



## Research Paper

### The Effectiveness of Building a Lasting Connection (BLC) Premarital Program on Marital Engagement, Emotional Security, and Literacy of Couples during Marriage



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#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The aim of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of Building a Lasting Connection Premarital Program on Marital Engagement, Emotional Security, and Literacy of couples during marriage.

**Methods:** The method of this research is a pre-test-post-test semi-experimental with a control group, and the statistical population includes all married couples in Ferdowsi University of Mashhad who have been married for at least 6 months. From the research population, 24 couples were selected based on the available sampling method and then randomly assigned to groups. Participants in the experimental group received 5 2-hour training sessions on the sustainable link-building program, whereas participants in the control group received no training. The tools used included the Marital Participation Questionnaire, the Revised Emotional Security Questionnaire (ISQ-R), and the Iranian Family Psychological Functioning Scale (IFPFS). SPSS 26 statistical software, descriptive statistics, and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were used for data analysis.

**Results:** According to the present study, the Building a Lasting Connection training program improved marital engagement, emotional security, and couples' literacy during marriage among participants in the experimental group compared with the control group. The effect sizes for the variables of marital engagement, emotional security, and couples' literacy were 0.759 ( $p<0.001$ ), 0.835 ( $p<0.001$ ), and 0.745 ( $p<0.001$ ), respectively.

**Conclusion:** Based on the results of the present study, the premarital educational program, grounded in the model of building a lasting connection during the marriage period, can help improve couples' relationships on the eve of marriage.

#### Key words:

Couples Therapy, Emotional Security, Marital Engagement, Psychological Functioning

## 1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important decisions in a person's life, which can have a significant impact on various aspects of life and mental health. A successful marriage can reduce anxiety and depression and increase

feelings of happiness and satisfaction. On the other hand, if marriage is not approached consciously and in healthy conditions, it may lead couples toward separation. Therefore, awareness and preparation before marriage

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can play an important role in improving mental health and marital sustainability (Mortezaei, 2022; Sommer, 2015). In Iran, the initiation of a marital life between a man and a woman begins with the recitation of marriage vows, and the quality of their relationship during this period is a primary focus in marriage counseling sessions (Miller, 2021). The period before marriage provides an opportunity for couples to practice responsibility, deepen their self-knowledge, and assess their capabilities (Sarvari et al., 2023). At this stage, couples experience a more transparent and profound relationship, gradually preparing for new experiences such as consulting on issues, establishing deeper emotional bonds, and setting new boundaries for interactions with extended family and friends. Consequently, challenges may arise during this period, emphasizing that the way couples communicate can significantly impact the future of their marital life and, in some cases, lead to divorce and separation (Razavi et al., 2018).

Regarding this issue, statistics indicate an increase in divorce rates in Iran, a concerning trend. According to data released by the National Organization for Civil Registration of Iran, based on the 2020 census, the divorce rate increased by 36% compared with 2019. In 2020, for every three marriages, one divorce was registered. Research conducted in 2022 identified key factors contributing to divorce, including behavioral issues between couples, unmet emotional needs, lack of psychological preparedness for marriage, and premarital relationship history (Miri et al., 2022). There is also a significant relationship between family relationships, conflict resolution styles, and marital burnout in couples seeking divorce (Javdan et al., 2023).

Given these insights, the importance of premarital education is increasingly apparent. This phase offers an opportunity to empower couples, and premarital education programs support successful marriages and help prevent marital breakdown. Participation in these programs enhances the readiness and strengthens the multiple skills of couples (Mansourinia et al., 2011). A 2022 study examined the perceptions of individuals seeking divorce regarding premarital education and counseling. The findings highlighted that premarital education enables individuals to understand their partner, their perspectives, and potential differences. This realization, especially among those who had not taken premarital education and counseling seriously, became more evident (Yadsaye et al., 2022).

One of the key factors contributing to a fulfilling marital life is marital engagement. Recently, clinical researchers have examined variables related to the interdependence of couples in relationships, shifting the focus from intrapersonal factors to interpersonal ones. According to

their perspective, achieving marital happiness requires viewing the relationship as a third entity. In other words, instead of perceiving themselves as independent individuals, couples should embrace their relationship through a "we-ness" perspective (Singer et al., 2015; Johnson, 2019).

