

## Women's Experiences of Couple Interactions during the COVID-19 Related Restrictions

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### Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 has profoundly affected people's daily lives, and caused various challenges. Interactions of spouses have been one of the most important dimensions of life affected by these changes. The aim of this study was to identify the dimensions of women's experience of couple interactions during the restrictions imposed during COVID-19 pandemic. This research was conducted with a qualitative approach and a phenomenological method. The participants included 11 married women in Tehran who, during the restrictions caused by COVID-19, spent most of their time at home with their husbands. Data were collected using semi-structured and in-depth interviews. The data obtained from the interviews were coded and analyzed using the Colaizzi's method. The data were categorized into 18 sub-themes and three main themes. The findings showed that the potential of a couple relationships in crises can be such that individuals spontaneously do things to reduce the tensions in a way that this not only reduces the amount of stress, but also enriches their relationship. Women who had such an experience saw the forced situation of being together as a good opportunity to fix their relationship. But the spouses who did not have a normal couple relationship and did not have the necessary skills to repair the gaps and there has been tension, disconnection or overlapping roles and transgression of boundaries in their relationship, would make the gap in the relationship deeper with inappropriate reactions; therefore, this period has led to more conflicts for them. Given the changes multiple crises may cause in spouses' interactions, it seems that studying the crisis-creating situations may contribute to development of an effective model for couples' lives in critical times.

**Keywords:** Spouse relationships, Couples, Corona-virus, Phenomenology, Qualitative study.

## Introduction

The world is currently facing a widespread pandemic. The effects of this pandemic, which has largely overshadowed various aspects of human life, are likely to last for years. These consequences range from economic effects to the impacts on peace of mind (Ahmadi et al., 2021). The rapid spread of the virus has prompted health decision-makers to make attempts to prevent the rapid spread of the disease by imposing specific restrictions (Tandon, 2020; Ahmadi et al., 2022). A group of these restrictions, known as "quarantine", refers to the separation of individuals or communities at risk of an infectious disease; it is in fact a kind of "isolation" of individuals from each other, so as to control the disease and in order to break the transmission chain (Parmet & Sinha, 2020). These restrictions were wide-ranging and were implemented in full for some specific time in some areas, such as Wuhan, China; people were not allowed to leave the house in any way and their needs were met by the government. In some other areas, only the organizations, educational centers, and some public places were temporarily closed, and also some restrictions were imposed on traffic and travel. In Iran, we witnessed this kind of restrictions. Overall, these restrictions caused more people stay at home and the hours spent together with family members increased. But, research shows that observing these restrictions although helps control the spread of the disease, has also consequences for mental health.

Studies on the negative psychological effects of being in quarantine for a long time report symptoms such as fear of death, anxiety and depression, sleep problems, irritability, post-traumatic stress, confusion, increased domestic violence between spouses and aggression (American Psychological Association, 2020; Sacco et al., 2020; Moffitt et al., 2020; Asgari et al., 2020; Rezaeian, 2020). Also, the long period of quarantine, lack of facilities and information about the disease, financial loss and bankruptcy are among the notable social consequences of the outbreak of the virus (Brooks et al., 2020; Giallonardo et al., 2020; Polizzi et al., 2020). At the same time, research has also been conducted on the effects left on spouses' relationships (Harris & Tarchak, 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020), mentioning adverse effects such as unemployment and financial losses besides the other consequences of the pandemic and quarantine on the interactions of spouses. According to the Global Times, the increasing number of divorces registered since the beginning of the pandemic is another consequence that has been reported in many countries of the world, especially in China (Gunther et al., 2020). Therefore, crises such as pandemics seem to have the potential to affect marital and family interactions.

