



Marital Satisfaction and Depression in Older Adults: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Marital satisfaction is an important concept contributing to depression. In contrast to younger and middle-aged individuals, the negative association between marital satisfaction and depression has been reported to be strongest among older adults. This study reviewed the association between marital satisfaction and depression in older adults. Based on the literature review, findings demonstrated that older women have lower marital satisfaction and higher depression level compared to older men. Also, although spouse support is a primary source of social support and an influential protective factor against depression in older marriages, older women have less spouse support than older men. According to the findings, older women are at increased risk for depression due to poorer marital satisfaction and spousal support.

KEYWORDS: Marital Satisfaction; Depression; Older Adults; Spouse Support.

KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGE

1. The association between marital satisfaction and depression is strongest in the oldest cohort compared to young and middle-aged adults.
2. Older women are more likely to suffer from depression than their male counterparts, despite both genders being at risk. Furthermore, older women reported poorer marital satisfaction than older males.
3. While high levels of spouse support are more protective than support from others against depression in older adults for both genders, less spouse support is associated with a higher risk of depression for older women.
4. Based on the literature review, it is suggested that prioritizing to increase spouse support and marital satisfaction during young marriages might help cope with depression during older ages, particularly for women.

INTRODUCTION

Marital satisfaction, an extended term referring to the quality of a marriage in terms of marital happiness (Lewis & Spanier, 1979), is strongly associated with well-being (Robles, 2014; Uchino, 2006). Although marriage is a protective factor for health and well-being in older adults (Carr & Springer, 2010), long-term marriages have also been linked with depression (Proulx et al., 2007; Whisman & Uebelacker, 2009). This review study examines the relationship between marital satisfaction and depression in older adults.

Literature Review

Depression is defined as helplessness, hopelessness, and sadness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 155-189). Although older adults are less likely to develop depression compared to younger adults, depression is one of the most common mental issues among older adults (Blazer et al., 1988; Kim et al., 2018) and public health problems because of its serious consequences. Nearly 15% of older adults in community samples have clinically significant depression symptoms (Blazer, 2003). The aging adult population in Turkey has increased by 22.5% in the last five years (Turkish Statistical Insititue, 2021) and severe antidepressants are more prescribed to the older adult population compared to the other age groups (Karakus, 2021). Findings demonstrated that older adults with depressive symptoms had poor functioning (Cole et al., 1999).

Furthermore, older adults are more likely to have cognitive disturbances, somatic symptoms, and loss of interest than younger adults due to depression (Fiske et al., 2009). It is also stated that suicide in older adults is higher than in younger adults and is more closely associated with depression (Fiske et al., 2009). More specifically, older adults with depression are at risk of disability and mortality (Rodda et al., 2011).

A myriad of studies focuses on understanding the factors associated with depression in older adults (Brodady et al., 2001; Heun et al., 2001; Maier et al., 2021; Roh et al., 2015). While race or ethnicity is not associated with the prevalence of depression (Swenson et al., 2000), various factors, including marital status, gender, and lack of social support, contribute to depression in older adults (Choi & Ha, 2011; Cohen et al., 2009; Djernes, 2006). Consistent with the literature, studies conducted with Turkish older adults demonstrated that being female and widowed contributes to depression among older

adults (Kekovali et al., 2002).

Although a large body of literature highlighted that married individuals have good physical and mental health (Carlson, 2012; LaPierre, 2009; Robards et al., 2012; Spiker, 2014),

marriage is also viewed as a risk factor for depression in older adults (Cole & Dendukuri, 2003; Sewitch et al., 2004). Current findings indicate that marriage is not beneficial for all spouses (Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Williams, 2003), and having better physical and mental health is closely associated with the quality of the marital relationship (Bloch et al., 2010; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008; Jabalamelian, 2011) instead of marital status. While high-quality marriages are beneficial for health and well-being, low-quality marriages may be harmful (Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Proulx et al., 2007). Marital satisfaction is a term that refers to marital quality, including positive feelings, thoughts, and positive communication about each other (Rao, 2017).

Many studies have focused on the relationship between marital satisfaction and mental health variables, particularly depression (Bodenmann & Ledermann, 2008; Gilmour et al., 2022; Katz et al., 2000). Research conducted with married people, including older adults, highlighted the negative association between marital satisfaction and depression (Du Rocher Schudlich et al., 2011; Herr et al., 2007; Proulx et al., 2007; Rao, 2017; Whisman, 2001; Whisman & Uebelacker, 2009). The marital discord model of depression states that dissatisfying marriages and lower levels of spousal support are associated with the onset or maintenance of depression symptoms among married people (Beach et al., 1990). Marital stability has been linked to well-being (Proulx et al., 2007; Whisman & Uebelacker, 2009). Thus, it is stated that negative interactions are less dominant in older marriages (Carstensen et al., 1995) compared to middle-aged couples, and marital satisfaction tends to decrease during the middle of marriage and increase again in later life (Gagnon et al., 1999). However, Umberson et al. (2006) highlighted that marital happiness decreases over time. Consistent with this, a study by Bookwala and Jacobs (2004) investigated the association between marital satisfaction and depression among young, middle-aged, and older adult cohorts and found the strongest association in the oldest cohort. A longitudinal study by Ulrich-Jakubowski et al. (1988) found that while marital discord was not associated with greater depressive symptoms over 15 months, an increase in depressive symptoms predicted a

subsequent decrease in marital satisfaction in older adults for older men, unlikely younger counterparts. Consistent with this, longitudinal studies conducted with older adults highlighted that depression predicts marital satisfaction (Pruchno et al., 2010; Wright, 1990). The relationship between marital satisfaction and depression differs for older adults than younger counterparts.