In a flexible marital relationship, we-ness plays a crucial role, as it encourages couples to engage in mutual investment in their relationship. This mutuality enables them to maximize their relational benefits and succeed in fostering a fulfilling bond (Fergus & Skerrett, 2015). However, this mutuality and we-ness does not mean the elimination of personal interests or independence. Rather, it reflects the alignment of couples in working toward their shared goals while maintaining their individual identities (Singer et al., 2015).

An essential factor related to this "we-ness" and marital partnership is emotional security. Emotional security is defined as feeling safe and comfortable with vulnerability within the relationship. Establishing emotional security requires building complete trust between partners (Cordova, 2007). In line with the concept of emotional security in dealing with disagreements in marital relationships, recent studies have examined the impact of emotional security on couples' adaptability. For example, a 2021 study found that emotional intelligence plays a significant role in resolving marital conflicts and can contribute to improving relationship quality (Suri & Kochhar, 2021). Trust develops when each partner considers the other as a part of themselves, fostering interdependence (Bagarozzi et al., 1984). Secure attachment and a sense of security in couples are directly linked to marital flourishing and partnership (Kusumawardhani et al., 2024).

According to Cordova's theory, safety disagreeing is a subset of emotional security. This means each partner can express differing opinions without fear of rejection from their spouse (Cordova, 2007). Developing the capacity to understand and accept opposing views requires emotional literacy. Ripley defines emotional literacy as the ability to recognize, understand, and appropriately express one's emotions, as well as the capacity to understand and respond to others' expressed emotions (Ripley, 2008).

High levels of emotional literacy reduce the emotional distance between couples, decreasing the likelihood of emotional separation. Numerous studies have shown that couples who understand their emotions and the impact of this understanding on their relationship enhance the quality of their marital life (Lyusin, 2006; Johnson, 2019). Additionally, the emotional literacy of couples, as future parents, predicts the problem-solving and emotion regulation skills of the next generation (Bozkurt Yükçü & Demircioğlu, 2021).

Various studies indicate that premarital education encourages couples to establish more constructive communication (Boyce et al., 2016). Johnson, a pioneer of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), asserts that emotionally focused couple therapy improves family dynamics by enhancing positive interactions, leading to a more stable family system (Johnson, 2012). Emotion-focused couples therapy can significantly increase self-efficacy and reduce burnout, emotional exhaustion, and mental fatigue (Shehnifayz et al, 2024). Over the years, multiple premarital education protocols have been developed, each addressing different aspects of marriage and related issues. Some of these models include: the “Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts” (SYMBIS) model, based on Bowen’s concept of self-differentiation, the Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (PICK) program, based on the Attachment Theory for close relationships, and Olson’s Marriage Enrichment Program, emphasizing various areas such as marital expectations, communication, conflict resolution, and more (Dion, 2005).

While the effectiveness of these models has been validated in numerous studies, they have often underemphasized the role of emotion in marital relationships and its importance in premarital counseling. This research, therefore, seeks to examine the effectiveness of this emotional dimension in premarital education. The EFT approach, developed by Johnson, integrates perspectives from the Attachment Approach, the Systematic Approach, and the Humanistic Approach. Compared to other approaches to couple therapy, EFT is more experiential (Johnson, 2019). Research supports the effectiveness of this approach in enhancing variables such as emotional self-regulation, reducing marital conflicts, fostering marital adjustment, and improving couples' satisfaction (Shokri et al., 2022).

Studies show that training couples in emotional skills significantly affects their adaptability and engagement in the relationship (Qadiri et al., 2018). Additionally, research indicates that group-based training is highly effective due to the opportunity for deep learning. In group settings, couples benefit from observing other couples, comparing their relationships, and more effectively processing the educational content (Gilmore & Jorgensen, 2019). Consequently, implementing group-based emotionally focused therapy offers greater efficacy (Borjali & Mehradsadr, 2021; Johnson, 2012).

One educational program developed for couples, based on the Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) approach, is the Building a Lasting Connection (BLC), designed by Gilmore and Jorgensen in 2019. Inspired by Johnson's emotion-focused therapy, BLC emphasizes experiential learning and centralizing the relational process between

couples. It consists of five core components: attachment, relationship, managing differences, physical contact, and common goals. These components are sequentially structured, with each stage building on the last, facilitating progressive growth in the couple's relationship (Soleimani et al., 2021; Gilmore & Jorgensen, 2019).