Understanding the mechanism by which family and couple interactions are affected by different situations requires knowledge of the theories in the field of couple relationships. Theoretical study of spouses' interactions has been done by numerous experts. For example, Gottman and Notarius (2000) consider spousal interactions as ways of communicating as well as how to resolve conflicts. In another definition, interaction means behavioral give-and-take that takes the form of a regular pattern of behavior (Noller & Feny, 2002). As defined by Miller (2014), intimate couple relationships include at least seven specific components, including: knowledge, interdependence, care, trust, responsiveness, mutuality, and commitment. Rajabi et al. (2018) has also mentioned appreciation and respect as another component. In some other studies, the issue of spending time with a spouse and its positive impact on intimate relationships has also been emphasized (Cag & Yildirim, 2018). In Christensen and Salawi's model (1991, cited in Ahmadi et al., 2006), couples' interactive patterns include reciprocal constructive pattern, expectation-avoidance and mutual avoidance; in this model, the role of positive and negative interactions of couples and their effects on their adjustment have been studied. Satir (2000) regards dysfunctional interactions with features such as indirect, unclear, vague, dishonest, distorted, and incomplete messages as indicators of a dysfunctional family; she considers transparent and clear communication as a guarantor of adaptive family interactions (Hajhosseini et al., 2017; Goldenberg & Goldenberg; translated by Shahi-Baravati et al., 2015).

Gottman (1993), in his study in the field of interactive patterns, considers two interactive patterns for couples: stable and unstable. Stable marriages are classified into three categories: "validating couples", "volatile couples", and "conflict-avoider couples". Validating couples have less specific roles and less negative/positive emotional exchanges. Volatile couples, with less differentiated roles, have a high participation in roles and emotional exchanges (Rebello et al., 2014), and while having high stability, they also have high psychological contacts; But, conflict-avoider couples avoid interaction with each other. Rashid and Moradi (2017) and Molayi and Esmaili (2019) pointed out that positive interactions between couples lead to higher marital satisfaction and compatibility, and negative interactions are characterized by a negative psychological atmosphere and unwillingness to solve the conflicts and are seen as negative predictor of decision-making skills. Privacy and boundaries are other important issues in the relationship between spouses. Tensions or breakdowns in marital relationships are caused by boundaries problems. Interpersonal boundaries refer to hypothetical and invisible boundaries. A family is considered healthy when each spouse, while being a member of the marital subset, has the opportunity and authority to address his/her own issues. Violation of these boundaries in both forms of diffuse boundary (excessive solidarity) or

rigid boundary (excessive independence with lack of intimacy) causes problems in the relationship between spouses (Namvaran-Germi et al., 2017; Derakhsh et al., 2019; Saemi et al., 2021).

Research shows that the more efficient a couple's relationship is, the less conflict they will experience (Hooman et al., 2016). In such relationships, boundaries are clear, and emotional support, problem-solving approach and specific roles are attended to (Bakhsipour et al., 2017; Kuo et al., 2017; Timothy-Springer & Johnson, 2018; Bawono et al., 2019). Also, a study by Malek-Asa et al., (2017) demonstrated that couple's communication pattern and positive interactions with each other can predict marital commitment.

During application of the restrictions to control COVID-19, some studies in the field of marital relationships have been conducted. For instance, Panzeri et al. (2020) studied the intimate and sexual relationship of couples in Italy. Some of the participants in this study mentioned a decrease in sexual desire and marital satisfaction during the period of restrictions; this may be due to violation of women's privacy and increase in psychological pressure. Günther-Bel et al. (2020) in a mixed-method study examined the family dynamics during the restriction periods in Spain. According to the results of this study, the level of anxiety in the family increases during COVID-19-related restrictions.

Due to the risks of COVID-19 and the negative effects of the ongoing crisis, consequences such as job loss can be regarded among the stressors on the marital subsystem, which, in turn, may be a threat to the quality of the relationship between spouses. Unemployment and job loss, imposing economic hardships, can cause problems also for families and couples. Ghaemi-Asl et al. (2019) investigated the negative effect of losing a job for marriage and marital relationship and found that it is a predictor of divorce. The presence of family members and especially spouses together for a long time in critical periods such as the outbreak of a disease can cause negative psychological consequences.

Although in various countries such as China, family experts predicted the possibility of an increase in divorce rate after the end of the restrictions, it seems that the way to deal with the COVID-19-related restrictions depends on individuals (Gold Buscho, 2020); despite the negative psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety and the like, some couples took the opportunity to repair their relationship in stay-at-home days. Because the issues in the relationship between spouses are more numerous in variety than in other relationships, in critical times such as war, natural disasters, quarantine and the like, issues such as role overlap, transgression of boundaries, escalation of conflicts or even improvement of relationships and healing the wounds caused by previous conflicts are highlighted. Therefore, there is a need for more scientific research in the field of

family and couple relationships in a situation when they are forced to stay together for a longer period of time. However, little research has examined the experience of couple interactions during COVID-19-related restrictions in Iran. Because of the COVID-19-related restrictions and the consequent changes in people's lifestyles, the interactions of family members also underwent stressful changes; the pressure on women seems to have been higher as compared to other family members (Panzeri et al., 2020). These changes included the increase the amount of housework, the presence of all family members at home, and the remote work from home which disrupted normal routines; the changes reduced women's marital satisfaction and in some cases increased domestic violence against them (Connor et al., 2019). Therefore, the present study was conducted with the aim of identifying the dimensions of women's experience of couple interactions in the days of restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Method

