental_Health_Interventions_Empowering_Local_Leaders_and_Organizations (open in a new window). 2025 Apr 21.
35. Humam F, McBryde-Redzovic A, Mahoui I, Ali S, Abolaban H, Zia B, et al. The role of Muslim religious leaders in mental health: A community-based participatory research study in the San Francisco Bay area. *Pastoral psychology* 2023; 72(4): 539-56.