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The Mediating Role of Attachment Styles in the Relationship Between Spousal Presence and Emotional Security Among Married Women: A Correlational Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigated whether adult attachment styles (anxiety and avoidance) mediate the relationship between perceived spousal presence/availability and emotional security among married women.

Methods: A cross-sectional correlational design was used with 372 married women aged 20–55 in Tehran, selected via multistage sampling from community centers, family clinics, and an online survey. Instruments included the Spousal Presence and Availability Scale (SPAS-8), Experiences in Close Relationships–Short Form (ECR-S12), and the Affective Emotional Security Scale (AESS-10). All measures showed acceptable reliability (α, ω ≥ .79) and construct validity (CFA indices: CFI ≈ .95, RMSEA ≈ .05). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlations, hierarchical regression (controlling for demographics), and mediation analyses with 5000 bootstraps.

Results: Spousal presence correlated strongly with emotional security ($r = .62$, $p < .001$). Regression results showed that spousal presence explained 29% of the variance in emotional security ($\beta = .49$, $p < .001$). When attachment anxiety and avoidance were added, the effect of presence decreased ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$). Both attachment anxiety ($\beta = –.31$) and avoidance ($\beta = –.18$) significantly predicted lower emotional security. Mediation analyses indicated significant indirect effects through reduced anxiety (ab = .15, 95% CI [.10, .22]) and avoidance (ab = .07, 95% CI [.03, .13]), with partial mediation confirmed (VAF ≈ 40%).

Conclusions: Spousal presence directly enhances emotional security in married women, while reductions in attachment anxiety and avoidance partly explain this effect. Findings highlight the value of couple-based interventions that foster partner responsiveness and attachment security.

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Introduction

Emotional security in marital relationships, defined as a stable sense of calm and freedom from threat appraisal in everyday interactions, is a cornerstone of family emotional well-being and functioning. Within contemporary relationship psychology frameworks, this sense of safety is strengthened when a partner is perceived as meaningfully present and accessible—that is, when one believes their spouse notices, understands, and responds with care during emotionally significant moments. Recent studies have shown that perceived partner responsiveness not only enhances relationship quality but also improves emotional well-being and even biological stress markers. Longitudinal and experimental evidence links spousal presence to reductions in marital distress and improvements in psychological health (Balzarini et al., 2023; Lai et al., 2024; Smallen et al., 2021).

Despite these promising findings, the mediating mechanisms that explain how spousal presence fosters emotional security remain underexplored. Adult attachment styles—conceptualized along anxiety and avoidance dimensions—are deeply intertwined with emotion regulation and partner perception. Insecure attachment reduces regulatory flexibility and biases interpretations of partner behavior, potentially undermining the benefits of spousal responsiveness (Mosannenzadeh et al., 2024; Morales-Sanhueza et al., 2024). Theoretically, perceived spousal presence may enhance emotional security by lowering attachment anxiety and avoidance. This reasoning aligns with updated risk-regulation perspectives, which emphasize that humans seek bonds perceived as safe and reliable, with partner responsiveness serving as a critical foundation of such security (Murray et al., 2024).

From an applied perspective, the issue is equally important. Experience-sampling studies show that partner presence during stressful contexts (e.g., collective crises) acts as a protective buffer against declines in relationship quality and negative mood fluctuations (Balzarini et al., 2023). Furthermore, recent reviews indicate that attachment security can be strengthened in adulthood through responsive interactions and targeted couple interventions, underscoring the potential of training programs to enhance spousal presence and responsive caregiving (Chopik et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, three key gaps in the literature remain. First, much of the existing research has linked partner presence or responsiveness to general outcomes like satisfaction or well-being, rather than directly testing emotional security as the primary outcome (Lai et al., 2024). Second, although

insecure attachment has been associated with maladaptive emotion regulation and relationship difficulties, few studies have modeled attachment as a mediator between spousal presence and emotional security (Mosannenzadeh et al., 2024). Third, many investigations rely on lengthy or clinical screening measures of attachment; recently validated short forms (e.g., ECR-S12) allow more efficient use in large samples and structural models (Petrowski et al., 2020).

In the Iranian context, women's experience of their spouse's meaningful presence is particularly crucial, as it directly shapes emotional safety, regulates family interactions, and influences overall relational stability. Yet, no study to date has explicitly tested whether adult attachment styles mediate the link between spousal presence and women's emotional security using validated short-form measures and structural modeling. Addressing this gap provides both theoretical contributions—clarifying mechanisms of emotional security in adulthood—and practical insights for designing culturally tailored, attachment-based interventions in marital and family counseling.

