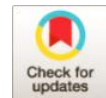




The Relationship Between Emotional Alexithymia and Post-Divorce Adjustment, With the Mediating Role of Perceived Social Support in Divorced Women

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ABSTRACT

Divorce is a significant social challenge that has profound effects on the lives of divorced women and can cause major changes in their emotional, social, and economic aspects. Therefore, the present study was conducted to determine the mediating role of perceived social support in the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment in divorced women. The research method was descriptive-correlational of the path analysis type. The statistical population included all divorced women referring to 3 private psychological and counseling service centers in Mashhad City, from whom 90 individuals were selected via non-random convenience sampling based on Klein's (2010) inclusion and exclusion criteria. They then completed the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale (1976), the Zimet et al. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (1988), and the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (1998). The path analysis method was used to analyze the data. Findings showed that the indirect effect of alexithymia through the mediating role of perceived social support on post-divorce adjustment was significant at the five percent error level ($\beta = -0.244$, $P\text{-value} < 0.05$). The results indicated that perceived social support can play a mediating role in the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment, and also that alexithymia has an indirect effect on post-divorce adjustment through the mediating role of perceived social support. It is suggested that counselors use the results of the present study to design and implement educational programs for divorced women aimed at post-divorce adjustment and alexithymia.

Keywords: Perceived Social Support, Alexithymia, Post-Divorce Adjustment, Divorced Women.

Introduction

Divorce is considered the most important indicator of marital discord and one of the most stressful sources that can disrupt individuals' cognitive structures and render them incapable of using stress coping strategies [1]. In recent years, the divorce rate in Iran has increased significantly; according to published statistics, in some regions, we witness more divorces each year compared to previous years [2]. This increase in divorce is due to various factors, including cultural, economic, and social change [3]. Facts show that many women initiate divorce due to demographic and economic reasons, and this affects their psychological and emotional state. [4]. Women experience higher levels of distress after separation and divorce compared to men, although this

pressure is somewhat less when women are the petitioners for divorce compared to when their spouses request separation. It is still considered a damaging factor in their lives [5]. Intense grief, difficulty moving on, and persistent longing for the lost relationship manifest after divorce and can impair daily functioning [6]. Furthermore, post-divorce adjustment refers to the psychological and emotional functioning of divorced women in life. This adjustment involves the ability to overcome challenges and improve the quality of life. (7). Failure to adjust can lead to problems such as depression and anxiety, which, if prolonged, turn into complicated grief [7]. The issue of post-divorce adjustment has become a critical matter for many families, and especially for divorced women.



The divorce process can have profound emotional and psychological effects on individuals and poses specific challenges for women, particularly in emotional and social domains [8].

For divorced women, this type of grief may manifest in various ways, including chronic grief, difficulty accepting the divorce, and impairment in social and occupational functioning [9]. This emotional distress related to grief is known as complicated grief, which refers to a state where individuals become trapped after losing an important relationship or emotional source. In the case of divorce, women and men may ultimately experience deep feelings of loss and despair [10]. Complicated grief specifically involves persistent feelings of sadness, an inability to accept the separation, and frequent desires to return to the previous relationship [11]. Many factors can influence the intensity of the complicated grief experience, including family situations and cultural views that can affect emotions related to divorce and grief. For example, in a culture where separation is considered undesirable, divorce can bring feelings of guilt and shame [12]. Looking at past research, we find that divorced women need social and emotional support to enhance their level of adjustment after divorce [13].

Also, the level of social support plays an important role in facilitating the process of complicated grief. Divorced women who receive more emotional support from family and friends are better able to cope with grief compared to those who do not receive this support [2]. Therefore, when there is a lack of effective emotional expression and processing in women, alexithymia can prolong and intensify that grief resulting from divorce [9]. Hence, Li and Liu (2020) also report that marital conflicts leading to divorce can have significant lasting effects on feelings of anger, violence, resentment, hatred, and physical and verbal abuse, even after the couple separates, and such effects over time also lead to symptoms and physical illnesses in divorced individuals [14]. On the other hand, given women's vulnerability in society compared to men, divorce can impose noticeable effects on their psychological distress and, adversely, and sometimes lastingly, affect their psychological and physiological functioning, leading to chronic and neural pains in the body, migraines, and neuro-digestive disorders [15].

