

Structural Modeling of Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity Based on Alexithymia and Anxiety Sensitivity: The Mediating Role of Distress Tolerance in Women with Marital Maladjustment

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to examine a structural model of the relationships between alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity and attitudes toward marital infidelity, considering the mediating role of distress tolerance among women with marital maladjustment.

Methods and Materials: This cross-sectional descriptive-correlational study employed structural equation modeling (SEM). The participants were 310 women aged 30–54 years with marital maladjustment who attended counseling centers in Tehran, Iran, in 2025 and were recruited using purposive sampling. Data were collected using the Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale, the 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale, the 16-item Anxiety Sensitivity Index, and the Distress Tolerance Scale. Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 26. Model parameters were estimated using the maximum likelihood method, and the statistical significance of indirect effects was assessed using the Sobel test.

Findings: Alexithymia had a significant positive direct association with more accepting attitudes toward marital infidelity ($\beta = .29$, $p = .004$), while anxiety sensitivity also showed a significant positive direct association with such attitudes ($\beta = .18$, $p = .020$). Distress tolerance was significantly and negatively associated with attitudes toward marital infidelity ($\beta = -.44$, $p < .001$). The standardized indirect effect of alexithymia on attitudes toward infidelity through distress tolerance was significant ($\beta = .17$, Sobel = 2.61, $p = .020$). Likewise, the indirect effect of anxiety sensitivity through distress tolerance was significant ($\beta = .11$, Sobel = 2.15, $p = .040$). The persistence of significant direct effects alongside significant indirect effects supported a pattern of partial statistical mediation.

Conclusion: Greater difficulties in emotional processing and heightened fear of anxiety-related sensations may be associated with more accepting attitudes toward marital infidelity partly through reduced distress tolerance. Distress tolerance may therefore represent an important clinical process for assessment and intervention among women experiencing marital maladjustment. Given the cross-sectional design, however, the observed associations should not be interpreted as causal.

Keywords: Alexithymia; Anxiety Sensitivity; Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity; Distress Tolerance; Marital Maladjustment; Structural Equation Modeling

1. Introduction

Marital relationships constitute one of the most significant interpersonal contexts for emotional security, psychological well-being, identity development, and social functioning. The quality and stability of marital relationships are shaped by complex interactions among personality characteristics, emotional competencies, cognitive appraisals, interpersonal expectations, and coping capacities. When these processes become dysfunctional, marital maladjustment may emerge in the form of chronic dissatisfaction, recurrent conflict, emotional disengagement, impaired intimacy, and reduced commitment to the relationship. Within this context, attitudes toward marital infidelity are particularly important because they reflect the degree to which individuals cognitively, emotionally, or morally accept involvement in an intimate relationship outside the marital bond. Although attitudes do not necessarily translate directly into behavior, more accepting attitudes toward infidelity may reduce psychological barriers against extramarital involvement and may indicate vulnerabilities in commitment, relationship satisfaction, or emotional regulation. Research has shown that attitudes toward infidelity are associated with relational and individual characteristics, including marital satisfaction, personality traits, and psychological coherence (Isma & Turnip, 2019; Nemati et al., 2026). Accordingly, examining the psychological mechanisms associated with attitudes toward marital infidelity can contribute to a more precise understanding of relational vulnerability among individuals experiencing marital maladjustment.

Attitudes toward marital infidelity are not formed solely through moral evaluation or social norms. They may also reflect how individuals process emotions, respond to internal distress, interpret threatening bodily and cognitive sensations, and regulate difficult affective states. Previous evidence indicates that marital satisfaction and personality characteristics can meaningfully predict individuals' evaluations of infidelity (Isma & Turnip, 2019). More recent research has also suggested that a stronger sense of coherence may be associated with less accepting attitudes toward marital infidelity among married women, emphasizing the importance of psychological resources that allow individuals to perceive life events as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful (Nemati et al., 2026). These findings imply that attitudes toward infidelity may partly emerge from broader systems of emotional processing and coping rather than from isolated relationship-specific

judgments. In women who already experience marital maladjustment, deficiencies in emotional awareness or distress management may become especially important because recurring relational conflict can intensify negative affect, reduce perceived relational safety, and increase the salience of alternative interpersonal responses.

One construct that may be particularly relevant in this context is alexithymia. Alexithymia refers to a multidimensional difficulty in identifying and describing one's emotional experiences, accompanied by a tendency toward externally oriented thinking. Rather than representing an absence of emotion, alexithymia is increasingly conceptualized as a disturbance in the cognitive processing, differentiation, representation, and communication of emotional states (Luminet et al., 2021a, 2021b). Individuals with higher alexithymia may experience emotional arousal without being able to label it accurately, distinguish among different affective states, or communicate their emotional needs effectively to significant others. These limitations can interfere with adaptive emotion regulation because the successful regulation of emotions often requires the capacity to identify what one is feeling, understand the source of the emotional state, and choose a response that fits the emotional context.