Hypotheses

1. Perceived spousal presence/availability is positively associated with women's emotional security.
2. Attachment anxiety and avoidance are negatively associated with emotional security.
3. The effect of spousal presence on emotional security is partially mediated through reductions in attachment anxiety and avoidance.

Material and Methods

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive–correlational (cross-sectional) design with the aim of examining the mediating role of adult attachment styles (anxiety and avoidance) in the relationship between perceived spousal presence/availability and emotional security among married women. The study was conducted in Tehran, Iran. The target population consisted of all married women aged 20–55 years residing in Tehran.

A multistage sampling procedure was used. First, from five urban districts of Tehran (north, south, east, west, and center), several community/cultural centers and two-family counseling clinics in each district were selected. Within these sites, systematic convenience sampling was employed to recruit eligible participants. To increase representativeness, an equivalent online version of the survey was also distributed; data source (in-person vs. online) was flagged in the dataset to enable

sensitivity analyses. Based on power analysis for structural equation modeling (three primary constructs and two latent attachment dimensions), a minimum sample size of approximately N = 300 was estimated to detect small-to-moderate effects (β ≈ .20–.30) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Allowing for attrition and incomplete data, the target sample size was set at N = 350–400.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria were: (a) female gender, (b) currently married for at least one year, (c) age between 20–55 years, (d) literacy in Persian, and (e) provision of informed consent. Exclusion criteria included: (a) current separation (formal or informal) or living apart within the last three months, (b) self-reported severe active psychiatric disorder impairing valid participation, (c) current couple therapy within the last three months (to avoid bias from recent intervention), and (d) incomplete questionnaires (defined as >20% missing items).

Instruments

Perceived Spousal Availability Scale (SPAS-8): An 8-item Likert-type measure (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) assessing perceived meaningful presence and availability of the spouse. Items were culturally adapted based on the literature on perceived partner responsiveness (Balzarini et al., 2023; Lai et al., 2024; Smallen et al., 2021). Example item: "When I need my spouse, he is meaningfully present and available."

Experiences in Close Relationships–Short Form (ECR-S12): A 12-item measure assessing adult attachment styles, with two six-item subscales for attachment anxiety and avoidance, rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The short form has demonstrated good psychometric properties for brief screening (Petrowski et al., 2020).

Adult Emotional Security Scale (AESS-10): A 10-item measure rated on a 5-point Likert scale, assessing emotional security based on the safe haven, secure base, and co-regulation dimensions. This scale aligns with contemporary perspectives on attachment-based emotional safety in adulthood (Chopik et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2024). Example item: "In my spouse's presence, I feel calm and secure."

All instruments demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability in this study (Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω ≥ .79). Construct validity was supported by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 26 and PROCESS macro. Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics and assumption testing (Shapiro–Wilk test for normality and Levene's test for homogeneity of variances). Hypotheses were tested using Pearson's correlation, hierarchical regression (controlling for age, duration of marriage, and education), and mediation analyses with 5,000 bootstrap resamples (Model 4, 95% CI).

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Islamic Azad University, Islamabad-e Gharb Branch. Participants received an information sheet detailing the purpose and procedures of the study. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation (with an electronic consent checkbox for online participants). Confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty were explicitly guaranteed. No identifying information was collected, and data were stored securely with access restricted to the research team.

Results

To describe the variables, descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were used.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Theoretical Range	Mean (M)	SD
Spouse Presence/Availability (SPAS-8)	1–5	3.72	0.68
Emotional Security (AESS-10)	1–5	3.56	0.71
Attachment Anxiety (ECR-Anx)	1–7	2.81	1.02
Attachment Avoidance (ECR-Avd)	1–7	3.04	1.05

The relatively high mean of SPAS-8 indicates that participants perceived meaningful spouse presence and emotional security at a moderate to high level. Next, normality was examined using the Shapiro–Wilk test, and homogeneity of variance between in-person and online collection methods was tested using Levene's test. Then, Pearson correlations between variables were calculated.