Alexithymia refers to difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions. Individuals with high levels of alexithymia often struggle to express their feelings and may have a limited emotional vocabulary. This emotional detachment can hinder their ability to process grief effectively [16]. In the context of divorce, where emotional distress is common, alexithymia can intensify feelings of loss and complicate the grieving process for women. Research indicates that divorced women with high alexithymia may find it challenging to cope with the emotional consequences of their separation, leading to prolonged periods of complicated grief [17]. Alexithymia

has three key characteristics: difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking, which harm the individual in several ways [18]. Generally, individuals with alexithymia over-evaluate abnormal physical stimuli, misinterpret emotional arousal, and display emotional distress through physical complaints [19]. Divorced women experience and grapple with more alexithymia due to incorrect interactions [20].

On the other hand, perceived social support refers to the belief that an individual has access to help and emotional support from family, friends, and other significant people [21]. Perceived social support plays an important role in coping with grief and can significantly mediate the effects of alexithymia on complicated grief. Perceived social support involves the belief that one has access to supportive relationships and resources, which can significantly impact psychological outcomes [22]. For divorced women, a strong support network can provide a sense of security and acceptance, which is essential during times of emotional turmoil [23]. Research indicates that perceived social support can protect individuals from the adverse effects of emotional distress, including complicated grief. The presence of supportive relationships can foster resilience and promote healthier coping strategies [24]. When individuals perceive that they have support, they are more likely to engage in positive emotional processing and expression, reducing the likelihood of complicated grief and its associated symptoms. In scenarios where alexithymia is present, perceived social support can act as a vital mechanism through which individuals with emotional distress can manage their grief [25].

Looking at past research, it can be seen that studies show women who report higher levels of perceived social support are less likely to experience complicated grief, even when they exhibit high levels of alexithymia [26]. Generally, interventions aimed at improving support systems can help individuals better express their emotions and lead to healthier grieving processes. Furthermore, creating a supportive environment can enable divorced women to confront their grief more openly and facilitate emotional recovery [27].

Therefore, with the increasing rate of divorce and its associated psychological challenges, a deeper understanding of the impact of emotions and grief processes on the mental health of divorced women is essential. Hence, the present study will be conducted to investigate the mediating role of perceived social support in the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment in divorced women. Conducting this research can contribute to the development and improvement of psychological and social intervention programs to provide greater support for divorced women, focusing on strengthening social support and reducing alexithymia in the post-divorce adjustment process.

Also, by strengthening perceived support and emotional insight, therapists can help reduce the effects of complicated grief and promote healthier outcomes for women affected by divorce-related distress. Through targeted interventions, a supportive therapeutic environment can be created that addresses the unique challenges faced by divorced women and emphasizes the importance of perceived social support in overcoming alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment. Thus, given the aforementioned, the present study is conducted to answer this question: Can perceived social support play a mediating role in the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment in divorced women?

Method

This study employed a descriptive-correlational method of the path analysis type; furthermore, this research was fundamental in terms of its objective, and the results obtained were objective. The statistical population of the study consisted of all divorced women referring to 3 private psychological and counseling service centers in Mashhad County during the period from Esfand 1403 to Ordibehesht 1404 (February 21, 2025, to May 21, 2025). A sufficient sample size for path analysis is 10 times the number of parameters in the model. The best sample size is also 20 times the number of model parameters. Therefore, the sample size should be between 10 to 20 times the number of model parameters. Hence, in structural models, a minimum sample size of 200 is defensible, and accordingly, 30 individuals per path can be estimated; therefore, 90 women referred to the centers were selected via non-random convenience sampling. To observe ethical considerations, voluntariness, confidentiality, and protection from harm were considered in the present study, which fostered participants' trust in the research implementation. Inclusion criteria for the study: women aged 25 to 40 years; women with one divorce experience; women who had divorced at least one year ago; women without children; unemployed women; women with a diploma, bachelor's, or master's degree; women who scored below 300 on the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale. Exclusion criteria for the study: failure to complete the questionnaires; incomplete completion of the questionnaires.

