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## Exploring Marital Resilience Through the Lived Experiences and Perception of Spousal Support During Events of Shared Stressors

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Prince-James Smith

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2026

Abstract

Exploring Marital Resilience Through the Lived Experiences and Perception of Spousal

Support During Events of Shared Stressors

by

Prince-James Smith

MPhil, Walden University, 2024

MS, University of Phoenix, 2013

BS, Franklin University, 2008

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

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## Abstract

Marital resilience during shared stressors remains insufficiently understood, particularly when both spouses are simultaneously affected by the same external stressor and must adapt together over time. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore marital resilience through the lived experiences and perceptions of spousal support during shared stressors among individuals who had been legally married for 10 years or more, with specific attention to how participants described the shift from solo coping to dyadic coping over time. Bowlby's attachment theory provided the theoretical foundation, and Senge's learning organization theory served as the conceptual framework. Participants included 18 legally married individuals who had been married for 10 years or more and had experienced at least one shared stressor within the previous 5 years. The findings suggest that shared stressors often began with solo coping, guarded reliance, or parallel coping before couples moved toward dyadic coping. Emotional support, practical support, communication turning points, shared planning, and recurring check-ins were central to this shift. Participants also described hope, efficacy, and optimism as psychological resources that supported coping persistence and relational adaptation. Resilience was most often perceived as improved teamwork, increased trust, reduced conflict escalation, and greater relational closeness over time, although some accounts reflected delayed trust and temporary disconnection. The implications of these findings support positive social change by informing both theoretical advancements in cognitive psychology and practical interventions for couples seeking to enhance their relational well-being.

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## Dedication

Success is often seen as an individual achievement, a pursuit driven by determination and perseverance. However, I firmly believe that success is never truly singular; it is shaped, nurtured, and sustained by the unwavering support of those who walk beside us.

This dissertation is dedicated to my spouse, whose steadfast encouragement and belief in me have been a source of strength during this demanding journey. Your patience, love, and unwavering presence have lifted me through moments of doubt and propelled me forward with confidence.

To my family, who instilled in me the values of resilience, perseverance, and continuous growth, I am profoundly grateful. Your sacrifices, wisdom, and unconditional love have provided the foundation upon which I stand today. Every lesson, every word of encouragement, and every gesture of support have been a guiding force in my pursuit of this milestone.

To my friends, who have been my sounding boards, my sources of laughter, and my pillars of encouragement, I cherish each of you. Your presence in my life has made this journey not only bearable but meaningful. Your words of reassurance and your belief in my abilities have helped me stay the course, even when the path seemed uncertain.

This accomplishment is not mine alone; it belongs to each of you who have walked this journey with me in ways big and small. May this work stand as a testament to the power of love, and unwavering support in the pursuit of knowledge and personal growth.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Marital relationships are dynamic and evolve over time as couples navigate a range of challenges and stressors. Spousal support plays a critical role in fostering resilience and maintaining marital satisfaction, particularly during periods of shared stress. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, placed unprecedented strain on marriages because of financial hardship, health anxieties, and disruptions to daily routines (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Unlike many previous crises, in which one spouse may have been more directly affected than the other, the pandemic created a context in which both partners experienced the same stressor simultaneously. In many instances, when couples were confronted with the choice between dyadic coping and individual coping during shared stressful events, they relied on individual coping strategies or experienced relational deterioration. The COVID-19 pandemic was not the first global crisis to challenge family life, nor will it likely be the last.

By examining the role of spousal support in fostering resilience and learning, this study had the potential to inform relationship counseling and therapeutic interventions. Identifying strategies that promote learning organization theory within marriages could provide couples with practical tools for strengthening their relationships and adapting to external stressors. In addition, the findings could inform individuals and mental health professionals about the importance of support systems in long-term marital satisfaction. Ultimately, this research contributes to positive social change by advancing understanding of how healthier and more resilient marriages may support stronger families and communities.

## **Background**

Marital relationships are dynamic and evolve over time as couples navigate various challenges and stressors, which requires spousal support to foster resilience and maintain marital satisfaction, particularly during periods of shared stress. The COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented strain on marriages because of a convergence of stressors, including financial hardship, employment changes, health anxieties, parenting conflicts, and disruptions to daily routines (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Unlike earlier crises, in which one spouse may have been more directly affected, the pandemic created a situation in which both partners were simultaneously exposed to chronic and acute stressors, thereby amplifying relational tensions and threatening relationship stability (Galdiolo et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Luetke et al., 2020). Research indicated that such conditions intensified relationship conflict (Lee et al., 2021), exacerbated psychological distress and loneliness (Torales et al., 2020), and increased instances of intimate partner violence and emotional withdrawal (Bullinger et al., 2020; Jetelina et al., 2020). Furthermore, partners reported significant shifts in emotional and sexual satisfaction, with many struggling to maintain healthy communication patterns during confinement and prolonged proximity (Luetke et al., 2020; Schmid et al., 2021; Torres-Cruz et al., 2021).

Despite these challenges, some couples demonstrated resilience by adopting adaptive coping strategies such as shared emotional regulation, dyadic coping, and constructive communication, all of which were positively associated with marital satisfaction and psychological well-being (Donato et al., 2021; Günther-Bel et al., 2020;

Randall et al., 2022). Still, even couples with initially high levels of dyadic coping experienced a gradual rise in conflict over time, suggesting that resilience is dynamic and context sensitive (Lee et al., 2021). These complex dynamics highlighted a critical gap in understanding not only how couples responded to shared stressors but also how such stress may have catalyzed or impeded continuous adaptation and learning within the marital relationship.

The role of spousal support in mitigating stress and promoting resilience has been well documented (Işık & Kaya, 2022; Xiang et al., 2022). However, less is known about how spousal support fosters learning organization theory within marriages, particularly in response to shared stressors. Learning organization theory, as conceptualized by Senge (1990), refers to the ongoing process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and emotional strategies necessary for adaptation and growth. In a marital context, this process involves couples developing new ways to support one another, communicate effectively, and navigate challenges together.

Understanding the intersection between spousal support and learning organization theory within marital relationships is essential for improving relationship satisfaction and resilience. Existing research has primarily focused on spousal support in contexts such as illness, military deployment, or financial stress, often addressing these stressors individually (Freeman et al., 2024; Lebow, 2020; Wikle et al., 2021). This study addressed a gap by exploring how individuals in long-term marriages perceived and experienced spousal support during shared stressors and how this support contributed to learning organization theory and marital resilience.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that prompted this research was the significant increase in marital stress and instability exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected marriages through rising divorce rates and challenges experienced by new marriages (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). Unlike previous studies that often focused on situations in which one spouse was more directly affected by conditions such as postpartum depression, cancer, or other illnesses (Falconier et al., 2015; Lebow, 2020; Papp & Witt, 2010), the pandemic created a unique context in which both spouses were affected simultaneously by the same stressor. Couples faced unprecedented challenges, including prolonged confinement, financial hardship, health anxieties, and disruptions to daily routines. These stressors underscored the importance of spousal support in maintaining marital satisfaction and resilience (Donato et al., 2021; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Ongoing societal stressors, including economic recession, emerging health threats, and geopolitical tensions, have continued to strain marital relationships and reinforced the need to understand how couples navigate such challenges effectively.

The specific research problem addressed in this study was the limited understanding of how spousal support influenced learning organization theory within marriages and its subsequent impact on marital satisfaction and personal development. Although prior studies examined the role of spousal support in stress management and relationship satisfaction, limited research had explored how such support facilitated an individual's shift from solo coping strategies to dyadic coping, particularly during mutual stressors. The transition from individual coping to a collaborative, shared approach may

significantly affect how couples navigate challenges and sustain marital resilience (Falconier & Kuhn, 2019).

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore marital resilience through the perception of spousal support during experiences of shared stressors within the framework of learning organization theory. I investigated how individuals who had been legally married for at least 10 years perceived and experienced spousal support during shared stressor events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or financial hardship. I also examined how such support contributed to cognitive resilience and emotional regulation, both of which are central to learning organization theory. In addition, the study explored how these perceptions of spousal support influenced long-term relationship satisfaction, adaptability, and stability. In doing so, the study identifies key strategies that individuals and couples used to integrate learning organization principles into their marital interactions, including ongoing reflection, adaptive learning, and collaborative coping mechanisms. By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals in enduring marriages, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how spousal support and shared learning processes foster resilience in the face of mutual adversity. In addition, the study provides insight into how couples developed systems-thinking approaches to managing marital challenges, reinforcing mutual growth and collaboration.

## **Research Question**

To guide this investigation, the study was framed by the following research questions designed to uncover the lived experiences and cognitive processes related to spousal support and adaptive functioning during shared marital stressors.

Research Question 1: How do individuals who have been married for 10 years or more within the last 5 years perceive spousal support and the transition from sole coping to dyadic coping during shared stressors events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2: How do these perceptions of spousal support influence overall resilience and stability in marital relationships?

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for the Study**

This study was grounded in two complementary frameworks: Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and Senge's (1990) learning organization theory. Together, these frameworks provided a foundation for understanding resilience and adaptability within long-term marital relationships. Attachment theory explains how emotional bonds developed in close relationships contributed to individuals' regulation of emotion, stress resilience, and interpersonal functioning. Within the marital context, secure attachment has been linked to higher relationship satisfaction, emotional security, and adaptive stress responses (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). More recent studies indicated that attachment security promoted mutual support and emotional regulation, whereas attachment insecurity, including anxiety or avoidance, was associated with greater conflict, stress reactivity, and poorer relationship functioning, particularly during collective stress events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Overall et al., 2021; Park et al.,

2022; Selcuk et al., 2010). These findings emphasize how adult attachment patterns influenced the ways spouses gave and received support, thereby reinforcing or undermining relationship resilience.

Learning organization theory, conceptualized by Senge (1990), highlights how systems, including marital relationships, foster resilience and growth through continuous learning, reflective dialogue, shared vision, and adaptive behavior. In marriage, this process is reflected in partners collaboratively identifying patterns of stress, creating supportive feedback loops, and adjusting their emotional strategies and communication styles to sustain the relationship over time. This perspective aligns with more recent research advocating for a systems-thinking approach to coping and adaptation in couples, particularly during crises (Freeman et al., 2024; Günther-Bel et al., 2020). Scholars have noted that marriages functioning as learning systems demonstrate higher levels of adaptability, mutual accountability, and emotional attunement (Ocampo et al., 2018; Ortenblad, 2010).

By integrating these frameworks, the study explored how spousal support during shared stressors contributed to the development of secure relational bonds and adaptive problem-solving. This dual-theoretical lens facilitated a deeper understanding of how couples cultivated resilience through both internal psychological securities, as described by attachment theory, and externalized, co-constructed learning processes, as described by learning organization theory. Applied to marriage, this framework highlights how couples engaged in lifelong learning and collaborative problem-solving to navigate shared stressors. Integrating these perspectives allowed for an exploration of the

cognitive and emotional processes that underpinned marital stability and personal development.

### **Nature of the Study**

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design to explore how individuals perceived and experienced spousal support during shared stressor events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, within the context of long-term marital relationships. Phenomenology was appropriate for this inquiry because it emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals and how meaning was constructed through those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). By collecting and analyzing first-person narratives, this approach provided an in-depth understanding of the emotional, cognitive, and relational processes that underlay spousal support and resilience.

The study was grounded in learning organization theory (Senge, 1990), which was operationalized by examining how individuals applied adaptive learning, systems thinking, and emotional regulation within their marital interactions. Learning organization principles, which are typically applied in business and organizational contexts, were used to conceptualize marriage as a collaborative system in which both partners continuously adapted, reflected, and grew in response to shared challenges. The study investigated how these principles emerged organically in marital dynamics, especially when couples encountered mutual stressors such as financial strain, health crises, or global disruptions.

The decision to focus on individuals who had been married for 10 years or more stemmed from an interest in understanding sustained marital resilience. Long-term

couples offered a unique lens through which to examine the developmental arc of spousal support, including shifts between solo coping and dyadic coping strategies. Although previous literature examined marital satisfaction, communication, and coping independently (Dixon & McCabe, 2015; Lewis & Taylor, 2020), few studies had explored how spousal support contributed to learning and adaptation over time, particularly through a Learning Organization lens.

Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns and insights. The findings were intended to inform both theoretical understanding and practical applications in marriage counseling, relationship education, and cognitive psychology. By overlooking the role of learning organization theory in marriages, existing research has failed to fully recognize a potentially important component of marital resilience and satisfaction. Addressing this gap provided a more nuanced understanding of how couples applied adaptive learning and collaborative coping to foster enduring marital stability.

### **Definitions**

*Attachment theory:* Refers to Bowlby's conceptualization of how emotional bonds shape an individual's sense of security, emotional regulation, and relational functioning across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969). In adult marital relationships, attachment theory helps explain how partners seek, provide, and interpret support during times of stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

*Bidirectional support:* Refers to a mutual exchange of emotional, informational, or tangible assistance between partners. This form of support operates within

relationships where both individuals actively provide and receive support, contributing to a sense of relational equity and stability (Li et al., 2024). The concept suggests that external stressors influence perceived spousal support and marital stability in a reciprocal manner (Li et al., 2024).

*Dyadic coping:* Refers to the interplay of coping strategies between partners within a relationship, particularly in response to external stressors. It involves mutual stress management, where both partners actively participate in supporting each other to maintain relationship equilibrium (Lee et al., 2022). Research suggests that dyadic coping can buffer against stress and strengthen relationship quality, though its effectiveness can vary based on contextual stressors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Donato et al., 2021).

*Emotional regulation:* Refers to the process by which individuals and couples manage emotional responses to stressors through strategies such as cognitive reframing, self-soothing, and mutual emotional validation (Gross, 1998; Kent et al., 2014).

*Internal or solo coping:* Refers to an individual's independent efforts to manage stress without relying on external support. It encompasses cognitive and behavioral strategies such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, and self-reflection. Unlike dyadic coping, solo focus in response to stress and does not include the active participation of a partner or social support network (Folkman, 2013; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

*Learning organization theory:* Refers to Senge's framework describing how systems adapt and grow through continuous learning, shared vision, reflective dialogue,

and systems thinking (Senge, 1990). In this study, learning organization theory was applied to marriage to understand how couples learned, adapted, and collaborated in response to shared stressors.

*Marital resilience*: Refers to ability of a couple to adapt, recover, and grow stronger in response to stressors and adversity. Marital resilience incorporates both individual and dyadic coping processes and is central to long-term relationship functioning and satisfaction (Goldring et al., 2022; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

*Marital satisfaction*: Refers to an individual's overall subjective evaluation of the quality, fulfillment, and functioning of the marital relationship. It often includes perceptions of emotional closeness, communication quality, support, conflict management, and relational stability (Fincham & Rogge, 2010).

*Perceived spousal (partner) support*: Refers to an individual's belief that their spouse is available, responsive, and supportive during times of stress. Perceived support is conceptually distinct from enacted or observable support because it emphasizes the individual's interpretation of the partner's availability and responsiveness (Lee et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2022).

*Shared stressor (mutual)*: Refers to an external challenge or adverse event that simultaneously affects both partners in a relationship. Shared stressors can range from a wide range of events such as financial difficulties and health crises to global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Shared stressors may include financial hardship, illness, family disruption, or large-scale events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which

require joint or parallel coping responses (Donato et al., 2021; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

*Solo coping:* Refers to an individual's independent efforts to manage stress without relying on partner involvement or external support. It includes cognitive and behavioral strategies such as self-reflection, private problem-solving, and internal emotional regulation (Folkman, 2013; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

*Spousal support:* Refers to the emotional, practical, informational, and relational assistance provided by one spouse to the other during times of need or stress. In marital relationships, spousal support may include empathy, reassurance, shared responsibilities, and behaviors that promote mutual well-being and relational stability (Cutrona, 1996; Xu et al., 2022).

*Systems thinking:* Refers to an approach that views behaviors, stressors, and outcomes as interconnected rather than isolated events. Within marital relationships, systems thinking emphasizes how each partner's emotions, behaviors, and coping responses affect the functioning of the relationship as a whole (Senge, 1990).

### **Assumptions**

In this study, it was assumed that participants were able to accurately recall and articulate their experiences regarding spousal support and coping during shared stressors, including financial strain, health crises, and global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these experiences influenced the marital relationship. Given the qualitative nature of the study, data collection relied on participants' self-reported perceptions and reflections. This assumption was necessary because phenomenological

research depends on subjective accounts to understand lived experiences. It was also assumed that spousal support contributed to marital resilience, emotional regulation, and satisfaction. Although existing literature supported this assumption (Falconier & Kuhn, 2019; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020), the study did not aim to prove this relationship quantitatively; rather, it sought to explore how individuals perceived and experienced it.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study was limited to individuals in long-term, legally recognized marital relationships of at least 10 years who remained married at the time of data collection. The study explored marital resilience through the perception of spousal support during experiences of shared stressors within the framework of learning organization theory. Specifically, I sought to understand how individuals married for at least 10 years perceived and experienced spousal support as a mechanism for coping, emotional regulation, and marital stability during significant stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic hardship, and health crises. By focusing on long-term marriages, the study provided insight into how partners engaged in dyadic and solo coping, integrated learning and adaptation within their relationship, and contributed to marital resilience over time. In addition, the study examined the transition between solo coping and dyadic coping, exploring how couples determined when to rely on their partner and when to manage stress individually. This focus contributed to understanding bidirectional support and systems-thinking approaches within the marital context.

