

Psychological and Behavioral Mechanisms Underlying Marital Dysfunction: An Integrative Theoretical Review

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Abstract

Marital dysfunction is a pervasive yet theoretically fragmented construct in relationship science. Although cognitive, attachment, behavioral, and systemic perspectives have identified numerous factors associated with relationship distress, these processes have often been examined separately, limiting the development of a coherent explanatory account. This integrative theoretical review synthesizes contemporary empirical evidence to develop a mechanism-based framework of marital dysfunction. It brings together psychological vulnerabilities, including maladaptive cognitive processing, emotion dysregulation, attachment insecurity, developmental adversity, personality characteristics, and psychopathology, with the behavioral processes through which these vulnerabilities shape couple interactions. Particular attention is given to communication, conflict regulation, reciprocal interaction, and behavioral dysregulation within couple and family systems. The review also critically examines areas of empirical convergence, methodological limitations, and priorities for future research. Overall, the evidence suggests that marital dysfunction is best understood as a dynamic, multilevel process in which psychological vulnerabilities, behavioral adaptation, and contextual stressors interact over time, rather than as the cumulative effect of isolated risk factors. By bringing these lines of evidence together, the review offers a coherent framework for understanding how relational difficulties emerge and are maintained and provides a basis for future research and process-oriented interventions across diverse sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: marital dysfunction; marital distress; psychological vulnerabilities; behavioral regulation; emotion regulation; attachment; Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model; integrative theoretical review

1. Introduction

1.1 Marital Dysfunction as a Global and Multidimensional Challenge

Marriage is an important context for psychological well-being and family functioning. The quality of the marital relationship is associated with partners' physical and mental health, parenting practices, and children's developmental adjustment. For this reason, marital dysfunction is increasingly viewed not simply as a private relational problem but as an issue with broader implications for individual and family well-being (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bodenmann et al., 2020).

Understanding marital dysfunction has become particularly important in the context of relationship instability and psychological distress among couples across different sociocultural settings. Longitudinal evidence links persistent marital distress to greater risks of depression, anxiety, and substance misuse (Whisman, 2007), as well as cardiovascular problems, impaired immune functioning, and lower life satisfaction (Lu et al., 2024). Its effects may also extend beyond the couple, affecting parenting quality, family cohesion, and children's emotional, behavioral, and social adjustment (Lu et al., 2024). These broader consequences highlight the importance of understanding the processes through which marital difficulties develop and persist.

Despite extensive research, however, marital dysfunction remains conceptually heterogeneous. It is not simply the absence of marital satisfaction, nor is it necessarily a discrete clinical condition. Rather, it has increasingly been understood in terms of persistent difficulties in emotional regulation, communication, collaborative problem-solving, and mutual responsiveness under conditions of relational stress (Bodenmann et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2022). This perspective reflects a broader shift in relationship research from focusing primarily on relationship outcomes toward examining the processes through which partners influence one another over time. In this view, marital functioning is shaped by the interplay between individual vulnerabilities, couple-level processes, and contextual stressors.

1.2 Conceptualizing Marital Dysfunction Beyond Marital Satisfaction

The distinction between marital dysfunction and marital satisfaction is important for understanding how relationship difficulties are conceptualized. Marital satisfaction has traditionally been used as a primary indicator of relationship quality, and many studies have therefore treated low satisfaction as evidence of dysfunction. Although this approach has contributed substantially to research on couple relationships, the two constructs are not equivalent. Marital satisfaction refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of the relationship at a given point in time, whereas marital dysfunction concerns persistent difficulties in the processes through which couples regulate emotions, manage conflict, maintain intimacy, and respond to internal and external stressors (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

This distinction also helps explain why satisfaction alone may not capture the ways relationships become dysfunctional. Couples may report relatively high satisfaction while engaging in interaction patterns that increase their vulnerability to later deterioration. Conversely, temporary decreases in satisfaction may reflect normative transitions or situational stressors without indicating persistent dysfunction. Marital functioning is therefore increasingly understood as involving interconnected cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal processes rather than as a simple continuum from satisfaction to dissatisfaction (Bodenmann et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2022).

This process-oriented view also changes how marital distress is explained. Rather than focusing primarily on direct associations between individual characteristics and relationship outcomes, contemporary perspectives emphasize the reciprocal influence of individual vulnerabilities, couple interactions, and contextual stressors over time. As a result, similar stressors may have different effects on relationships depending on how partners regulate their emotions, respond to one another, and adapt to relational demands (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Overall et al., 2022).