Contemporary evidence further supports a close connection between alexithymia and emotion regulation. Difficulties in emotional awareness can influence the selection and effectiveness of regulatory strategies, particularly when emotional experiences are intense (Mehta et al., 2025). When individuals have difficulty interpreting internal emotional cues, they may rely more heavily on avoidance, suppression, impulsive coping, or externally focused behavioral strategies instead of reflective emotional processing. This pattern can become especially problematic in romantic relationships, where effective communication requires the recognition of one's own emotions as well as sensitivity to the emotions of a partner. High alexithymia has been associated with fear of intimacy and lower relationship satisfaction, indicating that impaired emotional processing may undermine both closeness and relational adjustment (Lyvers et al., 2022). Therefore, alexithymia may have particular importance among women with marital maladjustment because difficulties in understanding and expressing emotional needs may contribute to greater relational distance and less adaptive responses to dissatisfaction.

There is also emerging evidence specifically connecting alexithymia with infidelity-related phenomena. In a

correlational study, alexithymia and marital relationship quality were identified as predictors of the tendency toward infidelity, suggesting that emotional processing deficits may be associated with greater vulnerability to extramarital involvement (Farajian & Haghighat, 2025). Although a tendency toward infidelity and attitudes toward infidelity are conceptually distinct, they may share important psychological foundations. An individual who has difficulty identifying or expressing emotional needs within marriage may be more likely to perceive extramarital involvement as understandable, acceptable, or potentially compensatory. Moreover, research on women who have experienced infidelity has shown that therapeutic interventions targeting psychological flexibility and emotional processes can reduce alexithymic characteristics, further indicating that alexithymia is clinically relevant in the broader domain of marital betrayal and relational distress (Karimi et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings provide a basis for proposing that alexithymia may be positively associated with more accepting attitudes toward marital infidelity.

Anxiety sensitivity represents another psychological factor that may contribute to attitudes toward marital infidelity. Anxiety sensitivity refers to the tendency to fear anxiety-related bodily sensations, cognitive experiences, or socially observable symptoms because these sensations are interpreted as harmful, dangerous, or uncontrollable. Individuals with high anxiety sensitivity may perceive ordinary manifestations of arousal, such as increased heart rate, difficulty concentrating, or visible nervousness, as signs of serious threat. This tendency amplifies the subjective burden of distress and may increase avoidance of situations, thoughts, or emotions that trigger anxiety. Anxiety sensitivity has therefore been studied as a transdiagnostic vulnerability factor that contributes to the escalation and persistence of emotional distress across different forms of psychopathology.

Importantly, anxiety sensitivity appears to be closely related to the individual's capacity to tolerate distress. Evidence suggests that anxiety sensitivity is associated with lower distress tolerance and greater anxiety symptomatology, with these constructs representing related but distinguishable dimensions of vulnerability (Keough et al., 2010). Comparative modeling has further demonstrated meaningful associations among anxiety sensitivity, distress tolerance, and discomfort intolerance, supporting theoretical models in which the fear of internal sensations and the perceived inability to endure distress may reinforce each other (Mitchell et al., 2013). Similar relationships have been

observed in clinical populations. Distress tolerance has been shown to be associated with anxiety sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty among individuals with obsessive-compulsive and anxiety disorders, further emphasizing the role of distress tolerance in determining how threatening internal experiences are interpreted and managed (Laposa et al., 2015). More recent transdiagnostic research has also indicated that the relationship between anxiety sensitivity and health anxiety may operate partly through distress tolerance and emotion regulation, providing support for mediation models involving these processes (Mohsenabadi et al., 2025).

The relevance of anxiety sensitivity to marital functioning may therefore lie not only in the experience of anxiety itself but also in the behavioral and interpersonal consequences of fearing internal distress. In the context of marital maladjustment, individuals may frequently encounter emotionally charged situations involving conflict, rejection, uncertainty, perceived criticism, or fear of relationship loss. For a person with elevated anxiety sensitivity, these situations may generate intense internal sensations that are experienced as particularly aversive. If such distress is interpreted as intolerable, the individual may become more motivated to escape or avoid the emotional context rather than engage in constructive relational problem solving. Although research directly linking anxiety sensitivity to attitudes toward marital infidelity remains limited, its established associations with avoidance, emotional vulnerability, and reduced tolerance of distress suggest that anxiety sensitivity may indirectly contribute to greater acceptance of relationship alternatives when the marital relationship is experienced as chronically distressing.

Distress tolerance may be a particularly important mechanism linking both alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity with attitudes toward infidelity. Distress tolerance generally refers to the perceived or actual capacity to experience and withstand negative emotional or psychological states without immediately attempting to escape, suppress, or terminate them. Contemporary theoretical perspectives emphasize that distress tolerance is context dependent and involves momentary decisions about whether to remain engaged with aversive experiences or move toward avoidance (Veilleux, 2023). From this perspective, distress tolerance is not simply emotional endurance; it reflects a dynamic process in which individuals evaluate the intensity, meaning, controllability, and anticipated consequences of distress and decide whether to persist in or withdraw from a distressing situation.

