

Perceived Stress and Marital Adjustment: The Mediating Role Forgiveness Among Married Men and Women

***Kainat Ikram and Gulzar Ahmad, PhD**

Lahore Garrison University, Lahore, Pakistan

Current research was designed to assess the relationship between perceived stress, forgiveness and marital adjustment among married men and women with mediating role of forgiveness between perceived stress and marital adjustment as well. It was hypothesized that there is likely to be a positive correlation between perceived stress, forgiveness and marital adjustment among married men and women. It was also hypothesized that forgiveness is likely to mediate the relationship between perceived stress and marital adjustment among married men and women. Additionally, it was hypothesized that there is likely to be significant gender differences between perceived stress, forgiveness and marital adjustment. A sample 80 married men and 80 married women ($N=160$) with intact marriages, during their first 5 years of marriage time span were recruited with snow ball sampling technique. Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, 1983), Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Laura, et al., 2003) and Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) were used for measuring the perceived stress, forgiveness, and marital adjustment respectively. Demographic and correlational analysis, mediation and independent sample t-test were performed. Findings showed that there were significant positive correlations between perceived stress, forgiveness and marital adjustment among married men and women. Further, forgiveness significantly mediated the relationship between perceived stress and marital adjustment. Additionally, there were non-significant gender differences in perceived stress and marital adjustment but forgiveness was significantly higher in married men as compared to married women.

Keywords: Perceived stress, Forgiveness, Marital adjustment, Married Men and Women

Forgiveness has great coping strategic power to deal with people because it brings a measure of relief for married people both for married men and women. If married people encountered with stress or stressful situations, they increased their forgiving behavior in order to reduced stress and in this way, they enhanced their marital adjustment (Cohen et al., 2007; Slavich et al., 2010). Forgiveness is a very important variable in married life to reduce stress and increase marital adjustment (Baviskar & Pravin, 2013). Forgiveness brings a lot of change in married life as well i.e. it enhances understanding and romantic relationship between partners, reduces stress and exaggerate marital satisfaction (Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Jackson, 1998; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990). Due to biopsychosocial changes in early years of married life, the couples do come across marital adjustment difficulties and their marital relationships decline especially, while having children (Ahmad & Najam, 1998). In such a situation, among the various coping strategies, forgiveness may give them relief from negative thoughts, feelings and behavior.

Forgiveness is highly appreciated trait in almost all religions including Islam. The Al-Mighty, Allah quoted in Al-Quarn,” ... *If you pardon and overlook and forgive, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful*” (64:14). Forgiveness may be granted to the person doing wrong

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed Ms Kainat Ikram, Lahore Garrison University, Lahore, Pakistan Email: annieikram123@hotmail.com

intentionally or unintentionally. Islam intends all family members and the society to remain tolerant, determined, patient, forgiving and compassionate for one another (Quran, 2:153; 3:200; 31:17; 41:35). Quran says, “*Who spend [in the cause of Allah] during ease and hardship and who restrain anger and who pardon the people – and Allah loves the doers of good*” (3:134). Researchers have begun to show that forgiveness brings a measure of relief, but scientists also consider the possibility that forgiveness has implications for emotional and psychological well-being. (Enright, 2001; Luskin, 2003). Sato (2005) believed that the expression of forgiveness frees a person from internal strife. In this way, when a person does not forgive, they are, in effect, refusing to let go of their desires and leading them to an inner conflict, which can lead to depression. Conflicts between people can increase the stress of an individual's experience related to internal conflicts.

Stress is a common phenomenon in the present social life and during various changes occurring in marital and family life as well. Bhargava and Trivedi (2018) have defined that stress is a state of mental pressing factor for the specific individual dealing with issues from environmental and social prosperity which prompts countless infections / diseases. Selye (1956) characterized stress as any outer occasion or any internal drive which takes steps to disturb the body and life from harmony. Severe stress is strongly linked to poor mental and physical health (Cohen et al., 2007; Slavich et al., 2010).

Marital adjustment indicates emotional strength or steadiness, intellectual capability and social efficacy or effectiveness. Marriage leads to adjustment, involvement and satisfaction. Both husband and wife must have knowledge about how to compromise, live together, to share, and adjust together. Marriage is a major component to live in a society where spouses have to solve their social, cultural, personal and sexual problems (Baviskar & Pravin, 2013). Landis (1954) described that Marriage gives people an opportunity to satisfy their needs for togetherness, love and sexual expressions. Ahmad and Najam (1998) in their longitudinal study on transition to parenthood with control group of infertile couples during their first five years of marriage time span indicated that marital adjustment declines significantly in couples with children as compared to the infertile couples. Such decline in marital adjustment/relationship is likely to aggravate their stresses during such changing phase of life.