The present study has been conducted with a qualitative approach and phenomenological method. This method has been chosen because it seeks to reflect the experiences of women in relation to their marital interactions during the restrictions imposed to control COVID-19. The study population included married women from the middle socio-economic class in Tehran in 2020. Individuals were selected through convenience sampling method and the interviews with them continued until saturation point (11 participants). Inclusion criteria were as follows: 1- Having the desire to participate in the study, 2- Having the experience of full-time stay at home with one's spouse due to COVID-19-related vacations and the application of traffic restrictions for at least one month (in the current study, by vacation we mean staying at home for the period announced by the government\_ March and April 2020\_ for all members of society and in order to break the chain of transmission and reduce the spread of disease; therefore, it is not in the specific sense of "quarantine", which refers to mandatory isolation for sick people for at least two weeks or mandatory lockdown for all residents of a city, as was done in some cities such as Wuhan, China) 3- The duration of marriage (at least one year). Exclusion criterion was as follows: Informant's physical and/or mental inability to continue the interview. Participants volunteered to participate in the research by viewing the research call posted on social networks such as Instagram, WhatsApp and Telegram. Prior to the interview, participants were given the necessary explanations about the ethical considerations, and after obtaining their consent for participation and audio-recording, they were assured about the right to withdraw from the interview, and the confidentiality of their identity throughout the research process. Interviews were conducted virtually (voice or video call) by two women who were master's graduates in family counseling.

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were used to collect data. The interviews started with a general open question and then continued with the questions that arose during the interview. The first question was: "Please describe one of the days when you stayed more time at home with your spouse due to the COVID-19 restrictions"; next, the subsequent questions were asked based on the participant's answers. For more information and to clarify the issues, we used exploring questions such as "Can you give an example?" Colaizzi's method of data analysis was used to analyze the interviews. This method includes the following steps: 1. Reading and rereading the transcript, 2. Extracting significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon, 3. Formulating meanings from significant statements, 4. Aggregating formulated meanings into theme clusters and themes, 5. Developing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon's essential structure or essence, 6. A description of fundamental structure of the phenomenon is subsequently generated and 7. Validation of the findings of the study through participant feedback completes the analysis.

Researchers collaborated and exchanged ideas to extract themes. As the interviews continued, the previous theme became clearer and more complete, and sometimes a new theme was formed. In order to clarify, categorize and solve the contradictions in the interpretation, repeated returns to the texts was done. It is worth noting that to ensure the accuracy of the results; the criteria such as credibility, confirmability, and dependability were used. The interview questions were prepared based on the theoretical and research background and in accordance with the intended concepts; and they were approved by a specialist with a doctoral degree in counseling in terms of content and form. In addition, the coding and categorization were reviewed by the interviewees as well as two specialists with a doctoral degree in counseling.

## Findings

In this study, 11 women, who during the days of COVID-19-related traffic restrictions stayed at home with their husband for at least one month, participated. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants

Code	age	Employment situation	education	length of marriage (years)
1	43	housewife	diploma	20
2	40	artist	bachelor's	10
3	53	skin care professional	bachelor's	9
4	30	jeweler	master's	4

Code	age	Employment situation	education	length of marriage (years)
5	54	housewife	diploma	11
6	59	housewife	diploma	40
7	45	housewife	bachelor's	17
8	50	housewife	diploma	32
9	44	teacher	bachelor's	23
10	40	engineer	master's	14
11	31	housewife	master's	3

Phenomenological analysis of the interviews resulted in formation of 18 sub-themes, three main themes and one core theme (see Table 2).