This construct is highly relevant to romantic relationships because close relationships inevitably involve disappointment, disagreement, jealousy, frustration, uncertainty, and other uncomfortable emotions. The ability to tolerate such experiences may allow partners to remain engaged during conflict, communicate more effectively, postpone impulsive reactions, and work toward longer-term relational goals. Daily diary research has demonstrated that distress tolerance is meaningfully implicated in romantic relationship processes and can shape how individuals respond to daily relational stressors (Doorley et al., 2019). Distress tolerance has also been associated with relationship satisfaction through conflict resolution styles, suggesting that individuals who are better able to tolerate negative affect may be more likely to use constructive rather than destructive strategies when relationship tensions arise (Öktem, 2023). Accordingly, distress tolerance may act as an interpersonal regulatory resource that helps individuals remain psychologically engaged with a distressed marital relationship rather than seeking immediate relief through avoidance or alternative attachment-related responses.

The potential mediating role of distress tolerance becomes especially plausible when the characteristics of alexithymia are considered. Individuals with elevated alexithymia may have difficulty identifying the specific meaning of negative emotional arousal and may therefore experience distress as diffuse, confusing, or overwhelming. Deficits in emotional labeling and differentiation can make distress harder to organize cognitively and more difficult to regulate adaptively (Luminet et al., 2021a, 2021b). Moreover, the relationship between alexithymia and emotion regulation appears to depend partly on the intensity of emotional experience, suggesting that high-intensity affect may expose individuals with alexithymic characteristics to greater regulatory difficulty (Mehta et al., 2025). In marital conflict, such individuals may therefore experience a combination of high emotional activation and low emotional clarity, potentially reducing their willingness or perceived ability to tolerate distress. Lower distress tolerance may, in turn, increase the appeal of psychological or interpersonal escape strategies and contribute to more permissive attitudes toward infidelity.

A similar mediating process may operate for anxiety sensitivity. Individuals who fear anxiety-related sensations may interpret distress itself as dangerous, unacceptable, or indicative of impending loss of control. Consequently, their threshold for remaining engaged with emotionally painful marital experiences may be relatively low. Studies showing

inverse relationships between anxiety sensitivity and distress tolerance provide empirical support for this proposition (Keough et al., 2010; Laposa et al., 2015). Theoretical comparisons of these constructs further suggest that anxiety sensitivity and distress tolerance may occupy interconnected positions within broader emotional vulnerability systems (Mitchell et al., 2013). In addition, contemporary mediation evidence demonstrates that distress tolerance can explain part of the association between anxiety sensitivity and other anxiety-related outcomes (Mohsenabadi et al., 2025). Extending this reasoning to marital functioning, anxiety sensitivity may contribute to more accepting attitudes toward infidelity partly because individuals who experience anxiety-related arousal as threatening may have reduced capacity to endure the emotional discomfort associated with marital conflict, dissatisfaction, or relational uncertainty.

This framework is particularly relevant to women with marital maladjustment. In an already distressed marriage, repeated negative interactions can provide a chronic context in which emotional processing deficits, fear of anxiety sensations, and low distress tolerance become activated simultaneously. Under such conditions, attitudes toward infidelity may represent not only moral or interpersonal beliefs but also broader cognitive-affective responses to sustained relational strain. A woman who experiences intense but poorly differentiated emotions, fears the physiological or cognitive consequences of anxiety, and perceives herself as unable to tolerate prolonged relational distress may be more likely to view extramarital involvement with reduced disapproval. Conversely, stronger distress tolerance may allow an individual to remain engaged with difficult marital experiences without translating emotional discomfort into more permissive attitudes toward relational boundary violations. The association between distress tolerance and relationship functioning found in previous research supports this possibility (Doorley et al., 2019; Öktem, 2023).

Despite growing evidence regarding each of these constructs, several gaps remain. Existing research has examined the relationship of alexithymia with relationship satisfaction, fear of intimacy, infidelity tendency, and experiences surrounding marital infidelity (Farajian & Haghighat, 2025; Karimi et al., 2023; Lyvers et al., 2022). Other studies have established robust associations among anxiety sensitivity, distress tolerance, and anxiety-related outcomes (Keough et al., 2010; Laposa et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2013; Mohsenabadi et al., 2025). Research has also shown that distress tolerance is relevant to romantic

relationship functioning and conflict resolution (Doorley et al., 2019; Öktem, 2023), while studies of attitudes toward marital infidelity have emphasized variables such as marital satisfaction, personality, and sense of coherence (Isma & Turnip, 2019; Nemati et al., 2026). However, these lines of research have largely developed separately. There remains limited evidence regarding whether alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity are simultaneously associated with attitudes toward marital infidelity and whether distress tolerance statistically mediates these relationships, particularly among women who are already experiencing marital maladjustment.

Addressing this gap may have both theoretical and clinical value. From a theoretical perspective, testing a mediation model can help integrate emotional-processing deficits, anxiety-related vulnerability, and distress-regulation capacity within a unified framework for understanding attitudes toward infidelity. Such a model shifts attention from isolated predictors toward the mechanisms through which vulnerability characteristics may be translated into relationship-related attitudes. From a clinical perspective, distress tolerance is potentially modifiable and may therefore represent a useful intervention target. If lower distress tolerance accounts for part of the relationship between alexithymia or anxiety sensitivity and more accepting attitudes toward infidelity, interventions that improve the capacity to remain engaged with emotional discomfort may reduce maladaptive relational responses even when broader personality or emotional vulnerabilities remain present. This interpretation is consistent with evidence emphasizing the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of distress tolerance (Veilleux, 2023) and with findings indicating that alexithymia-related difficulties can respond to psychologically focused intervention (Karimi et al., 2023).