In this study, the Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale (FDAS), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS) were used.

a) Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale (FDAS): This instrument consists of 100 items and was developed by Bruce Fisher in 1976. It is scored on a 5-point Likert scale. This scale is designed to assess the level of adjustment after the end of a romantic relationship, and a higher total score indicates better individual adjustment after separation [28]. It is widely used by

researchers investigating the process of divorce and family adjustment. This scale has 6 subscales: self-worth feeling, detachment, anger, grief, social intimacy, and social self-worth [29]. Scores above 300 indicate greater adjustment to divorce, and scores below 300 indicate less adjustment [28]. The reliability and validity of this questionnaire have been calculated in many studies conducted abroad, and the results indicate that it has high reliability and appropriate validity [11]. Fisher reported the test-retest reliability of this scale as 0.98, and its convergent validity has been examined through correlation with the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale and the Personality Orientation Questionnaire; its content and construct validity have also been calculated, all indicating the appropriate validity of this scale. The concurrent criterion validity of this scale was also examined by determining its correlation with the scores of the (SCL-90) questionnaire, which showed a significant inverse correlation between the scores of this scale and the dimensions of (SCL-90); its content validity was also confirmed by three specialists from the counseling department of the University of Isfahan.

b) Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS): The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support was designed by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley (1988) and measures perceptions of the adequacy of social support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others [30]. The MSPSS has 12 questions, each rated on a five-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). In this scale, every four questions are assigned to one of the three factor groups—family, friends, and significant others—based on sources of social support. In this scale, an increase in an individual's score indicates their score on the overall factor of perceived social support; furthermore, the total score for each of the three subscales is obtained from the sum of the individual's scores on the questions of each scale. The results of the study by Zimet et al. (1988), aimed at investigating the psychometric properties of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, showed that this instrument is valid and reliable for assessing perceived social support. The results of the study by Bruwer et al. (2008) on the psychometric properties of the scale using confirmatory factor analysis showed that the three-factor structure of this scale (family, friends, significant others) has an acceptable fit with the data. Shokri obtained Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the overall factor of perceived social support and its three dimensions (family, friends, significant others, and the overall dimension) in an Iranian sample as 0.89, 0.84, 0.85, and 0.86, respectively. [31].

c) Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS): This scale was introduced by Bagby, Parker & Taylor (1994) and is a 20-item test that assesses three subscales: difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking.

It is scored on a five-point Likert scale from score 1 (strongly disagree) to score 5 (strongly agree); a total score is also calculated from the sum of the scores of the three subscales for overall alexithymia [32]. This scale is suitable for administration in general and clinical samples and can be administered individually or in groups, depending on the circumstances. The psychometric properties of this scale have been examined and confirmed in numerous studies Bruwer (2008) reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients for total alexithymia and the three subscales of difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking as 0.85, 0.82, 0.75, and 0.72, respectively [31]. The test-retest reliability of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale in a sample of 67 individuals on two occasions with a four-week interval was confirmed, ranging from 0.70 to 0.77 for total alexithymia and various subscales. The concurrent validity of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale has been examined and confirmed based on the correlation between the subscales of this test and scales of emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, and psychological distress [33].

Considering the research method, population, and sample described; to implement the research, after obtaining permission from the university, during the period from Esfand 1403 to Ordibehesht 1404 (February 21, 2025, to May 21, 2025), visits were made to psychological counseling centers licensed by the Welfare Organization or the Organization of Psychology and Counseling of Mashhad city, and 3 private psychological and counseling service centers declared their readiness to cooperate with the present study. After notification through posting flyers in the virtual space of the centers and necessary checks, to select the statistical sample based on Babaei's (2018) view, 90 women referred to the centers were selected via non-random convenience sampling. Then, the required number of questionnaires were made available at the counseling centers, and a call for the selected individuals to attend the chosen counseling center was made for the selected individuals [34]. To analyze the data obtained from the questionnaires, two software packages, SPSS22 and AMOS20, were used. For data analysis in this research, at the descriptive level, frequency, mean, and standard deviation were used, and at the inferential level, to examine the relationship between variables and the mediating role of perceived social support, the path analysis method was used to identify different relationship paths.

