The Mediating Role of Mindfulness in Explaining the Causal Relationships between Psychological Well-Being, Emotion Regulation, and Family Functioning in Firefighters

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Purpose: This study aimed to examine the mediating role of mindfulness in explaining the causal relationships between psychological well-being and emotion regulation with family functioning in firefighters.

Methodology: The research method was correlational, using structural equation modeling (SEM). The statistical population included married firefighters who were employed in fire stations in the southwestern districts of Tehran during the winter of 2022 and spring of 2023, with a minimum of two years of work experience and at least one year of marriage. Based on the recommendations of Hoyt and Kramer, 300 participants were selected voluntarily. For data collection, the Family Functioning Questionnaire (Epstein et al., 1980), the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003), the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989), and the Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer et al., 2006) were used. The statistical analysis results, based on structural equation modeling, indicated that the proposed structural model had a good fit with the collected data.

Findings: The indirect path coefficients between psychological well-being and the reappraisal component of emotion regulation with family functioning, as well as the total path coefficients between these variables and mindfulness with family functioning, were negative and significant. In contrast, the total and indirect path coefficients of the suppression component of emotion regulation with family functioning were positive and significant. Additionally, the findings revealed that emotion regulation, psychological well-being, and mindfulness could explain 57% of the variance in family functioning among firefighters.

Conclusion: Therefore, it can be concluded that enhancing psychological well-being, increasing mindfulness, and addressing emotion regulation strategies can contribute to improving family functioning.

Keywords: Psychological well-being, emotion regulation, mindfulness, family functioning

1. Introduction

Among all institutions, organizations, and social entities, the family holds the most crucial and valuable roles. Since the family institution generates human resources and serves as a gateway to other social institutions, it is considered one of the main pillars and fundamental structures of any society (Mohammadi et al., 2021; Sevari & Terahi, 2024; Urbańska-Grosz, 2024).

Various models, including the McMaster Model, exist for assessing and evaluating family functioning. This model was introduced by Epstein, Lawrence, Baldwin, and Bishop (1983) at McMaster University and is based on a systemic theory. It assesses six dimensions of family functioning, where some of these dimensions overlap or interact with each other. These dimensions, which significantly impact the physical and emotional health of family members, include problem-solving, communication, roles, affective involvement, affective responsiveness, behavioral control, and overall family functioning (Sevari & Terahi, 2024).

Psychological well-being is a notable construct within the field of positive psychology, first introduced by Ryff (1989). Among the models developed to define the stages and criteria of a good life and well-being, Ryff's model has gained widespread acceptance and has demonstrated relative stability. This model, with a developmental perspective on human capabilities, conceptualizes psychological well-being as comprising: (1) self-acceptance, (2) the ability to recognize and accept one's strengths and weaknesses, (3) purpose in life (meaning having goals and objectives that give life meaning), (4) personal growth (the sense that one's talents and potential are actualized over time), (5) positive relations with others (having close and meaningful connections with significant people), (6) environmental mastery (the ability to manage and regulate daily life matters), and (7) autonomy (the ability to pursue personal desires and act according to personal principles, even if they contradict social norms and demands) (Wang, 2024; Zhang, 2024).

One aspect of individual functioning is emotion regulation. Various studies have shown that individuals' ability to regulate emotions can play a crucial role in adapting to stressful life events (Tang, 2024; Zitzmann et al., 2024). Emotion regulation helps individuals identify maladaptive and ineffective beliefs and thoughts and replace them with flexible and adaptive strategies. Training in emotion regulation, by increasing the use of positive emotions and managing negative emotions, leads to improved cognitive, social, and emotional skills (Omidi et al., 2024; Razavi, 2024).

One key factor in regulating and recognizing emotions is mindfulness. Research findings have indicated that mindfulness can foster deeper awareness of emotions and feelings (Shojeyan et al., 2024; Sodani et al., 2024). Mindfulness is defined as paying attention in a particular way—purposefully, in the present moment, and without judgment (Sadeghian, 2024; Salah et al., 2024). Individuals who score higher on mindfulness scales are more aware of their daily activities and become more familiar with the automatic characteristics of their minds (such as the tendency to escape the present and engage with the past and future, or to judge changeable internal and external phenomena) and develop moment-to-moment awareness (Mohammad & Quoquab, 2024; Raugh & Strauss, 2024).