The BLC program is a novel approach conducted in a group and experiential format. According to experiential learning theory, individuals experience greater growth when learning is grounded in direct experience (Kolb, 2014). Thus, couples who participate in experiential learning programs are expected to achieve more sustained outcomes. Research indicates that participants recall experiential segments of the BLC program more effectively than other parts (Kasten, 2022). Unlike traditional premarital interventions that primarily focus on didactic instruction and cognitive-based strategies, the BLC program emphasizes experiential learning and interactive engagement, fostering deeper emotional and relational growth. Many conventional premarital programs rely on passive learning, where couples receive information about relationship skills without actively applying them in real-life scenarios. However, research suggests that experiential learning approaches, such as those implemented in the BLC program, enhance long-term retention, emotional engagement, and practical skill application (Capps, 2022). For instance, a phenomenological study exploring the lived experiences of couples who attended an experiential, attachment-based premarital workshop found that participants could not recall the lecture content, but they could remember what they experienced and felt during the experiential segments. This highlights the effectiveness of experiential learning in promoting lasting relational skills (Capps, 2022). Furthermore, the BLC program's group-based structure provides social support and shared learning experiences, which can enhance motivation and reinforce behavioral changes. Compared to self-guided or lecture-based premarital interventions, experiential approaches allow couples to practice conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and communication skills in a dynamic setting, leading to greater relational resilience and lasting positive outcomes. A review of research-based interventions on marriage preparation emphasizes the importance of incorporating interactive components in premarital programs to effectively build and maintain healthy, connected, and committed relationships (Futris & Schramm, 2015). Given these advantages, integrating experiential learning into premarital interventions is essential for promoting stronger, more adaptive marital relationships and preventing relationship distress in the long term. This study investigates whether the BLC approach influences marital engagement, emotional security, and emotional literacy among engaged couples.

## 2. Materials and Methods

**Study Design:** This research is applied in purpose and quantitative in data collection. The study adopts a semi-experimental, pre-test, post-test control group design, utilizing convenience sampling. The target population includes all married students at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad in the 2023-2024 academic year who have been in the engagement period for at least six months. The target population of the present study includes all married students studying at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad during the academic year 2023-2024, who have been engaged for at least six months.

**Inclusion Criteria:** Participants must meet the following criteria: (1) engaged couples who have been married for a minimum of six month(1) Couples who are in the engagement period and have been engaged for at least six months; (2) a score above 75 on the A.R.E. questionnaire; (3) aged between 20 and 35; (4) consent to participation via signed consent forms.

**Exclusion Criteria:** Participants were excluded if they: (1) used psychiatric medication or had a history of psychological disorders; (2) were engaged in other therapeutic programs; (3) opted to withdraw from sessions; (4) had significant evidence of physical violence in their relationship; (5) had active extramarital affairs or addiction issues; (6) missed more than two sessions.

An initial sample of 27 couples was selected based on these criteria. Of these, one couple was participating in another therapeutic program, and two couples were unable to attend due to work commitments, leaving a final sample of 24 couples (12 in the intervention group and 12 in the control group). The sample size was 12 couples for each group based on similar studies.

### Instruments

**Marital Engagement Questionnaire:** Developed by [Singer and Labunko-Messier \(2005\)](#) to assess mutuality in relationships, this 10-item Likert-scale questionnaire measures the importance couples place on "us" versus individual needs, encompassing areas such as household responsibilities, financial decision-making, child-rearing, sexuality, communication, future planning, and interactions with extended family. Higher scores (range 10-70) indicate greater mutuality. The results of Singer and Labunko's study on the validity of this questionnaire showed that it is reliable. In men, Cronbach's alpha was 0.86; in women, 0.91, indicating internal consistency of the items. In Iran, the overall reliability coefficient was 0.90 ([Fallahi, 2018](#)).

**Intimate Safety Questionnaire-Review (ISQ-R):** Developed by [Cordova and Scott \(2001\)](#), this 28-item questionnaire measures perceived security and vulnerability in relationships across five subscales: emotional safety, physical/sexual safety, safety being yourself, safety in public, and safety disagreeing. Scores range from 0 to 112, with higher scores indicating greater emotional security. Reverse-scored items include 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 28, 27, 26, 24, 23, 20, 16, 15, and 14. Internal consistency reliability is 0.88, with Cronbach's alpha reported as 0.93 for men and 0.96 for women.