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to examine a structural model of the relationships of alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity with attitudes toward marital infidelity, with distress tolerance as a mediator, among women with marital maladjustment.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This applied, cross-sectional study was conducted using a descriptive-correlational design and structural equation modeling. The study population consisted of women with marital maladjustment who attended counseling centers in

Tehran in 2025. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and a total of 310 women participated in the study. The inclusion criteria were the presence of marital maladjustment, age between 30 and 55 years, and having at least a high school diploma. Incomplete questionnaires or unwillingness to continue participation were considered exclusion criteria. The observed age range in the final sample was 30–54 years. In the initial study documents, marital maladjustment was specified as an inclusion criterion; however, no separate standardized cutoff score was reported for operationalizing this criterion.

After obtaining institutional approval, the researcher contacted counseling centers in Tehran and received the necessary permission to conduct the study. Participants were informed that the questionnaires were administered solely for research purposes and were asked to provide honest responses without recording their names or identifying information. To reduce fatigue, rest periods were provided between instruments when necessary. The study topic and procedures were explained to participants, confidentiality and privacy were emphasized, and additional explanations were provided when needed. Participation imposed no financial cost on the participants. The study received ethical approval from Islamic Azad University under ethics code IR.IAU.A.REC.1405.016.

2.2. Instruments

Attitudes toward infidelity were assessed using the 12-item Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale (Whatley, 2006). The Persian version used in the present study was introduced and translated for use in Iran by Abdollahzadeh (2010). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 12 are reverse scored. Total scores range from 12 to 84, with higher scores indicating greater acceptance of marital infidelity. A score of 48 represents the midpoint between rejection and acceptance of infidelity. Previous Iranian studies have reported a Cronbach's alpha of approximately .84 for this scale. In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha was .88.

Alexithymia was measured using the 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby et al., 1994a, 1994b). In addition to a total alexithymia score, this instrument assesses three dimensions: difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking. Items are rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater alexithymia. The initial instrument-development studies confirmed adequate

internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and a three-factor structure consistent with the theoretical framework (Bagby et al., 1994a, 1994b). Persian-language studies have also supported the reliability and factorial validity of the 20-item Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Besharat, 2007, 2008). In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha for the total scale score was .76.

Anxiety sensitivity was assessed using the 16-item Anxiety Sensitivity Index (Reiss et al., 1986). Based on the scoring procedure documented in the study protocol, this instrument comprises three domains: physical concerns (8 items), concerns about impaired cognitive control (4 items), and social concerns related to the visibility of anxiety symptoms in the presence of others (4 items). Responses are scored from 0 (very little) to 4 (very much), yielding a total score ranging from 0 to 64; higher scores indicate greater fear of anxiety-related sensations. Satisfactory reliability and construct validity have been reported for the original Anxiety Sensitivity Index (Reiss et al., 1986). In the present sample, Cronbach's alpha was .85. In the source protocol, a later secondary reference had been cited for the 16-item form; however, in the present article, Reiss et al. (1986) are cited as the original developers of the instrument, while the same 16-item scoring procedure used in the study was retained.

Distress tolerance was measured using the 15-item Distress Tolerance Scale (Simons & Gaher, 2005). The scale assesses four related dimensions: tolerance of emotional distress, absorption by negative emotion, appraisal of distress, and regulatory efforts to alleviate distress. Items are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree), and after scoring in the intended direction, higher scores indicate greater distress tolerance. The initial validation study supported a four-factor structure subsumed under a higher-order distress tolerance factor, as well as acceptable reliability (Simons & Gaher, 2005). The Persian version of the instrument has also demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity (Azizi, 2010). Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was .74.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 26. Descriptive statistics included frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis. Item-level missing values were handled using

median imputation, in accordance with the procedure documented in the source analysis. Standardized scores were used to identify univariate outliers, with absolute standardized scores greater than 2.58 considered extreme values. Identified extreme values were replaced with the mean of the corresponding variable, consistent with the procedure used in the source study. Univariate normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis indices, whereas multivariate normality was examined using Mardia's coefficient. Linearity was evaluated using scatterplots, and multicollinearity was assessed using tolerance values and variance inflation factors. Structural equation modeling was performed using maximum likelihood estimation. The adequacy of the measurement model was evaluated based on standardized factor loadings. Overall model fit was assessed using the chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio, root mean square error of approximation, comparative fit index, normed fit index, goodness-of-fit index, and adjusted goodness-of-fit index, and these indices were interpreted according to commonly accepted structural equation modeling criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2023). Indirect effects were examined using the Sobel test (Sobel, 1982), with a significance level of less than .05.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 310 women. The mean age of the participants was 42.03 years ($SD = 5.68$; range = 30–54 years). Regarding educational attainment, 60 participants (19.4%) had a high school diploma, 63 (20.3%) had an associate degree, 77 (24.8%) had a bachelor's degree, 55 (17.7%) had a master's degree, and 55 (17.7%) held a doctoral degree. Most participants were employed ($n = 230$, 74.2%), whereas 80 (25.8%) were homemakers. Overall, 222 women (71.6%) had children and 88 (28.4%) had no children. The mean duration of marriage was 12.50 years ($SD = 4.59$; range = 5–20 years).

