

Research Paper

The Role of Spirituality in Promoting Emotional Intimacy and Shaping Conflict Resolution Styles Among Married Couples

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ABSTRACT

Emotional intimacy and conflict resolution styles are critical determinants of marital satisfaction and long-term relational health. While extensive research has explored these constructs, the influence of spirituality – a search for the sacred characterised by entities, concepts, or qualities that are set apart from the ordinary and worthy of reverence – remains insufficiently examined within marital context. This study investigates the role of spirituality in shaping these two dimensions within the context of marital relationships, focusing on newlyweds and long term married couples. Employing a quantitative, cross sectional research design, data were collected from 208 (104 female, 104 male) participants using the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES), Emotional Intimacy Scale (EIS), and Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI). The findings revealed a significantly positive relationship between conflict resolution styles- acceptance, self-protection and conflict engagement- and spirituality suggesting how spiritual orientation may influence conflict management style. No statistically significant relationship was found between emotional intimacy and spirituality. Further, the comparative analysis indicated that newlyweds reported higher levels of spirituality and more intense conflict engagement than long-term couples, while emotional intimacy levels remained relatively consistent across both groups. These findings highlight the active role played by spirituality in early years of marriage.

Keywords: *Spirituality, Emotional Intimacy, Conflict Resolution Styles, Newlyweds, Long Term Married Couples, Marital Relationships.*

In the earliest bloom, love is effortless holding two people together. As days turn into months and months into years, life starts becoming complex. What holds two people together through sleepless nights, unspoken hurts, and years of change? In a world that focuses on compatibility, algorithms, and communication hacks, in an era where marriages are being tested by distance, digital distractions and diverging values. Is it just compatibility or communication that binds them through tough times? It is the quiet force of spirituality that is overlooked.

Marriage is celebrated as a sacred unity of two unknown souls committed to share life's joys and challenges written right from birth and settled in heaven, but celebrated on earth. While

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the initial stages of this beautiful journey are filled with discovery, affection, shared dreams and emotional closeness. The real test begins as the couple moves through the complexities of their daily life where the foundation of a lasting relationship begins to rely more on deeper qualities, such as mutual understanding and ability to manage the conflicts from being able to navigate through the disagreements to balancing out the responsibilities. The strength of marriage is not tested by absence of a conflict, but rather by the depth of connection and the maturity by which the challenges are handled.

In today's time, marriage is not just limited to a legal contract or a social institution between two people, rather it is a dynamic emotional bond which is evolving multifold. Emotional intimacy- the ability of partners to be truly vulnerable to each other, feel seen, heard and valued in the emotional world and remain emotionally available for each other, promotes feeling of safety, mutual understanding and strengthens resilience amongst them during tough times. The process involves creating a safe emotional climate where both the partners feel seen, heard and valued while reciprocating, emotional disclosure and validation of feelings. Although built over time, emotional intimacy is influenced by personal experiences, mutual efforts and underlying belief system- of which spirituality is one. According to Holland et al., (2016) by creating shared values and reinforcing mutual respect for each other, spirituality may promote emotional intimacy among couples.

The ability to constructively handle conflicts, referred to as conflict resolution style, is yet another factor that helps to maintain longevity and quality of interpersonal relationships. It has been noted that when two parties are involved, there are high chances of having differences in opinions, interests, goals or outcomes often leading to a conflicting situation. Even though temperament, past experiences and social learning often influences the conflict resolution style but studies have noted the role of spiritual beliefs and practices (Paul, 2016; Garavand, 2022)

Types of Conflict Resolution Styles:

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (1974) has listed five modes-

- 1. Competing:** This style involves scoring high on assertiveness and low on cooperativeness. Individuals pursue one's own goal at the expense of others. This often results in a win-lose outcome.
- 2. Accommodating:** This involves low assertiveness and high cooperativeness. This involves handling conflicts by yielding others' preference, showing selflessness and submitting to others.
- 3. Avoiding:** This style involves low on assertiveness and low on cooperativeness. It involves keeping disagreements to oneself or withdrawing from the conflict. There is little regard for oneself and others.
- 4. Collaborating:** This involves being high on assertiveness and high cooperativeness. Through open dialogue, problem solving and mutual understanding individuals seek win-win outcomes. Here parties are concerned about collaborating to arrive at a solution acceptable to both.
- 5. Compromising:** This involves moderate assertiveness and moderate cooperativeness. Individuals tend to find a common ground to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