Given that an individual's occupation is interrelated with their personal and family functioning, and considering the importance and sensitivity of the firefighting profession, which is constantly accompanied by stress and tension, it appears that firefighters' ability to regulate emotions, their level of psychological well-being, mindfulness, and family functioning mutually influence each other. Therefore, the present study aimed to propose a model for predicting family functioning based on psychological well-being and emotion regulation, mediated by mindfulness, in firefighters.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study is applied in terms of its purpose and falls within the category of descriptive-correlational research, specifically structural equation modeling (SEM).

The statistical population of this study included married firefighters who were employed in fire stations in the southwestern districts of Tehran (Islamshahr, Baharestan, and Robat Karim) during the winter of 2022 and spring of 2023. Participants were required to have at least two years of work experience and have been married for at least one year.

According to Hoyt and Kramer (2004; translated by Sharifi et al., 2009), a sample size of 20–40 participants per predictor variable and its components is sufficient. Since emotion regulation has two components, psychological well-being has six components, and mindfulness is considered as a construct in this study, 25 participants were assigned per variable, leading to an estimated sample size of 300 participants.

The sampling method was non-random and voluntary. From a total of 40 fire stations, 25 stations were randomly selected. Firefighters employed in these selected units who met the inclusion criteria (work experience and marital duration) and were willing to participate were included in the sample.

2.2.   Measures

2.2.1.   Family Functioning

This questionnaire was developed by Epstein, Lawrence, Baldwin, and Bishop (1980) to assess family functioning based on the McMaster model. The questionnaire consists of 60 items, rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (4). It measures seven subscales: problem-solving (items 2, 12, 24, 38, 50, 60), roles (items 4, 10, 15, 23, 30, 34, 40, 45, 53), affective involvement (items 5, 9, 19, 28, 39, 49, 35, 57), communication (items 3, 14, 18, 29, 43, 52, 59), affective responsiveness (items 13, 21, 22, 25, 33, 37, 42, 54), behavioral control (items 27, 32, 44, 47, 48, 55, 58, 7, 17), and general family functioning (items 1, 6, 8, 11, 16, 20, 26, 31, 36, 41, 46, 51, 56). Higher scores indicate poorer family functioning. Each subscale score is calculated by averaging the respective item scores. The validity and reliability of this questionnaire were assessed by Epstein et al. (1983) on a sample of 503 participants, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.92, indicating good internal consistency. The validity analysis confirmed the ability of this questionnaire to differentiate between clinical and non-clinical families in its seven subscales at a significance level of 0.001. In Iran, Yousefi (2011) examined the psychometric properties of this questionnaire and reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83. The total variance explained by the seven factors was 20.36%. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha values were calculated as follows: problem-solving (0.58), communication (0.69), roles (0.66), affective involvement (0.71), affective responsiveness (0.77), behavioral control (0.73), and general family functioning (0.81) (Farsi, 2024).

2.2.2.   Emotion Regulation

This questionnaire was developed by Gross and John (2003) to measure emotion regulation strategies. It consists of two subscales: reappraisal (items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10) and suppression (items 2, 4, 6, 9). Participants respond using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree"

(1) to "strongly agree" (7). The reported Cronbach's alpha was 0.79 for reappraisal and 0.73 for suppression (Gross & John, 2003). Hosseini and Kheir (2019) found a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79 for reappraisal and 0.76 for suppression in an Iranian sample. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the questionnaire explained 47.71% of the total variance. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha values for autonomy (0.76) and reappraisal (0.74) were obtained (Razavi, 2024).