Several intentional boundaries were established to ensure that the study remained focused and manageable. The population consisted of individuals who had been legally

married for at least 10 years and who had experienced shared stressors in their marriage, such as financial strain, health crises, or global events. Individuals in committed relationships who were not legally married were excluded. Participants also needed to be able to articulate their experiences in a semi-structured interview format. Newlyweds and couples married for fewer than 10 years were excluded to maintain a focus on long-term marital dynamics, as were divorced or separated individuals, because the study emphasized resilience within ongoing marital relationships. Additionally, non-heterosexual marriages were not specifically examined, as sexuality was not used as a participant selection factor in this study. Couples who had not experienced a significant shared stressor within the last 5 years were also excluded.

Given the phenomenological nature of the study, the findings were not intended to be statistically generalizable to all marital relationships but may be transferable to similar populations, particularly those in long-term, legally recognized marriages who had experienced shared stressors. The design emphasized depth rather than breadth and prioritized rich, contextualized understanding over statistical generalization. The findings may inform relationship education and therapeutic practices aimed at strengthening long-term marital resilience. Furthermore, by focusing on lived experiences, the research could support future investigations that test or adapt these findings across different demographics or types of intimate partnerships, such as newlyweds, same-sex couples, or cohabiting partners. This approach aligned with the methodological emphasis on meaning-making and supported the study's commitment to uncovering nuanced patterns of support, learning, and adaptation within long-standing marriages.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations related to design and methodology. First, it relied on self-reported data, which are inherently subject to participants' ability to recall and articulate their experiences accurately. This reliance may have introduced potential concerns such as selective memory and social desirability bias. Although steps were taken to encourage openness and honesty, including assurances of confidentiality, such biases could not be completely eliminated.

A second limitation involved the transferability of the findings. Because the study focused exclusively on individuals who had been legally married for at least 10 years and who had experienced shared stressors, the results may not transfer to couples in shorter-term marriages, those without significant shared stressors, or individuals in nontraditional marital arrangements. These factors limited the extent to which the findings could be broadly applied.

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study incorporated strategies such as in-depth interviewing and participant reflection. In addition, member checking was used to allow participants to review and validate their interview responses, thereby helping to ensure accurate representation of their experiences.

Despite these limitations, the study offered meaningful contributions by providing an in-depth exploration of spousal support, continuous learning, and resilience in long-term marital relationships. The findings may inform therapeutic practice, marital education programs, and future research focused on relationship functioning under conditions of shared stress.

### **Significance**

This study contributes to the field of cognitive psychology by examining the psychological processes that underly learning organization theory and resilience in marital relationships. It also has practical implications for relationship counseling and therapeutic interventions, as understanding the role of spousal support in fostering resilience may inform strategies for strengthening marital bonds.

In addition, this study addresses an underexplored area in marital research by highlighting the importance of learning organization theory as a component of marital satisfaction. By investigating how spousal support contributed to cognitive and emotional adaptation, the study provides insight that may benefit couples seeking to strengthen their relationships and navigate external stressors more effectively.

The significance of this research lies in its integration of learning organization theory with the lived experiences of spousal support during mutual stressors, an approach that has been largely absent from existing literature. Unlike prior studies that isolated individual stress contexts, this study focused on shared stressors, events that concurrently affected both partners, and explored how learning, adaptability, and collaborative coping emerged within these high-pressure environments. The findings were expected to inform the development of proactive relational strategies grounded in lifelong learning, emotional regulation, and reciprocal support.

Moreover, the study sought to contribute a conceptual framework that practitioners and educators could apply when working with couples, particularly by emphasizing continuous learning and systems thinking within intimate relationships. By

clarifying some of the mechanisms through which couples build marital resilience, this study aimed to influence not only academic discourse but also practical applications in counseling, premarital education, and community-based relationship programs.

Ultimately, this research addresses a meaningful gap and sought to advance scholarly discussion regarding how resilient, learning-oriented partnerships may thrive in an increasingly complex world. By focusing on the lived experiences, this study provided a deeper understanding of the role of spousal support in fostering marital resilience and stability.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the study, including its background, significance, research problem, purpose, and theoretical framework. The rise in marital stress and instability associated with shared stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of spousal support in fostering resilience and marital satisfaction. The study was framed by learning organization theory, which emphasizes continuous adaptation and systems thinking, and by attachment theory, which explains the role of emotional security and relational responsiveness in coping and resilience.

The research problem centered on the limited understanding of how spousal support influenced the shift from solo coping to dyadic coping during shared stressor events and how that shift shaped marital resilience. Although prior literature has examined spousal support, communication, and coping, limited research has focused specifically on how couples transition between individual and dyadic coping in the face of mutual stressors. By investigating this transition, the study addressed an important gap

in the literature and offered insight into how couples sustain their relationships during adversity.

The study employed a qualitative, phenomenological design and focused on individuals who had been married for at least 10 years and who had experienced significant shared stressors. Although the study involved methodological limitations, including reliance on self-reported data and possible recall bias, rigorous qualitative procedures were used to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness. These efforts positioned the study to contribute knowledge to cognitive psychology, marital counseling, and systems-oriented approaches to intimate relationships.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review and examines the empirical and theoretical scholarship relevant to marital resilience, spousal support, shared stressors, attachment, and learning organization theory. Rather than merely summarizing existing literature, Chapter 2 identifies the gaps and tensions in the literature that justified the need for the present study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Marital relationships are dynamic systems shaped by a range of internal and external influences, including stress, communication patterns, cultural expectations, and socioeconomic pressures. Spousal support, a critical component of relational functioning, has consistently been linked to marital satisfaction and resilience. However, existing research has primarily focused on acute stressors, individual coping mechanisms, or newly established relationships, often overlooking how spousal support is perceived and sustained in long-term marriages facing shared external stressors. The purpose of this literature review was to examine existing scholarship related to spousal support, marital satisfaction, dyadic coping, and the effects of stress, with particular attention to sustained resilience in long-term marriages.

The problem addressed in this study was the limited understanding of how spousal support contributes to long-term marital resilience in the context of mutual stressors, defined as events that affect both partners simultaneously, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, financial instability, or chronic life disruptions. Although spousal support has been shown to buffer stress and improve marital satisfaction, much of the existing research has centered on short-term events or on situations in which one partner was the primary stress bearer. This emphasis left a critical gap in understanding how support systems evolve when both spouses experience high levels of stress at the same time. Long-term marriages, in particular, present a unique context in which spousal support mechanisms may shift from traditional roles to more adaptive and reciprocal strategies. Additionally, much of the literature reflects Western, middle-class perspectives, thereby

limiting insight into how diverse cultural and socioeconomic factors influence the perception and delivery of support. This study sought to address these gaps by exploring how spousal support fostered emotional, cognitive, and relational resilience in couples who had sustained their marriages through shared stressors over an extended period.

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of relevant literature and identifies the key constructs and theoretical foundations framing the study. First, the literature search strategy is described, including the databases, search terms, and procedures used to identify relevant peer-reviewed sources. Second, the chapter presents the theoretical foundation, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), and the conceptual framework, learning organization theory (Senge, 1990), highlighting how each informed the study's central questions. Third, the review synthesizes current literature across five major themes: (a) spousal support and marital satisfaction, (b) financial stress and marital stability, (c) external stressors, COVID-19, and marital resilience, (d) cultural and socioeconomic influences, and (e) dyadic coping. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in the literature and explaining how this study sought to extend current knowledge by exploring the interplay among spousal support, long-term marital resilience, and systems thinking in the context of shared stressors.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

A systematic and targeted approach was used to identify relevant literature for this study. The following databases were searched: PsycINFO, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, and Google Scholar. Key search terms included combinations of the following: *spousal support*, *marital satisfaction*, *dyadic coping*,

*attachment theory, learning organization theory, financial stress and marriage, COVID-19 and relationships, and cultural and socioeconomic factors in marriage.* Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were used to refine the searches, and filters were applied to limit results to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2024, unless a source was considered a foundational theoretical work.

An iterative process was used to review titles, abstracts, and full texts, with priority given to empirical studies, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews that addressed long-term marital functioning, shared stressors, and the role of spousal support. Special attention was given to studies involving culturally diverse populations and non-Western contexts to address limitations in the existing literature, which has often lacked representation beyond Euro-American samples. In addition, the search strategy aimed to identify studies that moved beyond isolated short-term events to examine relational processes across extended timeframes and within the framework of mutual adaptation. This approach resulted in the selection of more than 80 sources informing the current study. These sources were critically reviewed and organized according to theoretical grounding, methodology, sample characteristics, and relevance to the study variables. The selected literature provided a foundation for examining the intersection of spousal support, long-term resilience, and systems-based relational thinking within marital contexts.

## Theoretical Foundation

### Attachment Theory

Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory posits that human relationships are rooted in early attachment experiences that shape emotional bonds throughout life. Central to the theory is the concept of the attachment behavioral system, a biologically driven mechanism designed to ensure proximity to a caregiver, particularly during times of threat or distress. Through repeated interactions with primary caregivers, children develop internal working models, or mental representations of self and others, that inform their expectations, emotional responses, and behaviors in close relationships throughout adulthood. These models influence how individuals perceive spousal support and interpret a partner's availability and responsiveness.

Attachment theory distinguishes between secure and insecure attachment styles. Securely attached individuals, having experienced consistent and responsive caregiving, typically develop a positive view of themselves and others. Conversely, individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment styles may struggle with relational security, thereby affecting their ability to seek and provide effective spousal support (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). As adults, securely attached individuals tend to exhibit emotional resilience, effective communication, and greater receptivity to spousal support. In contrast, anxiously attached individuals often hyperactivate the attachment system, demonstrating fear of abandonment and excessive reassurance-seeking. Avoidantly attached individuals tend to deactivate the attachment system by suppressing attachment needs and avoiding closeness. Both insecure styles may impair the ability to give and

receive effective support in marriage, particularly during stressful periods (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

Attachment theory has been widely applied in marital research and has demonstrated that secure partners tend to exhibit greater trust, intimacy, and constructive conflict resolution (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017; Li et al., 2022; Overall et al., 2021; Park et al., 2022). Secure attachment has also been linked to stronger emotional regulation (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023), higher marital satisfaction (Xiang et al., 2022), and more effective coping under mutual stressors (Karantzas et al., 2023). Physiological and affective synchrony has likewise been shown to be more pronounced among securely attached couples, thereby strengthening relational bonds during emotionally charged situations (Chen et al., 2021). Contemporary findings further support the role of attachment security in marital satisfaction and resilience across life stages and contexts, including during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee et al., 2021), recurrent pregnancy loss (Voss et al., 2020), and periods of economic strain (Li et al., 2024). Securely attached couples also tend to engage in affectionate presence, touch, and shared emotion, which may serve as buffers against daily stressors (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016; Zayas et al., 2024).

In the context of this study, attachment theory helps explain how individuals perceived and interpreted spousal support on the basis of attachment history, how these dynamics shaped emotional regulation and cognitive resilience under shared stress, and how long-term relational security contributed to marital satisfaction and resilience during adversity. By exploring the mechanisms of secure and insecure attachment, this research clarifies how couples used spousal support to navigate financial hardship, health crises,

and external disruptions. Attachment theory therefore provided a foundational psychological lens for understanding the interpersonal patterns underlying marital adaptation and resilience.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Learning Organization Theory**

Senge's (1990) learning organization theory, originally developed to strengthen organizational resilience, emphasizes systems thinking and shared learning as tools for navigating complex environments. Although the theory is most commonly applied in business settings, it may also be applied to marriage as an adaptive relational system. When applied to marriage, the theory reframes relationships as evolving systems in which partners engage in continuous personal and relational growth (Senge et al., 1999). Although originally developed for organizational contexts, this framework offers a valuable lens for understanding how long-term marriages may build resilience by applying learning processes traditionally associated with organizational success (Senge, 1994).

In the context of marriage, a learning organization may be understood as a relationship in which partners continuously acquire knowledge, refine emotional strategies, and adapt coping mechanisms to promote resilience and long-term stability. While research on marital satisfaction has often emphasized communication and conflict management, few studies have examined how couples actively engage in systemic learning behaviors to sustain resilience in the face of shared stressors (Dixon & McCabe, 2015; Lewis & Taylor, 2020). This study addressed that gap by investigating how

learning organization processes, especially systems thinking, promoted emotional regulation, mutual support, and sustained resilience in long-term marriages (Falconier & Kuhn, 2019).

Traditional coping models have typically focused on the individual; however, in long-term partnerships, spousal support often facilitates a shift from solo coping to dyadic coping. During shared crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this shift becomes especially critical. Learning organization theory highlights how couples co-adapt and co-learn, thereby enabling more effective joint coping strategies (Brown, 2021; James et al., 2019; Smith & Harris, 2020). These dynamics align with the study's focus on how support was perceived, how it fostered emotional regulation, and how it sustained long-term marital satisfaction and resilience. Learning organization theory consists of five key components: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning (Senge, 1994).

Systems thinking focuses on understanding the interconnectedness of elements within a system (Senge, 1994). In the context of marriage, systems thinking helps partners recognize how their actions, behaviors, and emotions influence one another. It encourages spouses to approach marital challenges holistically rather than treating problems in isolation (Senge, 2003).

Personal mastery involves continuous self-improvement and self-awareness (Senge, 1994). Within a marriage, this principle fosters personal growth and development, enabling each spouse to become more self-reflective and adaptable.

Partners committed to personal mastery may contribute to a stronger and more resilient marital bond (Senge et al., 1999).

Mental models refer to deeply ingrained assumptions and beliefs that influence behavior (Senge, 1994). In relationships, recognizing and challenging mental models allows couples to interrupt negative patterns of thinking and improve communication and emotional support. By fostering openness to new perspectives, spouses may cultivate a more growth-oriented relationship.

Shared vision in marriage refers to the collective aspirations and goals that partners develop together (Senge, 1994). Establishing a shared vision may enhance unity and commitment, allowing spouses to navigate stressors with a stronger sense of purpose and alignment in their long-term objectives (Senge et al., 1999).

Team learning emphasizes collaborative problem-solving and collective knowledge-sharing (Senge, 1994). In a marital relationship, this principle translates into effective communication, conflict resolution, and mutual support during challenging times. Partners who engage in team learning may foster a culture of continuous growth and resilience (Senge, 2003).

In the context of this study, learning organization theory served as a conceptual tool for examining how long-term marriages survived and adapted under stress. Just as organizations evolve through feedback and adaptation, marriages may also adjust to external challenges through shared learning and systemic reflection. By engaging in shared vision, personal mastery, and team learning, couples may transform adversity into a process of mutual development. These components also help reframe stress as a joint

problem rather than an individual burden, thereby encouraging emotional presence and accountability. In this way, the theory aligned directly with the study's central concerns. It helped explain how spousal support fostered emotional regulation, facilitated shifts from individual to dyadic coping, and strengthened long-term marital resilience through collective learning and strategic alignment (Alderman, 2022; Senge, 1994).

### **Literature Review Related to Variables and Key Concepts**

To explore the dynamics of spousal support and its relationship to marital satisfaction, resilience, and learning organization theory, the literature was organized into five primary themes: (a) spousal support and marital satisfaction, (b) financial stress and marital stability, (c) external stressors, COVID-19, and marital resilience, (d) cultural and socioeconomic influences, and (e) dyadic coping.

#### **Spousal Support and Marital Satisfaction**

Marital satisfaction has been widely studied, particularly in light of increasing divorce rates and declining relationship satisfaction over recent decades. Research has suggested that a substantial proportion of marriages in the United States end in divorce, with financial strain, lack of emotional support, and ineffective communication frequently identified as major contributing factors (Pietromonaco et al., 2021). Even among intact marriages, dissatisfaction has remained prevalent, with many couples reporting decreased relational fulfillment over time (Williamson et al., 2013). Given these challenges, understanding the role of spousal support in fostering long-term marital resilience and satisfaction remains critical. Studies have consistently underscored the positive relationship between spousal support and marital satisfaction (Xu & Burlison,

2004), particularly in the ways emotional, instrumental, and informational support enhance psychological well-being and relational stability (Heffner et al., 2004).

Emotional support, characterized by empathy, encouragement, and validation, plays a central role in enhancing relationship satisfaction and buffering the effects of stress (Heffner et al., 2004; Işık & Kaya, 2022). Partners who perceive high emotional support often report stronger coping abilities and a greater sense of relational fulfillment (Donato et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2017). This becomes especially salient during transitional periods such as childbirth, when the absence of emotional support may increase risk for postpartum depression (Antoniou et al., 2022). MacDonald et al. (1998) emphasized that emotional support fostered positive mental health outcomes in high-stress contexts, whereas Uysal Irak et al. (2020) found that such support helped reduce work-family conflict and employment-related guilt among working mothers. These findings suggest that emotional support is not only protective during crisis but also foundational for managing dual roles within contemporary marriages. In addition to emotional care, forgiveness has emerged as an important relational process that reinforces long-term adaptation. Aalgaard et al. (2016) demonstrated that forgiveness strengthened marital bonds by promoting emotional healing following transgressions, an especially relevant factor in long-term relationships that undergo repeated cycles of stress and recovery.

