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DOI: 10.4103/jehp.jehp_105_18

# Investigating the relationship between conscientiousness and self-compassion with marital satisfaction among Iranian married employees

Abdollah Maleki, Yousef Veisani<sup>1</sup>, Sehat Aibod<sup>1</sup>, Akbar Azizifar<sup>2</sup>, Mostafa Alirahmi<sup>3</sup>, Fathola Mohamadian<sup>4</sup>

Department of Psychology,  
Faculty of Human  
Sciences, Islamic Azad  
University, Ilam Branch,  
Ilam, Iran, <sup>1</sup>Psychosocial  
Injuries Research  
Center, Ilam University  
of Medical Sciences,  
Ilam, Iran, <sup>2</sup>Department  
of Psycholinguistics,  
School of Medicine,  
Ilam University of  
Medical Sciences, Ilam,  
Iran, <sup>3</sup>Department of  
Psychology, Mostafa  
Khomeini Hospital,  
Ilam University of  
Medical Sciences, Ilam,  
Iran, <sup>4</sup>Department of  
Psychology, Psychosocial  
Injuries Research Center,  
Ilam University of Medical  
Sciences, Ilam, Iran

**Address for  
correspondence:**

Dr. Fathola Mohamadian,  
Department of Psychology,  
Psychosocial Injuries  
Research Center, Ilam  
University of Medical  
Sciences, Ilam, Iran.  
E-mail: [mobinmohamadian@yahoo.com](mailto:mobinmohamadian@yahoo.com)

Received: 02-12-2018  
Accepted: 12-01-2019

## Abstract:

**BACKGROUND:** Marital satisfaction, conscientiousness, and self-compassion are necessary for successful and lasting marriages. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between marital satisfaction, conscientiousness, and self-compassion among married employees of Shahid Mostafa Khomeini Hospital in the city of Ilam in 2017.

**METHODOLOGY:** This study is a descriptive research with a correlation design. The research population included all 260 married employees of Mostafa Khomeini (I) Hospital in the city of Ilam, among which 150 were selected using simple random sampling. Data were collected using three questionnaires of conscientiousness, self-compassions, and marital satisfaction. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and multivariate regression.

**RESULTS:** The research results revealed a positive and significant relationship between conscientiousness and marital satisfaction ( $P = 0.028$  and  $r = 0.187$ ) and a positive and significant relationship between self-compassion and marital satisfaction ( $P = 0.000$  and  $r = 0.185$ ). Both conscientiousness and self-compassion variables could predict 51% of the variance of marital satisfaction among married employees.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Given the research results, it could be stated that people who have self-compassion and have a high level of conscientiousness make much effort for their improvement and resolving their committed mistakes. For this reason, they have high motivation to maintain marital relationships.

## Keywords:

Conscientiousness, empathy, government employees, Iran, personal satisfaction

## Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important decisions in an individual's life and satisfaction with marriage is among the most important factors determining the quality of life and mental health. Thus, family psychology experts have considered the level of marital satisfaction as a criterion to evaluate the quality of marital relationships.<sup>[1]</sup> Marital satisfaction can be viewed as the result of general pleasure with common

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life, satisfaction with sexual relations, and emotional satisfaction.<sup>[2]</sup> Marital satisfaction is a predictor of mental health of married people which plays a crucial role in training people and actualizing of their potentials.<sup>[3]</sup> Satisfactory marital relationships would lead to enhanced competence, adaptability, compromise, longer life expectancy, healthy and desired nutrition, reduced depression, and having children with better educational status.<sup>[4]</sup> Displaying of acceptable behaviors by the spouse can develop desired mutual relationships and provide the conditions

**How to cite this article:** Maleki A, Veisani Y, Aibod S, Azizifar A, Alirahmi M, Mohamadian F. Investigating the relationship between conscientiousness and self-compassion with marital satisfaction among Iranian married employees. *J Edu Health Promot* 2019;8:76.

for mutual understanding among the couples.<sup>[5]</sup> Marital satisfaction is in fact an adaptation between the current status and the expected status and it is the general and subjective assessment of the individual considering the nature of marriage. It involves a certain level of satisfaction of the needs, expectations, and desires of the person.<sup>[6]</sup> Results of many studies suggest that personality traits of the couples are among the most effective factors considering the level of life satisfaction which play a major role in explaining the changes in marital satisfaction.<sup>[7,8]</sup> One of the components of personality variable is conscientiousness which may cause lower level of incompatibility; conscientiousness people are generally responsible, reliable, and hardworking.<sup>[9]</sup> People with higher level of conscientiousness could manage the conflicts developed cohesively in the relationships in a more constructive manner.<sup>[9]</sup> These people adhere to the principles and strive for their goals.<sup>[10]</sup> The studies conducted by Rosowsky *et al.*<sup>[11]</sup> and Chehreh *et al.*<sup>[12]</sup> suggest that couple conscientiousness is a good predictor of marital satisfaction.

