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Emotional Flexibility as a Mediator between Love Styles and Self-Compassion: A Multi-Group SEM of Divorcing and Non-Divorcing Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine and compare the structural relationship between love styles and self-compassion mediated by emotional flexibility in divorcing and non-divorcing women.

Methods and Materials: Using a correlational research design based on structural equation modeling (SEM), the study was conducted on 400 women (200 divorcing and 200 non-divorcing) selected through multistage cluster sampling from counseling centers across Tehran in 2024. Instruments included the Self-Compassion Scale (K. Neff, 2003), the Triangular Love Scale (Sternberg, 1986), and the Emotional Flexibility Scale (Fu et al., 2018). Data were analyzed using SPSS v26 and AMOS v24. Bootstrapping was used to test mediating effects, and structural weights were compared between groups.

Findings: The proposed model had good fit indices in both groups. In divorcing women, passion and commitment had significant direct effects on emotional flexibility, while intimacy and passion influenced self-compassion. In non-divorcing women, all love components (intimacy, passion, and commitment) significantly predicted both emotional flexibility and self-compassion. Emotional flexibility significantly mediated the relationship between love styles and self-compassion in both groups, with stronger effects observed among non-divorcing women. The final model explained 89% and 62% of the variance in self-compassion for divorcing and non-divorcing women, respectively.

Conclusion: Emotional flexibility serves as a key psychological mechanism linking romantic love patterns to self-compassion. The findings underscore the importance of emotional regulation capacities in fostering compassion and resilience in the context of romantic relationships, especially in women facing marital transitions. .

Keywords: Emotional Flexibility, Love Styles, Self-Compassion, Divorce, Women.

Introduction

Separation—from the end of a first romantic relationship to divorce after years of marriage—is an emotionally challenging event (Sbarra & Manvelian, 2021). For some individuals, the difficulties of divorce diminish relatively quickly, and although the end of the relationship is challenging, it is relatively free of lasting consequences. For others, about 10–15% of those who experience divorce, the end of the relationship is filled with considerable emotional pain. Often, this pain can be a mixture of emotional experiences such as longing, regret, anger, conflict, jealousy, and rejection. The way individuals interact with their own psychological experiences of separation plays a key role in long-term adjustment (Chau et al., 2022). In this regard, the present study focused on self-compassion as one of the psychological strategies that individuals employ to cope with divorce—and difficult life experiences more generally (Heidecker, 2020).

Self-compassion, defined as being kind to oneself, holding one's pain in mindful awareness, and recognizing one's suffering as part of shared humanity (Neff, 2003a), is associated with improved psychological functioning, better coping with stressful events (Chishima et al., 2018), and reduced risk of psychopathology (Karakasidou et al., 2023). Although self-compassion is largely considered an internal and individual psychological process (Neff, 2003b). Sbarra & Manvelian, (2021) showed that individuals express self-compassion through articulating their thoughts and emotions, and that measured levels of self-compassion can predict psychological adjustment following marital separation. While evidence supporting the protective role of self-compassion continues to grow, relatively few studies have examined the related factors, variables, and the mechanisms through which these influence the development of self-compassion. Accordingly, the present study examined the relationships between love styles and emotional flexibility with self-compassion.

Compassion holds a central place in schema theory, since nearly all experiential strategies aim to help patients develop compassion toward themselves as children. Although the potential causal directions between love styles, emotional flexibility, and self-compassion have not yet been empirically tested, considering their shared developmental roots, meaningful relationships between them are plausible. The quality of romantic relationships and emotional inflexibility often result from adverse relational experiences with close figures in childhood, such as rejection, abuse, or overprotection. Longitudinal evidence indicates that warm and nurturing family environments during childhood and adolescence significantly predict secure attachment bonds with future romantic partners (Collins & Madsen, 2019; Temel & Atalay, 2020). Similarly, Boykin et al., (2018), found that survivors of childhood maltreatment are more vulnerable to psychological inflexibility. Moreover, childhood adversity has been shown to increase the likelihood of widowhood, divorce, or remaining single in women (Matsukura et al., 2023).