Descriptive statistics for the main study constructs are presented in Table 1. Because alexithymia, anxiety sensitivity, and distress tolerance were represented in the structural model through their constituent indicators, the corresponding subscale scores are reported in the table rather than reconstructed total-score standard deviations lacking direct empirical support. The mean score on the Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale was 47.80, which was close to the scale midpoint of 48.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Main Indicators and Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity (N = 310).

Construct / Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Alexithymia – Difficulty Identifying Feelings	20.90	3.77	–0.142	0.244
Alexithymia – Difficulty Describing Feelings	15.00	3.17	–0.044	–0.336
Alexithymia – Externally Oriented Thinking	23.70	4.11	0.268	–0.079
Anxiety Sensitivity – Physical Concerns	15.50	3.82	0.157	–0.276
Anxiety Sensitivity – Social Concerns	7.78	2.90	0.064	–0.393
Anxiety Sensitivity – Cognitive Concerns	8.36	2.67	–0.092	–0.291
Distress Tolerance – Tolerance	9.05	2.51	0.053	–0.453
Distress Tolerance – Absorption	8.94	2.49	–0.228	–0.408
Distress Tolerance – Appraisal	15.09	3.24	0.102	0.052
Distress Tolerance – Regulation	11.90	2.96	0.149	–0.378
Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity – Total Score	47.80	6.53	0.024	–0.102

Skewness and kurtosis values for the main variables were within ± 3 , supporting acceptable univariate normality. Mardia's multivariate coefficient was 2.80, which was below the criterion used in the source analysis and supported approximate multivariate normality and the applicability of maximum likelihood estimation. The number of missing responses was limited and was handled in the source dataset using median imputation. A small number of univariate outliers were observed among the principal variables and were replaced with the mean of the corresponding variable in the source analysis. Examination of scatterplots supported the linearity of the relationships. Multicollinearity was also

not problematic; tolerance values for the principal indicators ranged from .912 to .964, and variance inflation factor values ranged from 1.03 to 1.09, all within acceptable limits.

All reported standardized factor loadings for alexithymia, anxiety sensitivity, and distress tolerance were statistically significant and exceeded .60. These findings indicate that the indicators adequately represented their corresponding latent constructs (Table 2). In the source structural analysis, attitudes toward marital infidelity were represented by the observed total score on the Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale.

Table 2

Standardized Factor Loadings for the Main Latent Constructs.

Latent Construct	Indicator	Standardized Factor Loading	p
Alexithymia	Difficulty Identifying Feelings	.88	< .001
Alexithymia	Difficulty Describing Feelings	.92	< .001
Alexithymia	Externally Oriented Thinking	.71	< .001
Anxiety Sensitivity	Physical Concerns	.80	< .001
Anxiety Sensitivity	Social Concerns	.86	< .001
Anxiety Sensitivity	Cognitive Concerns	.60	< .001
Distress Tolerance	Tolerance	.81	< .001
Distress Tolerance	Absorption	.73	< .001
Distress Tolerance	Appraisal	.69	< .001
Distress Tolerance	Regulation	.90	< .001

Alexithymia had a positive and statistically significant direct relationship with attitudes toward marital infidelity ($\beta = .29$, $p = .004$), indicating that higher alexithymia was associated with more accepting attitudes toward infidelity. Anxiety sensitivity was also positively associated with attitudes toward marital infidelity ($\beta = .18$, $p = .020$). In contrast, distress tolerance showed a relatively strong

negative relationship with attitudes toward infidelity ($\beta = -.44$, $p < .001$), indicating that greater distress tolerance was associated with less accepting attitudes toward infidelity.

The indirect effect of alexithymia on attitudes toward marital infidelity through distress tolerance was statistically significant (standardized indirect effect = .17, Sobel statistic = 2.61, $p = .020$). The indirect effect of anxiety sensitivity

on attitudes toward infidelity through distress tolerance was also significant (standardized indirect effect = .11, Sobel statistic = 2.15, $p = .040$). Because the corresponding direct relationships remained statistically significant, this pattern

was consistent with partial statistical mediation rather than full mediation. Given the cross-sectional design of the study, these indirect pathways should not be interpreted as evidence of temporal causality.

Table 3

Main Direct and Indirect Structural Relationships.

Effect	Standardized Effect	Test Statistic	p	Interpretation
Alexithymia → Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity	.29	2.90	.004	Positive direct relationship
Anxiety Sensitivity → Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity	.18	2.10	.020	Positive direct relationship
Distress Tolerance → Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity	-.44	-4.44	< .001	Negative direct relationship
Alexithymia → Distress Tolerance → Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity	.17	Sobel = 2.61	.020	Significant indirect relationship
Anxiety Sensitivity → Distress Tolerance → Attitudes Toward Marital Infidelity	.11	Sobel = 2.15	.040	Significant indirect relationship

Based on the indices available from the source analysis, the estimated structural system demonstrated acceptable overall fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.10$, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .94, NFI = .91, GFI = .96, and AGFI = .94 (Table 4). These values generally fall within ranges considered acceptable in structural

equation modeling. However, as noted in the analysis-reporting statement above, these indices pertain to the broader estimated structural system and not to a reduced model containing only the four focal constructs of the present article that was independently re-estimated.

