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Research Article

## Investigate the Mediating Role of Coping Skills in the Relationship between Cognitive Schemas Activated in Sexual Context and Marital Satisfaction

Majid Azizi<sup>1</sup>, Elham Tayyari<sup>2</sup>, Ghasem Abdoulpour<sup>3</sup>, Aboufazel Afshari<sup>4</sup>, Maryam Nouri<sup>5</sup>, Sajad Salari pak<sup>6</sup>

1. Ph.D. Student, Department of Psychology, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran.
2. M.A., Department of Psychology, Bandar Abbas Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bandar Abbas, Iran.
3. Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Shahed University, Tehran, Iran.
4. M.A., Department of Psychology, Bandar Abbas Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bandar Abbas, Iran.
5. M.A., Department of Psychology, Bandar Abbas Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bandar Abbas, Iran.
6. M.A., Department of Psychology, Bandar Abbas Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bandar Abbas, Iran.

### Article Info

#### Corresponding Author:

Majid Azizi

#### Email:

ma.azizi2021@gmail.com

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### Abstract

**Aim:** The aim of the present study was to investigate the mediating role of coping skills in the relationship between cognitive schemas activated in sexual context and marital satisfaction. The research method was descriptive-correlation and structural equation modeling.

**Methods:** The statistical population included all the men and women of Bandar Abbas, of whom 350 were selected by available sampling method. The sample of this study included 125 men (35.7%) and 225 women (64.3%). To collect data, the Cognitive Schema Questionnaire Activated in Sexual Context (QCSASC), the Elzaros and Folkman Coping Skills questionnaire (CSQ) and the Marital Satisfaction Scale were used. SPSS23 and AMOS software were used for data analysis.

**Results:** Structural equation modeling showed that coping skills and cognitive schemas activated in sexual context both directly and indirectly affected marital satisfaction in men and women. The evaluation of the hypothetical research model using fit indices showed that the hypothetical model fits the measurement model (CFI=0.97, NFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.044).

**Conclusion:** Consistent with the dual control model, the results of this research showed that coping skills have an effect on the marital satisfaction of women and men, and these findings emphasize that along with the coping skills of each person in marital relationships, the cognitive schemas activated in the sexual context are also important.



## 1. Background

Marriage is considered an important issue in all societies and having a successful married life is considered a major and ideal goal for almost everyone. The family has different functions, including the regulation of sexual behavior. The performance of this function by the family requires special conditions, the deviation of which causes sexual deviations such as sexual diversity (Warach & Josephs, 2021). Marital satisfaction is a very important and complex aspect of the marital relationship; in other words, one of the vital aspects of a marital system is the satisfaction that spouses feel and experience in their relationship (Taniguchi et al., 2006). Marital satisfaction is a complex process affected by various factors such as education, socio-economic class, love, commitment, marital relations, conflict, gender, the existence of children, sexual relations, and division of duties at different times (Schoenfeld et al., 2017). One of the intra-individual and cognitive factors that are important for understanding the marital relationship are schemas that are formed mainly in childhood and based on reality or experience and are stable throughout life. Forms of schemas the basis of a person's cognitive structures and as a mediator, they influence people's behavioral responses (Thimm, 2010). It is very important to determine the factors involved in increasing mental and sexual arousal; among these factors, we can mention the cognitive schemas activated in the sexual Context. Theoretical models and clinical observations to the importance of central cognitive structures (Pascoal et al., 2018); Central schemas and beliefs have been particularly emphasized in sexual performance processes (Moura et al., 2020; Tavares et al., 2020). Despite the growing volume of information and data emphasizing the importance of cognitive variables on sexual performance, few studies in the field of mediating the role of cognitive schemas have been done on the sexual performance of women (Pascoal et al., 2018). Vulnerabilities of schemas are considered one of the main components of intervening in sexual deviance. Schematic concepts are people's beliefs about sexual issues and themselves as sexual beings and include sets of standards and expectations around sexual issues (Wiegel et al., 2007)

Men's interpretation of the possible results of sexual diversity, their beliefs, and schemas affect sexual behaviors. Basic beliefs about sex often continue in behavior and emotional roles (Ahmadloo & Zeinali, 2018). Activated cognitive schemas play a role in predicting sexual behaviors both in terms of the number of sexual partners and the frequency of sexual behaviors and can provide the basis for the laxity of marital obligations (Medina et al., 2017). The schema and perceptions of people in the field of sexual issues and relationships have an impact on the evaluation of the quality of the relationship and, as a mediator, they affect the sexual performance. Perceptions and cognitive schemas may make people feel helpless or humiliated and they may avoid directly discussing their sexual problems (Quinta Gomes & Nobre, 2012).