2.2.3.   Psychological Well-Being

This questionnaire was designed by Ryff in 1980. The original version consists of 120 items, while the short form contains 18 items. It includes six subscales: self-acceptance (items 2, 8, 10), positive relations with others (items 3, 11, 13), autonomy (items 9, 12, 18), purpose in life (items 5, 14, 16), personal growth (items 7, 15, 17), and environmental mastery (items 1, 4, 6) (Ryff & Singer, 2006; as cited in Safidi & Farzad, 2012). Responses are rated on a six-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (6) (Roeini et al., 2003). The correlation between the 18-item scale and the original scale ranged from 0.70 to 0.89. The internal consistency of the three-item scale was reported as 0.56 (Ryff, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2006; as cited in Safidi & Farzad, 2012). In Iran, Safidi and Farzad (2012) examined the psychometric properties of this questionnaire, and factor analysis indicated that four components explained 50.37% of the variance. Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was 0.73. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha values were calculated as follows: autonomy (0.58), self-acceptance (0.63), positive relations (0.71), environmental mastery (0.66), purpose in life (0.56), and personal growth (0.65) (Rasul, 2023).

2.2.4.   Mindfulness

This questionnaire consists of 39 items and five subscales: observing (items 1, 6, 11, 15, 20, 26, 31, 36), describing without labeling (items 2, 7, 12, 22, 27, 32, 37), acting with awareness (items 2, 7, 12, 22, 27, 32, 37), nonjudgmental acceptance (items 3, 10, 14, 17, 25, 30, 35, 39), and non-reactivity (items 4, 9, 1, 21, 24, 33). The questionnaire was developed by Baer et al. (2006) through the integration of items from the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (Walsh et al., 2006), the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003), the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills (Baer & Smith, 2004), and the Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer et al., 2003) using factor analysis. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert

scale ranging from "never or very rarely" (1) to "often or always" (5), with total scores ranging from 39 to 195. Higher scores indicate greater mindfulness. Baer (2006) conducted an exploratory factor analysis on a sample of university students, revealing suitable internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.75 to 0.91. Factor intercorrelations were moderate and statistically significant, ranging from 0.15 to 0.34. Ahmadvand (2013) reported test-retest reliability coefficients for the mindfulness questionnaire in an Iranian sample ranging from 0.55 to 0.83. Tamanaei Far et al. (2016) found that five components explained 49% of the variance. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha values were obtained as follows: observing (0.71), describing without labeling (0.76), acting with awareness (0.73), nonjudgmental acceptance (0.80), and non-reactivity (0.75) (Mohammad & Quoquab, 2024).

2.3. Data Analysis

For data analysis, both descriptive and inferential statistical methods will be used. In the descriptive analysis, measures such as frequency, mean, and standard deviation will be utilized. To analyze the collected data, structural regression equation modeling will be employed. Data

analysis will be conducted using SPSS 18 and AMOS 23 software.

3. Findings and Results

In the present study, 300 firefighters participated, with a mean age of 38.71 years (SD = 6.20) and a mean work experience of 12.27 years (SD = 6.06). Regarding education levels, 23 participants (7.7%) had below a high school diploma, 176 (58.6%) had a high school diploma, 17 (5.7%) had an associate degree, and 84 (28%) had a bachelor's degree or higher. The mean age of participants' spouses was 34.07 years (SD = 6.03). In terms of their spouses' education levels, 13 (4.3%) had below a high school diploma, 203 (67.7%) had a high school diploma, 9 (3%) had an associate degree, and 75 (25%) had a bachelor's degree or higher. The mean duration of marriage among participants was 12.92 years (SD = 5.67). Additionally, 9 participants (3%) had no children, 90 (30%) had one child, 175 (58.3%) had two children, and 26 (8.7%) had more than two children.

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficients among psychological well-being, the reappraisal and suppression components of emotion regulation, mindfulness, and family functioning.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation Coefficients Among Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Psychological Well-Being	65.63	13.47	-				
2. Emotion Regulation / Reappraisal	26.41	7.49	0.23	-			
3. Emotion Regulation / Suppression	18.54	4.23	-0.39	-0.21	-		
4. Mindfulness	120.90	16.41	0.44	0.28	-0.37	-	
5. Family Functioning	150.81	18.83	-0.41	-0.33	0.42	-0.39	-

According to Table 1, psychological well-being and mindfulness, along with the reappraisal component of emotion regulation, were negatively correlated with family functioning, while the suppression component of emotion regulation showed a significant positive correlation with family functioning.