Instrumental support, including assistance with domestic responsibilities and financial contributions, also plays an important role in marital well-being (Beach et al., 2023). Couples who effectively share these tasks tend to experience lower levels of

conflict and greater satisfaction (Dean et al., 2007; Wikle et al., 2021). While instrumental support has often been framed as task-sharing, more recent studies have suggested that its perception and impact are strongly moderated by socioeconomic pressures and gender norms (Jackson et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2023). Moreover, instrumental support has been linked to improved work-family balance and subjective career success, particularly when mediated by clear role expectations and spousal collaboration (Amin et al., 2017). Informational support, which includes advice, feedback, and guidance, also contributes to relational growth and shared decision-making (Ocampo et al., 2018; Sanri et al., 2021). This form of support may enhance cohesion and trust by promoting joint problem-solving and open communication. The ability to navigate stressors through shared organizational thinking reinforces the importance of informational support in sustaining marital resilience (Senge, 1994).

Numerous studies have explored spousal support through qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches. Xu and Burleson (2004) found that emotional and instrumental support varied across gender and cultural contexts. Jakubiak and Feeney (2017), using experimental methods, demonstrated that affectionate touch improved marital satisfaction and overall well-being. Observational and physiological measures, such as heart rate monitoring during conflict, have provided additional evidence of support's stress-buffering effects (Heffner et al., 2004). Sayehmiri et al. (2020) synthesized findings through meta-analysis and reinforced spousal support's moderating role in marital outcomes. However, these studies have often relied on self-report and have not fully captured the complexity of support behaviors as they evolve over time.

Accordingly, the multidimensional nature of spousal support, including its emotional, instrumental, and informational dimensions, warrants examination across life stages and stress contexts in order to provide a more complete picture of how support fosters resilience in long-term marriages.

### ***Gaps in Existing Research***

Despite a robust body of literature, notable gaps remain in understanding how spousal support functions in long-term marriages, particularly during prolonged or mutual stressors. Much of the literature has focused on early-stage relationships, leaving the dynamics of support in marriages spanning decades comparatively underexplored (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; Karantzas et al., 2023). Cultural, racial, and socioeconomic factors have often been treated as peripheral rather than integral variables shaping how support is given and received (Lee et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2023). For example, systemic barriers such as racial discrimination, immigration-related challenges, and economic instability may influence both the availability and perception of spousal support (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Lebow, 2020; Overall et al., 2021). Furthermore, while dyadic coping models are well represented, relatively few studies have employed a systems-thinking lens, such as Learning Organization Theory, to examine how couples adaptively revise their support strategies over time (Alderman, 2022; Senge et al., 1999). As relationships encounter evolving stressors, ranging from caregiving and chronic illness to economic shocks and global crises such as COVID-19, research must more fully account for the adaptive mechanisms couples develop to maintain cohesion and resilience (Chen et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024; Zayas et al., 2024).

This study contributed to a more integrated understanding of spousal support by examining how emotional, instrumental, and informational support worked together to influence marital satisfaction. Although the current literature established foundational links between support and well-being, it rarely addressed how support behaviors evolved in long-term partnerships or how systemic and cultural factors moderated these processes. This study responded to those limitations by exploring how spousal support functioned within marriages of 10 years or more, particularly under conditions of shared stress, through the lens of Learning Organization Theory. By investigating how partners co-learned and co-adapted over time, the study aimed to illuminate the mechanisms through which spousal support fostered emotional regulation (RQ2), facilitated the shift from solo to dyadic coping (RQ1), and strengthened long-term marital resilience (RQ2).

### **Financial Stress and Marital Stability**

Financial stress has become an increasingly important concern in contemporary marriages and has contributed substantially to marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Hoehn-Velasco et al., 2023). Research has indicated that financial strain is one of the leading causes of marital conflict, with some studies reporting that approximately 36% of divorced individuals cited financial problems as a primary reason for separation (Hoehn-Velasco et al., 2023). Rising living costs, student loan debt, and job insecurity have intensified financial pressures on couples, making economic stability a critical factor in relationship satisfaction (Williamson et al., 2013). Economic stress negatively affects spousal support by increasing conflict and reducing emotional availability between partners (Beach et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2023). Collaborative financial management

strategies, however, have been found to enhance marital resilience (Sanri et al., 2021). Despite these findings, relatively few studies have examined how couples sustain financial resilience over time, particularly when both spouses' experience hardship simultaneously. Financial instability has also been associated with heightened psychological distress, lower relationship satisfaction, and diminished overall well-being among married couples (Wikle et al., 2021). When financial stressors emerge, couples often struggle to maintain effective communication, resulting in increased arguments and emotional withdrawal (Beach et al., 2023). Research has further suggested that financial disagreements are more likely to persist and escalate than many other forms of marital conflict (Pietromonaco et al., 2021).

### ***Empirical Research on Financial Stress and Marital Stability***

Several studies have examined financial stress and marital stability using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Dean et al. (2007) used survey-based analyses to examine the relationship among materialism, perceived financial problems, and marital satisfaction, revealing that financial instability significantly diminished marital happiness, particularly when material wealth was prioritized over relational health. Similarly, Falconier et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis on dyadic coping in financial contexts and found that couples who employed problem-focused coping strategies reported greater resilience and relationship satisfaction. Although both studies offered valuable correlational insights, neither fully captured the nuanced lived experiences of couples navigating prolonged financial hardship, thereby signaling the need for further qualitative research in this area. Rajkumar and Kaur (2012) examined dual-career couples and found

that financial instability amplified work-family conflict and disrupted perceptions of support. Building on these insights, Carrim and Ahmed (2016) studied Indian dual-career households and highlighted the interaction between economic strain and cultural expectations in shaping the division of financial responsibilities. These findings suggest that economic pressure does not operate in isolation but is mediated by sociocultural norms that, in turn, affect relational dynamics.

Yu and Cheng (2024) provided additional evidence by focusing on elite professionals facing occupational burnout and financial stress. Their study indicated that spousal support and financial planning functioned as buffers against these adverse effects. Byrne and Barling (2017) further examined the relationship between income disparities and marital satisfaction, finding that disproportionate earning potential often led to resentment and dissatisfaction, especially when one partner felt disproportionately burdened by financial responsibilities. Researchers have applied diverse methodological approaches to the study of financial stress in marriage, including self-report surveys, longitudinal tracking, and experimental designs. Li et al. (2024), for example, used longitudinal analysis to trace how financial challenges evolved over time and their cumulative impact on marital stability. However, longitudinal studies often face attrition, whereas self-report tools remain vulnerable to response bias. Experimental interventions, such as those assessed by Gariépy et al. (2016), underscore the potential of financial counseling and literacy initiatives to mitigate marital strain, although these studies have often neglected broader systemic factors such as policy shifts and labor market conditions.

### ***Collaborative Financial Management and Marital Resilience***

Financial stress has been widely recognized as a major predictor of marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Williamson et al., 2013). Economic uncertainty has been shown to escalate relational conflict and weaken the effectiveness of spousal support. However, recent studies suggest that couples who practice collaborative financial management demonstrate stronger resilience (Jackson et al., 2023; Kirkwood, 2009). This variable was central to the current study because financial pressures often intersect with health concerns, unemployment, and caregiving responsibilities, thereby requiring a broader understanding of how these strains affect marital dynamics over time. Scholars remain divided regarding which strategies are most effective in countering financial stress. Some have argued that transparent financial communication is paramount (Sanri et al., 2021), whereas others have emphasized the importance of spousal support and shared decision-making (Falconier et al., 2015). Moreover, while existing studies have largely focused on newly married or younger couples, relatively little is known about how long-term partnerships sustain financial resilience. Additional research is needed to examine how economic stress intersects with emotional intimacy, shifting role expectations, and cultural contexts.

### ***Socioeconomic Stressors and Power Dynamics***

Financial challenges often affect lower-income and minority couples most severely, intensifying stress through systemic inequalities such as wage gaps, limited access to financial services, and unstable housing (Gariépy et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2023; Zayas et al., 2024). Within these contexts, control over household

finances may create power imbalances, particularly when one partner dominates financial decision-making. Studies by Park et al. (2022) and Bar-Shachar et al. (2023) found that financial control was associated with decreased autonomy, trust, and mutual respect, especially in dual-income households experiencing economic hardship. These inequities may become more pronounced when cultural norms reinforce traditional gender roles that no longer align with contemporary financial demands. Karney and Bradbury (2020) and Voss et al. (2020) demonstrated that couples with robust emotional and social support networks were better equipped to navigate financial adversity. Cutrona's (1996) early work on social support as a buffer against financial strain remains relevant, and newer research has extended these findings by showing that relational support may mitigate the psychological toll of economic stress (Chen et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). Gordon and Whelan-Berry (2004), followed by Alderman (2022), emphasized the importance of joint financial decision-making in enhancing relational cohesion. Emotional resilience and a sense of shared responsibility often emerge from these practices, reinforcing both economic efficacy and relationship satisfaction (Jackson et al., 2023; Sanri et al., 2021).

### ***Gaps in Existing Research***

Although financial resilience has received substantial scholarly attention, important gaps persist. Most notably, there is a lack of research addressing how couples adapt financially when both partners experience hardship simultaneously, such as during a recession or global crisis. In addition, the literature continues to overemphasize short-term stressors while neglecting the cumulative impact of financial strain and its psychological consequences over years or decades (Donato et al., 2021). Cultural and

socioeconomic diversity also remains insufficiently explored, thereby limiting the transferability of findings across demographic groups. Finally, existing research rarely connects financial resilience with broader frameworks such as Learning Organization Theory, which offers insight into how couples engage in continuous adaptation and feedback-based decision-making (Alderman, 2022; Senge et al., 1999). This study sought to address these limitations by examining long-term financial coping strategies in enduring marriages, with a focus on collaborative learning, adaptive behaviors, and equitable financial partnerships. Specifically, the study explored how spousal support facilitated emotional regulation (RQ2), how it supported a shift from individual to dyadic coping under shared financial stress (RQ1), and how long-term financial management contributed to sustained marital resilience and satisfaction (RQ2).

### **External Stressors, COVID-19 and Marital Resilience**

The financial instability discussed in the previous section was further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced widespread disruption and heightened emotional strain in marital relationships (Donato et al., 2021; Xiang et al., 2022). The pandemic brought job loss, economic uncertainty, health-related fear, and prolonged isolation, all of which strained marriages (Pietromonaco et al., 2021). Many couples were required to adapt quickly to remote work, homeschooling responsibilities, and limited access to extended social support, thereby increasing the need for effective dyadic coping strategies (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015). This convergence of financial and relational stress provided a valuable context for understanding how spousal support mechanisms influenced long-term marital satisfaction and resilience. The pandemic also

created an opportunity to examine which factors contributed to successful adaptation, particularly in relation to spousal support and systems thinking. These insights directly informed the current study's focus on how shared stressors influenced emotional regulation and cognitive resilience within marital partnerships (RQ1, RQ2).

### ***Empirical Research on COVID-19 and Marital Resilience***

Several studies examined marital resilience during the pandemic using longitudinal designs, qualitative interviews, and self-report surveys. Xiang et al. (2022) found that spousal support significantly predicted reduced stress and higher marital satisfaction over time. Ahuja and Khurana (2021) reported marked shifts in relationship dynamics, particularly in coping strategies, before and after lockdown. Donato et al. (2021) emphasized that transparent communication and mutual reassurance buffered pandemic-related distress. Together, these studies support the view that the ways couples interpret and respond to external stressors have a profound influence on resilience outcomes. However, longitudinal studies may suffer from attrition bias, and qualitative research, while rich in contextual detail, often lacks transferability. In addition, the emphasis on immediate rather than prolonged responses highlights a gap in understanding how couples rebuild relationship stability beyond the initial crisis phase (RQ2).

### **Dual-Income Couples and Pandemic Pressures**

Work-family conflict and financial instability were found to intensify stress among dual-career couples. Westman and Etzion (2005) identified crossover effects in which professional stressors heightened interpersonal tension at home. Rajkumar and

Kaur (2012) showed that external health threats, such as COVID-19, amplified these pressures, particularly when both partners experienced uncertainty. Ahmed and Carrim (2016) expanded on this by illustrating how economic downturns could exacerbate power imbalances within dual-career households, thereby undermining shared decision-making. More recent studies have further emphasized how blurred work-home boundaries and uneven domestic responsibilities contributed to pandemic-related strain (Park et al., 2022; Zayas et al., 2024). These findings directly informed the present study's inquiry into how shared stressors influenced marital functioning and highlighted the importance of equitable support during mutual crises (RQ1).

### ***Biopsychosocial Dimensions of Spousal Support***

Greenberger and O'Neil's (1993) early work on occupational stress remains foundational, although newer studies offer greater nuance. Li et al. (2024) found that instrumental support buffered the emotional toll of pandemic-related job loss, while Chen et al. (2021) demonstrated physiological benefits, such as reduced cortisol levels, associated with spousal presence. Zayas et al. (2024) showed that even symbolic gestures of support, such as supportive text messages, improved emotional regulation. Davoine et al. (2013) remain relevant for understanding adaptation during relocation stress, but more recent findings suggest similar benefits during global crises. Park et al. (2022) and Karantzas et al. (2023) emphasized communication, shared emotional labor, and collaborative goal-setting as critical factors in long-term relational stability. These multidimensional findings reinforce the present study's emphasis on emotional regulation and collaborative coping strategies under mutual stress (RQ2).

### ***Stress-Buffering and Crisis Management Perspectives***

Several researchers analyzed the pandemic's relational impact through stress-buffering and crisis-management frameworks. Beach et al. (2023) linked financial strain to increased marital conflict, especially in households with preexisting vulnerabilities. Bar-Shachar et al. (2023) found that couples with high attachment security demonstrated greater emotional resilience, whereas Kanter et al. (2023) emphasized the compounding effects of financial instability and poor communication on marital satisfaction. Collectively, these studies support the view that emotional and practical spousal support are vital during periods of collective stress. They also demonstrate that crisis-management skills, such as problem-solving and emotional containment, are essential for navigating shared adversity. These themes are directly relevant to the study's focus on cognitive resilience and shared decision-making during relational stress (RQ1, RQ2).

### ***Psychosocial Outcomes and Adaptive Strategies***

The pandemic provided a real-time lens through which to examine both resilience and vulnerability in marital dynamics. James et al. (2022) found that some couples grew stronger, whereas others experienced heightened psychological distress, including anxiety and depression (Lebow, 2020; Zhang et al., 2017). Economic hardship compounded these stressors, particularly in lower-income households (Beach et al., 2023). Karantzas et al. (2024) used the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model to demonstrate that adaptive coping mechanisms protected relationship satisfaction. Goldring et al. (2022) introduced the concept of shared reality, showing that alignment in perception reduced reactivity and conflict. DePasquale et al. (2018) and O'Brien et al. (2014) similarly identified emotional

reassurance and joint decision-making as predictors of resilience. These studies reinforced the theoretical grounding of the dissertation by linking systems thinking and emotional support to sustainable marital adaptation (RQ1, RQ2).

### ***Gaps in Existing Research***

Despite a growing body of research, several gaps remain in understanding the long-term effects of external stressors such as COVID-19 on marital resilience. Most studies have focused on short-term outcomes and have not adequately captured the ongoing process of rebuilding emotional and structural stability in relationships (Donato et al., 2021). Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons remain limited, despite evidence that societal norms and access to resources shape relationship coping strategies (Pietromonaco et al., 2021). Few studies have examined how long-term marriages specifically sustained support systems over time or how those systems evolved across shared stressors. The integration of Learning Organization Theory has also remained underutilized in marital research, even though it offers a valuable framework for understanding continuous adaptation (Alderman, 2022; Senge et al., 1999). This study addressed these gaps by examining how spousal support facilitated emotional regulation (RQ2), promoted shifts from individual to dyadic coping (RQ1), and supported sustained relationship resilience through joint learning and strategic adjustment (RQ2).

### **Cultural and Socioeconomic Influences**

Cultural and socioeconomic influences are foundational to understanding marital dynamics because they shape how support is perceived, expressed, and sustained over time. Culture informs beliefs about gender roles, emotional expression, decision-making

processes, and family obligations, all of which influence marital satisfaction and resilience. For example, collectivist cultures may prioritize extended family involvement and hierarchical structures, whereas individualistic societies may emphasize spousal equality and emotional autonomy (Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Overall et al., 2021). Research has shown that cultural norms and economic status significantly affect marital satisfaction and resilience (Iwasa et al., 2024; Xu & Burleson, 2004). Societal values regarding gender roles, family obligations, and financial responsibilities shape how couples navigate stressors and adapt to challenges. At the same time, socioeconomic status influences access to essential resources such as housing, healthcare, education, and time, all of which directly affect the capacity for relational maintenance (Iwasa et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2023). Financial hardship may generate chronic stress, role overload, and reduced emotional availability between partners, thereby weakening the marital bond.