At the same time, the literature remains theoretically fragmented. Cognitive, attachment, behavioral, developmental, and systemic approaches have each generated substantial evidence, but they have largely developed in parallel. An important challenge, therefore, is to understand how the processes identified by these perspectives work together rather than treating them as separate sources of risk. This provides the basis for a mechanism-based account of how psychological vulnerabilities and behavioral processes contribute to the emergence and persistence of marital dysfunction.

1.3 Theoretical Fragmentation in Current Literature

Research on marital functioning has expanded substantially over the past four decades, but the theoretical perspectives guiding this work have largely developed along separate lines. Different traditions have focused on different aspects of relationship functioning. Cognitive models emphasize maladaptive beliefs and attributional processes (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992), attachment theory focuses on internal working models and emotional security (Johnson, 2019; Overall et al., 2022), and behavioral approaches examine patterns of interaction and behavioral exchange (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Systemic and stress-adaptation perspectives, in contrast, place greater emphasis on dyadic coping, contextual stressors, and reciprocal processes within the family (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bodenmann et al., 2020). Each of these perspectives has contributed important evidence, but their largely separate development has made it difficult to explain how the processes they identify may operate together in marital dysfunction.

A related limitation concerns the predominance of variable-centered research. Cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and contextual factors are often examined as separate predictors of relationship outcomes. This approach has been valuable for identifying factors associated with marital distress, but it provides less information about how these factors influence one another as relationships unfold over time. Longitudinal and transactional research increasingly points to reciprocal processes in which individual vulnerabilities, partners' behavior, and contextual demands can reinforce or modify one another (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bodenmann et al., 2020; Overall et al., 2022). The challenge, therefore, is not simply to identify additional factors associated with marital distress, but to understand how the processes identified across different theoretical traditions combine to shape relationship trajectories.

1.4 The Need for an Integrative Mechanism-Based Framework

The evidence reviewed across cognitive, attachment, behavioral, and systemic traditions points to a common problem: established factors associated with marital dysfunction are relatively well documented, but less is known about how these factors work together over time. Contemporary research increasingly emphasizes transactional processes in which psychological vulnerabilities influence how partners respond to relational stress, while recurring interaction patterns can, in turn, affect psychological functioning (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bodenmann et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2022; Overall et al., 2022). This perspective suggests that marital dysfunction cannot be fully understood by examining individual risk factors in isolation.

A more useful account therefore needs to consider the links between individual vulnerabilities, couple interactions, and contextual demands. Organizing existing evidence around these links can help clarify how marital difficulties emerge, persist, and change over time. Building on this approach, the present review brings together psychological vulnerabilities and behavioral processes within an

integrative framework for understanding marital dysfunction across different relational and sociocultural contexts.

1.5 Objectives and Scope of the Present Review

Building on this background, the present review develops an integrative account of the psychological and behavioral processes involved in marital dysfunction. The framework draws on the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and on more recent research on attachment, emotion regulation, and dyadic interaction (Bodenmann et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2022; Overall et al., 2022). It brings these perspectives together to examine how psychological vulnerabilities may shape behavioral responses to relational stress and how recurring patterns of interaction may, in turn, influence relationship functioning over time. From this perspective, marital dysfunction is viewed as a dynamic process involving the interaction of individual, relational, and contextual factors rather than as the result of isolated influences.

The review first examines the main psychological vulnerabilities associated with marital dysfunction and then considers the behavioral processes through which these vulnerabilities may be expressed and maintained in couple interactions. It subsequently brings the evidence together to assess areas of convergence, methodological limitations, and priorities for future research. Figure 1 presents the proposed framework and summarizes the pathways linking developmental experiences, psychological vulnerabilities, behavioral processes, contextual stressors, and marital dysfunction.