To assess the normality of univariate data distribution, skewness and kurtosis values were examined, and to evaluate the multicollinearity assumption, the variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance values were calculated. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Assessment of Normality and Multicollinearity Assumptions

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis	Tolerance	Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)
Psychological Well-Being	-0.16	-0.03	0.61	1.65
Emotion Regulation / Reappraisal	-0.62	-0.19	0.95	1.06
Emotion Regulation / Suppression	-0.86	-0.93	0.59	1.69
Mindfulness	-0.64	-0.33	0.72	1.38
Family Functioning	0.03	0.87	-	-

As shown in Table 2, all skewness and kurtosis values were within the acceptable range of ±2, confirming the normality assumption for the data distribution. Additionally, the tolerance values for predictor variables were all greater than 0.1, and the VIF values were all below 10, supporting the assumption of no multicollinearity. According to Mirza et al. (2006), a tolerance value below 0.1 and a VIF above 10 indicate a violation of the multicollinearity assumption.

To assess the assumption of multivariate normality, the Mahalanobis distance was analyzed. The skewness and kurtosis values for Mahalanobis distance were 0.86 and 1.13, respectively, indicating that the data followed a multivariate normal distribution. Additionally, a scatter plot analysis of standardized residual variances confirmed that the homogeneity of variances assumption was met.

In the present study, psychological well-being, mindfulness, and family functioning were considered latent variables, forming the measurement model. It was hypothesized that psychological well-being was measured by the indicators of autonomy, self-acceptance, positive relations, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth; mindfulness was measured by observation, description, acting with awareness, non-judgment, and non-reactivity; and family functioning was measured by problem-solving, communication, roles, affective involvement, affective responsiveness, behavioral control, and overall functioning.

The model fit was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS 24.0 with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation. Table 3 presents the fit indices for the measurement and structural models.

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Measurement and Structural Models

Fit Indices	Measurement Model	Structural Model	Cutoff Value
Chi-Square (χ^2)	264.86	309.82	-
Degrees of Freedom (df)	132	162	-
χ^2/df	2.01	1.91	< 3
GFI	0.916	0.911	> 0.90
AGFI	0.879	0.872	> 0.85
CFI	0.924	0.920	> 0.90
RMSEA	0.058	0.055	< 0.08

As shown in Table 3, all fit indices obtained from CFA supported the acceptable fit of the measurement model with the collected data. The highest factor loading belonged to the non-reactivity indicator ($\beta = 0.792$), while the lowest loading was for problem-solving ($\beta = 0.423$). Since all factor loadings exceeded 0.32, it can be concluded that all indicators had sufficient power to measure the latent variables in the present study.

Following the evaluation of the measurement model, structural model fit indices were estimated and assessed. The structural model hypothesized that psychological well-being and emotion regulation predict family functioning directly and indirectly through mindfulness. Table 4 presents the path coefficients in the structural model.

Table 4

*Direct, Indirect, and Total Path Coefficients in the Structural Model*

Effect	Path	b	SE	β	p
Direct	Reappraisal → Mindfulness	0.184	0.078	0.191	0.041
Direct	Reappraisal → Family Functioning	-0.031	0.020	-0.089	0.231
Direct	Suppression → Mindfulness	-0.225	0.072	-0.271	0.001
Direct	Suppression → Family Functioning	0.078	0.026	0.290	0.001
Direct	Psychological Well-Being → Mindfulness	0.656	0.203	0.335	0.001

Direct	Psychological Well-Being → Family Functioning	-0.145	0.060	-0.227	0.032
Direct	Mindfulness → Family Functioning	-0.111	0.035	-0.342	0.001
Indirect	Reappraisal → Family Functioning	-0.020	0.008	-0.065	0.013
Indirect	Suppression → Family Functioning	0.025	0.010	0.093	0.004
Indirect	Psychological Well-Being → Family Functioning	-0.073	0.026	-0.113	0.001