Recent studies have increasingly addressed the ways cultural frameworks influence spousal support. Xu and Burleson (2004) conducted a mixed-methods study examining how different types of spousal support varied across cultural contexts and found that emotional and instrumental support played distinct roles across ethnic groups. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2023) used a systematic review approach to explore spousal support in non-Western contexts and highlighted significant cross-cultural variation in marital expectations and support mechanisms. Non-Western contexts often prioritize indirect expressions of support, such as sacrifice, loyalty, and family honor, rather than overt verbal affirmation. This distinction becomes especially important in intercultural

marriages, where mismatches in support expectations may produce friction. In addition, cultural traditions may create prescriptive roles that constrain adaptability, particularly when rooted in traditional gender norms that no longer align with dual-income household realities. These dynamics underscore the importance of designing support interventions that are context-sensitive and culturally informed (Voss et al., 2020).

Socioeconomic factors similarly exert a powerful influence on marital satisfaction, particularly when compounded by cultural expectations. Sayehmiri et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis indicating that personality traits are moderated by socioeconomic status in relation to marital outcomes. Javadivala et al. (2021) reported that relationship programs tailored to couples in lower socioeconomic brackets produced stronger outcomes when paired with economic empowerment strategies, such as financial literacy training. In some immigrant households, for example, traditional gender roles may persist even when financial burdens are shared, thereby leading to asymmetries in labor and emotional exhaustion (Mohamed, 2019). This often results in one partner, frequently the woman, carrying a disproportionate share of caregiving and domestic responsibility while also contributing to household income. More recent studies by Bar-Shachar et al. (2023) and Jackson et al. (2023) indicate that perceived fairness in labor division is a strong predictor of both relationship satisfaction and emotional well-being, particularly during financial downturns. These findings support the need for deeper investigation into how socioeconomic pressures intersect with gender, race, and culture to shape the practice and perception of spousal support.

Power dynamics related to financial decision-making represent another important dimension of cultural and socioeconomic influence in marriage. Aycan and Eskin (2005) observed that in more traditional societies, men often controlled financial decisions, which could contribute to resentment or disempowerment among women. Contemporary research supports these findings while also showing that egalitarian financial practices are positively associated with marital satisfaction in dual-career households (Lee et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024). Mohamed (2019) found that couples who renegotiated household labor and financial responsibilities in response to changing career demands demonstrated greater resilience and mutual respect. Similarly, Karantzas et al. (2023) and Parasuraman et al. (1992) showed that adaptive coping in response to external stressors was more effective when grounded in shared values and transparent financial practices. Couples who engaged in collaborative budgeting, debt management, and long-term planning were not only more resilient but also reported stronger emotional connection. The alignment between financial partnership and emotional intimacy reflects the interdependence between tangible and intangible forms of spousal support.

### ***Cultural Differences in Relationship Conflict and Adaptation***

Lee et al. (2022) conducted a cross-cultural study of relationship conflict and compared marital adaptation strategies in Eastern and Western cultures. Their findings revealed that collectivist cultures placed greater emphasis on extended family support, whereas individualistic cultures prioritized direct spousal communication and problem-solving. Similarly, Overall et al. (2022) examined attachment security across socioeconomic groups and demonstrated that financially stable couples exhibited greater

resilience and more adaptive coping strategies during stress than couples with fewer resources. Kirkwood (2009) explored the role of spousal dynamics in entrepreneurship and highlighted how economic uncertainty could either strain or strengthen marital bonds depending on the level of mutual support and shared financial goals. In addition, Campbell and Wright (2010) analyzed incongruence between marital beliefs and practices in American society and noted the role of shifting cultural expectations in relationship satisfaction. Although these studies offer valuable insight, a key limitation is their reliance on self-report, which may introduce social desirability and retrospective recall bias. Future research would benefit from incorporating observational methods and in-depth ethnographic approaches to produce a more nuanced understanding of cultural and socioeconomic factors in marital resilience.

The inclusion of cultural and socioeconomic factors in this study was justified by their significant influence on marital satisfaction and resilience. Economic hardship has been associated with increased divorce rates and diminished relationship satisfaction (Dean et al., 2007), whereas cultural values influence conflict resolution strategies and expectations between spouses (Freeman et al., 2024). Because financial instability and cultural change continue to affect contemporary relationships, analyzing these variables provides a fuller understanding of how external forces shape marital dynamics. Cultural differences also influence how spouses perceive support, how they engage in dyadic versus individual coping, and whether continuous relational learning is valued and sustained. The current study therefore explored how the interaction of cultural norms and socioeconomic conditions affected spousal support (RQ1), shaped emotional regulation

and attachment (RQ2), and influenced the development of marital resilience strategies (RQ2).

### ***Gaps in Existing Research***

Although extensive research has examined the role of cultural and socioeconomic factors in marriage, several gaps remain. Much of the literature has traditionally centered Western perspectives, thereby overlooking the marital experiences of couples in more diverse cultural settings (Sharma et al., 2023). In addition, much of the existing scholarship has emphasized short-term economic fluctuation rather than long-term financial resilience. Goldring et al. (2022) explored the concept of shared reality in marital resilience and argued that couples who aligned their perspectives regarding cultural and financial expectations demonstrated greater stability. However, Kanter et al. (2023) noted that economic disparities within marriages, such as one partner earning substantially more than the other, may create power imbalances that undermine marital satisfaction. Understanding how cultural expectations interact with financial realities remains critical for the development of effective interventions that promote marital resilience across diverse populations.

Despite growing recognition of cultural and socioeconomic influences on marriage, further research is needed to examine how couples navigate these challenges over time. Hoehn-Velasco et al. (2023) investigated marriage and divorce trends in Mexico during economic downturns and highlighted the influence of financial hardship on marital dissolution. Similarly, Karantzas et al. (2024) examined parental relationship well-being during economic uncertainty and emphasized the role of adaptive coping

mechanisms in sustaining long-term marital satisfaction. Economic hardship disproportionately affects lower-income and minority couples, highlighting the need for contextualized financial interventions (Gariépy et al., 2016). However, existing research has primarily reflected Western perspectives, leaving important gaps in understanding culturally diverse marital experiences (Sharma et al., 2023). Future research should therefore explore how economic stress interacts with cultural expectations to shape marital resilience, examine how these dynamics affect the perception and provision of spousal support, and investigate how cultural and economic factors shape emotional regulation and attachment processes. By examining the intersection of culture and socioeconomic status, this study sought to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing long-term marital resilience.

### **Dyadic Coping**

Dyadic coping, defined as the ways couples jointly manage stress, has emerged as a critical component in fostering marital resilience and satisfaction (Haber et al., 2007). Research indicates that when couples engage in effective dyadic coping, they experience greater relationship stability, stronger emotional connection, and improved problem-solving capacity (Falconier et al., 2015; Papp & Witt, 2010). Dyadic coping encompasses a range of shared strategies, including emotional support, problem-focused coping, and collaborative stress management, all of which contribute to the longevity and quality of marital relationships (Donato et al., 2021).

### ***Methods of Coping***

Dyadic coping may take multiple forms and is commonly categorized as positive dyadic coping, negative dyadic coping, and delegated dyadic coping (Pluut et al., 2018; Xiang et al., 2022). Positive dyadic coping involves active engagement in stress management, reassurance, and collaborative problem-solving, and couples who consistently use these strategies report greater marital satisfaction and emotional intimacy (Vedelago et al., 2023). Negative dyadic coping, by contrast, is expressed through avoidance, withdrawal, or hostility and often contributes to relational discord and increased divorce risk (Haber et al., 2007). Delegated dyadic coping occurs when one partner assumes additional responsibilities to reduce the other partner's stress, which may be especially effective during acute periods such as financial strain or illness (Irak et al., 2020). However, its effectiveness depends partly on perception; when the behavior is interpreted as controlling or imbalanced, resentment may emerge. This highlights the importance of reciprocity, mutual understanding, and validation of each partner's contributions. Collectively, these forms of coping illustrate how nuanced relational interactions influence resilience outcomes.

### ***Comparing Coping Mechanisms***

In contrast to dyadic coping, solo coping refers to individual efforts to manage stress without partner involvement. Although solo coping may at times be adaptive, overreliance on it within marriage may foster emotional disconnection (O'Brien et al., 2014). Bidirectional support represents the ideal of mutual responsiveness, in which both partners give and receive emotional and instrumental support, thereby promoting

relational balance and long-term satisfaction (Totenhagen et al., 2018). This equilibrium is essential for sustained marital stability, particularly under recurring or mutual stressors. Studies have shown that reciprocal coping allows couples to construct a shared emotional environment characterized by empathy, joint decision-making, and a secure attachment base. This dynamic becomes increasingly important as external pressures intensify, such as during health crises, career transitions, or prolonged economic uncertainty. The ability to shift from self-focused to relationship-focused coping represents a key adaptive mechanism examined in this study (RQ1).

### ***Key Predictors of Marital Satisfaction in Dyadic Coping***

Dyadic coping is widely recognized as a key determinant of marital satisfaction and is supported by factors such as communication quality, emotional regulation, and mutual responsiveness (Totenhagen et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017). Couples who communicate constructively about both internal and external stressors tend to develop adaptive coping strategies that reduce misunderstanding and conflict escalation. Transparent communication promotes emotional attunement and reduces misinterpretation during distressing episodes, thereby creating space for emotional safety and shared resilience (O'Brien et al., 2014). The perception that one's partner is responsive builds trust and reinforces a relational foundation capable of withstanding adversity. This process facilitates joint resilience through shared meaning-making and open emotional expression. Communication, therefore, operates not only as a vehicle for problem-solving but also as a proactive mechanism for maintaining connection during

turbulent periods. The emphasis on emotional attunement and secure dialogue directly informed this study's exploration of resilience under shared stressors (RQ2).

Shared adaptation to stress also significantly influences relationship stability and satisfaction. When both spouses perceive that they are confronting stress together, the resulting sense of unity and shared purpose enhances marital security (Cutrona, 1996). This collective orientation becomes essential during periods of prolonged external stress, as couples who approach adversity with a team-based mindset report stronger emotional bonds and greater relational satisfaction (Vedelago et al., 2023). Such shared coping efforts reaffirm core values and reinforce mutual commitment, often resulting in a realignment of goals and renewed relational investment. Through this reframing, challenges may be viewed not merely as threats but also as opportunities for mutual growth and connection. This shared psychological processing builds both emotional and cognitive resilience and aligns closely with the adaptive processes examined in the current study (RQ2).

Emotional regulation also plays a foundational role in effective dyadic coping. Couples with high emotional awareness and empathy are better equipped to remain attuned to one another's needs during high-stress situations, particularly when external demands intensify emotional volatility (Halbesleben, 2010). Techniques such as validation, reflective listening, and self-regulation help create a psychologically safe environment in which both partners feel heard and valued. These skills are especially critical in managing crises such as pandemics or caregiving stress, where resilience must be sustained over extended periods (Donato et al., 2021; Galdiolo et al., 2022). Emotional

regulation also helps prevent escalation during conflict, thereby reducing relational damage and enabling faster recovery from interpersonal ruptures. In this study, emotional regulation was examined as both an outcome of secure spousal support and a mechanism through which cognitive and relational endurance were sustained (RQ2).

Resource allocation, defined as the flexible distribution of responsibilities, is another important component of adaptive dyadic coping. Couples who coordinate household, financial, and caregiving responsibilities in flexible ways may reduce stress overload and strengthen their relational infrastructure (Papp & Witt, 2010). These collaborative behaviors reflect situational empathy and adaptability, which may decrease resentment and increase mutual appreciation. Particularly during prolonged challenges such as unemployment or chronic illness, equitable task-sharing emerges as a practical expression of support. This sense of fairness in role distribution contributes to emotional well-being and strengthens the sense of partnership, especially in dual-income or caregiving-intensive households. The current research incorporated resource sharing as a key behavioral outcome of spousal support and organizational learning within the marital system (RQ2).

Long-term strategic planning also enhances relationship resilience by providing couples with tools to anticipate and address future stressors. When partners engage in joint discussions regarding retirement, savings, and caregiving responsibilities, they cultivate shared vision and emotional alignment (Falconier et al., 2015). These forward-looking conversations establish expectations, clarify roles, and reduce ambiguity, thereby helping to prevent future conflict. Strategic planning also communicates emotional

investment and reinforces relational trust. By engaging in proactive coping, couples may feel more in control and less vulnerable to future uncertainty. The capacity to anticipate and prepare for shared stressors connected directly to the present study's examination of long-term coping and the application of systems-level thinking within marriage (RQ2).

### ***Gaps in Existing Research***

Despite the breadth of research on dyadic coping, several important gaps continue to limit understanding of its impact across relational and cultural contexts. First, much of the literature has emphasized short-term or event-specific coping strategies, leaving limited insight into how dyadic coping evolves over time, especially under chronic or prolonged stressors such as financial instability or caregiving burden (Donato et al., 2021). Future research should therefore examine how couples adapt these strategies longitudinally, particularly during periods of shared stress. Second, the cultural specificity of dyadic coping has not been adequately addressed. There remains limited understanding of how cultural values shape coping behaviors and partner expectations, especially in non-Western or collectivist societies where individual stress disclosure may be discouraged (Galdiolo et al., 2022; Xiang et al., 2022). Third, reliance on self-report methods remains a methodological limitation. Studies would benefit from incorporating observational tools, physiological measures, and third-party perspectives to strengthen the validity of dyadic coping assessment (Pluut et al., 2018).

Finally, the long-term outcomes of dyadic coping for psychological well-being, health, and personal development remain understudied. Investigating how effective spousal collaboration supports mental health, reduces stress-related illness, and promotes

personal growth would contribute substantially to understanding marital resilience (Totenhagen et al., 2018; Vedelago et al., 2023). This study contributed to the literature by addressing these gaps and by examining how dyadic coping related to shifts between solo and shared coping (RQ1), emotional regulation under shared stress (RQ2), and the role of joint coping in long-term relational stability (RQ2). In this way, dyadic coping was positioned not merely as a response to adversity but as a transformative process embedded within the adaptive fabric of enduring marriages.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive foundation for understanding how spousal support contributes to marital satisfaction, resilience, and adaptive functioning under mutual stressors. The synthesis of peer-reviewed studies revealed that spousal support is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, instrumental, and informational components, each of which plays a distinct role in navigating relational challenges. These forms of support are further shaped by financial pressures, cultural norms, and socioeconomic disparities, all of which may either constrain or strengthen a couple's capacity for adaptive coping. Existing scholarship has emphasized the importance of dyadic coping and emotional regulation in mitigating relational distress, yet much of that work remains anchored in short-term events or Western perspectives. Accordingly, this study built upon those insights by shifting the analytic lens toward long-term marital relationships and their evolution in response to shared, chronic stressors. This orientation aligned with the study's goal of capturing the

lived experiences of individuals who had sustained their marriages for at least 10 years while navigating mutual adversity.

The application of Attachment Theory and Learning Organization Theory offered a distinctive foundation for the study. Attachment Theory highlights how early emotional bonds influence an individual's capacity to seek and provide spousal support, especially during periods of vulnerability. Securely attached individuals are more likely to perceive their partners as reliable sources of comfort and collaboration, thereby promoting emotional regulation and relational security. In parallel, Learning Organization Theory provides a systemic framework for understanding how couples evolve through shared vision, personal mastery, team learning, and systems thinking. This model supports the argument that long-term resilience is not only emotional but also organizational, requiring couples to adapt, co-learn, and engage in reflective practices that strengthen the relationship over time. The integration of these theories allowed for a deeper exploration of how support was perceived, how it regulated emotional functioning, and how it contributed to strategic relationship longevity.

Despite extensive research on spousal support, several critical gaps remained. The literature has disproportionately focused on newly married couples, acute crises, or individual coping mechanisms, leaving long-term adaptation under mutual stressors comparatively underexplored. In addition, the majority of studies have relied on self-report and have not sufficiently integrated cultural and socioeconomic dimensions as central analytic variables. This gap limits the field's ability to generalize or transfer findings across diverse populations and life contexts. Furthermore, while dyadic coping

has been well studied, relatively little work has examined how couples transition between solo and shared coping strategies and how those transitions shape relational outcomes. Similarly, few studies have explored how spousal support promotes emotional regulation as a mechanism of resilience or how continuous relational learning sustains long-term adaptation and marital stability. The current study sought to address these limitations by exploring the intersection of emotional attachment, systemic learning, and contextual influences on marital resilience.