In this context, the present study evaluated and compared the relationships between love styles, emotional flexibility, and self-compassion in a sample of divorcing and non-divorcing women. Another aim was to explore the potential pathways and mechanisms through which love styles influence self-compassion. Specifically, the study tested the indirect effect of love styles on self-compassion mediated by emotional flexibility in both divorcing and non-divorcing women.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study utilized a correlational design within the framework of structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population included all divorcing and non-divorcing women who referred to counseling centers and psychological service institutions in Tehran during the second half of 2023. Using multistage cluster sampling, five centers were randomly selected from five different geographical zones of Tehran (north, south, east, west, and center), and then 400 women were selected from these centers as the final sample. Of these, 200 were divorcing women (referred to family courts with a divorce petition), and 200 were non-divorcing women (with no current or previous divorce proceedings), matched by age and education level.

Inclusion criteria included: (1) being married at least for one year, (2) age range between 20 to 45 years, (3) minimum education level of high school diploma, and (4)

willingness to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria involved: (1) presence of severe mental disorders as self-reported or diagnosed by a counselor (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder), and (2) incomplete responses to the questionnaire battery.

Instruments

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS): This 26-item tool, developed by (Neff, 2003a), measures the degree of self-compassion across six subscales: self-kindness (items 5, 12, 19, 23, 26), self-judgment (items 1, 8, 11, 16, 21), common humanity (items 3, 7, 10, 15), isolation (items 4, 13, 18, 25), mindfulness (items 9, 14, 17, 22), and over-identification (items 2, 6, 20, 24). Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Reverse scoring is applied to negative items. Scores are summed within each subscale, and the overall self-compassion score is obtained by averaging across subscales. (Neff, 2003a) reported high reliability (Cronbach's α = .92) and good convergent validity with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (r = .59).

Triangular Love Scale (TLS): Developed by Sternberg, (1986), this 45-item scale assesses intimacy (items 1–15), passion (items 16–30), and commitment (items 31–45). Items are rated on a 9-point scale from 1 = not at all to 9 = completely. Higher scores indicate greater intensity in each component. Sternberg (1997) reported strong validity and internal consistency (α = .90 for intimacy, .80 for passion, and .80 for commitment).

Emotional Flexibility Scale (EFS): Developed by Fu et al., (2018), this 10-item measure assesses emotional flexibility on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). (Fu et al., 2018) reported Cronbach's α = .78 and adequate construct validity based on confirmatory factor analysis indices (CFI = .96, NFI = .98, NNFI = .97, IFI = .98, GFI = .98, RMSEA = .078). Since the scale had not been psychometrically validated in Iran, it was translated and piloted on 100 participants (divorced and non-divorced women). The Persian version demonstrated Cronbach's α = .77 and satisfactory construct validity using first-order confirmatory factor analysis.

Procedure

Following approval of the research proposal by the Psychology Research Council of Islamic Azad University, Arak Branch, and the issuance of an ethics code from the University's Biomedical Research Ethics Committee, official letters of introduction were obtained. Stage one involved identifying family counseling and psychological centers across Tehran. In stage two, 10 districts were randomly selected from the city's 22 districts. In stage three, two active centers per district were randomly chosen (20 centers in total). At these centers, the researcher explained the study objectives, sample characteristics, instruments, and procedures to the administrators. Subsequently, participant files were screened, and eligible women (both divorcing and non-divorcing) were contacted by phone. After obtaining informed consent and assuring confidentiality, participants were invited to complete the questionnaires either in person at the centers or online via an electronic link. Participation was voluntary, and no time limit was imposed for completing the instruments. Recruitment continued until the required sample size was achieved. At the end of data collection, participants were thanked and informed that results would be shared upon request.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in both descriptive and inferential phases. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were used to examine demographic characteristics and study variables. Inferential analyses included Pearson correlation coefficients, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 24. To test the mediating role of emotional flexibility, bootstrapping procedures in AMOS were applied. Model testing also included comparisons using structural weights. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