Seltermann et al., (2021) showed in a study that activated cognitive schemas predict a decrease in marital satisfaction. They also showed that dysfunctional schemas have a negative relationship with marital satisfaction and provide the basis for the lack of coherence and stability in marital relationships (Nobre, 2010). Some researchers believe that the coping skills used by people have a direct relationship with marital satisfaction in couples (Brown et al., 2020; Haqshenas & Babakhani, 2018; Leonard et al., 2022). Coping skills are one of the important variables for people to face stressful life situations, which have a broad concept and include cognitive and behavioral components (White et al., 2007). The style used by people in facing problems depends on the type of stressors and problems. In problems related to work and interpersonal relationships, problem-focused coping is used more, but in issues related to health and economy, the emotion-focused

coping style is effective; the problem-oriented coping style is more effective, due to situations that require a person to do constructive work (Baqtayan, 2015).

In addition, when one of the schemas is activated, a person responds to it with an incompatible coping style, which leads to the persistence of that schema (Clark et al., 2012). When the schema is aroused, which indicates the failure of one of the basic needs, and the accompanying emotions are a threat to them, they use coping styles of avoidance or submission (Lee & Cho, 2023). These styles are usually outside of people's consciousness and their repetition will cause their continuation in married life and especially in their sexual context. Accordingly, it can be said that this becomes more concrete among couples because in this area, instead of an individual, it is the interaction and confrontation of two people, both of whom can try to increase the level of compatibility, and if this issue is realized, marital satisfaction can be considered in their lives. According to the aforementioned material, the present research was conducted to investigate the mediatory role of coping skills in the relationship between the cognitive schemas activated in the sexual context and marital satisfaction.

## **2. Objectives**

The objective of this study was to investigate the mediating role of coping skills in the relationship between cognitive schemas activated in sexual context and marital satisfaction.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1. Sample and procedure**

This research is descriptive- correlational in terms of data collection. The statistical population of the research includes all men and women of Bandar Abbas city. The minimum volume required for this research has been calculated based on the widely used Holter critical N index, which was found to be 142 for the hypothetical model of the research based on latent and visible variables. Therefore, the total sample selected in this research is 380 people. Using the sampling method, the number of data related to 350 was available, and the analysis was performed only on their data. The sample of this study included 125 men (35.7%) and 225 women (64.3%). The average age and standard deviation of the age of the participants in the research were 35.75 and 7.20, respectively. In terms of the level of educations and the percentage of diplomas, respectively, it was 35 and 10%, post-diploma 15 and 4.3%, bachelor's degree 246 and 70.3%, and master's degree and above 54 and 15.4%, respectively. The highest number of participants in terms of education was related to bachelor's degree and the lowest was related to postgraduate level. The average number of children and the standard deviation of the number of children were 1.41 and 1.08, respectively

### **3.2. Research Tools**

#### **3.2.1. Cognitive schemas activated in sexual context questionnaire**

This questionnaire was created by Nober et al. (2009) and has 28 items that evaluate the cognitive schemas reported by people facing sexual situations and was created in 2 versions for men and women. The 28 items of the questionnaire include the self-schemas or central beliefs of Beck (Beck & Beck, 1995) which includes 6 subscales: undesirability/rejection, inadequacy, self-worth, difference/loneliness, helplessness. The participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement with the schemas on a Likert scale from (0=completely wrong to 6=completely true). All items are graded directly from 0 to 5. Nober et al. (2009) reported an internal consistency of 0.94 for this

questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Also, the retest reliability of 4 weeks on 34 people for the subscales including: unfavorability/rejection, inadequacy, self-worth, difference/loneliness, helplessness and total score were reported 0.61, 0.56, 0.49, 0.74, 0.73 and 0.66, respectively. In the study of Abdul Manafi, Winter, Cronbach's alpha was 0.70 (Abdolmanafi et al., 2019). Cronbach's alpha value for variables unfavorability/ rejection, inadequacy, self-worth, difference/loneliness, helplessness and total score were reported 0.63, 0.59, 0.51, 0.73, 0.67 and 0.71, respectively respectively.