Spirituality is an individual's sense of connection with something greater than themselves which may not be linked with a particular religious practice. Pargament (1997) quotes that

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“spirituality includes experiences of inner peace, purpose, transcendence, compassion, and moral guidance”. In marriages, spirituality acts as a core value system shaping attitudes, beliefs and coping styles. Shared spiritual practices tend to foster a deep sense of unity, strengthen emotional intimacy and help couples navigate conflicting situations. Sanctification of marriage (Mahoney et al., 2005) is the belief of one's marriage having spiritual significance. Higher levels of commitment, mutual respect, and willingness to resolve conflicts constructively have been demonstrated by those spouses who sanctify their marriages. Additionally, Hill and Pargament (2003) notes that it is a “central aspect of human functioning” influencing cognition, behavior, emotions and interpersonal relationships. In marriages, the way couples cope with stress, navigate conflicts and show emotional vulnerability is influenced by the level of shared spiritual beliefs. Spouses who engage in shared spiritual practices such as prayers, meditation or spiritual reading often report increased emotional intimacy and greater relational satisfaction (Fincham et al., 2011). During crises situations, spirituality tends to promote emotional resilience.

Rationale:

Marriage is a continuously evolving relationship demanding emotional, psychological and interpersonal investment from both the partners. Researchers have established the role of emotional intimacy and conflict resolution styles in facilitating marital satisfaction, the role of spirituality remains under explored especially across the marital duration. Traditional marital roles are being redefined, spirituality offers a deep, value based framework that leads to promotion of resilience and building empathy. Existing studies focus on marital satisfaction as an outcome or influences of religiosity. However, spirituality is a more personal, subjective and transcendent experience and is differentiated from religiosity. There is a growing need to understand spirituality as a psychosocial resource that influences how partners connect emotionally with each other and manage conflicting situations.

Moreover limited research has been done comparing these dynamics between newlyweds and long term married couples. Those in early stages of marriage are typically in a phase of developing marital habits, navigating expectations, maintaining boundaries and learning to navigate and regulate their emotions and conflicts. They are exploring each other's needs, keeping up with the expectations of each other as well as of their families, and sharing goals that have high emotional intensity. The conflicts may arise due to differences in opinions, adjustment issues or something that doesn't align with their values. By contrast, long-term couples have established a more or less stable pattern of interaction. Their notion of emotional intimacy and conflict might be different. It may be more stable or in some cases it may be strained. The valuable insights about the role of spirituality evolving over the time in marriage and how it interacts with emotional intimacy and conflict resolution among these two groups can be achieved. Furthermore, there is limited literature that combines psychological, relational and spiritual variables together to understand holistic marital functioning. While these variables are often studied in isolation, their interaction with relational processes is less frequently examined. Thus, this study aims to bridge the gap by investigating spirituality, not as a standalone trait, but a predictor and influence on interpersonal functioning within marital dyad.

METHODOLOGY

Aim: To understand the role of spirituality in promoting emotional intimacy and shaping conflict resolution style among newly married and long term married couples.

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Objectives:

- To examine the relationship of spirituality in promoting emotional intimacy and shaping conflict resolution style.
- To examine the impact of spirituality in promoting emotional intimacy.
- To examine the impact of spirituality in shaping conflict resolution style.
- To compare the means of spirituality in promoting emotional intimacy and shaping conflict resolution style among married couples.

Hypothesis:

- H1: There will be a significant positive relationship between spirituality, emotional intimacy and conflict resolution style.
- H2: Spirituality significantly predicts emotional intimacy among married couples.
- H3: Spirituality significantly predicts conflict resolution styles among married couples.
- H4: There will be a significant difference in the levels of spirituality, emotional intimacy, and conflict resolution styles between newlyweds and long-term married couples.

Sample:

Data was collected using a purposive and snowballing sampling method as the data was collected from participants who met specific criteria related to marital duration. The sample included a diverse population of 208 (104 female and 104 male) participants from 25-59 years of age, various ethnic groups, socioeconomic status and educational background currently residing in urban areas. The sample included couples who recently got married or had been married for the past 10 years to those who had been together for more than 10 years. The sample consisted of 104 newly married and 104 long term married couples. The exclusion criteria consisted of LGBTQ+ couples, those residing in rural areas and those who were below 20 years of age.

Research Design:

A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational, and comparative research design was used to understand the role of spirituality in promoting emotional intimacy and shaping resolution styles among married couples.