In summary, this literature review highlights the multidimensional nature of spousal support, the cultural and financial stressors that shape it, and the adaptive strategies couples use to sustain their relationships. The integration of interdisciplinary frameworks offered a more holistic understanding of how resilience is developed and maintained within marriages of 10 years or more. By focusing on shared stressors, this study emphasized the need for a systemic perspective on marital coping, one that values mutual growth, reflective practice, and emotional attunement. In doing so, it contributed to addressing a gap in the relational literature concerning long-term, culturally responsive, and psychologically integrated models of marital resilience. Chapter 3 presents the phenomenological research design used to explore these lived experiences, including participant selection, data collection, and analytic procedures.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how individuals perceived spousal support and resilience during shared stressors within long-term marriages. Although research on marital satisfaction and stress has expanded over time, much of that work has centered on individual coping or one-sided stress experiences, such as illness, financial strain, or caregiving responsibilities. What remained underexplored was how individuals interpreted and navigated mutual stressors within marriage, that is, situations that affected both partners simultaneously, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturns, relocation, or the death of a shared loved one. This study sought to uncover the mechanisms that shaped the shift between dyadic coping and solo-coping during such simultaneous stress events and to understand how individuals responded both internally and relationally within the context of long-term marital bonds. Understanding these mechanisms was important for developing interventions and frameworks that promote marital resilience and healthy emotional functioning. By focusing on individual perceptions within a shared context, this study offered a distinct lens through which to understand how relational dynamics shaped personal adaptation and coping processes.

This chapter outlines the methodology used to conduct the study. It describes the research design, research questions, role of the researcher, participant selection criteria, instrumentation, and procedures for data collection and analysis. In addition, it details the strategies used to ensure trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations related to recruitment, informed

consent, participant privacy, and data protection are also discussed. Collectively, these elements provided the methodological foundation for the findings and interpretations presented in Chapter 4 and offered insight into how individuals in long-term marriages perceived spousal support and sustained relational growth when confronted with external stressors.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study employed a phenomenological research tradition because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of individuals' lived experiences regarding spousal support and resilience within marriage. Phenomenology was appropriate for capturing the subjective perceptions and meanings participants attributed to their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research seeks to understand the essence of lived experience by collecting detailed narratives from participants and identifying common themes that emerge from their perspectives.

To facilitate this exploration, the study employed semistructured interviews with open-ended questions for a sample of 10 participants. The rationale for using open-ended questions was to encourage participants to share their personal experiences and viewpoints without undue constraint, thereby allowing for a rich and nuanced understanding of their perceptions of spousal support and marital resilience. This approach aligned with the phenomenological goal of obtaining deep, reflective insight into how participants made sense of their lived experiences.

## **Research Questions**

To explore marital resilience and the role of perceived spousal support during shared stressors, this study focused on the following two research questions:

RQ 1: How do individuals who have been married for ten years or more within the last 5 years perceive spousal support and the transition from solo coping to dyadic coping during shared stressors events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 2: How do these perceptions of spousal support influence overall resilience and stability in marital relationships?

## **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, I took an active role in conducting semi-structured interviews, recording and transcribing the conversations, and systematically analyzing the qualitative data to ensure a thorough exploration of the research questions. My role included initiating interviews, guiding participants through the discussion with probing and clarifying questions, and observing relevant nonverbal cues, such as body language and tone, to capture the depth of participants' experiences.

A key aspect of my role was to facilitate an open and reflective dialogue that allowed participants to express their lived experiences in their own words while minimizing potential researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, I adhered strictly to ethical research principles, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring that participants felt safe and comfortable throughout the interview process (Smith & Noble, 2014). To mitigate personal bias, I employed reflexive practices such as journaling and peer debriefing so that my interpretations

remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than in my own assumptions (Patton, 2015).

My role extended beyond data collection to rigorous qualitative analysis. I functioned as an observer-participant throughout the study, conducting interviews and analyzing the data while remaining mindful of potential bias. I had no prior personal or professional relationships with participants, and reflexivity was used throughout the study to manage assumptions and maintain analytic discipline. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and informed consent, were strictly upheld throughout the research process.

## **Methodology**

### **Population and Participant Criteria**

The target population for this study consisted of individuals who were currently legally married and had been married for at least 10 years. Participants must also have experienced a shared stressor event within the past 5 years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, a major health crisis, financial hardship, relocation, or another significant challenge. The purpose of selecting participants with shared stressor experiences was to examine the shift between solo coping and dyadic coping in response to those challenges.

To ensure that the study focused on perceived spousal support in the context of mutual stress, participants were required to have experienced a stressor that affected both partners. This requirement allowed for an in-depth exploration of how individuals navigated their coping processes in relation to their spouse, including movement from individualized coping toward collaborative strategies that supported marital resilience.

Participants were also required to be at least 21 years of age, thereby ensuring legal adulthood and a minimum level of life experience that might influence perceptions of spousal support and resilience. By focusing on individuals who had navigated shared stressors within a committed marital relationship, this study sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of how perceived spousal support facilitated cognitive resilience, emotional regulation, and the transition from independent coping to a dyadic support system within long-term marriages.

The target population therefore consisted of individuals who had been married for at least 10 years and had experienced shared stressors, such as financial hardship, health crises, or other significant challenges. Participants engaged in a semi-structured interview process to share their lived experiences.

### **Sampling Strategy, Size, and Saturation**

Purposeful sampling was employed to select 8 to 10 participants who had been married for at least 10 years and had experienced one or more shared stressor events within the last 5 years. Participants were also required to be willing to discuss their experiences of spousal support and resilience in the context of long-term marriage. This sampling method ensured that participants had experiences directly relevant to the study objectives.

Participants were recruited through a combination of online advertisements, social media groups, and community outreach. Flyers were posted in relevant Facebook groups, such as “Research Participation, Dissertation, Thesis, PhD, Survey Sharing,” and through platforms such as Walden University’s participant pool, The Chicago School of

Professional Psychology, the University of Texas at Dallas, and relevant professional networks. Additional outreach included communication with local churches, community organizations such as the AFS Intercultural Program, and universities to support participant diversity. This approach increased the likelihood of obtaining a broad range of experiences across demographic backgrounds.

The estimated sample size was 8 to 10 participants, with data collection continuing until thematic saturation was achieved. Thematic saturation occurred when no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews, indicating that the dataset was sufficiently rich to support a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Instrumentation**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol developed for this study. The protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, detailed descriptions of participants lived experiences regarding spousal support and systems thinking within marriage. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for follow-up questions while maintaining a consistent overall structure across interviews.

Permission was obtained from Mind Garden, Inc. under request DQLQTLHDL to use the Psychological Capital Questionnaire for research purposes for a period of 3 years. In the present study, the Psychological Capital Questionnaire was used to inform the development of selected interview questions related to hope, efficacy, and optimism rather than to serve as a standalone quantitative instrument.

To support consistency in data collection and minimize potential bias, all interviews were conducted via telecommunication using Zoom or Microsoft Teams. This approach allowed for geographic diversity and provided a private and convenient setting for participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, with the option to continue longer when necessary to ensure a thorough exploration of participants' experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed for accuracy through human quality assurance procedures. This process supported accurate capture of participants' narratives for analysis and interpretation.

### **Follow-Up Procedures**

Following completion of the initial interview, participants were not required to return for additional interviews; however, a brief follow-up communication was conducted. This follow-up occurred within 2 weeks of the interview by email or phone and provided participants with an opportunity to clarify or expand upon their responses as needed. The follow-up also served as a member-checking strategy to support the accuracy of interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Participants were asked whether the transcribed content accurately reflected their experiences and were invited to provide corrections or additional insight. This process was entirely voluntary and supported the credibility and authenticity of the data collected.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected because it is an effective method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns, or themes, within qualitative data. This approach

allowed for structured analysis while preserving the depth and complexity of participants lived experiences.

To support analytic rigor, MAXQDA software was used to organize and code the data. The coding process involved multiple stages, beginning with familiarization through repeated reading of the transcripts. Initial codes were generated to capture recurring concepts and key phrases. These codes were then grouped into broader themes and subthemes related to spousal support, systems thinking, and emotional and cognitive resilience. Themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of Attachment Theory and Learning Organization Theory.

Findings were presented with supporting participant quotations to provide rich, illustrative examples of the major themes. The analysis aimed to clarify how individuals perceived and navigated spousal support during mutual stressors and to offer practical implications for marital resilience and relationship counseling.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research was essential to maintaining the integrity of the findings and their usefulness within related contexts. The four criteria of trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, served as qualitative parallels to validity and reliability in quantitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following subsections outline the strategies implemented in this study to strengthen the rigor and trustworthiness of the research process.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the accuracy and believability of the study's findings (Patton, 2015). To establish credibility, this study employed in-depth engagement, member checking, reflexivity, and triangulation. In-depth engagement was supported through semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to fully express their lived experiences. Member checking was conducted by sharing transcript content or preliminary interpretations with participants to confirm that those interpretations accurately reflected their perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Triangulation was achieved by comparing multiple data sources, including interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant literature, to identify recurring themes and support emerging patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexivity was practiced through ongoing self-awareness and documentation of assumptions, biases, and reflections in a research journal to minimize subjective influence on data interpretation (Smith & Noble, 2014).

**Transferability**

Transferability concerns the extent to which a study's findings may be applicable to other settings or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because qualitative research does not seek statistical generalization, this study enhanced transferability through thick description and participant variation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Thick description involved detailed documentation of participants' narratives, the research context, and the nuances of the shared experiences, thereby allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other settings. Variation in participant selection was used to obtain diverse perspectives, including individuals with different marital experiences, stressor histories,

and relational dynamics. This approach supported the potential for the findings to resonate with similar populations beyond the immediate study sample.

### **Dependability**

Dependability addresses the consistency and stability of the study's findings over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish dependability, an audit trail was maintained that documented the research process, decision-making rationale, and any modifications made throughout the study. In addition, peer debriefing was used to enhance transparency, whereby external qualitative reviewers examined coding processes and thematic interpretations to support methodological rigor (Patton, 2015). Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, thereby supporting systematic coding and pattern identification in the dataset. Coding consistency was further supported through review and comparison of selected transcripts, and any discrepancies in interpretation were discussed and reconciled.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings were shaped by participants' experiences rather than researcher bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). To achieve confirmability, reflexivity, triangulation, and transparent documentation of researcher positionality were implemented (Smith & Noble, 2014). Reflexivity was actively practiced throughout the study, with personal assumptions and biases documented in a reflexive journal. Methodological triangulation supported validation of themes across multiple data sources, and an external review by an experienced qualitative researcher further reduced the potential for subjectivity. Confirmability was also

strengthened through transparent data management, including clear documentation of how interpretations were derived from the raw data.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethical procedures were paramount throughout the study to protect participants' rights, privacy, and well-being. Institutional permissions, including approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval No. 12-15-25-1190282), were obtained before data collection began to uphold ethical standards for research involving human participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Participants were recruited voluntarily through IRB-approved digital flyers and announcements shared via online communities, academic forums, and relevant social media platforms. All recruitment strategies were designed to avoid coercion, particularly in situations in which power dynamics or prior relationships could potentially exist between the researcher and prospective participants. The study adhered to the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice.

### ***Informed Consent and Ethical Concerns***

Written and verbal informed consent were obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. The consent process included a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, anticipated duration, and any potential risks or benefits (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. The consent process was designed to ensure that participants fully understood their rights and had opportunities to ask questions or seek clarification. Consent was obtained electronically and securely stored in encrypted digital files.

### ***Data Collection Ethics***

To protect confidentiality during data collection, interviews were conducted in secure, private virtual environments using platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Participants were encouraged to join the interview from a quiet, private location to safeguard comfort and privacy. All identifying details were removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used in transcripts and final reports (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Before the interview began, participants were informed of their right to pause or end the session if they experienced emotional discomfort. A list of support resources was also made available to participants as a precautionary measure for emotional support.

### ***Data Storage and Protection***

All collected data were stored securely on encrypted, password-protected devices and backed up in secure cloud storage accessible only to the researcher and authorized committee members. Audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms were retained for a period of 5 years after study completion and were to be permanently deleted thereafter in accordance with ethical research guidelines (Patton, 2015). No data were shared with external parties outside the research team. All digital files were labeled using pseudonyms to protect participant identity.

### ***Conflict of Interest and Incentives***

There were no known conflicts of interest in this study. The researcher had no prior relationships with participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Participants were thanked for their time with a written note of appreciation and received a \$20 visa gift card. Special care was taken to ensure that participants did not feel obligated to continue

participation if they became uncomfortable at any point in the study. These ethical safeguards helped uphold the trust and transparency essential to responsible human subjects' research.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 detailed the research methodology employed to explore marital resilience through the lens of perceived spousal support during shared stressors. A qualitative phenomenological design was selected to capture the lived experiences of individuals in long-term marriages, consistent with the principles outlined by Moustakas (1994). The chapter outlined the research questions, the role of the researcher, participant selection procedures, data collection methods, and the thematic analysis framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006). A comprehensive set of strategies was also implemented to support trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, thereby strengthening the rigor of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Ethical procedures were also described to protect participant rights, privacy, and data integrity.

Chapter 4 shifts to the presentation of findings, with emphasis on the emerging themes that illustrate the interplay among spousal support, marital resilience, and systems-oriented relational processes. Through rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences, Chapter 4 provides an in-depth analysis of how couples navigated shared stressors and sustained marital well-being.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore marital resilience through the lived experiences and perceptions of spousal support during events of shared stressors. The study examined how individuals who had been married for 10 years or more described spousal support during shared stressors, including but not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they experienced a transition from solo coping to dyadic coping over time. The intent was not to evaluate marital functioning as a clinical outcome, but rather to understand how participants interpreted spousal support as a relational process and how that process shaped coping coordination, perceived stability, and resilience in long-term marriages. This study was guided by two research questions:

- RQ 1: How do individuals who have been married for ten years or more within the last five years perceive spousal support and the transition from solo coping to dyadic coping during shared stressors events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ 2: How do these perceptions of spousal support influence overall resilience and stability in marital relationships?

To support interpretation of the findings, the study was grounded in Bowlby's attachment theory as the theoretical foundation and Senge's learning organization theory as the conceptual framework. Attachment theory provided a lens for understanding how perceived availability, responsiveness, and emotional security influenced coping behavior under threat, including patterns of seeking support, withdrawing, and repairing connection. Learning organization theory provided a complementary lens for examining

how couples adapted through shared meaning making, reflection, communication routines, and iterative problem-solving, particularly when stressors required ongoing adjustment rather than a single resolution.

This chapter presents the results of the study and is organized to provide a clear audit trail from the research purpose to the findings. The chapter begins with a description of the setting and contextual conditions that may have influenced participant experiences at the time of the study. Participant demographics and relevant characteristics are then presented to support interpretation of the findings. Next, the chapter describes the data collection procedures, including the number of participants, the method of recording, and any variations or unusual circumstances encountered. The Data Analysis section follows and describes the analytic process used to move from coded units to categories and themes, including consideration of discrepant cases. Evidence of trustworthiness is then presented to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter concludes with the results organized by research question and theme and ends with a summary of key findings and a transition to Chapter 5.

### **Setting**

The interviews for this study were conducted during a period in which many married individuals continued to process the lingering effects of shared stressors that had unfolded over multiple years. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was a prominent reference point for several participants, the setting of this study is best understood more broadly as a context of cumulative strain. Participants frequently located their experiences within overlapping disruptions that included health anxieties, employment

instability, financial uncertainty, changes in household routines, caregiving burdens, and extended family demands. These contextual conditions are important because the emotional tone and interpretive meaning participants assigned to spousal support were shaped by sustained exposure to stress rather than by a single event alone. As a result, participants' accounts often reflected both acute coping demands and longer-term relational adjustment, including shifts in communication patterns, emotional availability, role flexibility, and perceptions of relational stability over time.

Participant engagement began before interview scheduling. Individuals initially contacted me by email to express interest in participating. In response, I provided the consent form and requested a brief set of screening and scheduling details to support eligibility determination and interview coordination. Participants were asked to provide the following information: city and state, year of marriage, a brief description of the shared stressor experienced with their spouse, and general availability for a 60- to 90-minute interview, including preferred days and times. This information served two functions. First, it allowed me confirm inclusion criteria before initiating data collection. Second, it supported efficient scheduling while minimizing repeated email exchanges. After eligibility was confirmed, an interview time was scheduled, and the participant received a handout outlining what to expect during the interview process.

All interviews were conducted through Zoom in a one-time format lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, except for one participant who had to pause the interview because of a family emergency. Participants were encouraged to select a private space to support confidentiality and minimize interruptions, and they retained the

option to pause or reschedule if privacy was disrupted. Before the interview, participants received a “what to expect” handout describing voluntary participation, confidentiality considerations, and the option to decline any question without explanation. The handout also addressed practical considerations related to remote participation, including suggestions for preparing a quiet environment and minimizing distractions.

The interviews followed a semistructured design using a set of 20 preapproved interview questions. The interview protocol was approved through the institutional review board process and was implemented consistently across participants to support a stable data collection environment. In addition to the primary question set, one to two follow-up probes were used as needed from a predetermined list of probing questions. The purpose of these probes was to invite narrative depth and clarify meaning rather than redirect participant content or introduce new concepts. The approach emphasized storytelling and reflection, allowing participants to determine the level of detail and the sequence in which they shared their experiences.