Table 4

Reported Overall Fit Indices for the Estimated Structural System. Note. These indices do not pertain to an independently re-estimated reduced four-variable model.

Fit Index	Observed Value	Interpretation
Chi-Square to Degrees-of-Freedom Ratio (χ^2/df)	2.10	Acceptable
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	.05	Good
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	.94	Acceptable
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	.91	Acceptable
Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI)	.96	Good
Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI)	.94	Acceptable

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined a structural model in which alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity were associated with attitudes toward marital infidelity both directly and indirectly through distress tolerance among women with marital maladjustment. The findings showed that alexithymia had a significant positive direct relationship with more accepting attitudes toward marital infidelity. Anxiety sensitivity also had a significant positive direct association with attitudes toward infidelity. In contrast, distress tolerance was significantly and negatively associated with attitudes toward marital infidelity. In addition, distress tolerance significantly mediated the relationships of both alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity

with attitudes toward marital infidelity. Because the direct effects of alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity remained significant after the indirect pathways through distress tolerance were taken into account, the observed pattern was consistent with partial statistical mediation. Taken together, these findings suggest that difficulties in emotional processing and heightened fear of anxiety-related sensations may be associated with greater acceptance of marital infidelity partly through a reduced capacity to tolerate emotional distress.

The positive relationship between alexithymia and attitudes toward marital infidelity is consistent with the broader literature indicating that deficits in emotional identification, differentiation, and expression can adversely affect romantic relationships. Alexithymia is characterized

not by an absence of emotional experience but by difficulties in cognitively representing and communicating emotional states (Luminet et al., 2021a, 2021b). Individuals with higher alexithymia may experience strong affective activation while lacking the emotional clarity needed to identify what they feel, determine the interpersonal source of the feeling, and communicate their needs to a partner. In a distressed marital context, these deficits can intensify misunderstandings and impair adaptive communication, potentially increasing emotional distance and reducing the perceived capacity of the marital relationship to meet affective needs.

The present finding is also compatible with evidence linking alexithymia to poorer relationship functioning. Higher alexithymia has been associated with greater fear of intimacy and lower relationship satisfaction, suggesting that impaired emotional processing may interfere with closeness, openness, and relational security (Lyvers et al., 2022). In addition, direct evidence from research on infidelity-related outcomes indicates that alexithymia can predict greater tendency toward infidelity, particularly when marital relationship quality is poor (Farajian & Haghighat, 2025). Although a tendency to engage in infidelity is not identical to a more permissive attitude toward infidelity, the two constructs may share psychological antecedents. When emotional needs remain poorly understood or insufficiently communicated within marriage, extramarital relationships may be evaluated as more understandable, justifiable, or psychologically compensatory. The current findings therefore extend previous research by suggesting that alexithymic characteristics are not only associated with dissatisfaction and intimacy difficulties but may also be reflected in more accepting cognitive evaluations of marital infidelity.

The association between alexithymia and attitudes toward infidelity may also be understood through the perspective of emotion regulation. Contemporary findings indicate that alexithymia is strongly related to difficulties in regulating emotional experiences, particularly when affective intensity is high (Mehta et al., 2025). Effective emotion regulation generally requires accurate recognition and labeling of emotional states, because individuals must first understand the nature of their emotional experience before choosing an adaptive strategy. When this process is impaired, people may depend more heavily on avoidance, suppression, disengagement, or externally oriented coping. In marital relationships characterized by recurrent conflict or emotional dissatisfaction, these maladaptive strategies may

increase the appeal of alternatives that promise immediate emotional relief. This interpretation is also consistent with findings showing that alexithymia can be modified through psychologically focused intervention in women affected by infidelity, indicating that emotional identification and processing are clinically relevant components of relational distress (Karimi et al., 2023).

The second major finding was that anxiety sensitivity was positively associated with attitudes toward marital infidelity. Anxiety sensitivity reflects the tendency to interpret anxiety-related bodily, cognitive, and social sensations as threatening or harmful. Individuals high in anxiety sensitivity may perceive physiological arousal, loss of concentration, or visible nervousness as signs of danger or loss of control. In the context of marital maladjustment, emotionally charged interactions may repeatedly activate these fears. Arguments, perceived rejection, mistrust, criticism, or uncertainty about the relationship can produce anxiety-related sensations that become especially aversive for individuals high in anxiety sensitivity. Consequently, greater acceptance of infidelity may partly reflect an orientation toward escape from or avoidance of emotionally threatening relational states rather than merely a more permissive moral position.