Variables

- *Independent variable:* Spirituality
- *Dependent variable:* Emotional Intimacy, Conflict Resolution Styles

Measures

The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES)

The DSES, developed by Underwood (2002), is a 16-item self report measure designed to evaluate everyday experiences of connection with the transcendent. It includes constructs of awe, gratitude, mercy, sense of connection with the transcendent, compassionate love, awareness of discernment/inspiration and a sense of deep inner peace. The first 15 items are rated on a 6-point scale, ranging from “many times a day” to “never or almost never,” and are reverse-scored so that higher scores reflect more frequent spiritual experiences. The final item, which asks how close one feels to God, uses a 4-point scale ranging from “not close” to “as close as possible” and is not reverse scored. The total score is calculated by summing

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all item responses, with higher scores indicating a stronger and more frequent sense of spirituality in daily life.

Reliability and Validity: The DSES has strong internal consistency and 16-items yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .94, indicating high internal reliability and also showed strong evidence of content, construct, and convergent validity.

The Emotional Intimacy Scale (EIS)

The EIS was developed by Sinclair and Dowdy (2005), is a self report 5 item measure assessing the emotional closeness and connection between partners in a romantic relationship. The five items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal). There is no reverse scoring. The total score is calculated by summing the responses to all items, yielding a range from 5 to 25. A higher total score indicates a stronger sense of emotional intimacy and connection between partners.

Reliability and Validity: The scale showed a strong internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha value .88 and a strong test retest reliability. The EIS showed strong evidence of both content validity and construct validity.

The Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CSRI)

The CSRI is a self report questionnaire developed by Kudrek in 1994 that helps individuals and groups to identify their preferred style of conflict resolution. It evaluates four distinct conflict resolution strategies namely- conflict engagement, positive problem solving, self protection and acceptance- each with four items on a 5 point Likert scale.

Table 1- Item Distribution of Conflict Resolution Styles in the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI)

S. NO.	Conflict Resolution Style	Items
1.	Conflict Engagement	1,5,9,13
2	Positive Problem Solving	2,6,10,14
3.	self protection	3,7,11,15
4.	acceptance	4,8,12,16

Reliability and validity: The CRSI demonstrated good internal consistency. The conflict engagement showed Cronbach's alpha value of .77, compared to the positive problem-solving dimension's alpha .75. The alpha values for acceptance and self protection were .53 and .61 respectively. The CRSI showed strong content and construct validity.

Procedure

208 participants were sampled through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The sample consisted of 104 female and 104 male participants falling between the age group of 25-59 years of age. Data was collected using both online and offline methods to ensure wider and more diverse participant reach. An online Google Form was created which included brief introduction, informed consent, demographic details and three scales: The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale, Emotional Intimacy Scale and The Conflict Resolution Style Inventory. In addition to this, printed versions of this questionnaire were also

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distributed in person to some couples who were comfortable with offline mode. Clear instructions regarding the aim of the study and information about maintaining the confidentiality were explained. The data collected through hard copies were manually entered into excel sheets to ensure uniformity. The entire data was compiled and then analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The scores were then interpreted.

RESULT AND INTERPRETATION

The aim of the study was to understand the role of spirituality in promoting emotional intimacy and shaping conflict resolution styles among newly married and long term married couples. The data was collected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational, and comparative research design was used. 208 (104 female, 104 male) participants falling between the age group of 25-59 years of age were sampled. Data was collected using both online and offline methods using three scales: The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale, Emotional Intimacy Scale and The Conflict Resolution Style Inventory.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for Daily Spiritual Experience Scale, Emotional Intimacy Scale and Conflict Resolution Style among newly married and long term married couples

	Years	Mean	Std. Deviation
TotalDSES	Long term	37.52	7.417
	Newly Weds	42.78	7.781
TotalEIS	Long term	19.7	4.558
	Newly Weds	20.47	2.691
Conflict Engagement	Long term	9.01	3.01
	Newly Weds	11.66	3.334
PositiveProblem Solving	Long term	13.81	3.101
	Newly Weds	13.35	2.821
self protection	Long term	10.31	3.342
	Newly Weds	11.34	3.398
acceptance	Long term	11.04	2.52
	Newly Weds	12.51	2.734

Note: TotalDSES = Total score on the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale; TotalEIS = Total score on the Emotional Intimacy Scale. N= 208.