Miller and Worthington, (2010) reviewed married couples' gender-related differences in (1) marital forgiveness, (2) perception of forgiveness, and (3) the connection between sex, marital satisfaction, forgiveness, and self-esteem. Participants were 311 married couples in less than a year time span. The findings showed that men expressed more marital forgiveness in marriage and more sympathy for their married partners than their women counterparts. Askari (2016) investigated the relationship between forgiveness and contentment in marriage. For this purpose, eighty couples from Tehran (age range 18-31 years, $M= 20.6$ years) were selected by a sample of a multiphasic group. The findings showed that there was a strong correlation between forgiveness and contentment in marriage ($p < 0.05$). Most of the studies in literature were done on perceived stress and marital adjustment but very few studies were conducted on forgiveness especially, on Pakistani culture. The present study focused on a very important variable of forgiveness that is likely to mediate between perceived stress and marital adjustment.

Hypotheses

- There is a positive correlation of perceived stress with forgiveness and marital adjustment among married men and women.
- Forgiveness is likely to mediate the relationship between perceived stress and marital adjustment among married men and women.
- Married men and women differ significantly in perceived stress, forgiveness and marital adjustment.

Method

Participants

According to G Power value the calculated sample size was 180 but only 160 people responded. The final participants were consisted of 160 married individuals i.e. 80 married men and 80 married women with marriage duration 1 to 5 years and age range from 25 to 35. The sample was taken by convenient and snow ball sampling techniques.

Measures

Following measures were used in the current study:

Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was generated to gain data across a few areas including the participant's gender, age, family background, marital status, duration of the marriage, number of children. This information was very important for the further procedure.

Perceived Stress Scale

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is a widely used psychological tool for measuring stress perception. The questions in PSS reveal feelings and reflections last month. In each case, respondents were asked how often they felt in a certain way. The complete score of the PSS-10 went from 10 to 50, and a higher score showed a more significant level of perceived stress. The Perceived Stress Scale which has been shown to be valid and reliable, was developed by Cohen et al., (1983). This rating was by nature short, consisting of 10 items, and allowed respondents to report their information on progress from mild to severe, responding from "never" to "very often" using a five-point Likert scale. The internal consistency ratio was determined by Cronbach's alpha 0.88 (Cohen et al., 1983).

Heartland Forgiveness Scale

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) is an 18-item, self-report measure that measures a person's forgiveness (i.e., a tendency to forgive), rather than forgiving an event or person. The HFS contains the Total HFS and three six-item subscales (Forgiveness of Self, Forgiveness of Others, & Forgiveness of Situations). The Heartland forgiveness scale measures an individual's dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations outside anybody's ability to control (e.g., a natural disaster or illness). It is a self-report survey. It tends to be finished with paper and pencil or on the computer. The total HFS (18 items) and subscale scores should always be reported (Laura et al., 2003).

Marital Adjustment Test

The Marital Adjustment Test (MAT), frequently referred to as the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale or the Short Marital Adjustment Test (SMAT), is a 15-item measure intended to evaluate marital adjustment in married couples. This unique form of the measure incorporates items pointed toward evaluating the degree of agreement or disagreement between partners on a few issues including sex, relaxation, and finance. The measure likewise investigates feelings and thoughts with respect to the marriage and one's companion or spouse.

Procedure

The permission from the institution was taken for conducting the research. After granted permission, suitable scales for research were selected and all scales were open to use so there was no need to approach authors for permission. Online questionnaires were prepared and the basic objective and aim of the conduction of research was clearly mentioned. Married men and women from different areas were approached and they were ensured that their privacy would be maintained. No individual was forced to participate in the research. Online method was used to collect data due to COVID-19 through Whatsapp groups and posted on Facebook groups and pages. Convenient and snowball sampling techniques were used to collect data. According to G Power value the calculated sample size was 180 but only 160 people responded. The final participants were consisted of 160 married individuals i.e. 80 married men and 80 married women with marriage duration 1 to 5 years and age range from 25 to 35 (Locke & Wallace, 1959).

Results

The following tables show the results of the hypotheses under observation, along with a description of the study scales.