Another psychological factor, which might be related to marital satisfaction, is self-compassion. Neff argues that the structure of compassion represents the intimacy and acceptance of aspects of the individual and others' life which is pleasant and includes three main elements. First, whenever a person becomes aware of his inefficiency and suffers, he likes his existence (being) and understands it. The second element is the sense of common humanity and recognizing that pain and failure are unavoidable shared aspects in the experience of all human beings. Finally, self-compassion represents balanced awareness toward one's own emotions which involves the ability to cope with painful thoughts and emotions (rather than avoiding them) without feeling of grief and regret.<sup>[13]</sup> Studies conducted on self-compassion have also indicated that high scores on the scale of self-compassion are associated with lower anxiety and depression.<sup>[14]</sup> In addition, self-compassion contributes to meet the basic needs of self-autonomy, competency, and the need for communication.<sup>[15]</sup> Research suggests that those people who have high self-compassion, compared to those who have lower self-compassion, show a higher psychological health.<sup>[16]</sup> This self-supporting attitude is associated with many positive psychological outcomes such as a higher motivation to solve the personal conflicts, constructive problem-solving strategies, and the stability of marital life.<sup>[17]</sup> In addition to protect an individual against negative psychosocial states, self-compassion is strengthening the positive emotional states. For example, self-compassion is associated with emotions such as social bond and life satisfaction.<sup>[18,19]</sup>

Moreover, people with high self-compassion report higher level of happiness, optimism, life satisfaction and

more intrinsic motivation, higher levels of emotional intelligence, coping skills, wisdom, and higher resilience.<sup>[20]</sup> Findings of different studies suggest that self-judgment, feeling of isolation, and rumination of people with lack of self-compassion would directly contribute to a reduced marital satisfaction and instability.<sup>[21]</sup> In a research carried out by Jiang *et al.*,<sup>[22]</sup> results revealed that people with self-compassion have kind goals in their relationship. It means that they show high tendency to socially support their spouses and encourage interpersonal trust.<sup>[23]</sup> There are some reasons to justify why self-compassion facilitates interpersonal relationships including emotional resilience and peace of mind; allowing people to provide constructive responses to conflicts and problems in their relationships to improve psychological health in their relationship.<sup>[23]</sup> Furthermore, people with high self-compassion can fully meet their needs through peace of mind, kindness, and attachment, enabling them to give more freedom in their relationship with their spouse without excessive control. People with high compassion show a more balanced physiological response in their interaction with social support against stress. The existing evidence suggests that self-compassion is a positive psychological trait, so it is used as an indicator for mental health and well-being.<sup>[24]</sup> Couples' satisfaction is the most important factor for the improvement of personality characteristics in couples. In fact, marital relationship is based on interpersonal relationship model which is more affected by personality styles and also accompanied by biological factors and past experiences in spouses.<sup>[25]</sup> A group of researchers believes that there is a reciprocal relationship between marital satisfaction and occupation, which means that if an individual is in trouble in one of the two areas of "workplace" and "family," another area will be affected. In other words, the physical, psychological, and emotional health of people in society depends on the health of marital relationships.<sup>[26]</sup> According to the results of the Gharibi, Sanagouymoharer, and Yaghoubinia, the work of the hospital staff has negative consequences on their family and their social status which finally may lead to the disruption of common social activities of the couples.<sup>[27]</sup> Despite the variety of researches, there is a rare number of research investigating the effect of conscientiousness and self-compassion on marital satisfaction, so this study is trying to evaluate the relationship between conscientiousness and self-compassion with marital satisfaction among married employees.