### 3.2.2. Enrich Marital Satisfaction (EMS) Scale

The Enrich marital satisfaction scale was provided by Olson, Fournier, and Drackman (Morteza et al., 2018). The questionnaire includes 12 subscales of contractual responses, satisfaction, personal subjects, marital relationship, conflict solution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relations, parenting, relatives and friends, and roles of men and woman equality. The questionnaire was scored on a five-degree Likert scale of completely agree (5), agree (4), neither agree nor disagree (3), disagree (2), and completely disagree (1). In items No.s 47, 46, 45, 42, 41, 40, 3, 38, 37, 33, 32, 31, 30, 24, 23, 22, 21, 20, 19, 18, 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 6, 8, and 4, scoring is reverse (Shakeri et al., 2019). Scores of less than 30 indicate severe dissatisfaction with marital affairs, between 30-40 indicates dissatisfaction, between 40-60 indicates relative dissatisfaction and moderate, between 60-70 indicates high satisfaction and higher, and over 70 indicates very much satisfaction (Nourani et al., 2019). The validity of the scale was found to be 0.65 and was significant at 0.01 (Afshari et al., 2021). The correlation coefficient of the components of familial satisfaction and life satisfaction of the scale ranged from 0.41 to 0.60, and 0.32 to 0.41, respectively. In addition, the retest coefficient after the re-administration of the scale was found to be 0.88 (O'Connor et al., 2018). The internal consistency of the scale with Cronbach's alpha was 0.73 for the entire scale (Fonagy et al., 2016). Ghasemina et al. (Ghassamia et al., 2013) obtained Cronbach's alpha of 0.95 for the validity of the scale. Tarighi et al. (Teimouri et al., 2012) reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.79, 0.78, 0.82, 0.74, 0.64, 0.82, 0.72, 0.61, and 0.79 for each of the nine dimensions of the scale. Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.81. The value of Cronbach's alpha in the present study was 0.87 for the entire questionnaire.

### 3.2.3. Lazarus Coping Strategies Questionnaire

It is a 66-item test that is scored in a range of 4 options (from 1 to 4) and is based on the list of coping strategies by Elzaroi and Folkman (Lazarus & Stress, 1984) and a wide range of thoughts and evaluates the actions that people use when facing internal or external stressful conditions. This test has 8 subscales, direct confrontation, distancing, self-control, seeking social support, acceptance of responsibility, escape-avoidance, problem solving and positive reappraisal. These 8 patterns are divided into Problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, which are used in this research. In a study conducted by Vahedi (2010) on 763 male and female students of the second and third grades of public high schools in Tehran, the reliability of the confrontation method questionnaire using the internal consistency method was estimated to be 0.80 (Vahedi, quoted by Mansouri, 2013). Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.73. Vahedi (2013) and Bassak Nejad & et al (2012) in order to check the convergence validity of the coping strategies questionnaire also used the correlation calculation of the raw scores obtained from this questionnaire with the raw scores obtained from the Lionel stress

questionnaire, and the results showed that the WOCQ test has high convergent validity. Also, the results of principal component analysis and varimax rotation showed that the subscales consisted of 93 factors with a factor load of more than 9.3. In the present study, the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha method was estimated as 0.80 for the total coping strategy and 0.83 and 0.87 for the Problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, respectively.

### 3.3. Ethical consideration

All ethical principles were considered in this article. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and its implementation stages and signed the informed consent. They were also assured of the confidentiality of their information. Moreover, they were allowed to leave the study whenever they wished, and if desired, the results of the research would be available to them.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation coefficient and structural equation modeling (SEM), using SPSS23 and AMOS23 statistical software and bootstrap method.

## 4. Results

Descriptive statistics indicators are shown in [Table 1](#).

[Table 1](#). Descriptive indices of research variables

	Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Elongation
Activated schemas in sexual tissue	Powerlessness	14	3.72	0.586	-0.246
	Difference	4.34	2	1.03	4.52
	Rejection	7.86	2.36	0.473	0.566
	Unlovable	7.50	1.68	0.462	1.742
	Disability	17.02	4.96	1.70	5.243
Marital Satisfaction	Distortion	11.69	4.49	0.608	0.290
	Conflict	29.03	5.93	-0.004	0.302
	Relationship	26.99	7.78	0/241	-0.176
	Satisfaction	23.99	7.37	0.240	-0.010
Problem-focused coping	Support	13.97	5.23	-0.47	-0.093
	Responsibility	9.37	3.07	-0.20	0.08
	prudent	14.43	4.06	-0.21	0.13
	recalculation	19.32	4.59	-0.25	0.059
emotion-focused strategies	Encounter	12.28	3.92	0.075	0.34
	Avoidance	13.12	4.44	-0.07	-0.14
	escape/avoidance	14.01	6.55	0.06	-0.5
	self-control	17.48	4.77	-0.37	0.93

In [Table 1](#), the descriptive indices of the current variables, mean, standard deviation as well as the skewness and elongation of the research variables are shown.