Finding

The information in Table 1 shows that most individuals in the studied sample were in the 30 to 35 years age group, constituting approximately 43.3% of the sample, and 75.6% of the sample individuals were at most 35

years old. Also, the highest level of education belonged to bachelor's degree holders with 47.8%, and 67.8% of the sample individuals had at most a bachelor's level of education. Descriptive statistics, including minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, and the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for examining the normality of the variables' distribution, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Research Variables

	Count	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Test Statistic	P-value
Alexithymia	90	1.405	4.398	2.991	0.663	0.089	0.077
Perceived Social Support	90	2.268	5.000	3.526	0.661	0.042	0.200
Post-Divorce Adjustment	90	2.288	4.883	3.517	0.585	0.078	0.200

Given the normal distribution of the variables, Pearson's parametric correlation coefficient will be used to examine the correlations between them, the results of which are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Research Variables

	Alexithymia	Perceived Social Support	Post-Divorce Adjustment
Alexithymia	1		
Perceived Social Support	-0.383**	1	
Post-Divorce Adjustment	-0.487**	0.802**	1

**Significant at the 1% error level

If the significance probability (p-value) of the correlation coefficient between two variables is less than 0.01, the symbol ** is placed next to the correlation coefficient, and it can be concluded that there is a significant correlation between the two variables at the 1% error level. The results of the table above show that at the 1% error level, alexithymia has a significant negative linear relationship with perceived social support (-0.383) and post-divorce adjustment (-0.487), and perceived social support has a significant positive linear relationship with post-divorce adjustment (0.802).

Path analysis was used to test the research hypothesis. Perceived social support is the mediating variable, post-divorce adjustment is the dependent variable, and alexithymia is the independent variable.

The results of running the conceptual model for this hypothesis in the standardized estimates mode are as figure 1:

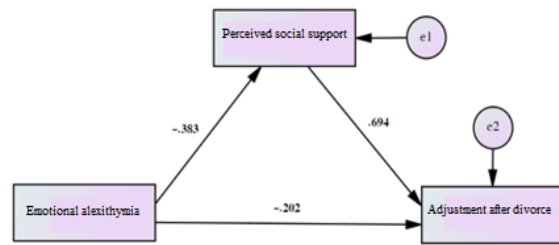


Figure 1: Standardized coefficients resulting from the implementation of the conceptual model

To examine the validity of the conceptual model, the goodness-of-fit indices are reported in Table 3. The results in the table below indicate a desirable fit of the model; in other words, the empirical data fit the proposed model well.

Table 3: Fit Indices of the Conceptual Model

Index	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	CFI	NFI
Value	2.052	0.067	0.985	0.991	0.982
Desirable State	$1 \leq \chi^2/\text{df} \leq 3$	$0 \leq \text{RMSEA} \leq 0.08$	$0.9 \leq \text{GFI} \leq 1$	$0.9 \leq \text{CFI} \leq 1$	$0.9 \leq \text{NFI} \leq 1$
Result	Desirable	Desirable	Desirable	Desirable	Desirable

Table 4 reports the standardized and unstandardized coefficients, as well as the t-statistic value for examining the significance of the direct relationships between the variables.

Table 4: Estimation of (Direct) Coefficients between Research Variables in the Conceptual Model

Components	Standardized Coefficient	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic	P-value
Perceived Social Support ---> Alexithymia	-0.383	-0.382	0.098	-3.91	< 0.001
Post-Divorce Adjustment ---> Perceived Social Support	0.694	0.639	0.064	9.958	< 0.001
Post-Divorce Adjustment ---> Alexithymia	-0.202	-0.186	0.064	-2.902	0.004

As can be observed in the results of the table above, all the examined relationships are significant at the five percent error level. The results of this analysis show that perceived social support and post-divorce adjustment have a significant effect on alexithymia. The relationship between perceived social support and alexithymia is inverse (standardized coefficient -0.383), meaning that the more social support an individual perceives, the lower their level of alexithymia. Also, post-divorce

adjustment has a direct effect on perceived social support (standardized coefficient 0.694), indicating that the better an individual's adjustment after divorce, the higher the social support they will perceive. On the other hand, the relationship between post-divorce adjustment and alexithymia is also inverse (standardized coefficient -0.202), meaning that individuals with a higher level of post-divorce adjustment experience less alexithymia.

Now, to test this hypothesis, we examine the indirect effect of alexithymia on post-divorce adjustment through the mediation of perceived social support in divorced women. Given the significant relationships between the variables, the four conditions of Baron and Kenny (1986) are met, and consequently, the mediating role of perceived social support in the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment is confirmed. The magnitude of the indirect effects and the Sobel test statistic for examining their significance are provided in Table 5.

