

SELF-ESTEEM AND EMOTION REGULATION AS PREDICTORS OF HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AMONG MARRIED COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the predictive roles of self-esteem, and emotion regulation in fostering healthy relationships among married couples. Given the significance of emotional regulation in marital stability, this research aimed to determine the level to which psychological factors contribute to relationship health. This investigation recruited 500 individuals currently in marital relationships. Gender distribution showed 353 female participants (70.6%) and 147 male participants (29.4%). Participant age averaged 38.38 years with a standard deviation of 7.70. The sample represented varied professional contexts, with academic staff comprising the largest proportion (70.6%). Employing a cross-sectional research approach, data were gathered via validated psychological measures. Specifically, self-esteem was evaluated using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) served to measure participants' emotion regulation patterns. Adaptive Relationship Scale was also used. Data were evaluated using Pearson's correlation analysis and hierarchical multiple regression to determine the predictive strength of each variable. Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that emotion regulation (cognitive reappraisal) ($\beta = .14, p < .01$), emotion regulation (expressive suppression) ($\beta = .25, p < .001$), self-esteem ($\beta = .12, p < .01$), significantly predicted relationship health. The final model explained 18% of the variance in healthy relationships ($R^2 = .18, p < .001$), with emotion regulation strategies emerging as the strongest predictors. The findings highlight the significant role of self-esteem, and emotion regulation in marital satisfaction. Interventions aimed at enhancing self-worth, and emotional intelligence in regulating our emotions could improve relationship quality among married couples.

Keywords: *emotion regulation, healthy relationships, married couples, self-esteem*

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage plays a crucial role in the well-being of individuals, influencing physical, emotional, and psychological health. A stable and fulfilling marital relationship has been linked with greater life satisfaction, reduced stress levels, and improved overall health outcomes (Robles et al., 2014). On the other hand, marital distress has been connected to several detrimental outcomes, such as a higher chance of mental health issues, heart disease, and early death. (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Given the significance of marital relationships, it is essential to explore the factors that contribute to healthy and fulfilling marriages.

One of the primary factors influencing marital satisfaction and stability is self-esteem. Self-esteem is a person's total perception of their value and dignity, which affects how they perceive themselves and their relationships with others (Rosenberg, 1965). High self-esteem has been linked to greater relationship satisfaction, effective conflict resolution, and enhanced emotional intimacy (Erol & Orth, 2014). Conversely, people who have low self-esteem frequently experience insecurities and feelings of inadequacy, which may lead to relationship dissatisfaction and heightened sensitivity to conflicts (Murray et al., 2000). Studies suggest that partners with higher self-esteem tend to engage in more positive communication patterns, express greater emotional support, and experience higher levels of trust and commitment (Sciangula & Morry, 2009).

Emotion regulation is another crucial psychological factor that impacts the quality of marital relationships. Emotion regulation refers to the ability to manage and control emotional responses to various situations (Gross, 1998). Two key strategies of emotion regulation—cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression—play distinct roles in relationship dynamics. While expressive suppression prevents the external manifestation of emotions, cognitive reappraisal entails rephrasing a situation to change its emotional impact. (Gross & John, 2003). Research has shown that cognitive reappraisal is positively associated with relationship satisfaction, as it helps partners maintain emotional stability, manage conflicts effectively, and foster empathy (Bloch et al., 2014). On the other hand, excessive reliance on expressive suppression can lead to emotional detachment and reduced intimacy, potentially straining the relationship (Lopes et al., 2004).

Despite the extensive research on marital satisfaction, married couples are separating at a higher rate than before and the interplay between self-esteem, and emotion regulation in predicting healthy relationships among married couples remains an area requiring further exploration. While previous studies may have examined these variables in isolation, there is a need to understand how they collectively influence relationship quality.

Objectives

This study aims to investigate the extent to which self-esteem, cognitive reappraisal, and

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expressive suppression predict healthy relationships among married couples. The study seeks to answer the following

Research Questions:

1. Will self-esteem significantly predict healthy relationships among married couples?
2. Will cognitive reappraisal significantly predict healthy relationships among married couples?