**Iranian Family Psychological Function Scale (IFPFS):** Developed by [Kimiiae et al. \(2012\)](#) to assess various family psychological functions, this 92-item instrument includes 12 subscales, such as relation, achievement, emotional literacy, spirituality/religion, entertainment, alliance, structure/organization, safety, conflict resolution, visiting relatives, independence, and control. Emotional literacy, used in this study, consists of 10 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (7 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). Higher scores reflect greater functionality. The internal consistency reliability for this subscale is 0.83, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89.

The intervention group participated in a five-session BLC program, with each session lasting two hours over four weeks, while the control group received no intervention. The implementation of the study followed a structured procedure. Initially, in line with the research objectives, a wide-scale announcement was made at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad to recruit participants. Subsequently, among the couples who volunteered, a selection was made according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. These participants were then randomly assigned to two groups, each consisting of 10 couples. Following this stage, as a pretest, questionnaires were distributed to participants in both groups, who were asked to complete them. Following the pretest, the educational intervention, which involved training in the Secure Attachment Bonding Program, was delivered in five sessions, each lasting two hours, over four weeks. This intervention was delivered exclusively to the experimental group by the researcher. Finally, in the posttest, both groups were asked to complete the questionnaires again to assess the impact of the intervention. Data were analyzed using SPSS-26. Descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, and standard deviation) were used to summarize demographic characteristics, while inferential statistics (specifically ANCOVA) were employed to test hypotheses given the pre-test/post-test design and control-group setup.

**Table 1. Content of Bonding Learning Curriculum Sessions (Gilmore & Jorgensen, 2019)**

Session	Session Content
<b>Session 1</b>	The first session began with an introduction and familiarization among the participants, followed by a welcome address. Participants provided written informed consent to take part in the study, and the group rules and intervention guidelines were presented by the facilitator. The pretest was administered, and an initial discussion was conducted to introduce the intervention topic related to marital relationships. The relationship hierarchy model was explained, and participants were introduced to the concept and understanding of love. Couples learned about the Love Map concept and received an overview of strategies for enhancing it. Additionally, John Bowlby's Attachment Theory was introduced, covering attachment styles in children and adults, the Attachment Cycle Model, as well as the concepts of vulnerability and risk in relationships. As part of the session, a practical exercise, "Two Hearts Beating as One," was conducted to reinforce the key themes discussed.
<b>Session 2</b>	In this session, a group discussion was conducted regarding the exercises and assignments provided. The main focus of the session was on communication. At this stage, emphasis was placed on teaching effective communication skills. Various types of communication, communication styles, and conversational connectivity were explained. Additionally, proper methods of conversation and other essential communication skills were introduced. A sharing exercise was conducted to foster deeper communication, and relevant assignments were given in this domain. Furthermore, an introduction to the mat and its initial use was provided. Couples were encouraged to focus on each other's positive aspects to deepen their relationships, and communication strategies for enhancing intimacy were explored. The session also addressed the importance of active listening in fostering intimacy, and specific exercises were introduced to help participants develop proper listening skills. Overall, this session aimed to equip couples with the necessary skills to express their concerns and issues in a manner appropriate to their specific circumstances.
<b>Session 3</b>	In this session, a group discussion was conducted regarding the exercises and assignments presented in the previous session. Emotions were defined, and participants were guided in recognizing both their own and their partners' emotions. Key topics such as mirror neurons, the limbic system, empathy, and the physiological effects of emotions were explored. Additionally, an explanation was provided on understanding one's own negative cycle (pursuer/withdrawer dynamic). A practical exercise was conducted to experiment with mirror neurons. Furthermore, discussions were held on coping strategies for stress and unmet needs that can contribute to tension in relationships. Attachment bonds were highlighted as a significant topic, along with the issue of relationship distress. Overall, this session focused on managing differences, identifying negative cycles between couples, and strategies for disrupting these patterns effectively.
<b>Session 4</b>	In this session, a discussion was conducted on the exercises and assignments, accompanied by key educational points. The following topics were then explored: satisfied vs. dissatisfied partners, the power of touch, non-sexual physical intimacy, the definition of caressing, levels of romantic touch, gender differences and variations in sexual wiring, four key elements of a fulfilling sexual relationship, and types of sexual intimacy (functional, reassuring, and bonding). Additionally, an exercise on discussing one's own sexual relationship was introduced and assigned as homework. Conversations aimed at fostering sexual intimacy were also emphasized. Overall, the objective of this session was to explain the concept of healthy sexual relationships, highlight gender differences in this domain, and define various types of sexual intimacy.
<b>Session 5</b>	Following the discussion on the assigned exercises and tasks, the session focused on the Stable Communication Map, which consists of five stages: (1) Getting to Know One's Partner, (2) Emotional Connection, (3) Trust, (4) Commitment, and (5) Physical Connection. Additionally, the importance of family rituals, roles, and goals was emphasized. Exercises related to cherished memories of rituals and reminiscence were conducted. Another key objective of this session was the formation of a couple's identity. Towards the end, a review of the program, a summary of key takeaways, and guidance for the future were provided. A post-test was also completed. Moreover, changes in the relationship or individual development were assessed. Overall, the final session aimed to educate couples on sharing goals and constructing shared roles in their relationship (Soleimani et al., 2021).