In this study, 200 divorcing women and 200 non-divorcing (normal) women were examined. The mean age of the divorcing women was 31.40 ± 3.24 years (range: 25–40), and the mean age of the non-divorcing women was 35.21 ± 2.50 years (range: 23–40). Demographic data indicated that in the divorcing group, 112 women (56%) held a high school diploma, 60 women (30%) had less than a diploma, and 28 women (14%) had an academic degree. In the non-divorcing group, 100 women (50%) held a high school diploma, 80

women (40%) had less than a diploma, and 20 women (10%) had an academic degree.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of study variables in divorcing and non-divorcing women (N = 400)

Variable	Group	Mean	SD	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
Love Style: Intimacy	Divorcing	70.15	29.92	19–119	0.10	-0.95
	Non-divorcing	84.30	27.88	50–129	0.52	-1.20
Love Style: Passion	Divorcing	80.49	20.74	22–111	-0.72	1.39
	Non-divorcing	92.50	25.85	32–121	-0.94	0.47
Love Style: Commitment	Divorcing	68.59	26.31	31–119	0.30	-0.69
	Non-divorcing	71.00	31.13	41–129	0.80	-0.83
Emotional Flexibility	Divorcing	45.18	12.75	19–69	0.23	-0.42
	Non-divorcing	52.40	11.70	30–69	-0.23	-0.70
Self-Compassion	Divorcing	73.89	18.25	47–111	0.45	-0.40
	Non-divorcing	75.80	20.40	54–113	0.70	-0.82

Table 2

Pearson correlation matrix for predictor, mediator, and outcome variables in divorcing women

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Intimacy	1				
2. Passion	0.44**	1			
3. Commitment	0.08	0.22**	1		
4. Emotional Flexibility	0.33**	0.62**	0.30**	1	
5. Self-Compassion	0.58**	0.36**	0.36**	0.38**	1

**p < 0.001; p < 0.05*

According to the correlation matrix, a significant positive relationship was found between love styles and both emotional flexibility and self-compassion among divorcing women. There was also a significant positive correlation between emotional flexibility and self-compassion ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3

Pearson correlation matrix for predictor, mediator, and outcome variables in non-divorcing women

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Intimacy	1				
2. Passion	0.52**	1			
3. Commitment	0.03	0.20**	1		
4. Emotional Flexibility	0.24**	0.70**	0.24**	1	
5. Self-Compassion	0.70**	0.36**	0.16*	0.34**	1

**p < 0.001; p < 0.05*

Similarly, among non-divorcing women, love styles were significantly and positively correlated with both emotional flexibility and self-compassion ($p<0.05$). Mahalanobis distances were computed. Since none exceeded the critical chi-square value at $p < 0.001$, no multivariate outliers were detected. Based on (Kline, 2023), all skewness values were < 3 and kurtosis values < 10, confirming univariate normality. Mardia's coefficients for divorcing and non-divorcing women were 3.442 and 4.762, with critical ratios of 1.247 and 1.485 respectively, both < 5, thus satisfying the assumption. No significant multicollinearity was observed based on Tolerance and VIF statistics.

The R^2 index shows the variance explained by the endogenous variables. (Cohen, 1992) described R^2 values of 0.26, 0.13, and 0.02 in structural equations as strong, medium, and weak, respectively. The coefficient of determination for the variable self-compassion in the structural model was 0.890, indicating that the exogenous and mediating variables—namely love styles and emotional flexibility—can predict 89% of the variance in self-compassion among divorcing women. This value is considered strong.

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strong, medium, and weak, respectively. The coefficient of determination for the variable self-compassion in the structural model was 0.62, indicating that the exogenous and mediating variables—namely maladaptive schemas, love styles, and emotional flexibility—can predict 62% of the variance in self-compassion among non-divorcing women. This value is considered strong. According to Table 4, standardized coefficients of all paths and their critical ratios in the proposed model can be observed.