Table 5: Estimation of Indirect Coefficients of Alexithymia on Post-Divorce Adjustment through the Mediation of Perceived Social Support using the Sobel Test

Variables (Path)	Indirect Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic	P-value
Alexithymia <--- Perceived Social Support <--- Post-Divorce Adjustment	-0.244	0.068	-3.615	< 0.001

According to the results in the table above, the answer to this research hypothesis is positive, and the indirect effect of alexithymia through the mediating role of perceived social support on post-divorce adjustment is significant at the five percent error level (" $\beta = -0.244$, P-value < 0.05").

Discussion

The present study was conducted to determine the mediating role of perceived social support in the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment in divorced women. Based on the reported data analysis, the answer to the research hypothesis is positive, and the indirect effect of alexithymia through the mediating role of perceived social support on post-divorce adjustment is significant at the five percent error level (" $\beta = -0.244$, P-value < 0.05").

This means that perceived social support can play a mediating role in the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment, and also that alexithymia has an indirect effect on post-divorce adjustment through the mediating role of perceived social support. Consequently, the researcher's first hypothesis was confirmed.

To explain the obtained findings, it can be said that this study examines the role of perceived social support as a mediating variable in the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment in divorced women. Since alexithymia refers to an individual's inability to identify and express their emotions [34]. It can cause emotional and psychological problems in divorced women. On the other hand, perceived social support refers to the support an individual feels from those around them, and social support is the subjective feeling of belonging, being accepted, being loved, and being needed, for oneself and for what one can do. Previous research has shown that social support can play an important role in improving the psychological state and adjustment of individuals after adverse experiences, such as divorce [14, 21].

Now, based on the results of this study, it has been shown that alexithymia can have a negative indirect effect on post-divorce adjustment. The inability to identify and express emotions may lead to increased feelings of loneliness and life dissatisfaction, which ultimately contribute to reduced adjustment. In contrast, perceived social support can act as a protective factor. Based on psychological theories, divorced women who feel supported by their family and friends cope better with the psychological problems arising from divorce and can overcome the negative feelings stemming from their alexithymia. This situation can facilitate their improved adjustment and help them face post-divorce challenges more effectively [21].

Research has shown that alexithymia negatively affects the quality of life and psychological adjustment of individuals. For divorced women, this can lead to greater feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Conversely, the presence of a strong social support network can help these individuals cope with their feelings and be more successful in the process of post-divorce adjustment [11].

Some studies have shown that divorced women who feel supported by those around them are better able to cope with negative feelings and problems arising from divorce. In this context, social support can act as a protective factor that reduces the negative effects of alexithymia. This point indicates the importance of creating and strengthening support networks for divorced women, especially in the early stages after divorce [9, 25].

Consequently, the findings of this research show that perceived social support indeed plays a vital role in the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment in divorced women. This means that perceived social support can mediate the relationship between alexithymia and post-divorce adjustment. Therefore, focusing on strengthening social support in the treatment and counseling process for divorced women can be used as a key strategy to improve their psychological state and adjustment.

Since all research has limitations, this study is no exception. Therefore, as this research was conducted using a correlational method and examined relationships between variables, its results cannot be considered as proof of complete effectiveness. Also, sampling from the population of divorced women necessitates caution in generalizing the results to other groups. The sample size was limited, and the results pertain only to a specific group or geographical area, which also affects their generalizability. Furthermore, the assessment tools may lack the necessary accuracy and reliability and may not fully measure more complex dimensions of mental health. Additionally, other factors affecting post-divorce adjustment were not considered in this study due to time and financial constraints. Given the mentioned limitations, it is suggested that future researchers investigate similar topics in other groups and compare the results. Also, using quasi-experimental or comparative causal methods could help improve the accuracy of the results. Conducting research with larger and more diverse sample sizes could also aid in generalizability and provide a better representation of the situation of divorced women. Longitudinal research to examine changes in post-divorce adjustment and emotional impacts is also recommended. Furthermore, future research should pay special attention to other factors influencing the dependent variables of this study. Finally, it is recommended that counselors use the results of this research to design and implement educational programs to enhance the adjustment of divorced women.

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