Table 2 represents the descriptive statistics. The sample consisted of long term married and newly wed couples with 104 participants in each group. On the daily spiritual experience scale, the mean score of newly married couples was higher (M = 42.78, SD = 7.78) than

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long-term couples ($M = 37.52$, $SD = 7.42$). This suggests that newlyweds may experience a greater frequency of spiritual experiences in their daily life. For the Emotional Intimacy Scale also, mean scores for newly married couples were slightly higher ($M = 20.47$, $SD = 2.69$) than long-term couples ($M = 19.70$, $SD = 4.56$).

For conflict resolution styles, the conflict engagement score was noticeably higher among newly married couples ($M = 11.66$, $SD = 3.33$) as compared to long-term couples ($M = 9.01$, $SD = 3.01$). This indicates that newlyweds have a tendency to engage more during conflicts. For positive problem solving, both groups reported similar scores, with long-term couples showing a slightly higher mean ($M = 13.81$, $SD = 3.10$) than newlyweds ($M = 13.35$, $SD = 2.82$). For self protection as a conflict resolution style, the mean score for newly married couples was higher ($M = 11.34$, $SD = 3.40$) as compared to long-term couples ($M = 10.31$, $SD = 3.34$). In acceptance, newly married couples showed higher average scores ($M = 12.51$, $SD = 2.73$) than long-term couples ($M = 11.04$, $SD = 2.52$), suggesting they may use acceptance more often to resolve conflicts.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix for Spirituality, Emotional Intimacy and Conflict Resolution Styles

		TotalDSES	TotalEIS	TotalCRSI
TotalDSES	Pearson Correlation	1	.023	.282**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.000
TotalEIS	Pearson Correlation	.023	1	-.194**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.745		.005
TotalCRSI	Pearson Correlation	-.282**	-.194**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.005	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note. $N = 208$. TotalDSES = Total score on the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (spirituality); TotalEIS = Total score on the Emotional Intimacy Scale; TotalCRSI = Total score on the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory.

Table 3 represents the Pearson correlation coefficient between spirituality, emotional intimacy and conflict resolution styles. The findings indicate that there exists a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between daily spiritual experiences (spirituality) and conflict resolution styles ($r=.282$, $p<.01$). This means that individuals with higher levels of spirituality tend to use more adaptive or constructive conflict resolution strategies. There was a significant weak negative correlation between conflict resolution styles and emotional intimacy ($r = -.194$, $p < .01$). This suggests that greater emotional intimacy may be associated with reduced use of maladaptive conflict resolution styles. Further, the correlation between daily spiritual experiences and emotional intimacy was not statistically significant ($r = .023$, $p > .01$) indicating no meaningful relationship between the two variables.

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Table 4: Simple Linear Regression Analyses Predicting Emotional Intimacy and Conflict Resolution Styles from Spirituality

Dependent Variable	R ²	Adj. R ²	F	p-value	B	β	t	Sig. (p)
Emotional Intimacy	.001	-.004	.106	.745	.011	.023	.325	.745
Conflict Engagement	.067	.063	14.889	.000	.111	.26	3.859	.000
Positive Problem Solving	.014	.009	2.943	.088	-.044	-.119	-1.715	.088
self protection	.081	.077	18.206	.000	.121	.285	4.267	.000
acceptance	.083	.079	18.731	.000	.098	.289	4.328	.000

Note: B = Unstandardized regression coefficient; β = Standardized beta coefficient; R = Correlation coefficient; R² = Coefficient of determination; p = significance level. N = 208. All analyses used TotalDSES (spirituality) as the independent variable.

Table 4 represents the simple linear regression analysis examining the predictive role of spirituality on emotional intimacy and conflict resolution styles. The results indicated that there is no significant relationship between spirituality and emotional intimacy ($F(1, 206) = 0.106$, $\beta = .023$, $t = .325$, $p > .001$). The R² value (.001) means that spirituality accounts for only 1% of the variance in emotional intimacy. There is a significant positive relationship between spirituality and conflict engagement style ($F(1, 206) = 14.89$, $\beta = 0.260$, $t = 3.859$, $p < .001$). The R² of .067 indicates that spirituality accounts for 6.7% of variance in conflict engagement.