Although relatively little research has directly examined anxiety sensitivity in relation to attitudes toward marital infidelity, the current result is consistent with evidence demonstrating that anxiety sensitivity is associated with broader emotional vulnerability and maladaptive responses to distress. Anxiety sensitivity has been linked to anxiety symptomatology and lower distress tolerance, indicating that individuals who fear anxiety sensations may also perceive themselves as less capable of enduring negative emotional states (Keough et al., 2010). Related evidence has shown meaningful associations among anxiety sensitivity, distress tolerance, and intolerance of discomfort, supporting the view that these constructs form an interconnected system of responses to aversive internal experiences (Mitchell et al., 2013). Similar associations have been reported in individuals with anxiety and obsessive-compulsive symptoms, where anxiety sensitivity is closely related to the inability to tolerate distress and uncertainty (Laposa et al., 2015). These findings provide a plausible explanatory basis for the positive relationship observed in the present study.

The strongest direct relationship in the model was the negative association between distress tolerance and attitudes toward marital infidelity. Women with greater distress tolerance reported less accepting attitudes toward marital

infidelity. This finding is theoretically meaningful because distress tolerance reflects the capacity to remain engaged with unpleasant internal experiences without immediately attempting to escape, suppress, or terminate them. Contemporary conceptualizations emphasize that distress tolerance is not simply passive endurance but a dynamic process involving choices about whether to remain engaged with distress or move toward avoidance (Veilleux, 2023). Within marriage, the ability to tolerate emotional discomfort may help individuals remain engaged during relational conflict, withstand temporary dissatisfaction, delay impulsive responses, and pursue longer-term relationship goals.

The present result is consistent with studies showing that distress tolerance has important implications for romantic relationship functioning. Daily diary evidence suggests that the ability to tolerate distress influences responses to everyday relationship stressors and may shape patterns of interpersonal behavior within intimate relationships (Doorley et al., 2019). Furthermore, distress tolerance has been associated with relationship satisfaction through conflict resolution styles, indicating that individuals with greater capacity to tolerate negative affect may be more likely to use constructive approaches to disagreement rather than withdrawal, hostility, or other maladaptive reactions (Öktem, 2023). In women experiencing marital maladjustment, greater distress tolerance may therefore function as a protective psychological capacity that reduces the likelihood that persistent relational strain will be translated into more accepting attitudes toward infidelity.

The significant indirect effect of alexithymia on attitudes toward marital infidelity through distress tolerance was another important finding. This result suggests that part of the association between alexithymia and attitudes toward infidelity may operate through diminished capacity to withstand emotional distress. Individuals with alexithymia may experience emotions as poorly differentiated and difficult to understand. Such emotional ambiguity can intensify the subjective burden of distress because individuals may recognize that they feel uncomfortable without clearly knowing why, what the feeling represents, or how it should be managed (Luminet et al., 2021a, 2021b). When emotional arousal is intense, this difficulty can become even more problematic, as alexithymia is associated with impaired emotion regulation under conditions of heightened affective intensity (Mehta et al., 2025). Consequently, lower distress tolerance may represent one

pathway through which alexithymic difficulties become linked to relationship-related attitudes.

This mediation finding also corresponds with relational research on alexithymia. Higher alexithymia is related to fear of intimacy and reduced relationship satisfaction (Lyvers et al., 2022), while more direct evidence indicates that alexithymia and poor marital relationship quality can predict infidelity tendency (Farajian & Haghighat, 2025). These associations may partly reflect the difficulty that alexithymic individuals have in remaining engaged with emotionally demanding interpersonal experiences. When distress cannot be clearly identified, communicated, or regulated, the individual may be more likely to disengage psychologically from the marital relationship or perceive alternative relationships as more acceptable. The present findings therefore add a potential process variable to existing research by identifying distress tolerance as one mechanism through which emotional-processing deficits may be associated with attitudes toward infidelity.

The mediation of the relationship between anxiety sensitivity and attitudes toward marital infidelity by distress tolerance was similarly consistent with prior theoretical and empirical evidence. Individuals high in anxiety sensitivity tend to interpret internal anxiety sensations as threatening, which can make distress more difficult to endure. Research has repeatedly demonstrated a relationship between anxiety sensitivity and lower distress tolerance (Keough et al., 2010; Laposa et al., 2015). Comparative modeling has also shown that anxiety sensitivity and distress tolerance represent distinct but related dimensions of vulnerability to aversive emotional and bodily experiences (Mitchell et al., 2013). More recent evidence supports mediation models in which distress tolerance helps explain the relationship between anxiety sensitivity and anxiety-related psychological outcomes (Mohsenabadi et al., 2025). The current study extends this transdiagnostic framework into the interpersonal domain by suggesting that reduced distress tolerance may also partially explain why greater anxiety sensitivity is associated with more accepting attitudes toward marital infidelity.

From a relational perspective, this pathway can be understood in terms of avoidance. Women with high anxiety sensitivity may find the emotional and physiological activation associated with marital conflict particularly threatening. If they simultaneously perceive themselves as unable to tolerate this distress, they may become more motivated to avoid emotionally demanding interactions or to seek alternative sources of emotional relief. This does not

imply that anxiety sensitivity or low distress tolerance directly causes infidelity. Rather, the findings suggest that these characteristics may influence how relational alternatives are cognitively evaluated. More permissive attitudes toward infidelity may emerge as one element of a broader pattern in which immediate reduction of distress becomes more psychologically salient than continued engagement with a difficult marital context.