3. Will expressive suppression significantly predict healthy relationships among married couples?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on marital well-being and provides insights into psychological interventions aimed at fostering healthy relationships.

METHOD

Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the extent to which self-esteem and emotion regulation predict healthy relationships among married couples

Participants

The study sample comprised 500 married individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, selected through convenience sampling. The participants included 353 females (70.6%) and 147 males (29.4%), with ages ranging from 23 to 57 years and an average age of 38.38 years ($SD = 7.70$). Regarding religious affiliation, 97.6% ($n = 488$) of the participants identified as Christians, while 1.4% ($n = 7$) were Muslims, and 1% ($n = 5$) adhered to Traditional Religion. Participants were also drawn from various occupational backgrounds, with 70.6% ($n = 353$) being academic staff and 29.4% ($n = 147$) being non-academic staff. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be legally married and in their unions for at least one year.

Instrument

To assess the key variables in this study, three standardized psychological instruments were administered. Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), comprising 10 items designed to measure overall self-esteem. Responses were recorded using a 4-point Likert format, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 4 = Strongly Agree. Example items include: "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others" and "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." The RSES has demonstrated good reliability in Nigerian samples ($\alpha = .73$) (Folayan et al., 2020), and a pilot study for the present research confirmed an acceptable internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .73.

Emotion regulation was assessed using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003), which measures two core strategies: cognitive reappraisal (6 items) and expressive suppression (4 items). Sample items include "I control my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I'm in" for cognitive reappraisal and "I control my

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emotions by not expressing them” for expressive suppression. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). Previous studies reported high reliability for this scale ($\alpha = .82$ for cognitive reappraisal and $\alpha = .77$ for expressive suppression) (Chukwuorji, Ifeagwazi, & Eze, 2017). The pilot study for the present research yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of .82 for cognitive reappraisal and .78 for expressive suppression.

To assess relationship health, the Adaptive Relationship Scale (ARS; Immanuel, 2018) was used. This 16-item scale evaluates the extent to which relationships are healthy and functional. The ARS consists of two subscales: adaptive relationships (7 items) and maladaptive relationships (9 items, reverse-scored). Sample items include “My partner and I communicate openly and honestly” for adaptive relationships and “My partner often ignores my emotional needs” for maladaptive relationships. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The full-scale alpha for ARS was previously reported as .86 (Immanuel, 2018), while the pilot study for this research confirmed an acceptable reliability level with a Cronbach’s alpha of .83.

Procedure

The data collection process took place over three weeks, during which 520 copies of the

questionnaire were distributed in workplaces and social gatherings. Each participant was approached individually, and the study’s purpose was explained before obtaining informed consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all individuals before data collection. The questionnaire was self-administered, and participants were encouraged to answer as honestly as possible. Of the 520 questionnaires distributed, 500 were completed and returned, yielding a 96.2% response rate. Some participants withdrew from the study, primarily citing the length of the questionnaire as a reason for non-completion. The ethical approval reference is D.PSY UNN/REC/2025-1-007.

Method of Statistical Analysis

For data analysis, SPSS (Version 27) was used to conduct both descriptive and inferential statistical tests. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and correlations, were computed for all study variables. Pearson’s correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationships among self-esteem, emotion regulation strategies, and healthy relationships. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to determine the extent to which self-esteem, cognitive reappraisal, and expressive suppression, predict healthy relationships among married couples. A p -value of $< .05$ was considered statistically significant in all analyses.

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RESULTS

Table 1: Pearson's correlations of demographic variables, cognitive reappraisal, self-esteem, and healthy relationships among married couples.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Age	38.38	7.70	-							
2 Gender	-	-	-.11*	-						
3 EB	-	-	.09*	.05	-					
4 Occupation	-	-	-.52***	.04	-.39***	-				
5 CR	29.25	8.47	.07	.02	.07	-.01	-			
6 ES	16.07	6.83	-.07	-.09*	.06	.07	.23***	-		
7 Self-Esteem	20.54	4.69	.24***	.08	.12*	-.01	.26***	.09*	-	
8 HR	54.42	10.17	.12**	.00	.02	-.01	.28***	.27***	.24***	-