For positive problem solving, regression results showed that spirituality did not significantly predict positive problem-solving ($F(1, 206) = 2.943$, $\beta = -0.119$, $t = -1.715$, $p > .001$). The R² of .014 showed that spirituality accounts for 1.4% of variance in positive problem solving. The analysis also revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between spirituality and self protection ($F(1, 206) = 18.204$, $\beta = .285$, $p < .001$). R² of .081 indicates that spirituality accounts for 8.1% of variance in self protection. The regression analysis for acceptance revealed that spirituality significantly predicted positive acceptance ($F(1, 206) = 18.204$, $\beta = .285$, $p < .001$) R² of .081 means that spirituality accounts for 8.1% of variance in acceptance.

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Table 5: Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Long-Term and Newlywed Couples on Spirituality, Emotional Intimacy, and Conflict Resolution Styles

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
		Total DSES	Equal variances assumed	0.253	0.615	-4.99	206	0	-5.26	1.054
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.99	205.529	0	-5.26	1.054	-7.338	3.181
TotalEIS	Equal variances assumed	20.762	0	1.482	206	0.14	-0.769	0.519	-1.793	0.254
	Equal variances not assumed			1.482	167.03	0.14	-0.769	0.519	-1.794	0.255
conflict engagement	Equal variances assumed	2.712	0.101	6.025	206	0	-2.654	0.44	-3.522	1.785
	Equal variances not assumed			6.025	203.874	0	-2.654	0.44	-3.522	1.785
positive problem solving	Equal variances assumed	2.797	0.096	1.123	206	0.263	0.462	0.411	-0.349	1.272
	Equal variances not assumed			1.123	204.185	0.263	0.462	0.411	-0.349	1.272
self protection	Equal variances assumed	0.088	0.767	2.202	206	0.029	-1.029	0.467	-1.95	0.108
	Equal variances not assumed			2.202	205.943	0.029	-1.029	0.467	-1.95	0.108
acceptance	Equal variances assumed	1.124	0.29	4.035	206	0	-1.471	0.365	-2.19	0.752
	Equal variances not assumed			4.035	204.638	0	-1.471	0.365	-2.19	0.752

Note. N = 208

Table 5 represents the Independent sample t test comparing long term married couples and newly wed couples across six psychological variables namely daily spiritual experience, emotional intimacy, conflict resolution styles- conflict engagement, positive problem solving, self protection, acceptance. For daily spiritual experience, Levene's test was not

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significant which suggested equal variances ($F = 0.253, p = .615$). The t test indicated a significant difference, $t(206) = -4.990$, between the two groups. Newly married couples reported significantly higher levels of spiritual experience ($M = 42.78$) compared to long-term married couples ($M = 37.52$), with a mean difference of -5.26 .

Levene's test was significant for emotional intimacy ($F = 20.762, p < .001$), indicating violation of the assumption of equal variances. Therefore, results from assuming unequal variances were used. The t -test revealed that there is no significant difference, $t(167.03) = -1.482, p > .001$. This means that there is a similar level of emotional intimacy between long-term and newly married couples.

For subsets of conflict resolution styles, Levene's test was not significant for conflict engagement ($F = 2.712, p = .101$); positive problem solving ($F = 2.797, p = .096$); self protection ($F = 0.088, p = .767$) and acceptance ($F = 1.124, p = .290$) so equal variances were assumed. The t test showed a significant difference, $t(206) = -6.025, p < .001$ with newlyweds reporting higher conflict engagement ($M = 11.66$) than long-term couples ($M = 9.01$), with a mean difference of -2.65 . The t -test result was not significant for positive problem solving, $t(206) = 1.123, p > .001$, indicating that both groups used positive problem-solving strategies at a similar level. For self protection, a significant difference was noted, $t(206) = -2.202, p < .001$. Newlyweds showed slightly higher self protection tendencies ($M = 11.34$) than long-term couples ($M = 10.31$), with a mean difference of -1.03 . The t -test for acceptance also showed a significant difference, $t(206) = -4.035, p < .001$. Newly married couples reported higher acceptance ($M = 12.51$) than long-term couples ($M = 11.04$), with a mean difference of -1.47 .

DISCUSSION

The present research studies the role of spirituality in promoting emotional intimacy and shaping conflict resolution styles among newly weds and long term married couples. The sample included a diverse population of 208 couples (104 females, 104 males) from 25-59 years of age. The sample included couples who recently got married or have been married for 10 years to those who had been married for more than 10 years. The exclusion criteria consisted of LGBTQ+ couples and those below 20 years of age residing in rural areas. A quantitative correlational, comparative research design was used to study the relationship between spirituality, emotional intimacy and conflict resolution styles and to compare the differences among married populations. The Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CSRI) measured conflict engagement, positive problem solving, self protection and acceptance. The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale and Emotional Intimacy Scale were used.