### 3. Results

In total, 24 couples were analyzed, with 12 in each group. The mean age of participants in the intervention group was  $27.85 \pm 3.73$ , while the control group was  $27.85 \pm 3.63$ , with ages ranging from 21 to 34 in both groups. In the intervention group, 70% of couples had been in a relationship for 6-12 months, while 30% had been together

for over 12 months. In the control group, these figures were 80% and 20%, respectively.

The mean and standard deviation for marital partnership, emotional security, and emotional literacy variables were reported for both the intervention and control groups across pre-test and post-test scores (Table 2).

**Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Dependent Variable Scores in the Intervention and Control Groups**

Dependent Variable	Intervention Group		Control Group		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
<b>Marital Engagement</b>	Pre-test	63.25	15.70	60.40	18.02
	Post-test	87.05	7.01	59.95	17.56
<b>Emotional Security</b>	Pre-test	36.90	10.47	34.65	12.67
	Post-test	54.60	7.47	34.15	12.19
<b>Emotional Literacy</b>	Pre-test	34.05	8.21	31.10	9.58
	Post-test	44.5	3.36	30.75	9.48

Table 2 displays the descriptive indices of the dependent variables (marital engagement, emotional security, and emotional literacy) in the pre-test and post-test for both the intervention and control groups. The difference in mean scores between the experimental and control groups in both pre- and post-tests indicates positive changes in marital engagement, emotional security, and emotional literacy in the post-test phase for the intervention group compared to the control group.

To assess the impact of the Building a Lasting Connection (BLC) pre-marital program on marital engagement, emotional security, and emotional literacy among couples, multivariate covariance analysis (MANCOVA) was utilized. Before presenting the results

of the MANCOVA test, key assumptions were verified. The normality of score distribution was examined using skewness and kurtosis values. Since these values for the measured variables fall within the range of -2 to +2, the scores are considered normally distributed. The Levene's test results for homogeneity of variance were not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). The results of Levene's test for the marital engagement variable are ( $p=0.507$ ,  $F=0.45$ ), for the emotional security variable ( $p=0.246$ ,  $F=1.38$ ), and for the couple's emotional literacy variable ( $p=0.291$ ,  $F=1.14$ ). The M-Box test results were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $F = 3.88$ ,  $df_1 = 6$ ,  $df_2 = 10462.189$ ), suggesting that other tests, such as Wilks' Lambda, were used due to the significance level being less than 0.05.

**Table 3.** Multivariate Covariance Analysis to Compare Marital Engagement, Emotional Security, and Emotional Literacy in Intervention and Control Groups

Test Name	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	p-value	Effect Size
<b>Pillai's Trace</b>	0.85	64.24	3	33	<0.001	0.854
<b>Wilks' Lambda</b>	0.15	64.24	3	33	<0.001	0.854
<b>Hotelling's Trace</b>	5.84	64.24	3	33	<0.001	0.854
<b>Roy's Largest Root</b>	5.84	64.24	3	33	<0.001	0.854

The results in Table 3 indicate a statistically significant difference between the intervention and control groups on the combined dependent variable (a linear

combination of marital engagement, emotional security, and emotional literacy), after controlling for pre-test scores ( $F = 64.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Wilks' Lambda = 0.15).