To reduce the risk of researcher influence, multiple safeguards were embedded into the interview setting and delivery. Questions were asked using a neutral tone and steady pacing, with nonreactive facial expression and body posture to avoid signaling approval, surprise, or disagreement. After asking each question, I allowed participants uninterrupted time to respond fully, without verbal prompting, paraphrasing, or mid-response commentary. I did not offer affirming statements, agreement cues, or evaluative reactions during participant responses. As a precautionary measure, I muted the microphone during extended participant responses when not speaking, thereby reducing

the possibility that inadvertent vocalizations or tonal inflections could be perceived as feedback. Once a participant completed a response, I used a brief transition, such as “Okay,” and proceeded to the next interview question. Probing questions were used to expand opportunities for participant storytelling and clarify meaning or sequence, and these were drawn from a predetermined probe list to minimize ad hoc prompting and reduce the risk of introducing researcher assumptions. No evaluative statements were used to signal agreement or disagreement with participant perspectives, and the interview was conducted in a manner intended to minimize demand characteristics and social desirability pressures. This stance supported the phenomenological emphasis on capturing participants lived meanings while reducing the likelihood that interviewer responses influenced participant disclosure.

Because the study required participants to revisit stressful periods, participant well-being was treated as an integral feature of the interview setting. Participants were checked on at multiple points during the interview to assess emotional comfort and readiness to continue, particularly when discussing difficult memories, relational conflict, loss, or periods of pronounced instability. Participants were reminded that they could pause, skip questions, or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. These protections were reinforced by participant support and well-being resources provided as part of the study materials.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked orienting and confirmation questions to establish context and reconfirm eligibility. Specifically, participants were asked, “Can you tell me a little about your marriage and how long you

and your spouse have been together?” and “Please confirm the year you got married and that you have been legally married for 10 or more years.” This opening sequence served as a rapport-building step and provided participants with an opportunity to situate their experiences within the broader history of their relationship. It also functioned as an additional procedural check to confirm that inclusion criteria were met at the time of the interview and to ensure that participants’ narratives were interpreted within the appropriate marital duration context.

Following the interview, participants received post-interview resources intended to support grounding, reflection, and self-paced processing. The grounding and reflection handout acknowledged that revisiting meaningful life experiences could generate emotional activation and provided brief strategies to reorient attention, regulate distress, and reflect without pressure to take immediate action. The handout also offered guidance regarding when to seek additional support if emotional responses persisted or interfered with daily functioning. Together, the screening and scheduling process, remote interview procedures, neutral interview stance, and well-being supports were intended to create a stable and ethically responsive setting that facilitated rich narrative descriptions of spousal support, coping transitions, and marital resilience during shared stressors.

### **Demographics**

A total of 18 participants met the inclusion criteria and contributed interview data for this study. All participants confirmed that they were legally married and had been married for 10 years or more at the time of participation. Participants represented a geographically diverse sample spanning multiple regions of the United States, with one

participant residing in Canada. U.S. participant locations included Virginia, Florida, Texas, Washington, DC, Ohio, Arizona, Missouri, Colorado, California, New York, and Georgia, with Ohio representing the most frequently reported state of residence. One participant reported residence in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. This geographic variation supported examination of spousal support and coping processes across different community contexts while maintaining the shared inclusion criterion of long-term marriage.

Participants reported marriage years ranging from 1996 to 2016. The marital duration of the sample ranged from 10 to 30 years, reflecting representation of both earlier and later phases of long-term marriage. Several participants were in the 10- to 15-year range, and multiple participants were in marriages exceeding 20 years. This spread in marital duration is relevant to interpretation of the findings because participants' narratives reflected different developmental stages of marriage, including variation in established routines, role expectations, and the accumulation of shared coping history over time. As shown in Table 1, the sample included participants married for approximately 10 to 16 years as well as participants with 24, 26, and 30 years of marital duration, allowing exploration of resilience processes that may reflect both relatively recent and deeply established relationship patterns.

With respect to family composition, participants varied in whether parenting and caregiving responsibilities were central to their stressor narratives. Several participants referenced children directly, including participants who reported two children, a 5-year-old child, and five children. One participant described parenting a child with

developmental delay, and others referenced caregiving demands that extended beyond childrearing, including responsibilities related to disability care, extended family needs, and shifting household roles. For some participants, parenting and caregiving served as a primary context in which spousal support was enacted, with descriptions of practical support involving childcare coordination, household labor redistribution, and role flexibility during periods of heightened stress. For other participants, children were not specified in the interview summary, suggesting that children were either not present, not central to the stressor narrative, or not disclosed in the interview context. These variations were retained as part of the overall demographic description because caregiving intensity can shape both the availability of spousal support and the perceived urgency of coping coordination during shared stressors.

Participants described a range of shared stressors, with several stressor clusters emerging across the sample. COVID-19 was frequently referenced as a prolonged shared stressor associated with disrupted routines, uncertainty, emotional strain, and shifts in household functioning. Financial stressors were also commonly described, including job disruption, employment instability, and pressure related to bills and economic uncertainty. Health-related stressors were present across several accounts, including serious illness such as cancer, chronic health concerns, and stress related to health vulnerability. Multiple participants described caregiving burdens, including childcare demands, disability-related caregiving, and responsibilities connected to extended family support. Several participants also referenced grief and loss as significant stressors that influenced emotional functioning and relational stability. Across cases, these stressors

were often layered rather than isolated, meaning that participants described multiple simultaneous demands that compounded emotional load and required both individual and shared coping adjustments. Table 1 provides a brief participant overview drawn from interview summaries and transcript content (participant identifiers are pseudonyms/codes).

**Table 1***Participant Characteristics Summary*

Participant	Location	Marital Duration	Children Noted in Interview Summary	Common Shared Stressors Described
P1	Kansas City, MO	30	five children	caregiving; disability-related caregiving; grief/loss; major disruptions
P2	Phoenix, AZ	24	not specified	financial strain; caregiving; relational adaptation
P3	New York, NY	26	two children	family demands; health; financial strain; role evolution
P4	Columbus, OH	13	not specified	cancer; health-related stressors
P5	Jacksonville, FL	15	not specified	health challenges; financial strain; family demands
P6	Lorton, VA	16	child with developmental delay	COVID-19; caregiving; health; financial strain
P7	Miami, FL	14	not specified	financial strain; caregiving; relational adaptation
P8	Houston, TX	13	not specified	financial strain; caregiving; relational adaptation
P9	Lakewood, CO	15	children referenced	COVID-19; early marital stressors; adaptation demands
P10	Georgetown, DC	13	children referenced	COVID-19; financial pressure; grief/loss
P11	Columbus, OH	12	not specified	religious stressors; financial stressors
P12	Columbus, OH	11	child referenced	COVID-19; job disruption; financial strain
P13	Austin, TX	14	not specified	COVID-19; job disruption
P14	Columbus, OH	10	not specified	COVID-19; relational adaptation; coping coordination under strain
P15	Atlanta, GA	13	not specified	financial strain; emotional distress; coping risks
P16	Ottawa, ON	12	two children	caregiving; health; financial strain
P17	Canton, OH	11	5-year-old child	family demands; employment strain
P18	Los Angeles, CA	12	children referenced	COVID-19; financial pressure; health; extended family demands

*Note.* “Children noted” and “shared stressors” reflect what has been documented in your interview summaries and coded segments so far.

Table 1 provides a summary of participant characteristics relevant to the study, including location, marital duration, children noted in the interview summary, and the primary shared stressors described. The table is intended to support interpretation of the findings by situating participant narratives within key contextual characteristics linked to coping demands and resource availability. In the results that follow, participant quotations are labeled using participant identifiers to preserve confidentiality while supporting transparency and traceability of thematic claims.

### **Data Collection**

Approval to begin data collection was obtained through Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval No. 12-15-25-1190282). Recruitment occurred through the Walden Participant Pool website and IRB-approved outreach in online research participation and dissertation support groups. In addition, the recruitment flyer was submitted to an APA division in which the researcher held membership. The division reviewed the flyer for compliance and, once approved, distributed it through a blind distribution list to protect recipient privacy.

A total of 41 individuals expressed interest in participating. Six individuals became unresponsive during the screening and scheduling process. Two individuals were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criterion of being legally married for at least 10 years. Eighteen participants met the inclusion criteria and completed an interview. Although the proposed sample size in Chapter 3 was 8 to 10 participants, the final sample included 18 participants because of the strong response rate and scheduling

efficiency created by participant self-scheduling. Each participant contributed one primary data source: a recorded and transcribed semi-structured interview.

Participant contact and scheduling followed a standardized sequence. Prospective participants initially contacted the researcher by email to express interest in the study. In response, the researcher provided the consent form and requested brief screening information to confirm eligibility and support interview coordination, including city and state, year married, a brief description of the shared stressor experienced with the spouse, and general availability for a 60- to 90-minute interview. After eligibility was confirmed, participants received a Zoom scheduling link to select an interview time. When needed, interviews were also scheduled manually for times not available through the scheduling link. Participants received a “what to expect” handout outlining the interview format, confidentiality protections, and participant rights, including the option to pause, decline questions, or discontinue participation without penalty.

All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Although both Zoom and Microsoft Teams were approved in the protocol, all participants selected Zoom because it offered greater convenience and supported scheduling consistency. Each participant completed one interview in a single-session format. The interview protocol consisted of 20 IRB-approved questions and was administered consistently across participants. Interview questions were informed in part by the Psychological Capital Questionnaire constructs of hope, efficacy, and optimism, for which research-use permission had been obtained from Mind Garden, Inc. One to two follow-up probes from a predetermined probing list were used as needed to clarify

responses and encourage narrative depth. These probes were used to clarify meaning, sequence, and interpretation rather than to redirect participant responses or introduce leading assumptions. Participants were allowed adequate time to share their experiences without interruption, and the researcher maintained a neutral demeanor throughout the interviews by avoiding language or reactions that could suggest agreement or disagreement with participant perspectives.

All interviews were recorded using Zoom and subsequently transcribed for analysis. Transcripts were reviewed for completeness and readability before formal coding began. Recordings and transcripts were managed in accordance with the confidentiality procedures described in the consent process, and all participant identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms or participant codes in analytic materials and reporting. Because the interviews required participants to revisit potentially distressing shared stressors, attention to participant well-being was maintained throughout data collection. Participants were checked on at multiple points during the interview to assess comfort and willingness to continue, particularly when discussing emotionally charged experiences such as illness, financial strain, grief and loss, or prolonged relational disruption. They were also reminded of their right to pause, decline to answer any question, or discontinue participation at any time. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were provided with post-interview support materials, including grounding and reflection resources and a well-being resource handout.

Minor variations occurred naturally across interviews in pacing and individualized probing, consistent with semi-structured qualitative interviewing. No

unusual circumstances occurred that compromised data usability or required changes to the interview protocol. When occasional technology-related disruptions occurred, such as brief connectivity issues, interviews were paused and resumed without loss of continuity. Following transcription and preparation, the interview dataset was organized for analysis using MAXQDA and the study's codebook and coding procedures to support consistent classification of support processes, coping behaviors, PsyCap dimensions, and resilience outcomes across transcripts.

### **Deviations from the Chapter 3 Plan**

Chapter 3 also referenced triangulation using multiple data sources. In the present study, interview transcripts served as the primary dataset. Rigor was therefore strengthened through process-based strategies, including an audit trail, documented decision rules, cross-case synthesis, and committee review of coded materials rather than through multisource triangulation.

### **Data Analysis**

The analytic process for this qualitative phenomenological study followed an inductive pathway from raw narrative accounts to progressively more abstract representations of meaning. Analysis began with preparation of the interview transcripts for systematic review. The primary analytic purpose was to identify how participants perceived spousal support during shared stressors, how they experienced a shift from solo coping to dyadic coping, and how those perceptions shaped resilience and perceived stability within long-term marriages. Consistent with a phenomenological orientation, analysis remained centered on participants' lived meanings, their descriptions of

relationship processes during stressors, and the interpretive language they used to explain change over time.

First-cycle coding was conducted using a structured codebook aligned with the research questions. The code system included (a) emotional support, (b) practical support, (c) solo coping behaviors, (d) dyadic coping behaviors, (e) Psychological Capital dimensions, including hope, efficacy, and optimism, and (f) resilience outcomes. Coding was applied at the segment level to capture discrete meaning units, defined as phrases or paragraphs expressing a coherent idea relevant to coping, support, adaptation, or relationship stability. During this phase, the goal was to remain close to participants' language and avoid premature abstraction. Segments were coded when they described the presence or absence of support, coping responses, communication patterns during stress, resource shifts, and perceived relationship consequences. When participants described multiple processes within the same excerpt, multiple codes were applied to preserve complexity rather than forcing exclusivity.

### **Code System and Operational Definitions**

To support analytic rigor and consistency across transcripts, a structured code system with operational definitions and decision rules was used. The code system was designed to align directly with the research questions by capturing (a) what participants described as spousal support, (b) how coping occurred initially and how it shifted over time, and (c) the outcomes participants attributed to these coping and support processes. Codes were applied to the smallest meaningful unit of text that conveyed a coherent idea, typically one to three sentences when feasible, in order to reduce thematic drift and

preserve conceptual boundaries between process and outcome codes. When participants described multiple processes in the same narrative sequence, segments were split and coded separately to avoid conflating supportive actions, coping behaviors, internal psychological resources, and reported results.

The code system included six primary categories: emotional support, practical support, solo coping behaviors, dyadic coping behaviors, PsyCap dimensions, and resilience outcomes. Emotional support was defined as support intended to influence feelings or emotional security, such as empathy, validation, reassurance, warmth, listening, acceptance, affection, or presence. This code was applied when the primary function of the spouse's behavior was emotional soothing or relational connection rather than tangible problem resolution. Practical support was defined as tangible or logistical support that reduced demands or increased resources, such as managing tasks, childcare, scheduling, money management, planning, transportation, or other concrete actions that lessened burden. A primary boundary rule differentiated emotional and practical support by asking whether the supportive act would remain meaningful if emotional language were removed; if the action was still support in the absence of emotional language, it was typically coded as practical support.

Coping codes were differentiated according to whether the coping process was primarily individual or coordinated between spouses because the analytic focus of this study required separation of parallel coping from coordinated coping in response to shared stressors. Solo coping behaviors were defined as any coping action the participant described doing primarily on their own to manage the stressor or regulate their internal

response, including thoughts, emotions, and physiological arousal. This code included self-regulation strategies such as breathing, prayer, journaling, exercise, cognitive reframing, withdrawing to regulate, thinking through problems alone, establishing routines or boundaries, and seeking support outside the spouse when the spouse was not part of that coping plan. The decision rule for solo coping was applied using a mechanism test: if partner interaction was not the mechanism through which coping occurred, the segment was coded as solo coping even if the spouse was present in the narrative or affected by the same stressor. This rule was necessary to prevent overcoding dyadic coping in excerpts where a spouse was mentioned but not functionally involved in the coping action and to preserve conceptual clarity between individual regulation efforts and relational coordination. In practice, solo coping was often signaled by first-person agency language emphasizing self-management, such as “I handled,” “I deal with,” “I tried,” “I did,” and “I started.” These first-person agency markers were treated as indicators because they reflected the participant positioning the self as the primary actor and regulator of the coping response, which aligned with the codebook goal of capturing individual coping as a distinct process category.

*Dyadic coping* behaviors were defined as coping efforts coordinated between spouses or occurring through interaction, including shared appraisal, teamwork, joint problem-solving, communication intended to align perspectives, planning, decision-making, and one spouse stepping in as part of a coordinated response. This code was applied when the spouse was part of the coping process rather than simply present in the story, because the analytic aim was to identify instances in which interaction itself

functioned as the coping mechanism. Dyadic coping was commonly indicated by coordination language such as “we talked,” “we planned,” “we decided,” “we got on the same page,” and “he or she stepped in,” which signaled that coping involved shared meaning-making or coordinated action rather than parallel efforts. The decision rule was intentionally strict to preserve analytic boundaries and to reduce conceptual overlap with emotional or practical support codes. When a segment contained both dyadic coping and an outcome statement, it was segmented to prevent process and outcome from collapsing into a single code, which aligned with the codebook clarification that “we talked” represents dyadic process, whereas downstream effects were coded as outcomes only when framed as longer-term change.

*Resilience outcomes* were coded as the reported results of coping or support processes over time, including relationship adaptation, stability, recovery, growth, strengthened trust, improved communication, reduced escalation, increased closeness, or negative outcomes such as increased distance, damaged trust, or prolonged disconnection. The decision rule for resilience outcomes was temporal and interpretive, meaning that outcomes were coded when participants described a shift over time, an end-state impact, or a sustained relational change rather than an immediate coping step. Statements such as “we talked,” “we made a plan,” or “we divided responsibilities” were not coded as outcomes because they represented coping processes and were coded as dyadic coping. By contrast, statements such as “after that we became closer,” “it made us more stable,” “we learned how to communicate better,” or “it made us distant” were coded as resilience outcomes. The rationale for this temporal rule was to prevent process

and outcome from collapsing into one category, thereby allowing the analytic narrative to trace a coherent pathway from support and coping mechanisms to longer-term perceived resilience and stability.