Table 4

Standardized coefficients of the proposed model paths

Path	Group	Std. Estimate (β)	SE	CR	p-value
Love Style Intimacy → Emotional Flexibility	Divorcing	0.010	0.007	0.124	0.930
	Non-divorcing	0.162	0.025	2.109	0.035
Love Style Intimacy → Self-Compassion	Divorcing	0.481	0.124	6.756	<0.001
	Non-divorcing	0.520	0.130	6.930	<0.001
Love Style Passion → Emotional Flexibility	Divorcing	0.392	0.109	6.022	<0.001
	Non-divorcing	0.462	0.119	6.520	<0.001
Love Style Passion → Self-Compassion	Divorcing	0.251	0.059	3.362	<0.001
	Non-divorcing	0.342	0.095	5.210	<0.001
Love Style Commitment → Emotional Flexibility	Divorcing	0.330	0.089	4.914	<0.001
	Non-divorcing	0.470	0.123	6.630	<0.001
Love Style Commitment → Self-Compassion	Divorcing	0.101	0.027	1.152	0.202
	Non-divorcing	0.282	0.067	4.103	<0.001
Emotional Flexibility → Self-Compassion	Divorcing	0.372	0.096	5.277	<0.001
	Non-divorcing	0.501	0.132	6.790	<0.001

Results from Table 4 show that, among divorcing women, passion and commitment love styles had a positive and significant effect on emotional flexibility, while intimacy and passion love styles had a positive and significant effect on self-compassion. Emotional flexibility also had a positive and significant effect on self-compassion in this group. Similarly, among non-divorcing women, intimacy, passion, and commitment love styles had positive and significant effects on both emotional flexibility and self-compassion.

Table 5

Bootstrap results for indirect paths in the proposed model

Path (Indirect)	Group	Indirect Effect	SE	Lower CI	Upper CI	p-value
Intimacy → Self-Compassion via Emotional Flexibility	Divorcing	0.0037	0.0010	-0.0022	0.0142	0.570
	Non-divorcing	0.0800	0.0266	0.0175	0.1412	<0.001
Passion → Self-Compassion via Emotional Flexibility	Divorcing	0.1443	0.0586	0.0840	0.2112	<0.001
	Non-divorcing	0.2300	0.0670	0.1412	0.3251	<0.001
Commitment → Self-Compassion via Emotional Flexibility	Divorcing	0.1221	0.0552	0.0609	0.1830	<0.001
	Non-divorcing	0.2350	0.0679	0.1225	0.3330	<0.001

Bootstrap results indicate that indirect effects of passion and commitment on self-compassion through emotional flexibility were significant in divorcing women. In non-divorcing women, indirect effects of intimacy, passion, and commitment on self-compassion via emotional flexibility were significant.

Table 6

Direct effects: Critical ratios for differences between divorcing and non-divorcing women

Tested Path	Critical Ratio
Intimacy → Emotional Flexibility	*2.47
Intimacy → Self-Compassion	0.843
Passion → Emotional Flexibility	1.251
Passion → Self-Compassion	1.412
Commitment → Emotional Flexibility	*2.30
Commitment → Self-Compassion	*2.83
Emotional Flexibility → Self-Compassion	*2.02

Table 6 results show significant differences between divorcing and non-divorcing women in the direct effects of intimacy and commitment on emotional flexibility, and commitment on self-compassion. These effects were stronger in non-divorcing women. Similarly, the effect of emotional flexibility on self-compassion was significantly greater in non-divorcing women.