Table 2. Results of phenomenological analysis of women's experience of couple interactions during the COVID-19-related restrictions

Sub-themes	Main themes	Core theme
Creating and perceiving an atmosphere of cooperation and participation in home affairs	Enriching the couple's relationship	During the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, some couples actively enriched their relationship and resolved their issues, while in another group, the same situation reduced the couple intimacy. According to participants, this could be due to the intensification and reproduction of previous conflicts and accumulation of previously unresolved issues.
Creating mutual understanding and greater intimacy		
Allocating time for joint couple activities		
Perception of gratitude		
Using the quarantine as an opportunity to compensate for being together for short time in the past		
Creating emotional interactions		
Perception of support and care for the spouse		
Creating the atmosphere for dialogue and verbal interactions		

Sub-themes	Main themes	Core theme
Perceiving and expressing satisfaction with the presence of the couple together at home		
Higher adaptability to spouse's personality traits	Conflict management	
Preferring the spouse's desire to one's own desire so as to create an atmosphere of empathy		
Maintaining personal distance		
Managing interpersonal conflicts with a problem-solving approach		
Not showing interest in participation and cooperation	Couples' avoidance to interact with each other	
Perception of misunderstanding in a couple relationship		
Passivity in the current situation and lack of constructive efforts to resolve conflicts		
Lack of an atmosphere of dialogue for talking about worries		
Reducing interactions in order to reduce tension		

The findings of the present study led to formation of a core theme: "During the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, some couples actively enriched their relationship and resolved their issues, while in another group; the same situation reduced the couple intimacy. According to participants, this could be due to the intensification and reproduction of previous conflicts and accumulation of previously unresolved issues." This core theme has three main themes, which are described in detail below.



### **The First Main Theme: Enriching the Couple's Relationship**

In the analysis of the interviews, we found a pattern in which the couple made efforts to provide better marital conditions during COVID-19-related restrictions in the hope to overcome the difficulties caused by the stress of the pandemic and challenges of being forced to stay indoors. The themes associated with this pattern was specified with the main theme entitled "Enriching the couple's relationship", which includes elements such as the couple's efforts in creating and perceiving the atmosphere of cooperation and participation in current home affairs, allocating time for joint activities, observing gratitude in the spouse's behavior, using the quarantine as an opportunity to compensate for being together for short time in the past, the existence of emotional interactions, the perception of support and care for the spouse, creating an atmosphere for dialogue and verbal interactions, and perceiving and expressing satisfaction with the presence of the couple together at home. For example, informants mentioned the following statements:

"Together we planned how we would spend our days. We used to say: So what are we going to do today? We tried to have a good time while we got to our work ... My husband helped me even though he is not a househusband, for example, he cleaned the floor and also helped me with the rest of my affairs. This year, we were together for the first time in Mid-Sha'ban holiday; while every year we were each busy with our own work. It was the first year we could share our spiritual feelings and it was a great experience. We went to a private club several times. It was so good." (31-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 3 years)

"We started our co-meditation. This is something we have never done together. We planned to walk for an hour and a half a day and do yoga for 40 to 45 minutes, then do breathing exercises and things like that." (53-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 9 years)

The women participating in the present study also mentioned the experience of gratitude from the side of their husbands and expressed their satisfaction with it:

"Spending more time at home, my husband thanks me very much. He used to thank me for doing the housework, but now it's a lot deeper; our children jokingly say that 'dad thanks from the bottom of his heart!' if I bring fruit, he then takes the dishes to kitchen (which he did not do before!)." (50-year-old woman, marriage length: 32 years)

Also, we found that some participants had emotional interactions with their husband in this opportunity to be more together, and this leads to more emotional intimacy in the family and, in turn, it seems to be effective in enriching the marital relationship:

"I needed such a time myself. My husband helped me a lot. He was trying to make the atmosphere happy. It was a good time and it brought us together and it was very good for us". (44 years old, married for 17 years). "My husband was very careful, especially

because I have diabetes. He advised the children that we should take care of your mother so that she does not get sick” (50-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 32 years).

“Well, we always talk about everything .... The solution to the problems between us is talking, and I talked a lot with my husband about my worries about coronavirus. We sympathized with each other” (44-year-old woman, length of marriage: 20 years).