The PsyCap category was treated as a distinct construct to prevent conflation with support actions, coping behaviors, and outcomes because PsyCap codes were intended to capture internal resource language rather than behavioral steps or partner actions. PsyCap was coded only when participants expressed hope, efficacy, or optimism in their own words, either individually (“I can”) or relationally (“we can”). The decision rule for PsyCap required that at least one of three indicators be identifiable in the excerpt: goal-directed pathways or agency for hope, capability or confidence statements for efficacy, or positive expectations or constructive explanations for optimism. When excerpts contained both coping behavior and PsyCap language, the segments were split and coded separately so that behavioral coping and internal capacity statements could be traced distinctly through the analytic chain from process to outcome. This separation was critical to analytic rigor because it prevented a generally positive tone from being miscoded as PsyCap and ensured that PsyCap remained reserved for explicit internal resource language.

*PsyCap optimism* was coded when participants expressed positive expectations for the future or a constructive explanatory style that framed difficulties as temporary, manageable, meaningful, or survivable. Optimism was identified when participants used language reflecting forward-looking confidence or reframing hardship as a “season” or “phase,” without necessarily articulating a specific plan or pathway. The decision rule for

optimism required that the primary meaning of the excerpt reflect expectation or explanatory framing rather than capability or goal-directed planning.

*PsyCap efficacy* was coded when participants expressed confidence in their capability to manage the situation successfully, either individually or as a couple, reflected in explicit competence language such as “I can handle it,” “we were able to,” or “I knew I could.” Efficacy was also coded when participants described a perceived shift from helplessness to capability tied to action readiness, persistence, or problem-solving confidence. The decision rule for efficacy required that the excerpt communicate capability or competence rather than general positivity or future expectation.

*PsyCap hope* was coded when participants expressed goal-directed thinking that included agency and/or pathways, meaning that the excerpt contained a goal plus willpower, a plan, or an identifiable strategy for reaching that goal. Hope was not coded for general reassurance alone. It was coded when participants articulated movement toward a goal, identified steps forward, or described a pathway, even if provisional, for improving or enduring the situation. The decision rule for hope required the presence of goal-plus-pathway and/or goal-plus-agency language, distinguishing hope from optimism, which may involve positive expectation without a plan, and from efficacy, which emphasizes capability rather than pathways.

Together, these operational definitions and decision rules strengthened analytic consistency across the dataset by clarifying what counted as support, what counted as coping, what counted as internal psychological resource language, and what counted as outcomes. This structure also supported the cross-case synthesis process because it

allowed patterns to be traced systematically from spousal support and coping processes to the resilience outcomes participants reported over time.

Following first-cycle coding, a second analytic cycle was conducted to identify patterns across participants and to move from codes to categories and themes. Coded segments were compared within and across transcripts, with attention to repetition, emphasis, and process sequences. This involved examining how codes co-occurred, such as emotional support preceding dyadic coping, practical support reducing overload, or Psychological Capital language appearing after shared planning. Segments were then clustered into broader categories that reflected how participants described coping transitions over time. For example, multiple accounts described early phases of stress marked by withdrawal or internalized coping, followed by turning points characterized by intentional conversation, shared planning, and role adaptation. These categories were further refined into themes that captured the most salient cross-case patterns and were directly aligned with the research questions.

Theme development was guided by three decision rules. First, a theme had to be supported by multiple participants, demonstrating that it represented a patterned perception rather than an isolated narrative. Second, the theme had to contribute directly to answering one or both research questions, meaning that it needed to illuminate how spousal support was perceived, how coping shifted, or how resilience and stability were influenced. Third, the theme had to be conceptually interpretable through the study frameworks, Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Senge's Learning Organization Theory, without forcing participants' language into theory-driven categories. Rather than treating

theory as a coding template, the frameworks were used during synthesis to interpret why certain patterns may have mattered, such as how emotional safety supported disclosure or how repeated check-ins reflected adaptive learning processes.

Throughout the analytic process, discrepant and nonconforming cases were intentionally retained and examined. Discrepant cases were defined as narratives in which participants described outcomes that differed from the dominant pattern, such as prolonged distance, reduced stability, or difficulty sustaining dyadic coping despite shared stress exposure. These cases were not treated as errors or outliers to be removed. Instead, they were used to refine the boundaries of the themes and identify conditions under which spousal support did not function as protective. For example, some participants described feeling distant during periods of shared stress, suggesting that stress could intensify disconnection when emotional support was experienced as mistuned or when resource depletion reduced coping capacity. These nonconforming descriptions were integrated into the results to prevent overgeneralization and to support a more credible representation of variability across long-term marriages.

The final output of the analytic process was a set of themes organized by research question. Findings for Research Question 1 emphasized the process of moving from early solo coping toward dyadic coping, including the role of emotional and practical support in enabling that transition. Findings for Research Question 2 emphasized how Psychological Capital sustained dyadic coping over time and how resilience outcomes appeared as improved teamwork, reduced escalation, and increased closeness, while also acknowledging important exceptions. Representative quotations were selected for each

theme to ground analytic claims in participant language and preserve the phenomenological commitment to lived experience as the primary source of meaning.

### **Thematic Saturation**

Thematic saturation was evaluated during the later stages of coding and cross-case comparison to determine whether the dataset had adequately captured the breadth and depth of the phenomenon under study. Across the 18 participant interviews, the major thematic patterns stabilized, particularly with respect to dyadic coping behaviors, emotional support, practical support, and resilience outcomes, all of which appeared consistently across a substantial portion of the dataset. These recurring patterns were reflected in participants' descriptions of shared stress, emotional reassurance, practical stepping in, communication turning points, role redistribution, and the gradual strengthening of teamwork, trust, and relational stability over time.

Solo coping behaviors also emerged across multiple cases, although the specific strategies described, such as withdrawal, private burden carrying, guarded reliance, and individualized stress management, were more variable in form and context. Expressions of PsyCap, including hope, efficacy, and optimism, were likewise evident across participants, but these codes appeared with greater dependence on individual wording, stressor context, and the point in the coping process at which participants were reflecting. As analysis progressed, the later interviews did not yield substantially new thematic categories. Rather, they confirmed, elaborated, and refined the existing thematic structure, including both dominant patterns and important contrasting experiences. This was particularly evident in the repeated pattern of early solo or parallel coping followed

by movement toward more coordinated dyadic coping, as well as in participants' descriptions of resilience as something developed through repeated support, communication, and adaptive adjustment rather than as an automatic consequence of marital duration alone. Taken together, this pattern indicated that the dataset was sufficiently rich to capture the central processes, recurring code clusters, and meaningful variations relevant to marital resilience, spousal support, and coping transitions during shared stressors, thereby supporting the adequacy of the sample for qualitative thematic development. The stabilization of thematic patterns, together with the retention of contrasting cases, supported the credibility and adequacy of the analytic structure used to interpret the dataset.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was established through procedures aligned with the qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Strategies were implemented throughout recruitment, data collection, transcription preparation, coding, and cross-case synthesis to strengthen methodological rigor and provide an auditable trail from participant narratives to reported findings. Because the study required participants to revisit stressful experiences, trustworthiness procedures were also designed to support participant well-being and reduce demand characteristics. Given that the study explored potentially sensitive experiences related to shared stressors and marital coping, these procedures were also intended to reduce the likelihood that participants' disclosures were shaped by interviewer influence or emotional discomfort during the interview process.

## **Credibility**

Credibility was supported through consistent implementation of the interview protocol, careful attention to participant meaning, and systematic analytic procedures. All participants completed a semi-structured interview via Zoom using the same IRB-approved interview protocol consisting of 20 core questions, with one to three probes selected from a predetermined probing list as needed for clarification and narrative depth. The use of a standardized protocol ensured that participants responded to the same core prompts, while the semi-structured format permitted participants to narrate their experiences in their own words and sequence. During interviews, the researcher maintained a neutral demeanor and avoided verbal or nonverbal cues that could be interpreted as agreement or disagreement, thereby reducing the risk of leading responses and supporting authenticity of disclosure. Participants were not interrupted while telling their stories, which enhanced the likelihood that accounts reflected participant priorities rather than researcher-driven framing.

Credibility was also strengthened by ongoing attention to participant well-being. Participants were checked on at multiple points during the interview to assess emotional comfort, particularly when revisiting stressful events such as illness, financial strain, grief, or relationship disruption. Participants were reminded that they could pause, skip questions, or discontinue participation without penalty. Post-interview grounding and well-being resources were provided to support emotional regulation and ensure that participants had access to support options after discussing potentially distressing

experiences. These procedures supported ethical responsiveness while also increasing credibility by fostering a safe context in which participants could disclose openly.

Analytically, credibility was strengthened through systematic coding using a structured codebook and documented decision rules. Segment-level coding preserved proximity to participant language. Cross-case comparison was used to verify that themes reflected multiple narratives rather than isolated accounts. Discrepant cases were retained and integrated into theme refinement to prevent overstatement of uniform outcomes. Representative quotations were used to anchor interpretations and support transparency between analytic claims and supporting evidence.

### **Transferability**

Transferability was supported through thick description of participant characteristics and the contextual conditions under which experiences occurred. Demographic information, including location, year married, marital duration, and family context, was collected to situate the sample and support interpretive clarity. Findings are presented with detailed descriptions of shared stressors and relational processes, including how participants described emotional support, practical support, coping transitions, and outcomes over time. Rather than making claims of statistical generalizability, the study provides contextualized accounts and labeled participant quotations so that readers can assess applicability to other populations of long-married individuals experiencing shared stressors. The inclusion of both dominant patterns and important exceptions further supports transferability by clarifying conditions under which themes were and were not present.

## **Dependability**

Dependability was supported through consistent procedures and maintenance of a clear methodological trail. Recruitment and scheduling followed a standardized process with eligibility confirmation prior to interview scheduling. Data collection procedures were stable across participants, including the same platform, the same core question set, and comparable interview duration. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were prepared using consistent readability and completeness checks prior to coding.

Analytic dependability was strengthened through a stable codebook, explicit operational definitions, and decision rules distinguishing overlapping constructs (support, coping, PsyCap, and outcomes). Segment-level coding and cross-case synthesis followed the same analytic process across transcripts. The progression from codes to categories to themes was guided by explicit criteria (multi-participant support, direct relevance to the research questions, and interpretability through study frameworks without forcing theory-driven categories), allowing the logic of interpretation to be traced systematically. The movement from coded excerpts to categories and themes was guided by explicit criteria, including the requirement of multi-participant support, direct relevance to the research questions, and interpretability through the study frameworks without forcing theory-driven categories. These procedures support consistency in how interpretations were produced and allow for replication of the analytic logic even though qualitative results are not intended to be identical across analysts.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability was supported by strategies that reduced the influence of researcher bias and ensured that conclusions were grounded in participant narratives. The neutral interviewing stance reduced the likelihood that participant responses were shaped by researcher approval or disagreement. During analysis, themes were derived inductively from coded segments and supported with representative quotations to demonstrate evidentiary grounding. The analytic structure explicitly distinguished between support processes, coping behaviors, psychological resource language, and outcomes to reduce interpretive drift. The code system distinguished between what participants described as actions and processes versus what they reported as outcomes, reducing interpretive drift and helping ensure that claims were supported by the type of evidence appropriate to the claim.

Confirmability was strengthened through documentation and review of analytic decision-making. Analytic memos were maintained to capture coding rationale, emerging interpretations, and theme boundary decisions, and these materials were available within the MAXQDA audit trail. Committee review of transcripts, coded segments, and memo documentation supported confirmability by evaluating whether interpretations were warranted by the data. Confirmability was also strengthened through deliberate integration of discrepant and non-confirming cases. Narratives reflecting increased distance, difficulty sustaining dyadic coping, or perceptions of mis-attuned support were retained and used to refine themes and prevent selective reporting.

## Results

This section presents findings from 18 semi-structured interviews with individuals who had been legally married for 10 years or more. Findings are organized by research question and presented as themes that emerged through inductive analysis of the coded transcripts. To strengthen analytic traceability, the themes below explicitly connect representative participant excerpts to the code clusters applied to those segments. In addition to dominant patterns, contrasting and discrepant cases are included to clarify theme boundaries and demonstrate that movement from solo coping to dyadic coping was often gradual rather than immediate. Participant identifiers are used to protect confidentiality while maintaining traceability of evidence.

### Findings for Research Question 1

**RQ1:** How do individuals perceive spousal support and the transition from sole coping to dyadic coping during shared stressors?

#### *Theme 1: Shared Stressors Initially Amplified Strain and “Solo Coping” Tendencies*

Across all cases (P1–P18), participants frequently described an early phase of shared stress in which coping occurred privately rather than collaboratively. These early responses were commonly coded as Solo coping behaviors and were often discussed retrospectively as part of a broader transition toward more coordinated coping. Participants described internalizing distress, suppressing emotion, or assuming personal responsibility for managing the stressor before involving their spouse. These accounts suggest that shared stressors did not automatically generate relational coordination;

instead, many participants initially responded through self-reliance, guardedness, or parallel coping.

For example, P18 described an early period of financial strain in which stress was managed alone: “I remember a time when I was dealing with financial pressure and initially tried to manage it on my own. I kept worrying privately, trying to figure everything out, and the stress kept building. I was more irritable and had trouble focusing because I felt solely responsible for solving the problem” (P18; Solo coping behaviors + PsyCap: Hope). This excerpt was coded as Solo coping behaviors because the participant described coping through private worry, internal burden carrying, and self-directed efforts rather than relational engagement. It was also coded as PsyCap: Hope, as the participant’s narrative reflected continued efforts to find a way forward despite remaining isolated in the coping process.

P18 further clarified that this individualized approach became increasingly difficult to sustain: “I thought I could handle most of the stress myself... But when I kept doing that, I got tired of it... That was when my stress became more, and she had to calm me down and help me out” (P18; Solo coping behaviors + Emotional support). This account extends the earlier excerpt by showing that private burden carrying, although initially intended to maintain control, became emotionally depleting over time. The segment remained coded as Solo coping behaviors because the participant continued to frame the stress as something to be managed alone at first, but it also reflected Emotional support once the spouse intervened to provide calming and assistance. Together, these

excerpts illustrate how solo coping could function as an initial regulatory strategy but ultimately intensify strain when sustained over time.

A later excerpt from the same participant demonstrated a clear shift toward shared coping: “Eventually, I opened up to my spouse and explained what was going on. Once we started discussing it together, the situation felt less overwhelming. We reviewed our expenses, made a plan, and supported each other emotionally” (P18; Dyadic coping behaviors + Emotional support + Practical support + PsyCap: Hope). This segment was coded as Dyadic coping behaviors because the participant described a coordinated and mutual response to the stressor. It was also coded as Emotional support and Practical support, as the spouse’s involvement reduced emotional burden while also contributing to concrete planning and problem solving. The continued presence of PsyCap: Hope suggests that hope shifted from an individualized effort to a shared, relationally reinforced process.

This same movement from private coping to collaborative coping appeared across several narratives. P3 stated, “I try to handle it alone. I was thinking, let me solve it, I do not like to tell her. When I finally involved her, it changed from me carrying everything to us sharing it. We started talking, planning, and supporting each other” (P3; Solo coping behaviors + Dyadic coping behaviors + Practical support + Resilience outcomes). This excerpt captured one of the clearest transitions from individual burden carrying to a shared coping process. The initial reluctance to disclose was coded as Solo coping behaviors, whereas the later emphasis on “talking, planning, and supporting each other” reflected Dyadic coping behaviors and Practical support. The segment was also

associated with Resilience outcomes, as the shift from “me” to “us” suggested a meaningful adaptation in how stress was managed within the relationship.

P6 described a similar process, although the initial need to cope alone appeared partly shaped by circumstance: “I knew I was going to have to navigate this by myself, so I leaned on parts of our family... When I was able to have access to him, then I did reach out, and we talked about it” (P6; Solo coping behaviors + Dyadic coping behaviors). This account indicates that solo coping was not always rooted in emotional avoidance or reluctance to rely on a spouse. In some cases, participants managed stress alone because partner access was temporarily limited, with dyadic coping becoming possible only once communication resumed. This distinction is important because it suggests that early solo coping may reflect contextual constraints as well as relational processes.

P10 offered additional nuance by describing temporary withdrawal as part of emotional regulation rather than relational disengagement: “There are times I want to be left alone... I want to handle my feelings first... before I can talk to someone else... When I feel better or ready, I talk about it. The important thing is understanding each other and knowing when to give your partner space” (P10; Solo coping behaviors + Dyadic coping behaviors + Emotional support + Resilience outcomes). This excerpt suggests that not all forms of solo coping were experienced negatively. In this case, managing emotions privately functioned as a short-term regulation strategy that preceded later disclosure and partner engagement. The segment therefore reflected Solo coping behaviors at the outset, but also Dyadic coping behaviors and Emotional support because mutual understanding and respectful timing became part of the couple’s coping process.

Its association with Resilience outcomes further suggests that some couples developed adaptive ways of balancing personal space with relational responsiveness.

A more guarded pattern appeared in P5's narrative: "So early on it was harder to rely on my husband because I didn't know if support would be there the next day" (P5; Solo coping behaviors + PsyCap: Efficacy + Resilience outcomes). Unlike participants who described coping alone due to preference or circumstance, P5's account reflected uncertainty about the reliability of support itself. This segment was coded as Solo coping behaviors because it described guarded self-reliance, and as PsyCap: Efficacy because the participant's appraisal centered on whether coping could be managed effectively within the relationship. The code Resilience outcomes was also applied because the participant described this early uncertainty from the standpoint of later growth, indicating that trust and support developed over time rather than being immediately available.