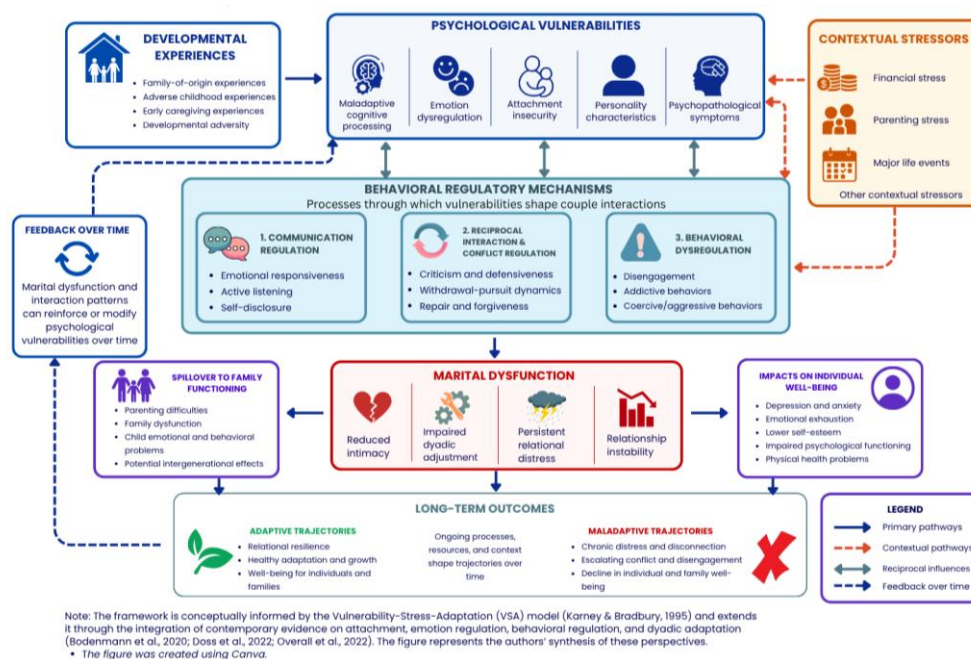


Figure 1: An Integrative Mechanism-Based Framework for Understanding Marital Dysfunction

2. Psychological Factors Associated with Marital Dysfunction

Within the framework presented in Figure 1, marital dysfunction is considered in relation to several psychological vulnerabilities that influence how partners perceive and respond to experiences within the relationship. These vulnerabilities do not necessarily affect relationship functioning in isolation. Rather, their effects may become evident through the ways partners regulate emotions, interpret one another's behavior, and respond to interpersonal and contextual demands. The following sections examine five areas that have received substantial attention in the literature: cognitive processing,

emotion regulation, attachment, personality characteristics, and psychopathological symptoms (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bodenmann et al., 2020; Overall & Simpson, 2022).

These factors are considered as interconnected influences rather than as separate causes of marital dysfunction. Their relevance lies not only in their individual associations with relationship difficulties, but also in how they may shape the behavioral processes through which marital distress develops and persists.

2.1 Cognitive and Emotional Regulation Processes

Cognitive processing and emotion regulation are closely connected processes through which spouses interpret relationship experiences, respond emotionally, and adapt to interpersonal stress. Cognitive appraisals can shape emotional responses, while emotional states can also influence how relational events are interpreted. This reciprocal relationship is particularly relevant to the way couples respond to everyday difficulties. Cognitive theories of intimate relationships have shown that maladaptive attributional styles, such as explaining a partner's negative behavior in internal, stable, and global terms, are associated with dysfunctional relationship beliefs, hostile interpretations, and negative expectations, increasing vulnerability to persistent marital distress (Fincham et al., 1987; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992).

These cognitive processes may become more problematic when they occur alongside difficulties in emotion regulation. Problems regulating negative affect can reduce psychological flexibility, increase emotional reactivity, and interfere with constructive problem-solving, making it more difficult for couples to respond effectively to contextual stressors. Recent longitudinal and dyadic research suggests that emotion dysregulation may help explain the association between parenting stress and marital satisfaction, while alexithymia, persistent anger, and limited emotional awareness have been linked to marital burnout, emotional disengagement, and reduced intimacy. In contrast, greater emotional flexibility and more adaptive emotion dynamics are associated with greater relationship stability and satisfaction over time (Wu et al., 2025; Johal & Ferrer, 2024; Zamani et al., 2023).

Taken together, these findings suggest that cognition and emotion should not be treated as entirely separate influences on marital functioning. Negative appraisals may intensify emotional arousal, while poorly regulated emotional responses may reinforce negative interpretations and expectations. Over time, these processes can contribute to patterns that make communication, conflict regulation, and relational adaptation more difficult. Cognitive-emotional regulation can therefore be understood as one pathway through which individual vulnerabilities become expressed in couple interactions and contribute to marital dysfunction (Filipović et al., 2016; Eleonora et al., 2024).