### **The Second Main Theme: Conflict Management**

Another category of couples' interactions during the COVID-19-related restrictions refers to the strategies focused on conflict management and conflict resolution. Due to the circumstances and in order to reduce the psychological stress caused by being together at home, couples tried to manage conflicts. These attempts included the following, among others: being adaptable to the spouse's personality traits, preferring the spouse's desires to personal desires in order to create an atmosphere of empathy, observing personal distance, and managing interpersonal conflicts with a problem-solving approach. An obvious thing in interpersonal relationships is the commitment of the parties to the management of conflicts that may occur naturally. How the parties manage and resolve these conflicts is one of the positive factors in a relationship; the more complete this skill is in the couple, the more constructive interaction can be observed from them. For example, one of the participants stated:

“For example, at night, once I wanted to read a book, but my husband wanted to watch a series. I used to go to watch the series with each other in order to maintain our solidarity and spend an hour together. I thought about it a lot ... We had a lot of fights in the beginning. I found the solution gradually.” (53-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 12 years).

“Participants also noted that they consciously maintained personal distance more than ever in order to reduce tensions and resolve conflicts when necessary:

We always respect each other. Maintaining respect and keeping the distance helped us to solve our problems, even in these days.” (50-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 32 years).

Sometimes women looked at problems through a solution-oriented viewpoint:

“I think that staying together for a long time let us resolve our conflicts; no matter how many fights we had, the fact was that we could not escape! It was no longer the case that we would not talk about issues and forget them through going to a party or going to see our friends. We talked about it, even though it upset both of us. We had to be together so we had to solve the problems”. (40-year-old woman, length of marriage: 10 years)

### **The Third Main Theme: Couples' Avoidance to Interact with Each Other**

Among the interviews conducted, another pattern of interactions was observed in which the spouses took steps to damage the relationship via their verbal or non-verbal behaviors. This group of interactions was as follows: unwillingness to participate and cooperate during COVID-19-related restrictions, perception of misunderstanding in the marital relationship, passivity in the current situation and lack of constructive efforts to resolve conflicts, failure to create an atmosphere for talking about worries, and reducing the interactions so as to reduce the tensions.

It seems that not showing willingness to participate and cooperate with each other on the days of traffic restrictions can be unpleasant for both parties and may create a perception of dissatisfaction:

"He is not a collaborator at all. Even when I asked him, he did not help at all. For this reason, my workload has increased". (40-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 17 years)

For some couples, being together for long periods of time during pandemic-related restrictions has led to dissatisfaction; and they believe this could be rooted in previous unresolved conflicts:

"We always had disagreements. If a man and a woman are friends, they can be together for long hours and enjoy being together. But if this friendship does not exist, then they will get into trouble together" (59-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 40 years)

Some respondents mentioned perception of misunderstanding and passivity in the face of challenges and conflicts; this perception has been in form of an increase in emotional distance:

"There is a fundamental difference between us that was very clear and bold during the time when my husband was at home because of COVID-19-related restrictions. I'm sure it might make him sad too, as it makes me sad. It's always the case that he says he is satisfied with the situation. But to be honest, it makes me sad. I usually come up with an idea and say something and get excited, but it's not like he to come up with an idea." (40-year-old woman, length of marriage: 10 years)

"I made myself busy; trying to improve the relationship is useless." (59-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 40 years)

It seems that in couples who were passive towards the situation, there is a lack of constructive effort to resolve the conflicts in many cases. Another group of interactions that caused a gap between couples was the lack of an atmosphere for talking with the spouse about worries:

"I manage the relationship a lot and I try to protect my relationship. I mean, I care what I say or what I do not say, or if he says something, I will not answer so that no dispute will be arisen ... I see this responsibility with myself and he cannot and does not

know how to do this ... and this is a pressure on me anyway, because we were together for 24 hours a day" (40-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 10 years).

"I rarely talked to him about my worries. He doesn't like to listen to me!" (53-year-old woman, duration of marriage: 12 years)

A number of interactions that widened the gap between couple were aimed at consciously and voluntarily reducing the interactions so as to reduce the tensions:

"Everything I do right now is not going to work out. My house is a jail for me now. I cannot tell him that I have a problem with you!" (40-year-old woman, length of marriage: 14 years).

## Discussion

This study intended to investigate women's experience of couple interactions during the COVID-19-related restrictions. Findings showed that there are three types of spousal relationships in the situation of being forced to stay at home together: 1. Enriching the couple's relationship, 2. Conflict management, and 3. Couples' avoidance to interact with each other.