**Table 4.** Results of Multivariate Covariance Analysis for Marital Engagement, Emotional Security, and Emotional Literacy in Post-test Phase

Dependent Variable	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p-value	Effect Size
<b>Marital Engagement</b>	Group	2815.21	1	2815.21	175.31	<0.001	0/834
	Error	562.06	35	16.06			
	Total	84667	40				
<b>Emotional Security</b>	Group	1255.17	1	1255.17	101.02	<0.001	0/743
	Error	434.88	35	12.42			
	Total	60162	40				
<b>Emotional Literacy</b>	Group	5911.12	1	5911.12	108.17	<0.001	0/756
	Error	1912.63	35	54.65			
	Total	230224	40				

The results of multivariate covariance analysis indicate that, controlling for pre-test scores, the intervention group effect on marital engagement, emotional security, and emotional literacy scores at the post-test phase is statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). In other words, the Building a Lasting Connection (BLC) pre-marriage program significantly increased marital engagement, emotional security, and emotional literacy in the experimental group compared to the control group in the post-test phase. The effect sizes for marital engagement, emotional security, and emotional literacy were 83.4, 74.3, and 75.6, respectively.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, the effectiveness of the sustainable bond building program training on couples' marital participation during marriage was examined. The results

showed that the sustainable bond building program training significantly increased the marital participation of couples in the experimental group compared to the control group. The results of the present study are consistent with the results of the research of [Shabaninia et al. \(2022\)](#), [Vatani et al. \(2021\)](#), [Denton et al. \(2000\)](#), and [Skerrett \(2015\)](#). A summary of the explanations of these studies is given below. [Shabaninia et al. \(2022\)](#) have shown in their research that emotion-focused therapy, by weakening cycles of negative interactions, rebuilding interaction patterns, and encouraging the emergence of new solutions to solve old communication problems, leads to the promotion of marital intimacy and greater bonding and attachment between couples, and as a result, it leads to the improvement of couples' sexual desires (which is one of the areas of marital partnership).

Vatani et al. (2021) have reported in their research that emotional structures are very important in finding a compromise with stressful events. Suppression of emotions and feelings in the long term causes relationships to deteriorate, and emotion-focused therapy improves communication (which is one of the dimensions of marital partnership) by helping couples to vent emotionally and express their needs. Denton and colleagues' research suggests that one of the underlying issues in emotion-focused couples therapy is security (which is one of the elements of marital partnership). This approach views severe marital distress as a response to a threat to the attachment bond. The results of this research suggest that EFCT increases marital satisfaction by processing attachment-related issues (Denton et al., 2000). Furthermore, the findings of this study indicated that the *Building a lasting connection* training program led to a significant increase in couples' emotional security in the experimental group compared with the control group. These results are consistent with the findings of Habibollahi Najafabadi and ZareNeyeatanank (2023), Ghoraishi (2020), and Bagheri et al. (2022). A summary of the explanations provided in these studies is presented below. The findings of Habibollahi Najafabadi and ZareNeyeatanank (2023) suggest that *Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)* enhances marital intimacy—one of the fundamental components of emotional security—by improving mental health and self-esteem in each spouse. By reducing interpersonal tensions, EFT fosters greater intimacy between partners, which in turn strengthens emotional security.

Ghoraishi (2020) reported that the emotionally focused approach is effective in reducing marital conflicts, which are key elements of emotional security. EFT facilitates couples' access to their core emotions and underlying needs, reconstructing their interactions and generating new relational cycles. Through learning and internalizing these new cycles, couples experience fewer conflicts and greater emotional security. Bagheri et al. (2022) highlighted that EFT includes specific strategies for the externalization of unexpressed needs and self-disclosure, both of which contribute to emotional security (Mikaeili et al., 2025). Their study suggests that a substantial portion of marital difficulties stems from couples' inability to timely and appropriately express their emotions and needs. Moreover, emotional divorce is rooted in this inability. Bagheri et al. emphasized that training couples to express not only positive emotions but also negative ones—such as anger, sadness, and resentment—enhances their responsiveness to one another, ultimately improving emotional security in their relationship.