Table 7

Indirect effects: Critical ratios for differences between divorcing and non-divorcing women

Tested Path	Critical Ratio
Intimacy → Self-Compassion	*3.11
Passion → Self-Compassion	*3.21
Commitment → Self-Compassion	*4.17

Table 7 results show that indirect effects of intimacy, passion, and commitment on self-compassion differed significantly between divorcing and non-divorcing women, with stronger effects observed in non-divorcing women.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results showed that the direct effects of passion and commitment love styles on emotional flexibility among divorcing women were positive and significant. Another finding revealed that the direct effects of intimacy, passion, and commitment love styles on emotional flexibility among non-divorcing women were positive and significant. Furthermore, the strength of the relationship between intimacy and commitment love styles and emotional flexibility was greater among non-divorcing women compared to divorcing women. In reviewing the research background, no prior study was found that specifically examined the relationship between love styles and emotional flexibility; therefore, it was not possible to compare results or discuss reasons for potential similarities or differences.

In explaining the relationship between love styles and emotional flexibility, research has demonstrated that romantic relationships can be examined through the lens of attachment theory Shaver & Hazan (1987). According to this theory, an individual's relational tendencies can be seen as the result of early interactions that evolve with personal development (Bowlby, 1969). Thus, attachment becomes a central factor in experiencing relationships across the lifespan, working alongside the development of emotional regulation processes (Cassidy, 1994; Viddal et al., 2017). Supporting this, Levy & Davis (1988) found that the love styles eros and agape were positively correlated with secure attachment, while negatively correlated with avoidant attachment. Conversely, ludus was positively related to avoidant attachment and negatively related to secure attachment, while mania was positively correlated with anxious attachment.

The findings further showed that the direct effects of intimacy and passion love styles on self-compassion were positive and significant among divorcing women. For non-divorcing women, intimacy, passion, and commitment love styles had positive and significant direct effects on self-compassion. Additionally, the strength of the relationship between the commitment component and self-compassion was greater among non-divorcing women compared to divorcing women. These findings are consistent with studies by Fooladchang & Abbasi (2023); Kaufmann et al. (2023), and Dakers & Guse, (2022), which confirmed the relationships of attachment styles, parenting styles, and love styles with self-compassion.

Another key finding indicated that the stronger relationship between the commitment love style and self-compassion among non-divorcing women aligns with Sternberg, (1986) perspective. He argued that when individuals nurture and sustain the three components of love—intimacy, passion, and commitment—their marital relationships not only endure but also flourish. Commitment is a cognitive component of love that involves the short-term decision to love another and the long-term pledge to maintain love. In contrast, divorcing women often cite their partner's lack of commitment, or their own reduced sense of commitment, as a central cause of separation Pouragha & Sotoodeh Navroodi, (2023).

From an empirical perspective, studies have confirmed associations between self-compassion and marital satisfaction and cohesion for both men and women. These associations are present in both actor-actor relationships (e.g., a woman's self-compassion and her own marital satisfaction) and actor-partner relationships (e.g., a woman's self-compassion and her spouse's marital satisfaction) (Jiang et al., 2020). Research further revealed that couples with higher self-compassion tend to show greater empathy and care when their partners are distressed (Collins et al., 2014). The exchange of self-compassion has been linked with higher relationship satisfaction and lower levels of

conflict and divorce (Dawson et al., 2023). In addition, self-compassion is related to greater partner support, intimacy, and commitment (Fehr et al., 2014). Interestingly, the benefits of self-compassion are not only subjectively experienced but also acknowledged by partners: individuals with higher self-compassion are perceived by their spouses as more caring, accepting, and autonomous (K. Neff, 2003; Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Collectively, these findings suggest that higher levels of commitment and self-compassion are experienced in successful marriages, which explains the stronger correlations in the non-divorcing group.

The results also demonstrated that emotional flexibility had positive and significant direct effects on self-compassion among both divorcing and non-divorcing women. Moreover, the strength of this relationship was greater among non-divorcing women. This finding is consistent with studies by (McLean et al., 2018; Pyszkowska, 2020).