Figure 1

Model with Path Coefficients
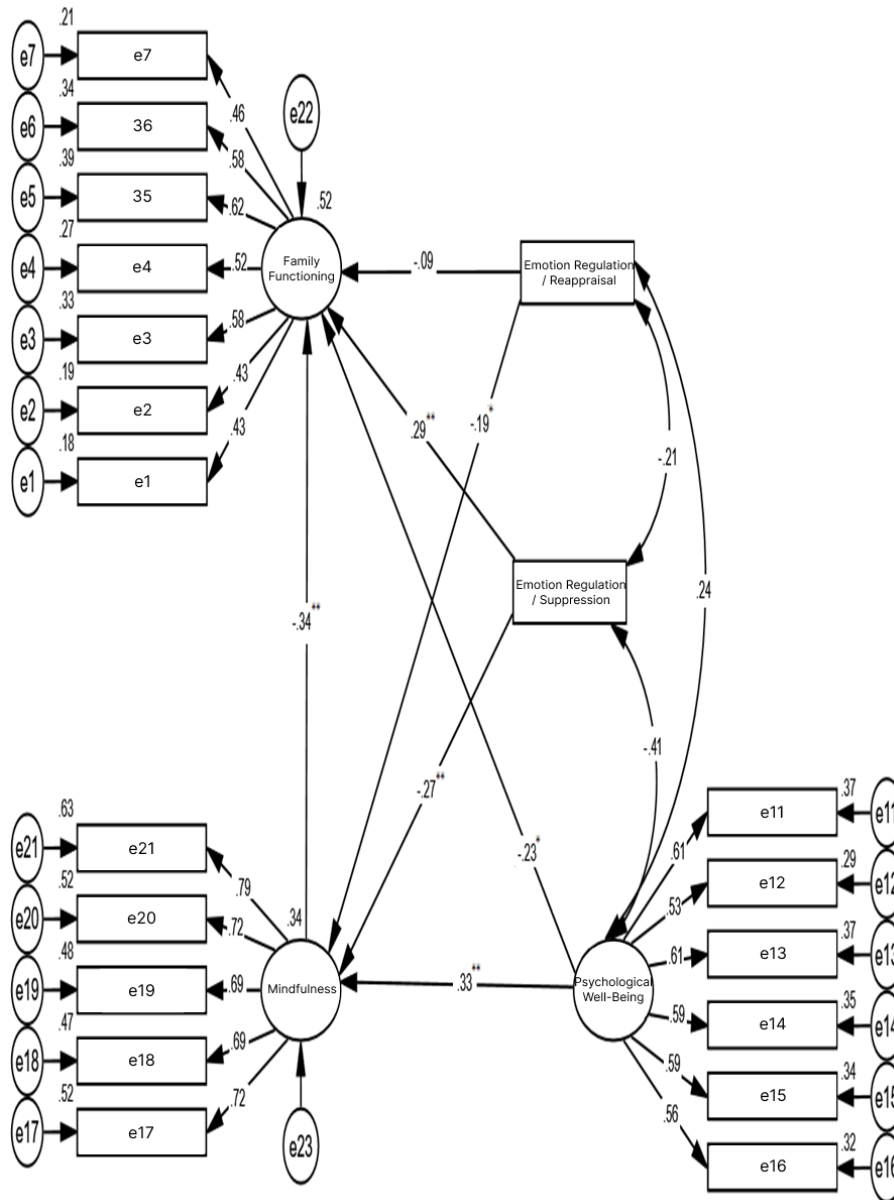
Based on Table 4, mindfulness mediated the negative relationship between reappraisal and psychological well-being with family functioning, and the positive relationship between suppression and family functioning.

According to the figure, the total explained variance (R²) for family functioning was 0.52, indicating that psychological well-being, emotion regulation, and mindfulness together explained 52% of the variance in firefighters' family functioning.