[Table 2](#) shows the correlation matrix of research variables. As the contents of this table show, all correlations include significant values ( $0.79 \geq r \geq 0.09$ ). Meanwhile, satisfaction and communication, satisfaction and distortion showed the highest correlation ( $r = 0.79$ ) and distortion and unlovable showed the lowest correlation ( $r = 0.09$ ).

Table 2: Correlation matrix of research variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Powerlessness	1																
Difference	0.33	1															
Rejection	0.32	0.54	1														
Unlovable	0.11	0.32	0.36	1													
Disability	0.33	0.63	0.53	0.43	1												
Distortion	0.21	0.23	0.12	0.09	0.27	1											
Conflict	0.26	0.22	0.15	0.18	0.23	0.54	1										
Relationship	0.25	0.25	0.22	0.16	0.29	0.71	0.75	1									
Satisfaction	0.29	0.31	0.22	0.15	0.34	0.77	0.61	0.79	1								
Support	-0.13	-0.17	-0.16	-0.18	-0.15	-0.19	-0.20	-0.10	-0.16	1							
Responsibility	0.19	0.15	0.18	0.16	0.12	0.13	0.26	0.19	0.19	0.44	1						
prudent	-0.13	-0.13	-0.16	-0.16	-0.18	-0.23	-0.25	-0.27	-0.12	0.48	0.63	1					
recalculation	-0.24	-0.23	-0.29	-0.15	-0.27	-0.25	-0.12	-0.19	-0.31	0.54	0.49	0.57	1				
Encounter	0.34	0.23	0.27	0.14	0.24	0.42	0.25	0.21	0.10	0.27	0.46	0.38	0.62	1			
Avoidance	-0.21	-0.15	-0.15	-0.13	-0.12	0.13	0.28	0.31	0.15	0.30	0.47	0.46	0.49	0.45	1		
escape/avoidance	0.38	0.41	0.35	0.18	0.42	0.28	0.42	0.42	0.38	0.55	0.46	0.25	0.21	0.4	0.61	1	
self-control	0.12	0.23	0.19	0.18	0.14	-0.15	0.17	0.16	-0.15	0.43	0.53	0.42	0.50	0.25	0.5	0.63	1

Before evaluating the measurement model and the structural model, the important assumptions of structural equation modeling, including univariate and multivariate normality and the absence of multiple collinearity, were examined. Calculating the skewness and kurtosis of each of the visible variables is a common way to evaluate the normality of a single variable. In this study, the skewness of the observable variables was in the range of -0.400 to 1.70 and their elongation was in the range of -0.010 to 1.243. Chou and Bentler (1995) consider the cutoff point of  $\pm 3$  as appropriate for the skewness value. Although there is little agreement about the elongation cut-off point, in general, values greater than  $\pm 10$  are problematic for this index, and values greater than  $\pm 20$  make the obtained results invalid (Klein, 2015). In this study, the assumption of multivariate normality was checked by calculating the relative multivariate elongation index, which was found to be 1.378. Bentler (1995) believes that if the value of this index is not more than 3, multivariate normality has been achieved. Therefore, the distribution of all combinations of variables is normal. The presumption of the absence of multiple collinearity was checked by checking the correlation matrix between the observed variables. Examining this matrix indicates the absence of multiple collinearity between them. The correlation coefficients are in the range of  $0.549 \geq r \geq 0.357$ . Correlation coefficients that are above 0.85 cause problems in the correct estimation of the model (Klein, 2015). In such a situation, one of the two variables should be excluded from the analysis. Structural equation modeling using the maximum likelihood estimation method was used to evaluate the measurement model and the structural model. The measurement model determines the relationship between visible variables and latent variables. The evaluation of this model is done using confirmatory factor analysis method. The fit indices of the measurement model presented in Table 3 show the optimal fit of this model. Therefore, visible variables have the necessary ability to operationalize immanent variables.