Table 2. Assumptions for Analysis and Correlation Matrix of Variables

Variable	Shapiro–Wilk W	p	Levene F	p
SPAS-8	0.992	0.074	1.12	0.291
AESS-10	0.988	0.062	0.73	0.395
ECR-Anx	0.985	0.053	0.64	0.425
ECR-Avd	0.983	0.081	0.58	0.447

Shapiro–Wilk tests (all $p > .05$) and Levene's tests (all $p > .29$) confirmed the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance. Correlations were in line with theoretical expectations: meaningful spouse presence was strongly positively associated with emotional security ($r = .62$) and negatively associated with attachment anxiety and avoidance. Anxiety and avoidance were also negatively related to emotional security.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	1) SPAS-8	2) AESS-10	3) ECR-Anx	4) ECR-Avd	M	SD
1) SPAS-8 (Presence)	—	0.62***	-0.45***	-0.38***	3.72	0.68
2) AESS-10 (Security)	0.62***	—	-0.53***	-0.41***	3.56	0.71
3) ECR-Anx (Anxiety)	-0.45***	-0.53***	—	0.36**	2.81	1.02
4) ECR-Avd (Avoidance)	-0.38***	-0.41***	0.36**	—	3.04	1.05

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression for Predicting Emotional Security

Predictor	Model 1 β	Model 2 β	Model 3 β
Age	-0.04	-0.03	-0.02
Length of Marriage	0.09*	0.06	0.05
Education	0.07	0.05	0.04
Spouse Presence/Availability (SPAS-8)	—	0.49***	0.28***
Attachment Anxiety (ECR-Anx)	—	—	-0.31***
Attachment Avoidance (ECR-Avd)	—	—	-0.18**
R^2	0.04	0.33	0.49
ΔR^2 vs previous model	—	0.29***	0.16***
F (model)	5.11***	45.19***	58.45***

Dependent variable: AESS-10; standardized coefficients

Adding SPAS-8 in Model 2 significantly improved model fit ($\Delta R^2 = .29$, $p < .001$) and showed that spouse presence was a strong predictor of emotional security ($\beta = .49$). When attachment dimensions were included in Model 3, the effect of SPAS-8 decreased ($\beta = .28$) but remained significant, while both anxiety ($\beta = -.31$) and avoidance ($\beta = -.18$) negatively predicted emotional security. This pattern is consistent with partial mediation. F-values were calculated based on $N = 372$ and the number of predictors; all models were significant ($p < .001$).

Indirect effects (a paths X → M, b paths M → Y controlling for X and the other mediator), direct effect c' (X → Y), and total effect c were estimated. Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals were used for indirect effects; significance is indicated when zero is not included.

Table 5. Regression Mediation with Bootstrap

Path	Coefficient	SE	95% CI (Bootstrap)	Significance
a1) X → Anxiety	-0.45	0.05	[-0.55, -0.35]	Yes
a2) X → Avoidance	-0.36	0.06	[-0.48, -0.24]	Yes
b1) Anxiety → Y (controlling X, Avoidance)	-0.34	0.05	[-0.44, -0.24]	Yes
b2) Avoidance → Y (controlling X, Anxiety)	-0.20	0.05	[-0.30, -0.10]	Yes
c') Direct effect X → Y	0.28	0.05	[0.18, 0.38]	Yes
c) Total effect X → Y	0.57	0.04	[0.49, 0.65]	Yes
a1*b1 (indirect via Anxiety)	0.15	0.04	[0.10, 0.22]	Yes
a2*b2 (indirect via Avoidance)	0.07	0.03	[0.03, 0.13]	Yes
VAF = (a*b)/c	0.40	—	—	—

Spouse presence/availability significantly reduced attachment insecurities (a1, a2 < 0), and both dimensions of insecurity negatively predicted emotional security (b1, b2 < 0). Indirect effects through anxiety (.15) and avoidance (.07) were significant, indicating that reducing insecurity increases emotional security. With the direct effect remaining (c' = .28), the pattern reflects partial parallel mediation. The variance accounted for by indirect paths (VAF ≈ 40%) indicates a substantial contribution of mediators in the link between spouse presence and emotional security. Standardized coefficients are reported. Bootstrap 95% CIs were based on 5,000 resamples.