Correlation analysis was conducted between all the variables of the study, including DSES, EIS and CSRI. Results indicated that spirituality was positively correlated with conflict resolution styles. This means that individuals with higher levels of spirituality tend to use more adaptive or constructive conflict resolution strategies. The findings are supported by earlier research findings indicating that spirituality promotes positive feelings and behavior, cognitions of relationship with oneself and others. This in turn provides individuals with a sense of identity, satisfaction, joy, respect, beauty, love and purposiveness (Gomez & Fisher, 2002; Kinnier et al, 2001; Fabricatore, 2000). Spirituality has been positively related with conflict resolution style (Khan et al.,2022). Furthermore, it has been found by Unala and Akgun (2020) that positive problem solving style that is generally associated with

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spiritual practices, predicts high marital satisfaction via marital adjustment and improved conflict resolution.

A significant weak negative correlation between conflict resolution styles and emotional intimacy suggests that greater emotional intimacy may be associated with reduced use of maladaptive conflict resolution styles. SadeghiFard, Samavi & Mohebbi, S. (2016) reported that constructive problem-solving skills and constructive marital conflict resolution styles (integration, compromising and accommodating styles) have a major role in increasing marital intimacy and marital compatibility. This is also consistent with findings of Bukhari and Hai (2023) reporting that positive conflict resolution style was strongly connected with intimacy in couples. Ahmad and Chowdhury (2022) conducted a qualitative study highlighting that individuals with effective communication skills are better equipped to manage conflicts constructively.

Further, there was no significant relationship between daily spiritual experiences and emotional intimacy indicating no meaningful relationship between the two variables in this study. This contradicts prior studies like Hatch et al., (1986) found that spiritual intimacy contributed positively to marital satisfaction. One of the possible explanations for this could be the individualized vs relational expression of spirituality. Since DSES reflects personal and internal religious engagement such as prayer, sense of divine rather than shared spiritual intimacy within marital relationship, the relational aspect may not have been captured adequately when measured at individual level. Additionally, there may be various cultural diversity within the sample. In cultures where spirituality is a private endeavour, partners may perform spiritual practices separately without letting it impact their emotional closeness. On the other hand, in cultures where spirituality is considered a communal affair, spirituality may directly influence emotional intimacy (Mahoney et al., 2001). Yet another possible explanation could be that emotional intimacy and spirituality may indirectly influence each other mediated by other variables such as communication patterns or attachment styles. However, mediational or longitudinal analysis would be required to detect any such association.

Thus, the first hypothesis stating that there will be a significant positive relationship between spirituality, emotional intimacy and conflict resolution style is partially proved as there is a positive relationship between spirituality and conflict resolution style but no significant relationship with emotional intimacy. Also, emotional intimacy and conflict resolution styles are negatively correlated.

Simple linear regression analysis was performed to predict the role of spirituality in promoting emotional intimacy and shaping conflict resolution styles among married couples. Spirituality measured by daily spiritual experience scale (DSES) was an independent variable while emotional intimacy and four conflict resolution styles- conflict engagement, positive problem solving, self protection and acceptance were dependent variables. The second hypothesis stated that spirituality significantly predicts emotional intimacy among married couples. However, the results do not support this. Spirituality was not found to be a predictor of emotional intimacy. The model explained only 0.1% of the variance in emotional intimacy suggestive of a negative effect. This finding contradicts previous research such as that of Padgett (2010) according to which spiritual intimacy, during major transitions like pregnancy, increases emotional warmth, affection and reduces negativity. However, a critical distinction between individual spirituality and shared spirituality must be

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made. This study measured individual spiritual experiences unlike shared experiences that are emphasized by Padgett and other researchers.

Emphasis on shared spiritual practices such as praying or attending services together have been promoted by Mahoney (2020), which promotes mutual understanding and marital connection. The non-significant findings in the present study may be explained by absence of shared spiritual experiences. From the findings of Holland et al., (2016) it can be argued that spiritual meaning often mediates the effect of spiritual intimacy on marital closeness which enhances emotional bond not just through individual beliefs rather shared values.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) further explains that emotional availability and secure bonds are closely linked to emotional intimacy. Spirituality may not contribute directly to marital intimacy while it may nurture personal growth or emotional regulation, unless expressed interpersonally. Anaeché (2020) also found that a stronger predictor of emotional intimacy is respect for spiritual differences, rather than uniformity in beliefs. This suggests that communication and mutual understanding of spiritual beliefs are key for stronger emotional connection.