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants (N=160)

Sample Characteristics	Men		Women	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Age				
25 – 30	53	66.3	71	88.7
31 – 35	27	33.7	09	11.3
Family Background				
Village	52	65.0	14	17.5
City	28	35.0	66	82.5
Family system				
Nuclear	22	27.5	36	45.0
Joint Family	58	72.5	44	55.0
Marriage Time Span				
1year	18	24.2	21	26.3
2year	11	13.3	18	22.2

FORGIVENESS AMONG MARRIED MEN AND WOMEN

3year	15	18.0	15	18.0
4year	14	17.0	08	10.3
5year	22	27.5	18	23.2
Have Children				
Yes	56	70.0	52	65.0
No	24	30.0	28	35.0

Table 1 showed frequency and percentage of married men and married women with respect to age, family background, family system, marital condition, marriage time span and children.

Table 2

Psychometric Properties of Perceived Stress, Forgiveness and Marital Adjustment among Married Men and Women (N=160)

Scales	M	SD	Potential Range	Actual Range	Cronbach's α
PSS	19.29	04.23	0-40	09-28	.65
HFS	81.81	10.79	1-126	46-107	.59
MAT	114.1	29.05	0-158	13-158	.74

Note. PSS= Perceived Stress Scale, HFS= Heartland Forgiveness Scale, MAT= Marital Adjustment Scale.

Table 2 demonstrated mean, standard deviation, range and reliability of all present study variables. Results indicated satisfactory alpha reliability on Perceived Stress Scale, Heartland Forgiveness Scale and on Marital Adjustment Test as well. Moreover, the Table showed actual and potential ranges which were nearly equal in all scales.

Table 3

Correlations for Perceived Stress, Forgiveness and Marital Adjustment (N=160)

Variables	1	2	3
1- Perceived Stress	-		
2- Forgiveness	.22*	-	
3- Marital Adjustment	.29***	.26***	-

Note. * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 3 showed correlation matrix among all the variables present in the study. The main findings indicated that perceived stress had significant positive correlation with forgiveness and marital adjustment. Forgiveness and marital adjustment were also significantly positively correlated with each other. All variables in present study were significantly positively correlation with each other. Mediation analysis was performed to see the mediating role of forgiveness in the relationship between stress and marital adjustment. First of all, assumptions of mediation were tested. Results are presented in table no 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Table 4

Linear Regression Shows Perceived Stress as a Predictor of Marital Adjustment (N=160)

Variables	Marital Adjustment	
	β	SE
Perceived Stress	.28***	.52
R	00.28	
R ²	00.08	
F	14.45***	

Note. *** $p < .001$

Table 4 showed linear regression analysis which was computed for showing perceived stress as the predictor of marital adjustment. Results indicated that marital adjustment was significantly predicted by perceived stress.

Table 5

Linear Regression Shows Perceived Stress as a Predictor of Forgiveness (N=160)

Variables	Forgiveness	
	β	SE
Perceived Stress	.22**	.19
R	0.23	
R ²	0.05	
F	8.27*	

Table 5 demonstrated linear regression analysis which was computed for showing perceived stress as the predictor of forgiveness. Results suggested that forgiveness was significantly predicted by perceived stress.

Table 6

Linear Regression Shows forgiveness as a Predictor of Marital Adjustment (N=160)

Variables	Marital Adjustment	
	β	SE
Forgiveness	.25***	.20
R	.26	
R ²	.07	
F	11.20**	

Note. *** $p < .001$

Table 6 demonstrated linear regression analysis which was computed for showing forgiveness as the predictor of marital adjustment. Results suggested that marital adjustment was significantly predicted by forgiveness.

Table 7

Shows perceived Stress on Marital Adjustment by Controlling the Forgiveness (N=160)

Variables	Marital Adjustment			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	SE	β	SE
Block 1				
Forgiveness	.20**	.20		
Block 2				
Perceived Stress			.24**	.52
R	00.36			
R ²	00 .13			
F	11.00***			
ΔR^2	.13			

Note. ** $p < .01$

Table 7 demonstrated linear regression analysis which was computed for showing perceived stress as the predictor of marital adjustment when forgiveness was controlled. Results suggested that marital adjustment was significantly predicted by perceived stress when forgiveness was controlled.