Table 3. Fit indices of measurement model and structural model of research

Models	Chi-square	df	X2/df	RMSEA	SRMR	GFI	CFI	NFI
Measuring model	84.05	50	1.681	0.041	0.041	0.95	0.99	0.96
Structural model	84.05	50	1.681	0.041	0.041	0.95	0.99	0.96

In addition, the evaluation of the structural model using the structural equation modeling method showed that all of the fit indices of this hypothetical model are within the optimal fit range. The fit indices of this model can be seen in Table 3. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual structural model along with standardized coefficients. As can be seen, the cognitive schema activated in the sexual context as an exogenous variable, respectively, with a standard coefficient of 0.14 (T-values=-8.02), 0.18 (T-values=3.56) and 0.22 T-values = 4.56 (0.56) has an effect on solution-oriented coping skills, emotion-oriented coping skills and marital satisfaction. Solution-oriented coping skills also have a standard coefficient of -0.34 (T-values=7.06) affects marital satisfaction. Emotion-oriented coping skills also affect marital satisfaction with a standard coefficient of 0.47 (T-values = 4.17), considering that in the structural model, the significance of the path coefficient is determined by using the T-value. If the value of t is more than 1.96, the relationship between the two constructs is significant, so all paths are significant.

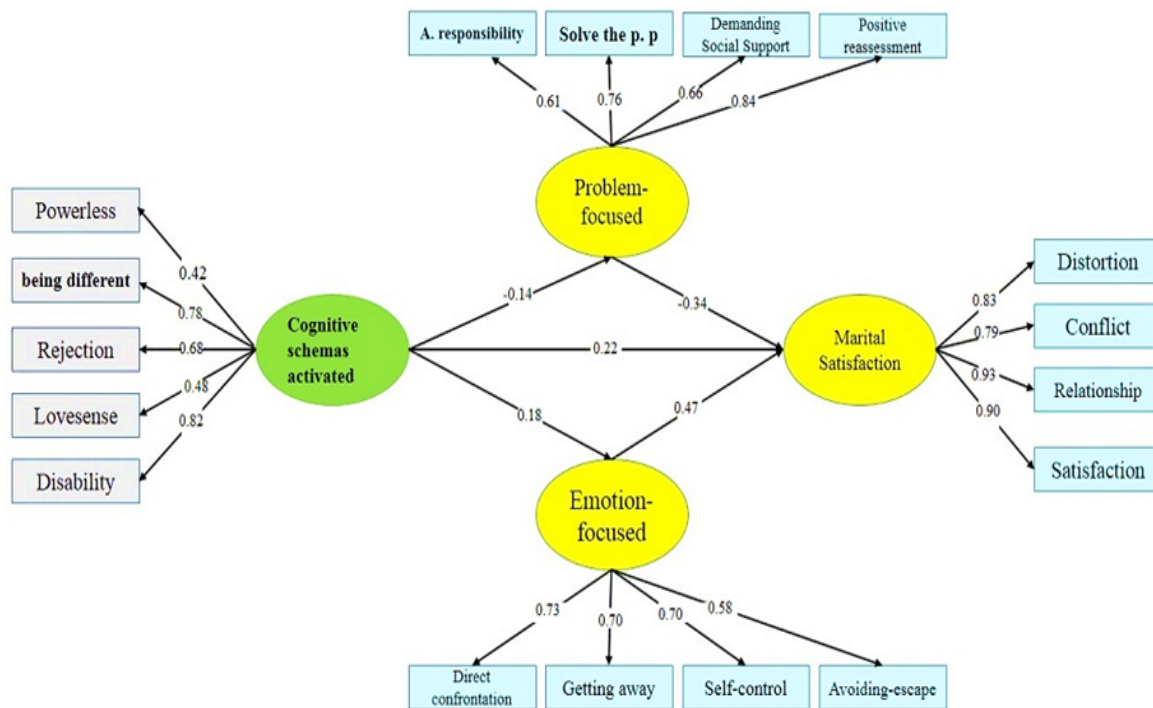


Figure 1. Structural model of the research

Table 4. Bootstrap test results for mediated relationships

Independent Variable	Covariate	Dependent Variable	Lower limit	Upper limit	Estimation error	Effect size	Sig level
Cognitive schema	emotion-focused coping	Marital satisfaction	0.205	0.469	0.069	0.325	0.05
Cognitive Schema	Problem-focused coping	Marital Satisfaction	0.438	0.191	0.086	0.297	0.05