According to the third hypothesis, spirituality significantly predicts conflict resolution styles among married couples. This hypothesis was partially supported as spirituality predicted multiple conflict resolution styles but not all. The analysis revealed that spirituality significantly predicted conflict engagement style. This suggests that individuals who are spiritually aligned may be more willing to address relational issues. Spirituality is often associated with peace and harmony but it also promotes emotional honesty, justice and accountability which may manifest as constructive confrontation (Fincham et al., 2011). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that spiritual values of truthfulness and responsibility can be reflected in interpersonal behavior such as assertive conflict engagement.

The analysis also revealed that spirituality predicted self protection with 8.1% of variance effect on it. Although it may seem to be inconsistent with positive relational functioning, such behavior can be understood as a form of coping strategy based on spiritual values of emotional restraint, inner peace and reflection. Individuals who have strong spiritual values may withdraw during a conflicting situation not to avoid rather as a means to maintain inner calm, practice emotional regulation and avoid escalation of it. This aligns with the concept of spiritual coping given by Pargament (2007) wherein individuals in order to process interpersonal tension, turn inward-often to pray, meditate or reflect. This promotes peace and clarity before re-engagement into the relational dynamics. Research by Mahoney et al., (2001) also supports this by stating that spiritually inclined individuals turn inwards in order to avoid escalation in conflict.

It has been found that compliance is also predicted by spirituality. This style involves accommodating partners' needs and seeking harmony at expense on one's own preferences. Spiritual well being has been found to promote traits like forgiveness, patience and humility often aligned with a compliant approach to conflict (Garavand, 2022; Paul, 2016). This form of conflict management is not necessarily maladaptive in cultures where collectivism and relational harmony are valued.

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Spirituality, however, does not predict positive problem solving. This contradicts previous research findings such as by Hoesni et al. (2021) and Ünal'a & Akgün (2022). Their findings revealed that spiritual well being promotes marital satisfaction partially due to enhanced problem solving. Spiritual individuals may use more of emotional regulation or acceptance rather than analytical conflict strategies which could be one of the possible explanations of derived results. Ahmad and Chowdhury (2022) examined that while spirituality may shape values and attitudes, effective communication and decision-making in conflict requires explicit skill development that must be consciously developed through intentional relational learning rather than spirituality alone.

According to the fourth hypothesis, there will be a significant difference in the levels of spirituality, emotional intimacy, and conflict resolution styles between newlyweds and long-term married couples. Independent sample t test offers a comprehensive view of how these variables are manifested across different stages of marriage. The analysis revealed that daily spiritual experiences were reported significantly higher for newly wed couples as compared to long term married couples. This suggests that spirituality, during early stages of marriage, may play a prominent role in serving as a foundation for establishment of shared values and beliefs. This finding aligns with work of Hoseni et al., (2021) according to which there is a positive relationship between spirituality and marital satisfaction among urban Malays in Malaysia. Biju and Bapu (2023) also found a significant positive correlation between spirituality and marital satisfaction among married individuals aged 25-40. Similarly, spirituality's integral role in marital dynamics has been studied by Kasapoğlu and Yabanigül (2018) reporting that it mediates the relationship between marital satisfaction and life satisfaction. Furthermore, theory of spiritual coping as proposed by Pargament (1997) states that individuals in order to navigate through new life stressors often turn to spirituality. For newlyweds, it may be a tool for identity integration, emotional bonding and meaning making especially at the onset of their marital life. Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory (1950) can also be used to explain this difference. In "Intimacy vs. Isolation" stage, young adults strive to form close and meaningful relationships. Spirituality may help newly weds to meet these relational needs whereas long term married couples may turn to generativity or other life domains causing a decline in overt spiritual engagement. According to the sanctification theory (Mahoney et al., 2005) newly married individuals may perceive their relationship as sacred and spiritually significant which leads to greater investment in spiritual activities. However, as the time passes, this initial sanctification may evolve or diminish due to demands of everyday life and realities of unmet relational expectations.