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; Gender (1 = male, 2 = female); EB = Educational background; CR = cognitive reappraisal; ES = expressive suppression; HR = healthy relations

Table 1 shows the correlation among the study variables. Older age was associated with being male ($r = -.11, p < .05$), tertiary educational background ($r = .09, p < .05$), and academic staff ($r = -.25, p < .001$) but associated with positively associated with self-esteem ($r = .24, p < .001$), and healthy relationship ($r = .12, p < .01$). Being male was associated with self-esteem ($r = -.09, p < .05$). Tertiary educational background was associated with

higher self-esteem ($r = .12, p < .05$). Cognitive reappraisal associated positively with expressive suppression ($r = .23, p < .001$), self-esteem ($r = .26, p < .001$), and healthy relationship ($r = .28, p < .001$). Expressive suppression associated positively with self-esteem ($r = .09, p < .05$) and healthy relationship ($r = .27, p < .001$). Self-esteem was positively related to healthy relationships among married couples ($r = .24, p < .001$).

Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression predicting healthy relationships among married couples by cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, and self-esteem with age as a control variable

Predictors	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3			Step 4		
	B	β	t	B	B	t	B	β	T	B	B	t
Age	.16	.12	2.66**	.16	.12	2.86**	.14	.11	2.59**	.13	.10	2.35*
CR				.27	.22	5.13***	.23	.19	4.29***	.17	.14	3.01**
ES				.34	.23	5.36***	.38	.25	5.78***	.38	.25	5.79***
SE							.41	.12	3.53***	.36	.12	3.13**
R ²		.01			.14			.16			.18	
R ² Δ		.01			.13			.02			.02	
F	7.09 (1, 496)**			26.79 (3, 494)***			21.74 (4, 493)***			19.38 (5, 492)***		
F Δ	7.09 (1, 496)**			36.13 (2, 494)***			12.45 (1, 493)***			12.96 (1, 492)***		

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; CR = cognitive reappraisal; ES = expressive suppression; SE= self-esteem.

The results of the hierarchical multiple regression for the test of the hypotheses are shown in Table 2. In Step 1, age was added as a control variable. Age was a significant positive predictor of healthy relationships among married couples, $\beta = .12$, $p < .01$. The B showed that for each one-unit rise in age, the healthy relationship among married couples increases by .16 units. Again, the model was significant, $F(1, 496) = 7.09$, $R^2 = .01$. The R^2 of .01 indicated that 1% of the variance in the healthy relationship among married couples was explained on account of the control variable.

In Step 2, cognitive reappraisal was a significant positive predictor of healthy relationships among married couples, $\beta = .22$, $p < .001$. The B showed that for each one unit rise in cognitive reappraisal and healthy relationships among married couples increased by .27 units. Expressive suppression was a significant positive predictor of healthy relationships among married couples, $\beta = .23$, $p < .001$. The B showed that for

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the predictive roles of self-esteem, cognitive reappraisal, and expressive suppression in fostering healthy relationships among married couples. The findings indicate that all four psychological variables significantly contribute to relationship health, reinforcing the importance of self-perception, and emotional regulation in marital satisfaction. This section discusses these findings in relation to existing literature, their implications for marital counseling and

each one unit rise in expressive suppression, healthy relationships among married couples increased by .34 units. The model was significant, $F\Delta(2, 494) = 36.13$, $R^2 = .13$. The $R^2\Delta$ of .13 indicated that 13% of the variance in healthy relationships among married couples was explained by cognitive the two dimensions of emotion regulations.

In step 3, self-esteem was a significant positive predictor of healthy relationships among married couples, $\beta = .12$, $p < .001$. The B showed that for each one unit rise in self-esteem, healthy relationships among married couples increased by .41 units. The model was significant, $F\Delta(1, 493) = 12.45$, $R^2\Delta = .02$. The $R^2\Delta$ of .02 indicated that 2% of the variance in healthy relationships among married couples was explained by self-esteem.

All the variables in the study explained 18% of the variance in the healthy relationship among married couples.

intervention, and study limitations that suggest directions for future research.