The persistence of significant direct effects for both alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity after distress tolerance was included in the model indicates partial rather than full mediation. This suggests that distress tolerance is an important, but not exclusive, mechanism connecting these psychological vulnerabilities with attitudes toward infidelity. Other processes are likely involved. For alexithymia, these may include impaired emotional communication, reduced empathy, fear of intimacy, limited awareness of relational needs, or maladaptive emotion-regulation strategies (Lyvers et al., 2022; Mehta et al., 2025). For anxiety sensitivity, additional mechanisms may include threat appraisal, intolerance of uncertainty, avoidance, heightened physiological vigilance, and dysfunctional emotion regulation (Mitchell et al., 2013; Mohsenabadi et al., 2025). Future models may therefore benefit from incorporating multiple mediating mechanisms rather than assuming that distress tolerance alone explains the observed associations.

The findings also complement research on broader psychological predictors of attitudes toward infidelity. Previous studies have indicated that personality characteristics and marital satisfaction are associated with attitudes toward infidelity (Isma & Turnip, 2019), while greater sense of coherence has been linked to less accepting attitudes toward marital infidelity among married women (Nemati et al., 2026). These findings collectively suggest that attitudes toward infidelity are embedded within a wider psychological system involving emotional processing, relationship quality, coping resources, personality, and perceived manageability of life experiences. The current study contributes to this literature by emphasizing emotional vulnerability and distress regulation rather than focusing solely on marital satisfaction or personality traits.

Overall, the pattern of findings supports a model in which alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity function as psychological vulnerability factors, whereas distress tolerance may serve as a regulatory capacity that partly determines how these vulnerabilities are expressed in relationship-related attitudes. This interpretation is

consistent with contemporary views of distress tolerance as contextually situated and behaviorally consequential (Veilleux, 2023). In marital relationships, the capacity to remain engaged with distress may be especially important because relational stability often requires individuals to tolerate ambiguity, frustration, disappointment, and temporary emotional pain without resorting to immediate avoidance. The current findings therefore highlight distress tolerance as a potentially important bridge between intrapersonal emotional processes and interpersonal attitudes toward marital boundaries.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design prevents conclusions about temporal ordering or causality; therefore, the indirect effects observed in the structural model should be interpreted as statistical mediation rather than evidence of a causal process. Second, participants were recruited through purposive sampling from counseling centers in Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to women who do not seek counseling, men, couples without identified marital maladjustment, or populations from other cultural and geographical settings. Third, marital maladjustment was used as an inclusion criterion, but a separate standardized cutoff score for operationalizing this condition was not documented in the initial study materials. Fourth, all principal variables were assessed using self-report instruments, making the findings potentially vulnerable to shared-method variance, social desirability, and response bias, especially given the sensitive nature of marital infidelity. Fifth, the overall fit indices reported in the study pertained to the broader structural system from which the focal paths were extracted rather than an independently re-estimated reduced four-variable model. Finally, missing data and a small number of extreme values were handled using median and mean replacement procedures, respectively, which are relatively simple methods and may underestimate natural variability.

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to determine whether alexithymia and anxiety sensitivity prospectively predict changes in attitudes toward marital infidelity and whether distress tolerance temporally mediates these relationships. Replication with probability-based sampling and more diverse groups, including men, couples, individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and populations from other cities and cultures, would improve external validity. Future research should also operationalize marital maladjustment using clearly defined standardized criteria and consider dyadic designs in which

data are collected from both spouses. Multi-method assessment could further strengthen validity by combining self-report measures with clinical interviews, behavioral measures of distress tolerance, partner reports, or ecological momentary assessment. It would also be useful to compare alternative structural models and investigate additional mediators such as emotion regulation, fear of intimacy, marital satisfaction, intolerance of uncertainty, attachment insecurity, and conflict-resolution patterns. Finally, future studies should independently re-estimate the focal four-construct model and use contemporary resampling procedures, particularly bootstrap confidence intervals, to evaluate indirect effects more robustly.

The findings suggest that assessment of women experiencing marital maladjustment may benefit from including emotional awareness, anxiety sensitivity, and distress tolerance alongside conventional evaluations of marital satisfaction and conflict. Clinicians may consider interventions that help clients identify and label emotional states more accurately, communicate emotional needs more effectively, reinterpret anxiety-related sensations less catastrophically, and remain engaged with difficult affect without immediately resorting to avoidance. Skills involving emotional differentiation, mindful observation of distress, gradual exposure to uncomfortable internal states, cognitive reappraisal, impulse delay, and constructive conflict engagement may be particularly relevant. Couple-based interventions may also benefit from helping partners recognize how poorly processed emotional experiences can influence relational judgments and reactions. Because attitudes toward infidelity are sensitive and potentially stigmatizing, practitioners should address them within a nonjudgmental and confidential therapeutic context, focusing on the psychological and relational processes underlying these attitudes rather than treating them as direct indicators of actual infidelity behavior.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the study and participated in the research with informed consent.

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