Even though newlyweds reported slightly higher emotional intimacy scores, the difference was not statistically significant indicating that both groups experienced the same level of emotional intimacy. This is consistent with the perspective that through effective communication and mutual bonds, emotional intimacy can be maintained or even deepened. Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999) highlights that as individuals age, they tend to prioritize emotionally meaningful relationships contributing to sustained or enhanced emotional intimacy in long-term marriages. Additionally, Relational-Cultural Theory (Miller & Stiver, 1997) posits that emotional intimacy is maintained through growth-fostering connections such as empathy, responsiveness, and mutual respect. In early stages of marriage, these elements may be reinforced through shared spiritual meaning and emotional availability.

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The conflict engagement scores were significantly higher for newly wed couples as compared to long term married couples suggesting that in early stages of marriage, couples may be more inclined to confront the conflict directly as they are in the process of establishing norms and setting boundaries. These findings are supported by Ünal and Akgün (2022), who revealed that positive problem-solving styles are predictive of marital satisfaction and adjustment. The higher conflict engagement among newlyweds is reflective of their efforts to actively negotiate and resolve issues so as to build a strong relational foundation. From the perspective of Social Exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) also, as newlyweds are still negotiating the cost and rewards of the relationship, they may engage in conflict in order to maximize their fairness and assert needs. This is contrary to long term couples who may avoid conflicts to maintain their sanity and peace and preserve their emotional energy. Equity Theory (Walster et al., 1978) emphasizes that individuals are attuned to perceived imbalances in early stages of their relationship. So when any partner perceives inequality in efforts or outcomes, it may prompt increased conflict engagement so as to restore the balance.

In terms of positive problem-solving strategies, no significant difference was found between the two groups indicating that both newlywed and long-term married couples use constructive approaches to conflict resolution at similar levels. This indicates that regardless of the duration of the marriage, effective problem-solving skills are essential for marital satisfaction. According to the cognitive-behavioral theory of marital satisfaction, couples who engage in positive problem-solving are more capable to handle conflicts and maintain the quality of relationship (Epstein & Baucom, 2002).

Newlyweds scored significantly higher than long-term couples in self-protection strategies. This indicates that newly married individuals tend to withdraw from conflicts more often. This could be due to uncertainty or lack of confidence in handling disagreements. Emotions regulation theory may explain this behavior as it posits that in order to manage emotional responses, individuals may withdraw themselves from stressful situations (Gross, 1998). Often viewed as maladaptive, this strategy can reflect emotional restraint and inner reflection, particularly when guided by spiritual or cultural values.

Higher acceptance scores have been reported by newlyweds as compared to long-term married couples. This suggests that partners in the early stages of marriage in order to preserve harmony and avoid conflicts may be more inclined to accept their partner's viewpoints or behaviors. Rusbult et al., (1991) explains this in his interdependence theory as a form of “accommodation” where partners suppress their immediate responses so as to maintain the stability in their relationships. Over time, couples may become more comfortable and feel secure sharing their true feelings and disagreements leading to decline in acceptance behavior and increase in negotiations or assertiveness. According to Paul (2016) compliance is often a temporary peacekeeping tool in early marital dynamics. In contrast, long term married couples, with the passage of time, have evolved to express their disagreements more freely and there has been a shift in power dynamics with more defined roles thus reducing passive acceptance. Thus, the findings partially support the fourth hypothesis. Newlyweds reported significantly higher spirituality, self protection, conflict engagement and acceptance while emotional intimacy and positive problem solving strategies were consistent across both the groups.

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CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed that spirituality significantly influences how partners manage their conflict by encouraging acceptance, emotional regulation, and engagement. Although a direct relationship between spirituality and emotional intimacy was not established, it raises questions about the complexity of this connection and indicates the possibility of remediating factors such as communication, shared meaning or attachment dynamics.

The differences between newly weds and long-term married couples were noted. Higher levels of spiritual engagement and more intense conflict behaviours have been reported by newly married couples. In contrast, long-term married couples exhibited moderated conflict resolution styles, which has possibly been shaped by years of experiences and the relational maturity they have achieved over time. This provides valuable insights about the role spirituality can take on different stages of marriage- a source of passion in early relations and a reflective force later. The findings offered a deeper insight to understand that spirituality is not only a private or religious practice rather a relational resource that can foster empathy, compassion and resilience. Even though it may not be visible in day to day activities, spirituality influences how partners hold values and attach meaning to their relationship.

In an era where relationships are being tested by complexities and changes, this study invites a return to something which is timeless: landscape of meaning, connection and emotional grounding. It is through this shared deeper sense of purpose and inner awareness that couples not only navigate difficult times but can flourish and outgrow such challenges enriching their marital bond.

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