Gender differences are substantial in marital satisfaction as well as depression. Studies investigated the marital quality among married individuals demonstrated that married women are generally reported to show less marital satisfaction (Amato et al., 2007; Kamp Dush et al., 2008; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009), and they consistently have lower marital satisfaction (Umberson et al., 2006) compared to men. Regarding gender differences, older women also reported lower levels of marital satisfaction than older men (Bulanda, 2011; Cohen et al., 2009; Windsor & Butterworth, 2010). Likewise, marital satisfaction and gender are critical indicators of depression in older adults. Although both older women and men are at risk for depression (Chen et al., 2014; Cheung & Mui, 2021), older women have high prevalence rates of depression compared to older men (Alvarado et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2014; Faulkner et al., 2007; Van de Velde et al., 2010). As women become older, the negative impacts of unhappy marriages on their physical and mental health become more pronounced. Therefore, older women are at risk of experiencing lower marital satisfaction, which leads to negative well-being outcomes (Bulanda et al., 2016; Hawkins & Booth, 2005), particularly depression (Whisman & Uebelacker, 2009).

Walker et al. (2013) stated that although marital satisfaction is important in the relationship between health and well-being, factors that account for long-term marriages remain unclear. Furthermore, in unions where both husband and wife report higher levels of marital dissatisfaction, only the wives reported depression (Gotlib & Whiffen, 1989). Whisman et al. (2004) highlighted that women are more affected by marital discontent and depression. Similarly, Dehle and Weiss (1998) stated that marital quality is a better predictor of depressive moods than husbands in marriage. Thus, it can be concluded that older women are the vulnerable population to having a higher prevalence of depression due to lower marital satisfaction than older men. Although there are various factors in the relationship between marital satisfaction and depression in older women,

spouse support is one of the critical factors.

Findings demonstrated that marriage is more closely tied to the wife's well-being due to the importance of emotional climate and spouse support among women in marriages (Read & Grundy, 2011; Sandberg & Harper, 2000). Banes and Duck (1994) stated that social support provides that an individual is appreciated and cared for by others and has also been found to be one of the critical factors in the relationship between marital satisfaction and depression (Beach et al., 1986; Khan & Aftab, 2013), particularly in women (Amiri et al., 2012; Hoseini et al., 2015).

Marriage is one of the close relationships that provide social support from their partner in older adults. According to (Curun, 2006), spousal support helps feel emotional closeness and more connection among couples. While the higher spousal support is negatively associated with a lower level of depression for both women and men (Choi & Ha, 2011), the lower level of spousal support and higher depressive symptoms are positively associated in women (Ciftci Aridag et al., 2019). Partnerships, such as marriage relationships, become increasingly vital as individuals age. Even though family and friends had a greater protective effect on older women's depression, high levels of spouse support were found more protective against depression in older adults for both genders than support from others (Druley & Townsend, 1998). In contrast, while less spouse support was associated with a higher risk of depression for older women, no such effect emerged for older men (Choi & Ha, 2011). Insufficient spousal support influences the association between marital satisfaction and depression in older women.

Depression is associated with the marital status of older persons, and the effect of marital status on depression may differ by gender. Older women, in particular, get less spousal support than older men; spousal support and marital satisfaction have a greater influence on depression in older women than in older men.

DISCUSSION

Depression is one of the psychiatric disorders with the highest rate among older adults, and it becomes chronic and reduces the quality of life when it is untreated (Blazer et al., 1988; Muller-Spahn & Hock, 1994). Findings demonstrated that getting older is not only a factor associated with increasing the risk of depression and various including gender, marital

status, and spousal support, contribute to depression in older adults (Druley & Townsend, 1998; Du Rocher Schudlich et al., 2011; Kockler & Heun, 2002). This review study examines depression in older adults from a marital satisfaction perspective.

A recognized marital relationship plays a significant role in late-life development (Hoppmann & Gerstorf, 2009). Although being married is a protective factor for depression in older adults (Gutierrez-Vega et al., 2018; Padayachey et al., 2017), particularly dissatisfying marriages may also be harmful to physical and mental health in older adults (Sewitch et al., 2004).