Table 8

Showing the Mediation of Forgiveness between Perceived Stress and Marital Adjustment among Married men and Women (N=160)

Variables	Marital Adjustment					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Block I						
Gender ^a	0.93	4.58	.05	4.52	.05	4.40
Block II						
Forgiveness			.24**	.21	.19*	.21
Block III						
Perceived Stress					.24**	.52
R	.36					
R ²	.12					
F	7.48***					
ΔR^2	.06					

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 8 demonstrated the mediating effect of forgiveness on perceived stress and marital adjustment. Forgiveness and perceived stress both were significant. Gender was not significant in any model. Perceived stress was significantly positively predicted marital adjustment through forgiveness.

Table 9

Sobel Test Shows the Mediating Effect of Forgiveness between Perceived Stress and Marital Adjustment among Married Men and Women (N=160)

Variables	Sobel Test	SE	p
Forgiveness	2.19	0.18	0.02

Note. * $p < .05$

Table 9 showed Sobel test which indicated the significant mediating effect of forgiveness between perceived stress and marital adjustment among married men and married women.

Table 10

Independent Sample t-test shows the Differences of Perceived Stress, Forgiveness and Marital Adjustment among Married Men and Women (N=160)

Variables	Men		Women		t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Perceived Stress	19.42	3.88	19.19	4.57	.32	.76	0.06
Forgiveness	83.68	10.31	79.94	10.99	2.22	.03	0.36
Marital Adjustment	116.83	26.69	111.44	31.16	1.18	.25	0.19

Note. Men=80; Women=80, * $p < .05$

Table 10 showed mean, standard deviation and t-values for married men and women on perceived stress scale, heartland forgiveness scale and marital adjustment scale. Result indicated non-significant mean difference between married men and women on perceived stress scale. The findings also showed that there was significant mean difference between married men and women on heartland forgiveness scale. Married men scored high on heartland forgiveness scale as compare to married women. Results also indicated non-significant mean difference on marital adjustment test among married men and women. Independent sample t-test showed non-significant mean differences on other demographics.

Discussion

The present research was designed to find a relationship between perceived stress, forgiveness and marital adjustment between married men and women. Online method was used to collect data due to COVID-19 through WhatsApp groups and posted on Facebook groups and pages from various cities. Convenient and snowball sampling techniques were used to collect data. According to G-power analysis, the calculated sample size was 180 but only 160 people responded during the course of specified time. The final participants were consisted of 160 married individuals (80 married men and 80 married women) with marriage duration 1 to 5 years and age range from 25 to 35 years. Convenient and snow ball sampling technique were used to collect data. Perceived stress scale (Cohen et al., 1983), Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Laura et al., 2003) and Marital Adjustment Scale (Locke & Wallace, 1959) were used for data collection. SPSS version 22 was used for statistical data analysis to

test all hypotheses. Forgiveness significantly mediated the relationship between perceived stress and marital adjustment.

Solomon, Delek and Zerach (2009) test results showed that forgiveness linked the relationship between PTSD and marital adjustment; the most important levels of post-traumatic stress disorders are related to a lower level of forgiveness, which is related to minor marital adjustments. Thus, PTSD appears to damage a person's ability to forgive, which in turn damages a relationship. They suggested that forgiveness reduces the feelings of guilt and inadequacy that often befall those who have been traumatized. People who feel better about themselves are better partners. This clarification can be expected from the view of Snyder and Heinze (2005), who argued that forgiving others allows people to feel powerful and in control in a relationship. These feelings can reduce intrapsychic activity and improve interpersonal relationships. Findings regarding the internal effects of forgiveness on reducing feelings of revenge and anger (Hope, 1987) and depression and stress (Hebi & Enright, 1993) can similarly help to understand the healing power of forgiveness in a relationship with the past.

McCullough and Worthington (1994) found that forgiveness consequents into decrease in hostility and hatred in marital relationship. They are also consistent with results that forgiveness strengthens intimacy and trust between partners (Jackson, 1998) and build their love and ability to help each other (Hargrave, 1994). It is also possible that forgiveness alleviates the effect of PTSD on marriage.

Implications

This study will help married men and women to enhance their marital adjustment for better understanding the role of forgiveness in marital adjustment. This study has highlighted the positive impact of forgiveness as mediating variable on perceived stress and marital adjustment. The study's findings have important practical implications that this study will promote forgiveness in marriages. It will be useful in reducing anger and hostility and increasing empathy and positive feelings among people involved in interpersonal conflicts.