Regular interactions in the family and between couples can create a feeling of satisfaction or, conversely, create an atmosphere of dissatisfaction in the family. The more dynamic and constructive these interactions are, the higher the level of satisfaction of the parties in the marital relationship and the more stable the marriage and family (Timothy-Springer, & Johnson, 2018). But if the couple's relationship is not properly formed and, as the closest people to each other, they do not have the necessary skills and the correct way to resolve conflicts, in times of crisis, this lack of skills is accompanied by recurring patterns of conflicts and leads to intensification and deepening the gap between them. In such cases, the need to acquire communication skills and also to avoid passivity in face of challenges in order to prevent the collapse of the marital relationship is felt more than ever (Hashemi & Asghari-Ebrahimabad, 2016).

As the findings of the current study showed, the desirable quality of couples' interactions can be effective in enriching their relationship. Such interactions have characteristics such as the couple's effort in creating and perceiving the atmosphere of cooperation, paying attention to creating a common understanding of events through constructive interactions, considering times for joint activities, perceiving gratitude from the side of spouse, using the quarantine as an opportunity to compensate for being together for short time in the past, creating an atmosphere for dialogue and verbal interactions, and expressing satisfaction with the couple's presence at home. Some studies have been conducted concerning the interactions that enrich the relationship. For example, Khodadadi-Sangdeh et al. (2015) found that cooperation in the family causes the perception of support and closeness in the couple; thus, the results of the present study are consistent with the mentioned research. Also in the study conducted by Kuo et al. (2017), it was shown that cooperation and participation of spouses in affairs related to family, children and home will be effective in increasing their level of satisfaction. The

findings of the present study is also consistent with Günther-Bel et al. (2020) who, in a study during COVID-19 pandemic and at the time of forced stay of spouses at home, showed that if the relationship is well managed, positive interactions are enhanced and couples do not get involved in triangles with children, the quality of the relationship will be satisfactory.

Recreation and spending time with one's spouse can also be considered as one of the components of enriching the relationship between spouses. These activities can improve the quality of the couple's relationship, and enhance the couple's satisfaction with marital interactions. Namvaran-Germi et al. (2018) and Çağ and Yıldırım (2018) have also demonstrated the positive role of entertainment and intimate dialogue between wife and husband in increasing intimacy and enriching the relationship between them. In general, spending time with one's spouse is a strengthening factor in the marital relationship, which is also mentioned in Islamic teachings. In his collection of hadiths (7th century AH), quoting the Messenger of God, Varam (1990) considers the value of spending an hour with one's spouse higher than I'tikaaf in the house of God due to the positive effects it has on the relationship between wife and husband.

Rajabi et al. (2018) have discussed the vital role of understanding and supporting the spouse in the experience of marital satisfaction. Gratitude, mutual support and efforts to please each other are among the factors that determine the success of marriage and are considered as factors that create intimacy between wife and husband. Considering the theme "enriching the couple relationship", the results of the present study are in line with the mentioned research. Enriching the couple's relationship partly depends on the exchange of love and caress. Rebello et al. (2014) also showed that love and caring are associated to marital satisfaction. Also, according to Saemi et al. (2021), emotional expression plays an important role in increasing intimacy between spouses. In emotion-focused therapy theory, a secure relationship is based on the expression of emotions and feelings in a safe atmosphere between spouses (Long & Young, 2013). If the spouses have the skills to resolve the conflicts or have acquired this skill over time, they will be able to manage the situation properly in times of crisis. This can be realized through accepting the spouse, empathizing with him/her, reducing destructive behavior, creating emotional awareness, observing boundaries, as well as talking about issues with a solution-focused approach. In Minuchin's theory on structural family therapy, introducing the characteristics of a healthy family, he emphasizes the demarcation by inter-personal boundaries (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2015). The findings of the present study are consistent with Derakhsh et al. (2019) and Saemi et al. (2021). Williamson (2020) also confirms that the positive performance of couples in the period of traffic restrictions due to COVID-19 pandemic can increase couple satisfaction. Considering and observing boundaries are also important to protect the family system and the marital relationship from the negative consequences of unresolved conflicts, as well as to manage the disagreements.