2.2 Attachment-Related Developmental Vulnerabilities

Early relational experiences can shape attachment-related vulnerabilities that influence intimate relationships in adulthood. Attachment theory views adult romantic relationships as important attachment bonds that provide emotional security, help regulate distress, and support coping with interpersonal challenges. Internal working models developed through early caregiving experiences may influence expectations about intimacy, trust, emotional responsiveness, and reciprocity later in life, as well as how partners interpret and respond to relationship difficulties (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Johnson, 2019).

Attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with different patterns of responding to relationship threats. Individuals with higher attachment anxiety tend to be more sensitive to rejection, seek reassurance, and respond to distress with heightened emotional activation. In contrast, attachment avoidance is more often characterized by emotional suppression, interpersonal distancing, and discomfort with intimacy. Despite these differences, both forms of insecurity can interfere with emotion regulation and reciprocal responsiveness within relationships. These patterns may also become part of recurring couple interactions. For example, the pursuer-distancer dynamic can develop when one partner seeks greater closeness or reassurance while the other responds by withdrawing, potentially reinforcing both partners' strategies over time (Johnson, 2019; Overall & Simpson, 2022).

Developmental adversity may further contribute to these vulnerabilities. Adverse childhood experiences, psychological maltreatment, and dysfunctional family environments have been associated with less secure attachment, difficulties in emotion regulation, and maladaptive expectations about relationships across development. From the perspective adopted in this review, such experiences are better understood as factors that increase vulnerability to later relationship difficulties rather than as direct causes of marital dysfunction. Their effects may be expressed through psychological and interpersonal processes that shape how individuals regulate emotions, interpret their partners' behavior, and respond to relational stress in adulthood (Kang & Choi, 2022).

2.3 Personality and Psychopathological Vulnerabilities

Personality characteristics represent another important source of individual differences in how partners respond to relationship stress. Rather than affecting marital functioning in isolation, personality traits may shape the ways individuals interpret relational events, regulate their emotions, and approach interpersonal problems. Neuroticism, in particular, has been consistently associated with poorer relationship outcomes and may increase vulnerability through greater emotional reactivity, negative affect, and less adaptive coping. In contrast, agreeableness and conscientiousness are generally associated with greater emotional cooperation, self-regulation, and constructive interpersonal behavior. These findings suggest that personality characteristics may influence marital functioning partly through the ways individuals regulate themselves and respond to their partners (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Overall et al., 2022).

Psychopathological symptoms may affect these same relational processes. Depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, and broader psychological distress can interfere with emotion regulation, responsiveness to partners, and collaborative problem-solving, thereby placing additional strain on the relationship. The relationship can also operate in the opposite direction. Longitudinal research suggests that psychological distress and marital difficulties may influence one another over time, with individual distress contributing to relationship deterioration and persistent marital problems potentially worsening psychological symptoms (Villeneuve et al., 2014). This reciprocal pattern highlights the importance of considering individual symptoms within the couple context rather than treating them as isolated characteristics. It also suggests that interventions focused only on individual symptoms may have limited effects on relationship functioning when the interactional processes through which these difficulties are expressed remain unaddressed (Hafner, 1981).

Taken together, personality characteristics and psychopathological symptoms can be viewed as individual-level vulnerabilities that influence, and are influenced by, the processes occurring within intimate relationships. Their contribution to marital dysfunction is therefore better understood in relation to the behavioral and interpersonal processes examined in the following section.

3. Behavioral Factors Associated with Marital Dysfunction

Psychological vulnerabilities become particularly relevant to marital functioning through the ways partners communicate, respond to conflict, and coordinate their behavior in everyday interactions. These behavioral processes are not limited to isolated actions or episodes of disagreement. Rather, repeated patterns of communication and interaction can shape how couples respond to relational demands and contextual stressors over time. When these patterns become rigid or consistently maladaptive, they may contribute to the persistence of marital difficulties and make constructive adaptation more difficult (Bodenmann et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2022).

The behavioral processes considered in this review fall into three related domains: *communication regulation, reciprocal interaction and conflict regulation, and behavioral dysregulation across couple and family systems*. Examining these domains helps clarify how individual vulnerabilities are expressed within relationships and how repeated interaction patterns may contribute to the development and maintenance of marital dysfunction.