In the present study, bootstrap test was used to evaluate mediating relationships. As the number of samples is not very large, bootstrap provides the most powerful and logical method to achieve indirect effects (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). In this method, if the upper and lower limits of this test are both positive and both negative and the value is zero and it is not between these two limits, then the indirect causal path will be significant. Table 4 presents the results of this test. As the table 4 shows, the path of the cognitive schema activated in the sexual context to marital satisfaction is mediated by skills. emotion-focused with the standard coefficient of 0.325 is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. Also, the contents of Table 4 showed that the path of cognitive schemas activated in the sexual context to marital satisfaction is mediated by Problem-focused coping with the standard coefficients of 0.297 are significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of mediators of coping skills in the relationship between cognitive schemas activated in sexual context and marital satisfaction. The structural relationships between research variables show the good fit of the hypothesized model. The results of the present study indicate a significant correlation between coping strategies (Problem-focused coping and emotion-focused) and cognitive schemas activated in the sexual context with marital satisfaction; this finding is in line with the results of (abdolpour et al., 2023), (Abdolmanafi et al., 2019), Brotto, et al. (2016), Khamseh & Nodargahfard (2020).

In fact, when faced with unsuccessful sexual situations, women with sexual dysfunction (regardless of the specific performance presented) tend to activate schemas of inadequacy at a significantly higher frequency compared to women without sexual problems. This fact can be related to the tendency of people with sexual problems to provide internal, stable and global attributions for situations of sexual failure. According to the concept of schema (Beck, 1996), it is likely that when the schema of incompetence is activated in a sexual situation, people actively seek symptoms. According to the scheme, ignoring contradictory stimuli and exaggerating the negative interpretation of the event (for example, "I am inadequate", "I am ineffective", "I am a failure").

Another common factor in various sexual disorders is the automatic thoughts presented during sexual activities. A lack of erotic thoughts is common to most of the clinically presented cases. This poor informational process of sexual stimuli is associated with a greater focus of attention on thoughts of failure and loss. This description of the content of automatic thoughts presented by women with sexual dysfunction is consistent with the activation of dysfunctional schemas mentioned earlier and also supports Barlow's (1986) model, suggesting that the difference between clinical and control attentional focus is that, while the latter is oriented towards erotic stimuli, the former is oriented towards the negative consequences of a final failure. In this model, the central and traditional role of cognitive processes (with the mediation of behavioral and emotional reactions) was replaced by a network of interdependent behavioral, emotional and cognitive dimensions. Beck (1996) proposed that different types of psychological disorders could be conceptualized again in this new term.

The results of the researches of (Haqshenas & Babakhani, 2018), Petasak and Keneth (2016)(Salmabadi et al., 2018) showed a direct and significant relationship between emotion-oriented coping strategies and a negative and significant relationship between solution-oriented strategies and marital satisfaction. For explaining these findings, we can be said that couples who focus on the emotion-oriented style emphasize controlling their emotions and emotional



reactions. Couples in this style deal with emotional confrontation and cope with psychological pressure by crying, getting angry, and shouting (Babakhani et al., 2016). Even emotional coping shows a general form of reaction to stressful events that may require relying on others (Salmabadi et al., 2018). emotion-focused sometimes manifests in the form of avoidance coping, which itself causes couples act by distancing yourself from it or by focusing on your feelings to cope with stressors.

## 6. Conclusion

Consistent with the dual control model, the results of this research showed that coping skills have an effect on the marital satisfaction of women and men, Problem-focused coping have a positive effect on marital satisfaction, and emotion--focused coping have a negative effect on marital satisfaction. Problem-focused coping because it pays attention to solving the problem when a conflict arises between couples, and this attention leads to the resolution of the conflict between couples. But emotion-focused coping focus more on the immediate control of the situation and based on the emergence of emotions. and these findings emphasize that along with the coping skills of each person in marital relationships, the cognitive schemas activated in the sexual context are also important.

## 7. Limitation and Recommendation

One of the limitations of this research is that it was carried out without considering the effects of socio-economic status and cultural and religious context on sexual issues in women. Most of the participants in this study were people with high school diploma. This issue had reasons such as the better cooperation of educated patients as well as the use of self-report tools for assessment and measurement (understanding the questions and answering them requires a relatively high level of literacy). In order to generalize the results to illiterate and low-literate patients, which are usually in different economy-social level, limitations do exist.

## 8. Author Contributions

All authors contributed in designing, running, and writing all parts of the research.

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## 10. Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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