

Multidimensional Emotional Empathy among Middle Age Married Couples

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Abstract: Empathy bridges the divide between being separate individuals with different backgrounds, feelings and perspectives. Empathy is one of the most vital of emotional fitness skills, especially during difficult times for a person or in the phase of crisis. Therefore, the present study included middle aged married couple in the age range of 40-55 years (N=60) as they would be in the stage where they are often trapped in the “sandwich generation” crisis-simultaneously managing their adolescents’ developmental changes, handling peak career stress, navigating the declining health of aging parents. Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale (MDEES) developed by Caruso & Mayer (1998) was used to measure Empathy. Out of 60 participants, there were 30 women and 30 men participants. The participants were selected through voluntary response sampling technique. Independent t-test method was used to analyze the level of empathy and differences of empathy between the groups using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The obtained result 0.14 shows that there is no significant difference between Married Men and Married Women participants in Multidimensional Emotional Empathy. Based on the obtained results it can be concluded that Middle aged Married Couples who participated in the study had an average level of Empathy.

Keywords: Emotion, Empathy, Middle age, Married Couple

Introduction

Empathy goes beyond just feeling sorry for someone (sympathy). It involves three distinct layers:

- **Cognitive Empathy:** Understanding your partner's perspective and thinking process.
- **Emotional Empathy:** Physically and emotionally feeling what your partner feels.
- **Compassionate Empathy:** Taking supportive action based on that understanding.

Why It Matters for Middle-Aged Couples (40–55 years)

The middle-age brings unique, compounding stressors that can strain a marriage. Empathy is critical during this stage for several reasons:

- **Navigating the Empty Nest:** As children leave home, couples must transition from being "co-parents" back to being partners. Empathy helps couples understand each other's grief or excitement about this new chapter.
- **Managing Career Peaks and Burnout:** Ages 40–55 are often the most demanding career years. Partners need empathy to support each other through professional exhaustion, retirement planning, or unexpected career pivots.
- **Coping with Aging and Health Shifts:** This stage frequently brings physical changes, such as menopause, shifting metabolisms, or chronic health diagnoses. Empathetic partners validate these vulnerable body changes rather than ignoring them.
- **Balancing the "Sandwich Generation" Strain:** Many couples in this age range are simultaneously raising teenagers and caring for aging, ailing parents. Empathy prevents resentment when one partner is emotionally drained by family obligations.
- **Preventing Roommate Syndrome:** Without active empathy, long-term couples often stop communicating deeply. They default to logistics, which erodes intimacy and increases the risk of "gray divorce."

How to handle a situation where there is an Empathy Imbalance

An empathy imbalance occurs when one partner consistently provides emotional support while the other defaults to logic, dismisses feelings, or remains emotionally unavailable. Over time, the giving partner burns out, and the receiving partner becomes defensive.

1. Shift from Accusing to Expressing

Stop telling your partner what they are *not* doing. Address the gap by focusing on your own experience and needs using "I" statements.

- Avoid: "You never listen to me and you don't care how stressed I am about my parents."
- Use: "I am feeling completely overwhelmed by my parents' health issues right now. I just need you to hold my hand and listen for 10 minutes without trying to fix it."

2. Define Your Specific Needs

Decades of marriage can lead to the false assumption that your partner should automatically know what you need. Spell it out clearly before the conversation starts.

- **The "Traffic Light" Strategy:** Explicitly state the goal of the conversation.
- **Green Light:** "I just need to vent and get validation. Please don't offer solutions."
- **Yellow Light:** "I am processing this and want to bounce ideas off you."
- **Red Light:** "I am stuck and I actively need your help to solve this problem."

3. Identify and Remove the Barriers

An empathy deficit is rarely driven by a lack of love. In the 40–55 age range, it is usually caused by specific mental barriers:

- **The "Fixer" Mentality:** Many partners (often men, though not exclusively) translate love into problem-solving. They offer logic because they think that is how to protect you. Explain that listening *is* the solution.
- **Emotional Exhaustion:** If a partner is facing massive stress at work or navigating midlife changes (like menopause or male midlife transitions), their capacity for empathy shrinks.

4. Build Empathy Micro-Habits

Do not expect a sudden, massive shift. Instead, implement small, daily practices to rebuild the emotional muscle.