## Methodology

The method of the current study was descriptive-correlational study (a field trial). It was conducted as a field trial. The research population included all 260 employees (formal and contractual) of

Shahid Mostafa Khomeini Hospital in Ilam in the year 2017. Sample size in this research was selected to be 150 people using the convenient and simple random method based on the Morgan table. The criteria for entering this research were employees who have spouses, at least their degree of education is high school and informed consent to participate in the study. Exit criteria also include having a specific physical or mental illness which can affect the way a person responds. Enrich Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire, Conscientious Subscale of Neo Five-Factor Questionnaire, and Self-Compassion Scale were used to collect the data. To assess the personality trait of conscientiousness, Conscientious Subscale of Neo Five-Factor Questionnaire was used. This questionnaire is a tool which assesses the personality trait with 60 items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from completely agree to completely disagree. The questionnaire assesses five main domains of personality including neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Each of these factors consists of 12 items. This test was translated into Persian by Garousi Farshi.<sup>[28]</sup> Moreover, it is standardized on Iranian students. Using Cronbach's alpha, its reliability has been reported between 0.56 and 0.78 for subscales. In the current research, scores of only 12 subscales were extracted and used in the data analysis section. Self-Compassion Scale was used to measure the compassion. This scale is a 26-item self-reporting tool developed by Neff *et al.*<sup>[15]</sup> to measure self-compassion.<sup>[15]</sup> Its questions are placed in six subscales of self-kindness, self-judgment, sense of common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification, assessing the quality of one's relationship with his experiences. It is scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from almost never (score 0) to almost always (score 4). The research conducted by Neff *et al.*<sup>[15]</sup> has shown a high reliability and validity for this scale. The general reliability, using the Cronbach's alpha, was reported to be 0.92. Each of the subscales also had an internal consistency (from 0.75 to 0.81). Moreover, the retest reliability, with 2-week interval, was reported to be 0.93.<sup>[15]</sup> The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of compassion subscales in Iran has been reported as follows: 0.81 for self-kindness, 0.79 for self-judgment, 0.84 for sense of common humanity, 0.85 for isolation, 0.80 for mindfulness, 0.83 for over-identification, and 0.76 for self-compassion (total scale).<sup>[29]</sup> In this research, the shortened form of enrich questionnaire was used to assess marital satisfaction. Based on Fowers and Olson,<sup>[30]</sup> this scale is sensitive to changes taking place in the family. Afkar *et al.* developed a 47-item questionnaire; the subscales of this questionnaire are as follows: (1) satisfaction of spouses, (2) personality issues, (3) marital relationship, (4) solving conflict, (5) financial management, (6) leisure activities, (7) relationships, (8) marriage and children, (9) relatives and friends, and (10) religious orientation. He calculated

and reported the internal correlation of the test as 0.95 for the shortened form. The questionnaire is in the form of five-option, "completely agree," "agree," "no idea," "disagree," and "completely disagree," and each domain has five questions with a 1–5 score for each.<sup>[31]</sup> The total questionnaire score varies from the minimum of 47 to the maximum of 235. A score of <30 suggests severe dissatisfaction, score 30–40 suggests dissatisfaction, 41–60 suggests relative and moderate satisfaction, score 61–70 suggests a high level of satisfaction, and a score higher than 70 suggests an extraordinary level of satisfaction of spouses in marital relationships.<sup>[32]</sup> The overall reliability of marital satisfaction, conscientious, and self-compassion was obtained 0.76, 0.74, and 0.81, respectively, by Cornbrash's alpha test. Data were analyzed using the descriptive analyzes for estimating mean and standard deviation, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov (K–S) test was used to test of data normality, for comparing two groups, Pearson test coefficient was used by correlate option and multivariate linear regression was used for forecasting a mean predictors on marital satisfaction. The analysis of results was performed by SPSS Inc. version 21, Chicago, Ill., USA. The significant level of the results in this research was considered to be <0.05.

This article was approved by Mostafa Khomeini Hospital in Ilam city, and for collection of data, the researchers explained the purpose of research for participants to obtain informed consent. The researchers promised the participants that their data will be considered as confidential.

## Results

All participants in this research are married. Their educational level varies from high school to PhD, so that 17% had diploma, 17% had over diploma, 52% had bachelor, 12% had master, and 2% had PhD degree of education. In addition, the highest income was related to an income over 10 million rials with 83%, 11% had an income between 2 and 10 million rials, 5% had lower than 3 million rials, and 1% had an income between 3 and 5 million rials. In terms of age, the highest mean age was related to ages between 30 and 39 years with 37%, the age range between 40 and 49 was 29%, the age range between 20 and 29 was 25%, age range between 50 and 59 was 5%, and age higher than 60 was 2%.

Based on Table 1, nonparametric test of K–S is used to predict the normality of the data. Based on the value of K–S and the value (sig) for each of the variables in the research, the distribution of data is normal and the normality of data is confirmed.

Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients related to predictor variables of conscientiousness self-compassion,

self-kindness and self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and overidentification with marital satisfaction in married employees of the hospital. The research results suggest a significant positive relationship between conscientiousness and marital satisfaction ( $P = 0.028$  and  $r = 0.187$ ), a positive and significant relationship between self-compassion and marital satisfaction ( $r = 0.185$  and  $P = 0.028$ ), a positive and significant relationship between self-kindness and marital satisfaction ( $P = 0.005$  and  $r = 0.187$ ), a negative and significant relationship between self-judgment and marital satisfaction ( $P = 0.012$  and  $r = -0.230$ ), a positive and significant relationship between common humanity and marital satisfaction ( $P < 0.002$  and  $r = 0.345$ ), a negative and significant relationship between isolation and marital satisfaction ( $P < 0.001$  and  $r = -0.300$ ), a positive and significant relationship between mindfulness and marital satisfaction ( $P < 0.004$  and  $r = 0.277$ ), and a negative and significant relationships

between over-identification and marital satisfaction ( $P = 0.017$  and  $r = -0.220$ ).

Based on Table 3, the predictive variables of conscientiousness ( $\beta = 0.009$  and  $t = 0.17$ ), self-compassion ( $\beta = 0.18$  and  $t = 0.48$ ), self-kindness ( $\beta = -0.04$  and  $T = -0.30$ ), sense of common humanity ( $\beta = 0.07$  and  $t = 0.57$ ), and mindfulness ( $\beta = -0.18$  and  $t = 0.48$ ) can positively predict marital satisfaction. Moreover, the subscales of isolation, self-judgment, and over-identification cannot predict marital satisfaction. The predictive variables of the model explain 51% of the variance of marital satisfaction ( $r = 0.72$ ). In addition, the strongest predictors of marital satisfaction were self-compassion ( $\beta = 0.18$  and  $t = 0.48$ ) and conscientiousness ( $\beta = 0.009$  and  $t = 0.17$ ).

## Discussion

The current research was conducted to evaluate the relationship between conscientiousness and self-compassion with marital satisfaction among married employees of Shahid Mostafa Khomeini Hospital in Ilam. The research results revealed a positive and significant relationship between conscientiousness and marital satisfaction among married employees. This result is consistent with results of previous studies conducted by Malouff *et al.*,<sup>[33]</sup> Claxton *et al.*,<sup>[34]</sup> and Dyrenforth *et al.*<sup>[21]</sup> Conscientiousness is one of the components of personality and positivist psychology which causes less incompatibility because conscientiousness people are generally responsible, reliable, and hardworking. People with higher level of conscientiousness could manage the conflicts developed cohesively in the relationships in a more constructive manner.<sup>[9]</sup> These people adhere to the principles and strive for their goals.<sup>[10]</sup> To explain the finding of the present research, it can be said that individuals with conscientiousness are managing their personal behaviors and feelings in a better way so that they can relinquish their interests easily and successfully use the strategies necessary to resolve the problems that exist in their marital relationships. In fact, these people have a good marital satisfaction, and they will be less likely to live in crisis and have a normal life.

In addition, there is a positive and significant relationship between self-compassion and marital satisfaction of

**Table 1: Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to examine the normality of research data**

Research variables	Mean distribution		Kolmogorov–Smirnov test	
	Mean	SD	Z statistic test	P
Marital satisfaction	147.00	24.00	0.597	0.455
Conscientiousness	46.09	8.00	0.443	0.398
Self-compassion	49.00	5.75	0.285	0.230

SD=Standard deviation

**Table 2: Pearson correlation coefficients of the variables of conscientiousness, self-compassion, self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and overidentification with marital satisfaction**

Index	Mean	SD	r	P
Conscientiousness and marital satisfaction	41.90	3.84	0.187	0.028
Self-compassion and marital satisfaction	35.25	4.75	0.185	0.000
Self-kindness	3.46	1	0.250	0.005
Self-judgment and marital satisfaction	3.58	0.75	-0.230	0.012
Common humanity and marital satisfaction	2.50	1.03	0.345	0.002
Isolation and marital satisfaction	3.20	0.49	-0.300	0.001
Mindfulness and marital satisfaction	3.58	0.94	0.277	0.004
Overidentification and marital satisfaction	2.58	1.15	-0.220	0.017

SD=Standard deviation

**Table 3: Results of regression of marital satisfaction using predictor variables (conscientiousness, self-compassion, self-kindness, sense of common humanity, and mindfulness)**