The results of this study regarding the significant increase in couples' emotional literacy are consistent with the results

of Moayed et al. (2023) and Seidyousefi et al. (2023). A summary of the explanations of these studies is given below. Moayed et al.'s research shows that one of the main goals of the emotion-centered approach is the regulation and management of emotions (which is a subset of emotional literacy). In explaining the effectiveness of this therapy, it can be said that it is a method that has a significant impact on the role of emotions and the way they are understood and expressed. By focusing on couples' emotions, this therapy helps them to understand their own emotions, as well as to correctly understand the emotions of the other party and to react to them in the correct way. This ability in the world of couples leads their emotional literacy towards further improvement (Moayed et al., 2023). According to the research report by Seidyousefi et al., emotion-focused couple therapy is effective on spouse acceptance (which is one of the elements of emotional literacy). In fact, this research uses the acceptance-rejection theory to explain this hypothesis. This theory states that the perception of rejection, which is the opposite of acceptance, leads to emotional instability, and in emotion-focused couple therapy, the therapist's entire effort is to help couples on the path of correcting immature emotions and stabilizing newer emotions. The more stable these positive emotions become in the relationship between couples, the better acceptance occurs in the relationship, and therefore, it can be said that the couple has acceptable emotional literacy (Seidyousefi et al., 2023).

The present study examined the effectiveness of the *Building a Lasting Connection* program in enhancing marital engagement, emotional security, and emotional literacy among engaged couples. The findings show that this intervention significantly improves marital engagement, security, and emotional literacy in the experimental group compared to the control group. These findings align with previous research by Shabaninia et al. (2022), Vatani et al. (2021), Denton et al. (2000), Skerrett (2015), Habibollahi Najafabadi & ZareNeyeatanank (2023), Ghoraishi (2020), and Bagheri et al. (2022).

Consistent with the present study, research by Shabaninia et al. (2022) on the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) showed that this treatment reduces infidelity risk and enhances marital quality. EFCT enhances marital intimacy and strengthens couples' bonds by weakening negative interaction cycles, rebuilding interactive patterns, and encouraging novel problem-solving strategies for long-standing relational issues (Shabaninia et al., 2022). Additionally, emotion-based structures are crucial for managing stressful events. Long-term suppression of emotions can damage relationships, but EFCT supports couples by fostering emotional expression, which enhances communication, a key element of marital engagement (Vatani et al., 2021).

A study by Denton et al. with 40 couples who participated in an eight-session EFCT program showed improved couple adjustment, positive emotions, and intimacy satisfaction, leading to increased marital satisfaction overall. Denton's findings emphasize that security is essential to the emotional connection and that severe marital distress often stems from threats to attachment bonds. EFCT addresses this by helping couples process issues related to secure attachment, thereby increasing marital satisfaction (Denton et al., 2000).

Empathy, another key component of EFCT, significantly impacts marital engagement by fostering emotional awareness and mutual support between partners, even when facing relational differences (Skerrett, 2015). EFCT helps couples enhance empathy through positive problem-solving strategies, ultimately improving relationship satisfaction (Perrone-McGovern et al., 2014). It is beneficial for couples to perceive their relationship as a dynamic, shared entity rather than solely as individual interests. Each partner should go beyond their personal concerns, fostering a focus on their partner's well-being. The BLC program, an emotion-focused intervention, enhances empathy and promotes mutual understanding, thereby improving marital engagement.

By promoting mental health and self-esteem for each partner, EFCT helps reduce tension, thereby enhancing marital intimacy—a core aspect of emotional security (Habibollahi, Najafabadi & ZareNeyeatanank, 2023). Research indicates that EFCT effectively reduces marital conflict by helping couples access fundamental emotions and needs, restructure their interactions, and create new relational cycles. Through these newly learned cycles, couples experience fewer conflicts and greater emotional security (Ghoraihy, 2020).

A significant issue among couples is the inability to express emotions and needs accurately and in a timely manner. EFCT focuses on effective emotional expression, encouraging couples to articulate both negative and positive emotions, thus enhancing responsiveness and, in turn, improving emotional security (Bagheri et al., 2022). Inadequate emotional expression leads to emotional withdrawal, ultimately causing intimacy erosion and, potentially, emotional divorce. By addressing underlying emotional issues, the BLC program, grounded in EFCT principles, promotes couples' functioning in various aspects of marital life. This approach helps couples manage and transform destructive patterns, fostering a more positive and secure bond, leading to greater satisfaction and emotional security.