Among the findings of this study, some interactions were revealed that can be considered as harmful interactions that deepen the gap between wife and husband. These interactions include unwillingness to participate and cooperate, perception of

misunderstanding in the marital relationship, passivity about the situation and not making a constructive effort to resolve conflicts, not creating an atmosphere for talking about worries, and reducing the interactions in order to reduce the tensions. Women, who are dissatisfied with their relationship, contribute to this dissatisfaction by highlighting their husband's negative points and forming a vicious cycle of negative interactions, blaming each other, anger and withdrawal. Mousavi (2020) showed that COVID-19-related quarantines can intensify these destructive patterns of behavior between spouses. A study by Cao (2020) also confirms that epidemic-related stay-at-home can have devastating effects on family relationships. The results of a study by Campbell (2020) also indicate an increase in domestic violence between spouses in this period. Lack of proper relationship between spouses, inability to resolve the conflicts, and irresponsibility in the relationship with spouse may lead to dissatisfaction with the marital relationship; and the perception of lack of care, support and respect may deepen the gap in the couple relationship. The results of the present study are consistent with Rashid and Moradi (2017) and Molayi and Esmaili (2019). Wittenborn et al. (2018) also found a group of defective cycles of interaction in couple relationship, according to which, couples who lacked a positive atmosphere for talking with each other about sufferings during conflicts, enter into this vicious cycle, creating a pursuit-evasion pattern, which in turn, deepens the gap between spouses. Pursuit-evasion pattern is one of the problematic patterns in the couple relationship in Bowen's systemic approach as well (Long & Young, 2013). In line with the present study, Panzeri et al. (2020) showed that couples staying together at home during the pandemic-related restrictions report interpersonal conflicts, dissatisfaction with the quality of the relationship as well as anxiety and worry caused by the situations.

## Conclusion

This study revealed that spouses who have formed their relationship effectively and have a constructive relationship with each other benefit from components such as respect, appreciation, support, expression of love, desire to collaboration with each other, and spending time together; in critical situations such as being forced to stay at home for a long time due to the restrictions imposed during COVID-19 pandemic, they are able to manage the stay-at-home conditions, and turn threats into opportunities. These components may be created if both parties are aware of the gap in the relationship and try to repair it with the participation and decision of both parties; women who have had such an experience, consider this situation as a good opportunity to repair their relationship. However, if the spouses do not have an effective couple relationship or the necessary skills to repair the gaps and there are tension, role interference and boundary transgression in their relationship, they may intensify the gap in the relationship through their inappropriate reactions.

The findings of this study represent concepts that can contribute scientific and practical measures to strengthen the family, but currently have received little attention.

Mechanisms involved in effectiveness of interactions such as leisure activities and domestic entertainment, efficient presence at home, companionship and participation, appreciation and observance of personal boundaries in the literature on couples and families need further clarification and require deeper research. Given the changes that various stressors and numerous life cycle crises cause in spouses' interactions; it seems that studying the crisis-causing situations can contribute to development of an efficient model for couple's interactions during critical periods of marital life.

The present study is one of the first studies on couple interactions during COVID-19-related restrictions and it is innovative in this regard. In addition, the criteria such as credibility, confirmability, and dependability were used to ensure the accuracy of the results. However, this study has some limitations. The present study was conducted at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and during the traffic restrictions imposed by the government. In future, possible persistence of the conditions can cause other changes in couples' relationships that have not been studied in this study. Another limitation of the present study pertains the convenient sample which was selected from the middle class (the participants admittedly were not involved in harsh economic problems such as unemployment or the like). Also, due to the restrictions imposed at the time of data collection and the urgent need for research in the field, it was not possible for researchers to sample a specific region in a limited time, so the speed of data collection was prioritized and the most available data and participants were taken into consideration. Therefore, participants were selected from different regions of Tehran and did not belong to a specific region.

In order to better understand the consequences of COVID-19 for families as basic units of society, and given that the disease may have several effects on the quality of life of family members, it is necessary to study the various dimensions of the COVID-19 and the ongoing pandemic in families belonging to different social classes, especially the lower classes of society. The changes caused by the economic recession and the loss of job opportunities can cause negative changes for families. The findings of the present study can also be used by family counselors and couple therapists to provide family counseling services to couples who face challenges in their relationships during the pandemic-related restriction.

### **Conflict of interest**

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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