Self-Esteem and Relationship Health

The results of this study revealed that self-esteem significantly predicts healthy relationships among married couples, supporting previous research that emphasizes the role of self-worth in relationship dynamics (Erol & Orth, 2014; Sciangula & Morry, 2009). Individuals with higher self-esteem reported more satisfying relationships, likely because they engage in more

positive communication patterns, experience greater trust, and feel more valued in their marriages. This finding aligns with sociometer theory (Leary et al., 1995), which posits that self-esteem serves as a gauge of perceived relational value. When individuals feel respected and appreciated by their partners, they tend to experience greater relationship stability and satisfaction.

Conversely, individuals with low self-esteem may experience heightened insecurity, fear of rejection, and difficulty expressing their needs, leading to relationship dissatisfaction (Murray et al., 2000). These findings suggest that interventions aimed at improving self-esteem—such as cognitive restructuring, self-compassion exercises, and assertiveness training, could enhance marital well-being.

Emotion Regulation and Relationship Health

This study also found that emotion regulation strategies, specifically, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression—play a crucial role in maintaining healthy relationships. Cognitive reappraisal, which involves modifying one's interpretation of emotionally charged events, emerged as a strong predictor of relationship health. This finding aligns with previous studies demonstrating that individuals who engage in cognitive reappraisal tend to experience greater emotional stability and constructive conflict resolution in their relationships (Bloch et al., 2014; Lopes et al., 2004). Effective reappraisal strategies may allow couples to de-escalate conflicts, adopt a more

empathetic perspective, and maintain emotional closeness.

Expressive suppression was also a significant predictor of relationship health, although its implications are more complex. While past research suggests that excessive reliance on suppression may lead to emotional detachment and reduced intimacy (Gross & John, 2003), the findings of this study indicate that controlled emotional expression can also foster relationship stability. In cultures where restraint and emotional regulation are valued, particularly in conflict situations, suppression may prevent unnecessary escalation and maintain relational harmony (Chen & Liao, 2021). However, excessive suppression without open communication could lead to unresolved emotional distress. Therefore, couples may benefit from a balanced approach—learning when to suppress emotions constructively and when to express them for effective conflict resolution.

Implications for Marital Counseling and Interventions

The findings of this study have significant implications for marital counseling and relationship interventions. Since self-esteem emerged as a critical factor in relationship health, therapists may incorporate self-affirmation exercises and cognitive-behavioral strategies to help individuals develop a positive self-concept. Given the importance of emotion regulation, couples' therapy could emphasize emotion-focused interventions, such as mindfulness

training, cognitive reappraisal techniques, and communication skills development to enhance emotional intelligence.

Limitations and Recommendation

While this study provides valuable insights into the predictors of healthy relationships, it has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences. While hierarchical multiple regression allows us to examine predictive relationships, the directionality and temporal sequence of these associations cannot be definitively determined from our data. Although significant associations were found, future longitudinal studies are needed to establish the direction of causality between self-esteem, emotion regulation, and healthy relationships.

Second, the sample was drawn primarily from an academic and professional population, which may not fully represent diverse marital experiences, particularly among lower-income couples or those with different educational backgrounds. Future research should examine these variables across broader demographic groups, including rural communities and diverse occupational sectors.

Third, this study considered self-reported measures from a single source which may introduce common method variance, which could influence the magnitude of observed correlations.

Future research could incorporate partner reports and observational methods to capture a more comprehensive picture of relationship dynamics. Additionally, exploring cultural factors—such as gender norms, societal expectations, and religious diversity—could further illuminate how self-esteem, emotion, and regulation interact to shape marital satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant roles of self-esteem, cognitive reappraisal, and expressive suppression in predicting healthy relationships among married couples. Individuals with higher self-esteem, and effective emotion regulation strategies tend to experience greater marital satisfaction. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on relationship dynamics and offer practical applications for marital counseling, emotion-focused interventions, and relationship programs. Given the importance of these psychological factors in marriage, future research should explore longitudinal patterns, cross-cultural variations, and intervention strategies to further enhance our understanding of what makes relationships thrive. By integrating these insights into counseling and therapy practices, professionals can better support couples in cultivating emotionally fulfilling, resilient, and enduring marital bonds.

Declaration of Originality

The authors declare that this manuscript is original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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