4.   Discussion and Conclusion

In explaining these findings, it can be said that, according to Brown and Ryan (2003), mindfulness is, both theoretically and empirically, one of the influential concepts

on psychological well-being, which contributes to vitality, health, positive relationships with others, and enjoying being with them, ultimately promoting overall psychological well-being (Sadeghian, 2024; Salah et al., 2024). On the other hand, mindfulness leads to greater life satisfaction in the face of stress and psychopathology, allowing individuals to be resilient in high-pressure situations, demonstrate better adaptation, and improve family functioning. Based on Kabat-Zinn's theory (1982), mindfulness is considered a tool for reducing psychological pain and suffering and is viewed as a behavior that opposes distractions and deviations, addressing the suppression of negative internal stimuli. Increased mindfulness is associated with a reduction in negative psychological symptoms, an increase in psychological well-being, and greater optimism (Sodani et al., 2024). Therefore, it can be concluded that for firefighters who deal with critical situations and work under unpredictable conditions, the result of mindfulness, which involves being in the present moment and identifying thoughts and feelings, can be beneficial in stressful job situations, preventing the transfer of stress, emotions, and dysfunctional thoughts to the home environment, and enhancing their family functioning in a positive way.

Regarding the variable of psychological well-being and its relationship with family functioning, it can be said that mindfulness, by enhancing environmental mastery and creating positive relationships—both components of psychological well-being—can mediate family functioning. Furthermore, mindfulness helps firefighters manage their emotions and thoughts during moments of grief, anger, or sadness caused by dangerous and distressing incidents and missions, by observing and non-judgmentally managing their feelings. Through non-reactivity and acting with awareness (components of mindfulness), they can maintain appropriate communication and performance in the family environment. Moreover, mindfulness aids firefighters when confronted with deaths in various accidents, enabling them to gain deeper self-awareness and self-acceptance through observation and immersion in their internal states, leading to a better understanding of life meaning and thus experiencing better mental health and psychological well-being. Psychological well-being allows family members to behave in a way that fosters relational satisfaction, increasing interpersonal intimacy when an individual's relationships improve. According to Hang et al. (2019), approaching one's thoughts and emotions provides individuals with an opportunity to strengthen relationships, which subsequently improves family functioning.

According to Gross (2015), emotion regulation strategies are those that individuals use in distressing situations to control their emotions (Razavi, 2024). On the other hand, Segal et al. (2018) argue that mindfulness increases cognitive awareness of emotions, which in turn enhances individuals' adaptive emotional strategies. Since mindfulness can reduce maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, mindful individuals respond to stressful situations without engaging in involuntary and maladaptive behaviors (Raugh & Strauss, 2024). When a person faces a difficult emotional or physical situation, they become more aware of their experiences by refraining from judgment about what is seen and what should be, which increases resilience. In relation to the nature of the firefighting profession and firefighters' exposure to various stressful conditions, mindfulness (which includes observing without judgment, increasing awareness, being present in the moment, acceptance, and avoiding avoidance) helps individuals cope with anxiety and stress. It enables them to modulate their emotions in different work situations, manage their feelings through reappraisal (a component of emotion regulation), control their behavior, and establish appropriate communication and perform effectively (which are components of family functioning). As a result, they maintain effective and appropriate relationships with themselves, colleagues, and family members, which can enhance family functioning. In contrast, individuals with low mindfulness, due to their lack of awareness of their thoughts, feelings, and emotions—and even their denial and suppression—are more likely to be affected by negative and destructive thoughts, which can harm their relationships both at work and at home and negatively impact their quality of life and family functioning. Therefore, since mindfulness can increase deeper awareness and emotional management of thoughts and feelings, reduce stress, enhance task-following, lower procrastination, and improve health, the greater an individual's awareness and alertness, the better and faster they can assess various situations and adopt appropriate behaviors. It seems that firefighters, due to their profession, must continuously reassess their emotions to manage hazardous situations, which can affect various aspects of their personal, professional, and family lives.

This study had some limitations, including that it was conducted on firefighters in the southwestern districts of Tehran, and the results should be generalized with caution to other populations and firefighters from other regions. Additionally, since there are no female firefighters in the firefighting departments of the southwestern districts of

Tehran, the findings apply only to male firefighters from the selected districts. Future researchers are also encouraged to investigate other factors, such as personality traits and other variables that could impact family functioning.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent. This study has received the ethical code IR.IAU.R.REC.1402.050 from the Islamic Azad University, Roudehen Branch.

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