- **The 10-Minute Daily Check-In:** Spend 10 minutes a day talking *only* about feelings, stressors, or highs and lows. No talk about kids, finances, or household chores allowed.
- **The "Repeat Back" Tool:** During arguments, stop and have the less-empathetic partner repeat back what they heard before they reply. (e.g., "*What I hear you saying is that you feel alone in managing the house. Is that right?*")
- **Micro-Appreciation:** Notice and praise small moments of empathy. Saying, "*Thank you for just listening to me complain about work today, it really helped,*" reinforces the behavior.

5. Protect Your Mental Health

If you are the partner giving all the empathy, you must prevent total emotional depletion.

- **Diversify support:** Lean on close friends, siblings, or a therapist for emotional processing so your spouse isn't your sole outlet.
- **Set boundaries:** It is okay to say, "*I love you and want to support you through this work crisis, but I am too drained to process it right now. Can we talk about it tomorrow morning?*"

Evidence-based Couple therapy exercises you can try at home to rebuild Empathy

1. The Gottman "Stress-Reducing Conversation"

Goal: To practice cognitive and compassionate empathy by listening *only* to understand, not to judge or fix.

- **The Setup:** Sit facing each other without phones or TV. One partner spends 10–15 minutes venting about an *external* stressor (e.g., work, aging parents, a health issue). Do not use this time to talk about marital problems.
- **The Listener's Rules:**
 - Show genuine interest (nod, make eye contact).
 - Take your partner's side completely, even if their perspective seems irrational.

- Express an "us against the world" attitude.

- **The Empathy Phrases to Use:**

- *"That sounds incredibly frustrating."*
- *"I can totally see why you felt hurt by that."*
- *"What is the worst part of this for you right now?"*

2. The EFT "Speaker-Listener" Technique

Goal: To slow down communication, eliminate defensiveness, and ensure both partners feel heard during a mild disagreement.

- **The Setup:** Use a physical object (like a TV remote or a tennis ball) as the "Floor." Only the person holding the object is allowed to speak.
- **The Speaker's Role:** Speak in short paragraphs. Talk only about your own feelings and needs using "I" statements. Do not criticize, blame, or bring up past arguments.
- **The Listener's Role:** You cannot interrupt, argue, or defend yourself. Your only job is to listen and then summarize what your partner just said before you can speak.
- **The Empathy Test:** The listener says, *"What I hear you saying is [summarize their point], and it makes you feel [emotion]. Did I get that right?"* The speaker must agree you got it right before passing the object over.

3. The "Two Views" Perspective Shift

Goal: To build cognitive empathy by stepping entirely into your partner's shoes regarding a recurring gridlocked issue (e.g., chores, extended family, or finances).

- **The Setup:** Write down a minor, recurring argument you frequently have.
- **The Exercise:** Take turns presenting the *other* person's argument as if it were your own. You must use the first person ("I feel...") and state their case so accurately and fairly that your partner actually feels validated.
- **Example:** Instead of defending your spending, you say: *"From your perspective, when I spend money without checking in, it makes you feel unsafe because you are carrying the stress of our retirement planning."*
- **The Outcome:** This forces your brain to map your partner's emotional logic, breaking the cycle of viewing them as the "adversary."

4. The "Appreciation Bombardment"

Goal: To rewire your brain to notice the positive attributes of your partner, which builds a baseline of emotional empathy and warmth.

- **The Setup:** Dedicate 5 minutes right before going to sleep.
- **The Exercise:** Take turns sharing three highly specific things you appreciated about the other person that day. General statements like "Thanks for being great" do not count.
- **Example:** *"I really appreciated how you made the coffee this morning when you saw I was running late,"* or *"Thank you for being so patient with my mom on the phone today."*
- **The Outcome:** Over time, this shifts your focus from what your partner is *not* doing to what they *are* doing, restoring mutual fondness.

Method

1. Problem

To study the Level of Emotional Empathy among Middle-Age Married Couple.

2. Aim and Objective

Explore the Emotional Empathy of Married Men and Married Women aged 40-55 years.

3. Variables

Independent variable: Gender

Dependent variable: Emotional Empathy

4. Hypothesis

There is no significant difference between Middle-Age Married couples on Emotional Empathy.