Theoretically, self-compassion is closely related to the process of emotional flexibility compassion (K. Neff, 2003; Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Emotional flexibility (Grol & De Raedt, 2021; Samson et al., 2022) is an integral part of cognitive flexibility and represents the ability to shift between emotional and non-emotional tasks depending on situational demands. Emotional flexibility emphasizes mindful awareness of thoughts and emotions as transient events, without attempting to alter them, and recognizing them as part of the shared human experience. This process fosters an open and accepting stance toward oneself and one's experiences, overlapping with the core elements of self-compassion: mindful awareness and self-kindness. Moreover, greater emotional flexibility enhances one's perspective on self and others, facilitating awareness of both personal and others' suffering, thus aligning with the common humanity element of self-compassion (Neff, 2003b).

The stronger correlation between emotional flexibility and self-compassion in non-divorcing women may be explained by their higher overall levels of emotional flexibility. Stressful circumstances such as marital conflict are inherently emotional, and how individuals respond—flexibly or rigidly—plays a critical role. Those with low flexibility tend to view stressors as uncontrollable, adopting rigid maladaptive responses (Lougheed & Hollenstein, 2016). Over time, such rigidity reduces tolerance for distress, leading to avoidance behaviors, feelings of failure, low self-worth, and helplessness (GÜNDÜZ, 2013; Kertz & Woodruff-Borden, 2013). These maladaptive responses increase marital conflict and, ultimately, divorce. In contrast, individuals with higher emotional flexibility can reinterpret stressors adaptively, reducing the tendency toward divorce.

The study also revealed that emotional flexibility mediated the relationship between love styles (passion and commitment) and self-compassion in divorcing women, as well as between love styles (intimacy, passion, and commitment) and self-compassion in non-divorcing women. Importantly, the strength of the indirect effects was greater among non-divorcing women. This suggests that women in stable, long-term relationships experience higher levels of intimacy, passion, and commitment, which foster greater flexibility in facing relational challenges. Such flexibility promotes openness toward the self and experiences, thereby increasing self-compassion.

When stressful or challenging experiences occur, partners in close relationships must draw on both intrapersonal skills (e.g., flexibility) and interpersonal skills (e.g., communication, support, self-compassion, empathy). Failure to do so in a way that fosters mutual understanding, care, and value diminishes relationship quality and may generate further stressors (e.g., more conflict, more avoidance). From this perspective, rigid, inflexible responses can be conceptualized as vulnerabilities carried by individuals with avoidant or anxious attachment styles, undermining family and relational dynamics Daks & Rogge, (2020). High emotional flexibility, however, enables individuals to approach experiences (including failure) with openness and accuracy, facilitating self-compassionate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Neff, 2003b).

The stronger mediating role of emotional flexibility in the relationship between love styles (intimacy, passion, and commitment) and self-compassion among non-divorcing women likely stems from their higher levels of relational intimacy, passion, and commitment.

Overall, results indicated significant differences in the structural model of the relationship between love styles and self-compassion through emotional flexibility in divorcing and non-divorcing women. The indirect effects of emotional flexibility were stronger in the non-divorcing group. Thus, love styles may influence

women's levels of self-compassion both directly and indirectly through emotional flexibility, with distinct patterns emerging between divorcing and non-divorcing women.

This study focused on divorcing and non-divorcing women attending counseling centers in Tehran; therefore, caution is warranted in generalizing the results to other populations. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the design, causal inferences cannot be drawn. Furthermore, the study relied on self-report measures, which may not fully align with actual behavior and may be subject to social desirability bias. Another limitation was participants' reluctance to participate, which reduced sample diversity.

Future studies should employ larger samples across diverse cultures and cities to improve generalizability. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to trace changes over time and establish causal relationships. Additionally, future research could combine self-report measures with observational or interview data to strengthen validity.

It is suggested that strategies grounded in intimacy, passion, and commitment be developed to enhance self-compassion among both divorcing and non-divorcing women. Given the direct impact of emotional flexibility on self-compassion, interventions such as educational workshops to improve emotional flexibility are recommended as a means to promote self-compassion, preparedness, and resilience in these groups.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

By the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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