

# Better Together? Exploring the Relationship Between Constructive Conflict and Emotional Distress

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## INTRODUCTION

The current study explores how constructive conflict, partner trust, and quality time with a partner are related to emotional distress among married women. Mental health crises garner heavy attention from researchers and policymakers. One potential protective factor for mental health has been found to be high relationship quality (Shaigerova et al., 2021). Studies have found that individuals with higher relationship distress are associated with greater levels of anxiety and depression (Hammett et al., 2016). Additionally, gender differences have been reported among the causal paths between couple relationships and mental health (Fincham et al., 1997). The literature supports that facets of relationship functioning influence emotional distress, especially for women.

The current study is theoretically grounded in family systems theory to inform how effective relationship functioning can be associated with reduced emotional distress. There is also an emphasis on examining communication patterns, such as constructive conflict, within couple relationships (Satir, 1972).

## PARTICIPANTS

The data were collected through a federal Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) project. All data were collected during an intake assessment at a voluntary community-based marriage enrichment class with their spouse. The sample included 234 individual married women. The mean age of the participants in the sample was 42.44 years old. Additionally, 85.9% of the sample identified as white, 8.1% as black, and 6% identified as another race, with 26.1% of participants identifying as Hispanic. 31.8% of the respondents had no college degree, 11.6% had an associate's degree, 37.3% had a bachelor's degree, and 19.3% had an advanced degree.

## MEASURES

**Constructive Conflict** was measured using six items to capture respondents' perceptions of positive conflict resolution skills with their partner. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 = never to 4 = often. A higher score indicated better conflict management. An example item included, "My partner/spouse and I were good at working out our differences."

**Partner Trust** was measured using four items on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 strongly agree. Higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived partner trust. For example, "I trust my partner completely."

**Partner Quality Time** was measured using three items on a 4-point scale from 1 = less often to 4 = almost every day. The sample items were "In the past month, how often have you and your partner/spouse 1) laughed together and 2) talked to each other about the day?" Items were coded so higher scores indicated a higher frequency of quality time.

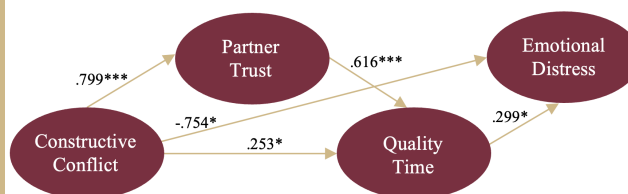
**Emotional Distress** was measured using six items on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = none of the time to 5 = all of the time. It asks respondents questions about how often they feel negative emotions. Items are coded so that higher scores indicate worse emotional distress. For example: "During the past 30 days, how often have you felt... Worthless?"

## DATA ANALYSES & RESULTS

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Model Variables (N = 234)

VARIABLE	MEAN	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Constructive Conflict	19.86	3.82	--			
2. Trust	13.39	2.63	.673**	--		
3. Quality Time	10.15	2.04	.602**	.665**	--	
4. Emotional Distress	11.08	3.91	-.435**	-.293**	-.182**	--

Note:  $p < .01$ \*\*, two-tailed.



**Figure 1.** Final Model of Direct and Indirect Paths

Note:  $p < .05$  \*  $p < .001$ \*\*\*, two-tailed;  $\chi^2(147) = 192.948$ ,  $p = .003$  CFI = .983 TLI = .980 RMSEA = .039 SRMR = .050

**Table 2.** Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Constructive Conflict to Emotional Distress

EFFECT	ESTIMATE	S.E.
<b>DIRECT</b>		
Constructive Conflict → Partner Trust	.799***	.034
Constructive Conflict → Quality Time	.253*	.104
Constructive Conflict → Emotional Distress	-.754***	.122
Partner Trust → Quality Time	.616***	.103
Quality Time → Emotional Distress	.299*	.136
<b>INDIRECT</b>		
Constructive Conflict → Partner Trust → Quality Time	.492***	.087
Constructive Conflict → Quality Time → Emotional Distress	.076	.049
Constructive Conflict → Partner Trust → Quality Time → Emotional Distress	.147*	.073
<b>TOTAL</b>		
Constructive Conflict → Quality Time	.745***	.043
Constructive Conflict → Emotional Distress	-.531***	.055

Note:  $p < .05$  \*  $p < .001$ \*\*\*, two-tailed.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationships between constructive conflict, partner trust, partner quality time, and emotional distress in married women. SEM analysis revealed that there were significant direct and indirect paths among the variables. There was a significant negative relationship when considering the total effect from constructive conflict through trust and quality time to emotional distress. This indicates that emotional distress, such as feelings of worthlessness, was negatively associated with the positive relationship strategies, such as constructive conflict and trust in the model.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION

This study highlights the influence of constructive conflict, partner trust, and quality time on emotional distress, offering evidence that strategies that promote healthy conflict management and couple trust may contribute to improved mental health. Additionally, it provides insight into the mechanisms driving the relationship between these variables. This contributes significantly to the literature by supporting the notion that relationship education and other therapeutic couple interventions aimed at strengthening relational functioning can positively influence mental health and well-being.

## KEY FINDINGS

To examine the relationship between the variables, the direct effects, indirect effects, and total effects in the model were examined in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017).

1. Consistent with the hypothesized model, there were significant positive direct effects from constructive conflict to trust (.799,  $p < .001$ ), and constructive conflict to quality time (.253,  $p = .015$ ), and the path from constructive conflict to emotional distress had a significant negative direct effect (-.754,  $p < .001$ ).
2. However, inconsistent with the hypothesized model, there was a positive direct relationship between quality time and emotional distress (.299,  $p = .028$ ).
3. The total effects of the path from constructive conflict to quality time had a significant positive effect (.745,  $p < .001$ ).
4. The total effects from constructive conflict to emotional distress had a significant negative relationship (-.531,  $p < .001$ ).