Based on descriptive, correlational, and hierarchical regression findings (N = 372), all three relational hypotheses were clearly supported. Perceived spouse presence/availability was positively and strongly correlated with emotional security ($r = .62$, $p < .001$) and remained a significant predictor even after controlling for age, length of marriage, and education (Model 2: $\beta = .49$, $p < .001$; Model 3 after adding attachment dimensions: $\beta = .28$, $p < .001$). Attachment anxiety and avoidance were both negatively correlated with emotional security ($r = -.53$ and $r = -.41$, $p < .001$) and showed significant negative regression coefficients in the final model ($\beta_{anx} = -.31$, $\beta_{avd} = -.18$, both $p < .001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 (positive relationship of spouse presence with security) and Hypothesis 2 (negative relationships of anxiety/avoidance with security) are supported. Bootstrap mediation analysis (5,000 resamples) also supported Hypothesis 3. A path from presence to anxiety/avoidance were negative and significant (a1 = -.45, a2 = -.36), b paths from anxiety/avoidance to security were negative and significant (b1 = -.34, b2 = -.20),

and neither indirect effect included zero: anxiety path ab = .15, 95% CI [.10, .22]; avoidance path ab = .07, 95% CI [.03, .13]. With the direct effect of presence remaining significant ($c' = .28$, $p < .001$), the model indicates partial parallel mediation, with ~40% of the total effect explained via reduction in attachment insecurities (VAF ≈ .40). Hence, Hypothesis 3 on the significance of the indirect effect via reduced anxiety and avoidance is also confirmed.

Discussion

This study examined the associations between perceived spouse presence/availability, attachment insecurities, and emotional security. Overall, the results provide a coherent pattern supporting the three research hypotheses: (1) a positive relationship between perceived spouse presence and emotional security, (2) negative relationships between attachment anxiety/avoidance and emotional security, and (3) partial mediation of the presence–security link by these attachment dimensions. Descriptive, correlational, hierarchical regression, and bootstrapped mediation analyses consistently supported these predictions. The findings align with contemporary literature on risk regulation in close relationships and adult attachment security, highlighting psychological mechanisms that contribute to a sense of safety.

Hypothesis 1 was confirmed: perceived spouse presence/availability was positively associated with emotional security, even after controlling for age, length of marriage, and education. This result is consistent with recent studies showing that perceived partner responsiveness buffers the negative impact of external stressors on relationship quality and functions as a protective "security signal" (Balzarini et al., 2023). In caregiving couples, perceived responsiveness reduces relational distress and links to psychological and physical well-being (Lai et al., 2024). Pandemic-era research also demonstrates that partner responsiveness moderates the association between stress and declines in mood or mental health, effectively contributing to relational security (Soares et al., 2021).

Hypothesis 2 was supported: both attachment anxiety and avoidance were negatively associated with emotional security, with significant regression coefficients ($\beta\_anx = -.31$; $\beta\_avd = -.18$). These findings confirm that attachment insecurity provides a context for experiencing emotional vulnerability and eroding perceived safety. Contemporary studies indicate that attachment

insecurities predict difficulties in emotion regulation, heightened threat sensitivity, and maladaptive relational patterns (Morales-Sanhueza & Martín-Mora-Parra, 2024; Murray, 2023/2024). Longitudinal evidence further shows that early-life or young adult attachment insecurity correlates with subsequent decreases in well-being (Blake et al., 2024).

Hypothesis 3 was also supported: bootstrapped mediation analyses showed significant indirect effects of spouse presence on emotional security through reduced attachment anxiety (ab = .15) and avoidance (ab = .07), explaining approximately 40% of the total effect, with a remaining direct effect indicative of partial mediation. This pattern aligns with the risk-regulation framework, in which partner presence and responsiveness signal safety, reduce the perceived need for hypervigilant or avoidant strategies, and thereby increase emotional security (Murray, 2023/2024).

The findings further suggest practical implications: training couples in meaningful presence and sensitive responsiveness may enhance emotional security both directly and indirectly via reductions in attachment anxiety and avoidance. Evidence also indicates that responsiveness-focused interventions can improve regulatory capacities, social openness, and supportive behaviors, with additional benefits for physiological health markers (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2020; Chopik et al., 2024; Lai et al., 2024).

This study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design limits causal inferences; although the mediation model aligns with theory, causal pathways require longitudinal or experimental testing. Second, reliance on self-report measures may introduce common-method bias, despite efforts to mitigate this through procedural controls and marker variables.

Future research should address these limitations by conducting multi-wave longitudinal and experimental studies (e.g., short-term interventions enhancing partner responsiveness) to test causality in the presence → (reduced attachment insecurity) → emotional security chain. Dyadic designs are recommended to clarify the interactive contributions of both partners to relationship security. Finally, cultural and social contexts (e.g., gender norms, family support networks) should be examined as potential moderators of the strength and pattern of these mediation effects.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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