Concerning gender differences, findings demonstrated that female older adults have more depression than men counterparts (Alvarado et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2014; Faulkner et al., 2007; Van de Velde et al., 2010). Kockler and Heun (2002) stated that older women and men have partially distinct symptoms of major depression from each other, and these differences are derived from gender differences in the perception and the expression of depressive syndromes. Furthermore, older women also reported lower levels of marital satisfaction than older men (Bulanda, 2011; Cohen et al., 2009; Windsor & Butterworth, 2010). Thus, it can be said that older women and men might have different insights and coping with problems such as retirement, chronic health conditions, decreased social ties, and factors related to their marriages.

Findings highlighted the negative association between marital satisfaction and depression in older adults (Bookwala & Jacobs, 2004; Whisman & Uebelacker, 2009) as a result of the moderation role of age in this relationship (Wang et al., 2014). Furthermore, regarding the gender differences in marital satisfaction and depression, studies highlighted the importance of marital satisfaction on depression in older women (Gagnon et al., 1999). Length of marriage contributed to marital satisfaction for women (Shek, 1995). Regarding the positive correlation between age and length of the marriage, it can be said that individuals in unhappy marriages have more likely to experience greater marital dissatisfaction during their older period, which can lead to depression.

However, the direction of the relationship between marital satisfaction and depression is reciprocal in the literature. While the marital discord model of depression stated that dissatisfying marriages and lower levels of spousal support are associated with

the onset or maintenance of depression symptoms among married people (Beach et al., 1990), the stress generation model suggested that poor psychological well-being associated with stressful communication with spouse turns to marital dissatisfaction (Davila et al., 1997). Although it has been found that higher marital satisfaction is positively associated with greater psychological well-being (Proulx et al., 2007), longitudinal studies conducted with older people stated that depression predicts marital satisfaction (Pruchno et al., 2010; Wright, 1990). Thus, future studies are needed to examine the factors related to marital satisfaction and depression in long-term marriages that longitudinally help improve older adults' quality of life.

Spousal support is one of the key components explaining the relationship between marital satisfaction and depression. Although minimizing contact with one's spouse disadvantages older adults (Bookwala & Jacobs, 2004), marriage support becomes more critical in older ages, particularly women. Older women having less spouse support experienced more significant depressive symptoms than older men (Choi & Ha, 2011). While spouse support is positively associated with marital satisfaction (Cutrona, 1996; Mickelson et al., 2006; Sung & Joo, 2011), marital satisfaction is negatively associated with depression (Khan & Aftab, 2013; Miller et al., 2013; Woods et al., 2019). It is clear that the absence or lower levels of spousal support for older women leads to lower marital satisfaction and more vulnerability to depression than older men.

One of the possible explanations for the importance of spouse support in older women might be related to caregiving roles. Traditional gender roles are also contributing factors to women's dissatisfaction in marriages (Beach et al., 2003). Besides being a mother, a wife, and a housewife in most marriages, women are also expected to do a variety of additional duties (Dempsey, 2002). They are also predominant caregiving providers (Sharma et al., 2016), particularly in spouse caregiving, due to the higher rates of chronic illnesses and disabilities among older adults (Gao et al., 2007). A meta-analysis study by Pinquart and Sorensen (2006) stated that women caregivers reported more depression than male caregivers due to higher levels of burden and caregiving tasks than men.

Based on the literature findings on marital satisfaction and depression in older adults, it is obvious that more studies are needed to understand better how long-term marriages are associated with depression in

older adults. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that there is a limited number of studies focusing on investigating the relationship between spousal support, which leads to marital dissatisfaction and depression in older adults. While numerous cross-sectional studies examined the relationship between marital satisfaction and depression, they have some significant methodological limitations. Davila et al. (2003) stated that the association between marital satisfaction and depression is bi-directional. A causal relationship between these variables could not be possible with cross-sectional data. Also, Beach et al. (2003) stated that dissatisfied partners provide less support in their marriages, likely negatively affecting their spouse's mental health. However, most of the studies include older adult samples instead of couples. More research is required to determine the intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships between depression, spousal support, and marital satisfaction in older married couples. Lastly, we have little knowledge about this relationship in literature except in America, Asia, and Europe. More specifically, to understand which type of spouse support is associated with marital satisfaction and depression and its relationship with marital satisfaction and depression between their own and partners, it is necessary to test mediating and moderating effects in older couples from a dyadic perspective in Turkey.

In light of the association between marital happiness and depression in older adults, this study reveals a variety of personal and public health implications. Considering older adults' psychological well-being and its association with the quality of late-life marriages, focusing on improving marital functioning helps to cope with psychological problems. Also, prioritizing to increase spouse support and marital satisfaction during young marriages helps to cope with depression in older ages, particularly for women. It is suggested that psychoeducation modules emphasize supporting marital roles, including caregiving among couples, particularly for women to increase social support and preserve psychological well-being. While working with older depressive women, examining marital satisfaction and spousal support in more detail is suggested. Also, as a public health strategy, providing resources to help caregivers helps to reduce depression in older women.

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