3.1 Communication Regulation

Communication is one of the main ways partners respond to one another's emotional and relational needs. It involves more than exchanging information and includes expressing emotions, responding to a partner's experiences, negotiating differences, and working together when difficulties arise. When these processes are effective, communication can support emotional connection, facilitate problem-solving, and help couples respond to relational stress more constructively.

Communication difficulties are consistently associated with marital dysfunction. Criticism, defensiveness, emotional invalidation, limited empathic responsiveness, and ineffective problem-solving can reduce mutual understanding and make it more difficult for partners to respond constructively to one another. These patterns may also amplify the effects of attachment insecurity, maladaptive cognitive processing, and emotion dysregulation by giving psychological vulnerabilities a repeated expression in everyday interactions (Körük & Özabacı, 2023). Communication difficulties are therefore better understood as part of the interactional processes through which individual vulnerabilities can contribute to persistent marital problems.

Communication regulation provides the first link between the psychological vulnerabilities discussed in the previous section and the reciprocal interaction patterns considered next. Examining this link helps clarify how individual processes become visible in the ways partners respond to one another over time.

3.2 Reciprocal Interaction and Conflict Regulation

Communication difficulties become particularly important when they develop into recurring patterns of interaction between partners. From behavioral, systemic, and attachment perspectives, marital difficulties are often maintained through reciprocal processes in which each partner's response influences the other's subsequent behavior. For example, criticism may elicit defensiveness, withdrawal may increase demands for reassurance, and hostility may provoke further hostility. When

these patterns are repeated, they can contribute to greater emotional distance and make it increasingly difficult for partners to respond constructively to one another.

Conflict itself, however, is not necessarily harmful to relationship functioning. What appears to matter is how couples manage disagreement and recover from difficult interactions. Constructive processes such as emotional validation, collaborative problem-solving, negotiation, and repair attempts can help partners restore connection and address disagreements more effectively. In contrast, contempt, coercion, avoidance, verbal aggression, and unresolved conflict can make future disagreements more difficult to manage and contribute to persistent relational distress.

These findings suggest that reciprocal interaction and conflict regulation provide an important link between communication patterns and longer-term relationship functioning. Repeated interaction cycles can become established over time, making them an important target for interventions that seek to improve marital functioning. Evidence from couple-focused interventions further supports the value of addressing these dyadic processes rather than focusing exclusively on individual partners (Bodenmann et al., 2020; Monk et al., 2021; Doss et al., 2022).

3.3 Multilevel Behavioral Dysregulation Across Couple and Family Systems

Some behavioral patterns extend beyond communication and conflict and can place additional strain on marital functioning. Technology-related behaviors, including problematic smartphone use, excessive online engagement, and phubbing, can reduce face-to-face interaction and emotional responsiveness and increase perceptions of partner neglect. These behaviors may be particularly problematic when they occur alongside existing psychological or relational difficulties. Similarly, substance misuse, pathological gambling, and other compulsive behaviors can interfere with emotional availability, cooperative problem-solving, and trust while also contributing to financial difficulties and recurrent conflict (Bodenmann et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2022).

The effects of these behavioral patterns may also extend beyond the couple. From a family-systems perspective, persistent marital hostility, withdrawal, and difficulties in behavioral regulation can affect parenting practices and the emotional climate of the household. Research has linked chronic marital conflict and ineffective regulation with inconsistent parenting, greater parenting stress, children's emotional insecurity, and poorer psychosocial adjustment (Lin et al., 2017; Kuo & Johnson, 2021; Lu et al., 2024). These findings illustrate how difficulties within the marital relationship can become connected to other family processes rather than remaining confined to the couple.

Taken together, behavioral dysregulation can be understood as a process through which difficulties in individual and couple functioning extend into the wider family system. This broader perspective is important because marital dysfunction may affect not only the partners' relationship but also parenting, parent-child relationships, and longer-term family adjustment.

4. Integrative Synthesis of Current Evidence

The preceding sections examined psychological vulnerabilities and behavioral processes separately to clarify their respective roles in marital dysfunction. Taken together, however, the evidence suggests that these processes do not operate in isolation. Psychological vulnerabilities can shape how partners respond to relational stress, while repeated interaction patterns can, in turn, influence individual emotional and psychological functioning. Their effects are also embedded within broader family and contextual processes.