5. Participants

The participants were 60 Married Couple (30 married women and 30 married men) in the age group of 40-55 years. Out of which women scored above average on the Empathy tool. Therefore their responses were chosen for further analysis. The participants were asked to fill demographic form along with a consent form for participation in the main research.

6. Materials

The tool which was used to accomplish the purpose of the study is Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale (MDEES) by Caruso & Mayer (1998).

Description of the tool: The items for the present scale was developed by categories such as "items denote a person who responds emotionally to others, who cries when they are sad, laughs when they are happy, and feels for animals, children and so forth".

Six negatively-worded items were included in the scale in order to reduce response. An attempt was made to include positive as well as negative emotional. A five-point response scale was used, where 1 was "Strongly Disagree" and 5 was "Strongly Agree".

Each response has a particular score assigned to it. The questions 4, 9, 13, 16, 20 and 27 are scored reverse like 5,4,3,2,1 The new empathy scale measures emotional aspects of empathy and can be used by researchers interested in a general measure of empathy as well as providing detailed subscales.

7. Procedure

For the purpose of this study, Married Couples in the age group of 40-55 years were contacted. The participants were approached with the consent form to take their permission for voluntary participation. Research questionnaires and queries of the participant were answered via Google forms. The responses were taken and the participant was thanked for their valuable time and support for the study. The filled responses scoring for each individual was done according to the purpose of the study. Thereafter, Independent Sample t-Test was used to identify if there is any significant difference between Men and Women in the Level of Emotional Empathy.

8. Results and Discussion

The present study wanted to understand the Level of Emotional Empathy among Married Couples. Therefore, Independent 't' test was used to study the difference between Married men and Married women.

Table showing Mean and Standard deviation of Empathy scores of Married Men and Married Women and 't' value for the difference between two groups on Level of Empathy.

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	't'
Level of Emotional Empathy	Married men	30	72.50	12.30	0.14
	Married women	30	72.00	15.10	(NS)

Table shows no significant difference was found in 't' value 0.14. The obtained mean value of Married Men participants is 72.50 with standard deviation of 12.30 and the obtained mean value of Married Women participants is 72.00 with standard deviation of 15.10.

The Intermediate values of degrees of freedom (df) is 58 and Standard Error of difference (SE) is 3.55.

This reveals on analyzing the data that the obtained difference value is considered to be not statistically significant. Therefore, the results show that there is no difference on Level of Emotional Empathy between Married men and Married women.

Limitations and Suggestions

The limitation of the research is the small sample size and the narrow age bracket (40–55 years) restricts findings to middle adulthood. The results cannot be generalized to younger newlyweds or older, retired couples who face different marital milestones. The Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale strictly captures emotional empathy (e.g., emotional contagion, positive sharing). It does not measure cognitive empathy (perspective-taking). Men and women might differ in how they intellectually understand a spouse's feelings, which this scale cannot track. Participants aged 40–55 grew up during similar socio-cultural shifts in gender roles. Their shared generational attitudes toward marriage and emotional expression may not reflect those of Generation Z or Millennials.

Since, the study was limited assessing only Emotional Empathy another study relating to psychological well-being, religion, emotional intelligence and Alexithymia should be good area for further research. Married Couples aged 40-55 years from Bengaluru districts were selected as participants for the study, a larger sample of

Married Couples representing different part of India with a larger sample size may yield better results and hence could be more generalizable.

Implication and Conclusion

A total of 60 samples were taken from the population among which 30 were Married men and 30 were Married women participants. Multidimensional emotional empathy scale by Caruso & Mayer (1998) was used for the present study. The data collected was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Parametric tests such as Independent Sample 't' test was used for analysis of data. The analyzed results was interpreted and discussed.

The findings indicate that there is no significant difference of Emotional Empathy between Married men and Married women. The mean score of both Married men and Married women level of Emotional Empathy is at somewhat similar level, suggesting that both the groups are Empathetic at a moderate level.

Psycho-Education, Family and marital therapy workshops can be organized at workplace or community centers for employers, employees, housewives, retired individuals to generate a better understanding and coping mechanism to deal with various issues in marriage life with their significant other effectively by incorporating the importance of Empathy in their life. Further research can be done to generate findings that can support the developmental projects which can lead to preventive measures.

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