Criterion variable	Predictive variables	Standard coefficient, $\beta$	t	P
Marital satisfaction	Conscientiousness	0.009	0.17	0.004
	Self-compassion	0.18	0.48	0.001
	Self-kindness	-0.04	-0.30	0.9
	Sense of common humanity	0.07	0.57	0.05
	Mindfulness	-0.18	0.48	0.001

married employees. These results are in consistent with the studies conducted by Neff and Beretvas<sup>[35]</sup> and Cogswell.<sup>[36]</sup> In general, self-compassion is self-kindness, self-understanding rather than self-judgment, and a kind of support for one's shortcomings and incompetency.<sup>[37]</sup> Emotional balance and flexibility provided by self-compassion in turn provide the conditions for more constructive responses to the conflicts and the problems of the relationship, leading to an increased health of relationships and satisfaction with the relationship.<sup>[23,37]</sup> Self-compassion is associated with high levels of better psychological functioning. The importance of this result lies in the fact that self-compassion variable leads to an increased life satisfaction because of its effect on one's satisfaction with marital life. It could be stated that self-compassion develops some positive characteristics such as reasonable self-understanding, patience, tolerance, and emotional balance during experiencing difficult life experiences and reminding the individual that self-compassion prevents the negative effects of adversities, which might happen to everybody, on marital life.<sup>[38]</sup> It can be said that self-compassion by creating some positive features, such as reasonable perception, patience and tolerance, and a balance in excitement during the difficult experiences of life, can prevent the negative effects which are affecting marital life. Another result of the present study indicated a positive and significant relationship among the subscales of self-kindness, sense of common humanity, mindfulness and marital satisfaction with significant negative relationship among subscales of self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification and marital satisfaction of married employees of the hospital. The current study results were consistent with results of studies conducted by Neff and Beretvas,<sup>[35]</sup> Baker and McNulty,<sup>[17]</sup> and Otani *et al.*<sup>[39]</sup> To explain the findings of the present research, it can be said that the feelings of judgment about oneself can be explained through the individual's neuroticism because self-centered and self-reflexive people do not show a sense of empathy toward others, and since their emphasis is on independence instead of empathy and dependency, they may ignore the views of the opposing side at the time of conflicts in life and judge only their own inferences. Moreover, using sense of common humanity, an individual can create psychological security for him/herself and find opportunity to understand and correct incompatible mental, emotional, and behavioral patterns more precisely. And also because isolated individuals are less likely to take action to resolve their mistakes, consequently, this can be a potential source for conflicts and ultimately, it reduces marital satisfaction in couples. The regression analysis results showed that the investigated predictive variables explain 51% of the total variance of marital satisfaction. To explain this relationship, it could be stated that couple conscientiousness is one of the most effective factors

considering the level of life satisfaction and it has special importance in explaining marital satisfaction changes.<sup>[9]</sup> People with high self-compassion have compassionate and kind goals in their relationship. It means that they have tendency for social support and encourage interpersonal trust with their spouses.<sup>[22]</sup> Research results also showed that compassion is associated with satisfaction with marital life. In explaining these results, it could be stated that self-compassion is associated with sense of worthiness, happiness, and sense of authenticity; self-compassion individuals are able to express their ideas in romantic relationships. Results of a study carried out by Neff *et al.*<sup>[20]</sup> showed that the level self-kindness of people is associated with the kindness of people in relationship with their spouses. People with self-compassion show high level of communication with their partner. In addition, openness to self-compassion is associated with intimate relationship with others. People who have self-compassion have a high acceptance of their spouses; it gives them more autonomy and independence; since self-compassion people do not consider themselves without defect (they are aware of their defects), consequently, they are able to accept the limitations of their partners. Moreover, people who have spouse with self-compassion report more satisfaction with their marital relationship.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Conclusions

Conscientiousness and self-compassion have a direct and significant relationship with marital satisfaction. The limitations of the present research were the inability to control all the variables of the research and also the temporal and spatial cross-sectional nature of the study. Considering the importance of marital satisfaction in couples and in order to increase the external validity of these studies, it is recommended that researchers carry out different studies in various areas. Likewise, it is recommended that the results of this research and similar studies were used in the areas of treatment and consultation.

## Acknowledgments

This article was approved by Mostafa Khomeini Hospital in Ilam city and the ethical code is 63920705952052. For collection of data, the researchers explained the purpose of research for participants to obtain informed consent. The researchers promised the participants that their data will be considered as confidential.

We appreciate all of the honorable employees of Shahid Mostafa Khomeini Hospital in Ilam and those who patiently participated and contributed in the present research, as well as those who cooperated with us in conducting this research.

## Financial support and sponsorship

This study was financially supported by Ilam University of Medical Sciences, Iran.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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