4.1 Empirical Convergence

Although contemporary theories differ in their assumptions and in the processes they emphasize, they show substantial overlap in how they explain marital dysfunction. Cognitive, attachment, behavioral, and systemic perspectives each highlight different aspects of relationship functioning, but their findings can be brought together around several common processes. Across these perspectives, marital difficulties are associated with the interplay between individual vulnerabilities, patterns of couple interaction, and contextual stressors rather than with isolated risk factors (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Bodenmann et al., 2020).

Research using longitudinal, clinical, and process-oriented approaches provides further support for this view. Communication, emotion regulation, attachment security, and dyadic coping appear to be closely connected in shaping how individual vulnerabilities are expressed within intimate relationships and how couples respond to stress over time (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Doss et al., 2022; Overall et al., 2022). Taken together, these findings point toward a shift in emphasis from identifying additional correlates of marital dysfunction to understanding how established processes interact and change over time, sometimes contributing to persistent difficulties and at other times supporting adaptation and resilience.

4.2 Critical Appraisal

Despite the convergence described above, several conceptual and methodological limitations remain. First, the predominance of cross-sectional self-report studies makes it difficult to draw conclusions about causal direction and provides only a limited view of the processes through which marital functioning changes over time. As a result, reciprocal relationships among psychological vulnerabilities, behavioral processes, and contextual stressors remain insufficiently examined.

Another limitation concerns the tendency to study communication, attachment, personality, and psychological distress as separate predictors of marital outcomes. Although this variable-centered approach has helped identify important correlates of marital dysfunction, it offers less insight into how these factors interact within relationships or how their interactions contribute to persistent patterns of adaptation or deterioration.

The literature also remains limited in its representation of diverse sociocultural contexts. The predominance of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) samples raises questions about the extent to which existing models apply across different cultural and relational settings. In addition, changes in the way couples interact, including technology-mediated communication, digital intimacy, and online interaction, have received comparatively less attention despite their growing relevance to contemporary relationships (Bodenmann et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2022).

4.3 Future Directions

Future research should test more directly how psychological vulnerabilities, behavioral processes, and contextual stressors interact over time. This will require more longitudinal and culturally diverse research, as well as multimethod designs that combine self-report measures with behavioral, physiological, and, where appropriate, digital indicators of relationship functioning. Greater attention is also needed to emerging forms of couple interaction, including technology-mediated communication and digital intimacy. These approaches could provide a more detailed picture of how

relationship difficulties develop, persist, and change across different contexts (Finkel et al., 2017; Overall et al., 2022).

Future studies should also move beyond examining individual risk factors in isolation and test the pathways connecting them. In particular, research could examine whether and when psychological vulnerabilities are expressed through specific interaction patterns, how these patterns feed back into individual functioning, and how contextual stressors alter these processes. The framework proposed in this review offers a conceptual basis for investigating these questions and for developing interventions that target the processes most directly involved in relationship dysfunction.

5. Conclusion

Marital dysfunction has been studied from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, yet important connections between these perspectives remain underdeveloped. The evidence reviewed here suggests that relationship difficulties are better understood as a dynamic process involving the interplay of psychological vulnerabilities, behavioral patterns, and contextual stressors. Cognitive and emotional processes shape how partners perceive and respond to one another, while attachment, personality, and psychopathological vulnerabilities can influence these responses. Repeated patterns of communication and conflict regulation may then reinforce or modify individual functioning over time, with effects that can extend into the wider family system.

Bringing these findings together provides a more integrated way of understanding how marital dysfunction develops and persists. Rather than treating cognition, emotion regulation, attachment, personality, communication, and conflict regulation as separate sources of risk, the proposed framework places them within a set of reciprocal processes that operate across individual, couple, and family levels. At the same time, important limitations remain in the evidence base, particularly the reliance on variable-centered approaches, cross-sectional and self-report methods, and samples that do not adequately represent diverse sociocultural contexts.

The value of an integrative framework lies ultimately in the questions it makes possible. Future research can use this framework to examine how particular vulnerabilities become expressed in specific interaction patterns, how these patterns feed back into individual functioning, and how contextual conditions alter these processes over time. Such work may help identify more precise targets for prevention and intervention and clarify why some couples remain resilient under stress while others experience persistent relational difficulties. Understanding these pathways is an important step toward a more comprehensive account of how intimate relationships adapt, deteriorate, and recover.

Conflict of Interest

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