Limitations and Recommendations

To generalize, sample size was small. To get genuine responses of population qualitative data should be included. Mother tongue was not used in scales which made difficulties. The data was collected in pandemic situation of COVID-19. The calculated sample size was 180 but only 160 people responded online and could not be able to collect more data due to COVID-19.

Longer marriage time span data should be collected and evaluated. Collect data in pandemic free situation. Increase sample size to gain better results. Use other demographics as well like family system, family background, socioeconomic status etc. Use other mediating variables like social support, self-compassion, emotional intelligence, compatibility, age, socioeconomic differences etc. as well. Only small number of studies have addressed the role of forgiveness in marital relationship so, I recommend that future researches should be conducted on it.

Conclusion

In conclusion this study mainly aimed at understanding the relationship between perceived stress, forgiveness and marital adjustment among married men and women. Gender differences among study variables were analyzed. The mediating role of forgiveness was examined. In the present study findings showed that there were significant and positive correlation between perceived stress, forgiveness and marital adjustment among married men and women and forgiveness significantly mediated the relationship between perceived stress and marital adjustment. Additionally, there were non-significant gender differences in perceived stress and marital adjustment but in Forgiveness there was significant gender differences. Forgiveness was significantly higher in men as compared to women.

References

- Ahmad, G., & Najam, N. (1998). A study of marital adjustment during first transition parenthood. *Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 9(1), 67-86. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1999-00383-006>
- Askari, Z. (2016). Forgiveness and its relationship with marital satisfaction: A sectional study. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 3(3). <http://doi:10.25215/0303.181>
- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 1173–1182. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.51.6.1173>
- Bharambe, D., Pravin, A., & Baviska. (2013). A study of marital adjustment in relation to some psycho-socio factor. *International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Invention*, 2(6), 08-10. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318338618_A_study_of_marital_adjustment_in_relation_to_some_pscho-socio_factor
- Bhargava, D., & Trivedi, H. (2018). A study of causes of stress and stress management among youth. *IRA-International Journal of Management & Social Sciences*, 2455-2267. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jmss.v11.n3.p1>
- Cohen, S., Janicki-Deverts, D., & Miller, G. E. (2007). Psychological stress and disease. *JAMA*, 298(14), 1685–1687. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.298.14.1685>
- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health & Social Behavior*, 24, 385-396. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.2307/2136404>
- Hope, D. (1987). The healing paradox of forgiveness. *Psychotherapy*, 24, 240–244. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/h0085710>
- Hargrave, T. D. (1994). Families and forgiveness: A theoretical and therapeutic framework. *The Family Journal*, 2, 339–348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480794024007>
- Hebi, J. H., & Enright, R. D. (1993). Forgiveness as a psychotherapeutic goal with elderly females. *Psychotherapy*, 30, 658–667. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.30.4.658>

- Jackson, S. M. (1998). The influence of forgiveness on intimacy and trust in marital and committed relationships. Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: *The Sciences & Engineering*, 58, 4452. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510377216>
- Locke, H. J., & Wallace, K. M. (1959). Short marital adjustment and prediction tests: Their reliability and validity. *Marriage & Family Living*, 21, 251–255. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.2307/348022>
- Miller, A. J., & Worthington, E. L. (2010). Sex differences in forgiveness and mental health in recently married couples. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5(1), 12-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760903271140>
- McCullough, M. E., & Worthington, E. L. (1994). Models of interpersonal forgiveness and their application to counseling: A review and critique. *Counseling & Values*, 39, 2–14. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1002/j.2161-007X.1994.tb01003.x>
- Quran. (2017). 2:153; 3:134; 3:200; 31:17; 41:35; 64:14. Ayat – *Al Quran*. *Al- Saud*. <https://quran.com/en/ali-imran/134>
- Solomon, Z., Delek, R., & Zerach, G. (2009). Posttraumatic stress disorder and marital adjustment: The mediating role of forgiveness. *Family Process*, 48, 546–558. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2009.01301.x>
- Thompson, L. Y., Snyder, C. R., Hoffman, L., Michael, S. T., Rasmussem, H. N., Billings, L. S., Heinze, L., Neufeld, J. E., Shorey, H. S., Roberts, J. C., & Roberts, D. E. (2005). Dispositional forgiveness of self, others, and situations. *Journal of Personality*, 73, 313-359. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00311.x>
- Worthington, E. L., & DiBlasio, F. (1990). Promoting mutual forgiveness within the fractured relationship. *Psychotherapy*, 27, 219–223. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0033-3204.27.2.219>