Research by Moayed et al. (2023) shows that emotional regulation, a core aim of EFCT, plays a significant role in emotional literacy. By focusing on emotions, EFCT enhances couples' emotional literacy, equipping them

with the skills to understand their own emotions and respond effectively to their partner's feelings, thus fostering a healthier relational dynamic.

EFCT also impacts marital acceptance. According to Rohner's (2005) acceptance-rejection theory, perceived rejection fosters emotional instability, and EFCT addresses this by stabilizing new emotions and helping couples transition from immature emotional responses to healthier ones. This emotional stability encourages mutual acceptance in the relationship, leading to greater emotional literacy (Seidyousefi et al., 2023).

While EFCT predominantly focuses on emotions, the BLC program also emphasizes experiential learning, an essential element in developing and sustaining knowledge. As an interaction-focused program, BLC enables couples to immediately apply learned skills through interactive group exercises, thereby increasing the likelihood of integrating these practices into their everyday lives (Gilmore & Jorgensen, 2019). Other pre-marital programs include the Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts (SYMBIS) model, which is based on a cognitive-behavioral approach, and the Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge (PICK) program, which targets dysfunctional beliefs about relationships and marriage. In contrast, the BLC program focuses on enhancing emotional literacy among couples by addressing maladaptive relationship patterns, revealing underlying emotional vulnerabilities, and reconstructing them within a secure context. This process of emotional processing fosters intimacy and satisfaction and encourages partners to be open and supportive, thus enhancing emotional literacy and secure attachment (Atadokht et al., 2024).

Emotion-focused interventions enhance couples' awareness, foster emotional expression, and support their foundational needs, such as security, social connection, and engagement, promoting a healthier lifestyle and improving quality of life (Aali et al., 2022). Ultimately, pre-marital education can play a preventive role, potentially reducing relational harm for future generations. Emotional literacy, sense of security, and participation of couples are important elements of family functions. In sum, the findings of the current research showed that the training program for building a lasting connection, based on an emotionally focused approach, has been effective in enhancing the marital partnership, security, and emotional literacy of couples during marriage. Emotional literacy leads to understanding one's own emotions and the emotions of others. This issue causes a person to be emotionally involved, accessible, and responsive in a relationship, which are important elements of a safe relationship, in which both parties have considerable emotional security. The feeling of security in the relationship between couples directly affects the level of

their participation. On the other hand, the amount of participation and intimacy of couples increases their sense of security.

Emotion-focused therapy is a therapeutic approach in the field of couples therapy and is related to the basic components of relationship satisfaction. These components include: emotion regulation and attachment style. Emotion regulation means knowing compatible and incompatible emotions and using them to strengthen relationship satisfaction. Attachment style is also effective in creating intimacy between couples and reducing confusion between them.

The bond between couples is a stable relationship, and the quality of their relationship directly affects the quality of life, mental health of people, and the next generation. As a result, it is necessary for people to acquire skills such as marital partnership and emotional literacy in order to improve them. Therefore, the exercises of the sustainable bond building program in the early years of joint life provide these skills to couples and help them to coordinate with their spouses in a purposeful way; improve their level of emotional literacy, improve emotional security and partnership between themselves and their spouses, and finally experience a high quality of life.

#### Limitations of the Study:

This study had several limitations, including the use of a non-probability convenience sampling method, which requires caution in generalizing the results. Additionally, data collection was conducted through questionnaires as a self-reporting tool. Furthermore, the semi-experimental nature of the study and the inability to control all potential confounding variables may have affected the internal validity of the results.

#### Suggestions for Future Research:

Given that Building a Lasting Connection (*BLC*) is an emerging intervention, it is recommended that further research be conducted to examine its effectiveness on other psychological variables. Additionally, future studies could explore the implementation of *BLC* in different samples and populations. Moreover, comparing this program with other couple therapy interventions designed for the early years of a relationship, such as *PICK* and *SYMBIS*, could be a valuable topic for future research in this field.

## 5. Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

In the process of conducting this research, ethical guidelines were observed. The principle of confidentiality and the protection of information related to the questionnaires were maintained. Informed consent was obtained from the participants for their involvement in the training sessions.

Respectful communication with the participants and the preservation of their human dignity were prioritized. Adherence to the principle of honesty was ensured to build trust throughout all stages of the intervention.

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### Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the writing and interpretation of the results of the manuscript.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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