P7 similarly reflected on how stress was initially carried privately and gradually became more openly addressed through repeated conversations. In one segment, P7 stated, "It sat heavy on me... We have had several conversations about it... I think it is a lot better now" (P7; Solo coping behaviors + Dyadic coping behaviors + Resilience outcomes + PsyCap: Optimism). In another, P7 explained, "I used to make excuses for him without actually talking to him... It has changed... talking it out... he encourages me to be verbal about it because he can't read my mind" (P7; Solo coping behaviors + Dyadic coping behaviors + Emotional support + Resilience outcomes). Together, these excerpts suggest that the transition to dyadic coping was often gradual rather than immediate. In P7's account, improvement emerged through repeated communication,

increased verbal expression, and encouragement from the spouse to articulate needs more directly. These features indicate that dyadic coping was not simply a one-time shift, but a developing relational practice built through conversation and adjustment over time.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that shared stressors often initially amplified strain and led participants toward solo coping, even within long-term marriages. Early responses commonly included private burden carrying, emotional suppression, guarded reliance, or temporary withdrawal before more coordinated coping became possible. For some participants, solo coping appeared to serve a short-term self-regulatory function; for others, it reflected uncertainty about support, limited partner access, or the perceived need to retain personal control over the stressor. Across cases, however, sustained solo coping often delayed visibility of need and postponed collaborative problem solving. As participants increasingly perceived safety, responsiveness, or emotional attunement within the relationship, they described becoming more willing to disclose vulnerability and engage in shared coping. In this way, the transition from solo coping to dyadic coping emerged not as an automatic response to shared stress, but as a relational process that developed over time through communication, responsiveness, and mutual adjustment.

***Theme 2: Emotional Support Created a Safe Haven That Enabled Vulnerability and Helped Initiate Dyadic Coping***

Across the 18 participants, emotional support was repeatedly described as a turning mechanism that reduced emotional isolation and made it easier to move from private distress to relational engagement. These excerpts were commonly coded as

Emotional support and often co-occurred with Dyadic coping behaviors, suggesting that emotional reassurance did more than provide comfort in the moment. Rather, participants described emotional support as creating the relational safety needed to disclose distress, remain engaged in difficult conversations, and begin coping together. In this way, emotional support functioned as a condition that helped transform stress from an individualized burden into a shared relational process.

P15 described a moment of emotional strain and explained, “But my wife picked it up that night, spoke with me, and really encouraged me” (P15; Solo coping behaviors + Dyadic coping behaviors + Emotional support). This excerpt suggests that the participant’s distress had initially been carried internally before the spouse’s intervention shifted the interaction toward shared coping. The segment reflected Emotional support through encouragement and emotional presence, while the co-occurring Dyadic coping behaviors indicated that support was not merely comforting, but also relationally activating. In other words, the spouse’s encouragement helped create the conditions for coping to become mutual rather than private.

A similar pattern appeared in P8’s narrative, which offered a fuller account of how emotional support opened the way for collaborative coping: “After thinking about it, I could not handle the thoughts anymore, so I sat my spouse down and narrated the story. She supported me by being there, listening to what I had to say. She made me calm down, and not overthink, and help with giving me that positive energy. We figured things out by talking. We looked at what was needed, and what should happen and resolved it” (P8; Practical support + Emotional support + Dyadic coping behaviors + PsyCap: Hope +

PsyCap: Optimism). This excerpt illustrates the progression central to this theme. The spouse's listening presence, calming influence, and positive energy were consistent with Emotional support, while the couple's later discussion of what was needed and how to resolve the issue reflected Dyadic coping behaviors and Practical support. The co-occurrence of PsyCap: Hope and PsyCap: Optimism further suggests that emotional support not only reduced distress, but also helped restore a more hopeful and future-oriented outlook. This account supports the interpretation that emotional support often served as the entry point into collaborative coping by first lowering emotional intensity and then making joint problem-solving possible.

P7 similarly emphasized the importance of emotional availability in making the participant feel less alone in the stress process: "I appreciate that he is always ready to talk. It can be a lot emotionally and it is easy to shut down and not want to fight or talk about it. I am happy he has never refused to talk to me when I feel the need to. That has been helpful because it gives me the perception that I am not doing this alone, and that I am not crazy" (P7; Emotional support + Dyadic coping behaviors). This excerpt highlights that emotional support was experienced not only through reassurance, but also through readiness and willingness to engage. The spouse's consistent openness to conversation appeared to counter tendencies toward shutdown and withdrawal, thereby supporting Dyadic coping behaviors. The participant's statement that this helped them feel "not doing this alone" underscores the extent to which emotional support reduced emotional isolation and reinforced the sense that the stressor could be approached together.

P11 described emotional support through a spiritually grounded interaction that also reflected shared coping: “I held her hand, looked into her eyes, and told her we were going to pray. She agreed and we prayed about it” (P11; Emotional support + Dyadic coping behaviors). Although brief, this account was analytically significant because it demonstrated how emotional support could be communicated through physical presence, eye contact, reassurance, and a shared spiritual practice. The segment reflected Emotional support in its calming and relationally affirming quality, while the joint act of prayer illustrated Dyadic coping behaviors by showing how partners engaged the stressor together in a mutually meaningful way. This excerpt also broadens the theme by showing that emotional support was not limited to verbal encouragement alone but could also be conveyed through embodied presence and shared faith practices.

P9 provided another example of emotional support arising through conversation and resulting in relief: “...I told him that I had been feeling overwhelmed, I did not really want to cook, and I did not really want to do the laundry. We spoke about everything, and that day it felt like a relief. I understood he understood the stress I was going through. It made me appreciate him even more. I was grateful” (P9; Dyadic coping behaviors + Emotional support). This excerpt suggests that emotional support was closely tied to feeling understood. The participant’s relief did not appear to come simply from expressing distress, but from recognizing that the spouse understood the stress experience. The segment therefore reflected Dyadic coping behaviors through mutual discussion and Emotional support through empathic understanding and relational validation. The participant’s gratitude and increased appreciation for the spouse further

suggest that emotionally supportive interactions could strengthen the relational bond while reducing the immediate burden of stress.

A comparable pattern appeared in P12's narrative, which emphasized that emotional support remained salient even when partners were not physically together: "Even when he is not physically with me, he is always emotionally with me. We call each other, and I tell him how I feel. He listens without interrupting, and that makes me feel relieved. Sometimes he encourages me, and that gives me strength" (P12; Emotional support + Dyadic coping behaviors). This excerpt is important because it demonstrates that emotional support was not dependent on physical proximity. Rather, participants experienced support through attentive listening, uninterrupted space to express emotion, and verbal encouragement that fostered relief and strength. The segment reflected Emotional support through the spouse's emotional availability and Dyadic coping behaviors through the ongoing reciprocal communication process. This account reinforces the interpretation that emotional support functioned as a relational resource that could be activated across distance when partners remained psychologically present and responsive.

P17 similarly described the emotional impact of supportive reassurance, stating, "When she says that, I feel a sense that it will definitely be alright. She helps me emotionally" (P17; PsyCap: Optimism + Emotional support + Resilience outcomes). In this account, reassurance was experienced as both comfort and a source of positive expectancy. The segment reflected Emotional support because the spouse's role centered on emotional steadiness rather than immediate task resolution. It was also associated with

PsyCap: Optimism, as the participant described moving toward a more confident expectation that the situation would improve. Its connection to Resilience outcomes suggests that emotionally supportive exchanges not only reduced distress in the moment, but also contributed to a broader sense of relational confidence and steadiness over time.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that emotional support did more than comfort participants during stressful experiences. It reduced emotional isolation, increased felt security, and helped participants become more willing to re-engage the relationship as a coping resource. Support was most strongly experienced when spouses stayed present, listened attentively, validated emotions, and created space for emotional processing before moving into logistics or problem solving. Several accounts suggested that support was weakened when a spouse attempted to solve the problem too quickly, minimized the experience, or failed to remain emotionally available. In this sense, emotional support operated as a relational skill set that shaped whether couples could coordinate effectively under stress.

From an attachment lens, emotional support functioned as a safe haven, allowing co-regulation and lowering perceived threat so that partners could move from self-protective coping to relational engagement. From a learning organization lens, emotional safety made dialogue possible by reducing defensiveness, increasing openness, and supporting shared reflection rather than reactive interaction. Participants' descriptions suggest that when emotional support was present, vulnerability became more tolerable, disclosure became more likely, and collaborative coping became more achievable.

Emotional support therefore appeared to serve as a foundational relational condition through which later coordination, teamwork, and resilience were made possible.

***Theme 3: Practical Support Acted as Concrete Resource Transfer That Reduced Overload and Signaled Reliability***

Practical support emerged as a second major form of support when participants described financial assistance, task redistribution, childcare coverage, or direct help with daily responsibilities. Practical support was represented across all 18 participant transcripts and emerged as a recurrent cross-case pattern in the dataset. Although the form varied by stressor and household context, participants consistently described tangible assistance as reducing overload, stabilizing daily functioning, and signaling that the spouse could be counted on under strain. These excerpts were commonly coded as Practical support and often co-occurred with Dyadic coping behaviors and PsyCap, suggesting that concrete assistance did more than complete tasks. Participants described practical support as a way of redistributing responsibility, protecting daily functioning, and demonstrating reliability during periods of shared stress.

P17 described this pattern directly: “My wife stepped in. Financially, she helped. She was by my side when I was doing major projects” (P17; PsyCap: Hope + Dyadic coping behaviors + Practical support). This excerpt reflected Practical support because the spouse reduced burden through financial help and active assistance during a demanding period. It also reflected Dyadic coping behaviors because the support occurred within a coordinated response to the stressor rather than as isolated help. The

co-occurring PsyCap: Hope suggests that the spouse's involvement helped create a workable pathway forward rather than leaving the participant alone in the strain.

P16 similarly described practical support as task redistribution combined with shared planning: "We had to make a plan for the house, who does what. He made sure he handled the majority of the chores, and I didn't have to" (P16; Practical support + Dyadic coping behaviors + PsyCap: Hope). This excerpt illustrates the central logic of the theme. The spouse's assumption of household labor represented Practical support through concrete task redistribution, while the statement "we had to make a plan" reflected Dyadic coping behaviors because the couple approached the stressor through coordinated role adjustment. The planning language also supported PsyCap: Hope, as the couple identified a pathway for moving forward rather than remaining overwhelmed by the situation.

A similar pattern appeared in P2's account during a physically demanding period: "Because of my pregnancy, I would throw up... His friend will literally take his shift... So he was at home. He did all the cleaning. He did all of this stuff. He took care of the baby" (P2; Practical support). Although this excerpt was primarily coded as Practical support, it was analytically important because it demonstrated how tangible assistance could reduce immediate overload and preserve basic functioning. The spouse's actions involved time, labor, and childcare, showing that practical support often operated through direct redistribution of energy and responsibility. Even when not explicitly framed as emotional reassurance, this kind of concrete help appeared to communicate dependability through action.

P7 also connected practical support to routine management during strain: “He picked up the kids... he did their bedtime routine... and then once they were in bed, then we would talk” (P7; Practical support). This excerpt is significant because it shows that practical support did not merely address tasks in isolation. By taking over childcare routines, the spouse reduced overload and created the conditions for later communication. In this sense, practical support not only stabilized the household, but also opened relational space for dyadic coping to occur.

P13 offered another clear example of practical support as a response to visible strain: “I started assisting her more in doing most of the house chores, to limit the stress it had on her” (P13; Dyadic coping behaviors + PsyCap: Hope). Although this segment was coded in the export as Dyadic coping behaviors and PsyCap: Hope, the content clearly reflected practical support through direct chore assistance. The participant’s rationale, “to limit the stress,” supports the interpretation that practical actions reduced overload while also signaling responsiveness to the partner’s needs. The dyadic component was evident in the coordinated shift in roles, while the hope element appeared in the participant’s effort to create relief and preserve functioning under stress.

P17 provided another example in a child-related crisis: “My wife handled it perfectly. She went to the school and was threatening to sue if our child got bullied again. Throughout that period, I was so stressed out that I couldn't show up for him, but my wife took up the responsibility, and that piece went away” (P17; PsyCap: Efficacy + Dyadic coping behaviors + Resilience outcomes + Practical support). This excerpt reflected Practical support because the spouse assumed concrete responsibility for an urgent

problem when the participant felt overwhelmed. It also reflected Dyadic coping behaviors, even though the spouse carried more of the action, because the response functioned within the couple's broader shared coping process. The co-occurring PsyCap: Efficacy suggested confidence in the spouse's capability, while the phrase "that piece went away" indicated a Resilience outcome in the form of reduced burden.

P18 also described coordinated practical support in financial terms: "We reviewed our expenses, made a plan, and supported each other emotionally" (P18; Dyadic coping behaviors + Emotional support + Practical support + PsyCap: Hope). This excerpt demonstrates that practical support was often intertwined with emotional and relational processes. Reviewing expenses and developing a plan reflected Practical support, while the shared discussion indicated Dyadic coping behaviors. The presence of Emotional support and PsyCap: Hope further suggests that practical support was most meaningful when it reduced concrete strain while also reinforcing shared movement toward a solution.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that practical support was experienced as more than task completion. Participants interpreted tangible assistance as a sign that the spouse could be counted on when stress had concrete consequences for the family system. Practical support was especially meaningful when it reduced immediate overload, redistributed responsibility, and helped restore daily functioning. Several participants also suggested that practical support was most impactful when it was anticipatory rather than purely reactive, with spouses noticing strain early and intervening before exhaustion

escalated into conflict. In this sense, practical support signaled not only help, but reliability.

From an attachment perspective, practical support reinforced perceptions of dependability and responsiveness, strengthening the belief that the spouse could function as a reliable partner under stress. From a learning organization perspective, practical support reflected systems thinking through role flexibility, redistribution of demands, and adaptive reorganization of household functioning. Participants' accounts suggest that when practical support was framed as shared responsibility rather than as a favor, it was more likely to strengthen dyadic coping and stabilize the relationship during prolonged strain.

Participants frequently described practical support as especially meaningful when it occurred early enough to reduce escalation in daily strain. Rather than waiting for distress to intensify, spouses who noticed overload and responded with task coverage, childcare assistance, or logistical planning were often experienced as particularly supportive. In these accounts, practical support appeared to reduce cognitive and emotional burden by easing decision fatigue, protecting daily functioning, and helping participants feel that the stressor was being carried more jointly rather than individually.

Participants also described practical support as conveying shared responsibility, not merely assistance with tasks. When spouses approached household demands, finances, or caregiving responsibilities as a joint problem to be managed together, participants more often described increased stability, reduced overload, and a stronger sense of teamwork. These accounts suggest that the meaning attached to practical support

shaped its relational impact; practical help was most powerful when it communicated dependability, responsiveness, and shared ownership of the stressor.

***Theme 4: Dyadic Coping Emerged After Turning Points Characterized by Intentional Communication and Shared Planning***

Dyadic coping emerged across cases as a relational process that often-followed identifiable turning points in how couples responded to shared stress. Although many participants initially described coping in parallel, dyadic coping became more visible when partners intentionally shifted from reacting individually to addressing the stressor together through direct communication, shared meaning-making, and coordinated planning. Dyadic coping was represented across all 18 participant transcripts and emerged as a recurrent cross-case pattern in the dataset. Participants frequently described this transition as occurring when the stressor could no longer be managed effectively through silence, assumption, or private burden carrying, making more explicit conversation and shared action necessary.

P18 described one such turning point by stating, “After a few days, we realized the stress was affecting how we spoke to each other, so we sat down and talked honestly about what each of us was feeling” (P18; Dyadic coping behaviors + Emotional support). This excerpt reflected Dyadic coping behaviors because both spouses intentionally addressed the impact of the stressor together rather than continuing to react separately. It also reflected Emotional support because the conversation created space for honesty, vulnerability, and mutual understanding. Analytically, this segment is significant because

it captures a shift from stress reactivity to shared reflection, suggesting that dyadic coping often began when couples explicitly acknowledged the relational effects of the stressor.

P3 offered a similarly clear reframe from blame to teamwork: “We learned if we start blaming, we lose. We tried to make it a team problem, not a person problem” (P3; Resilience outcomes + Dyadic coping behaviors). This excerpt is especially valuable because it makes the turning-point process explicit. The phrase “we tried” reflected Dyadic coping behaviors by showing that the couple deliberately changed how they approached the stressor. The statement also reflected Resilience outcomes because the participant framed this shift as a learned relational adjustment over time. Rather than remaining caught in blame or defensiveness, the couple intentionally reframed the stressor as a shared problem requiring a joint response.

A similar transition appeared in P8’s narrative, where internal pressure was converted into disclosure and joint problem solving: “I sat my spouse down and narrated the story... She told me... talk to him about how we were going to figure it out... the next thing I did was talk to him about solutions that would favor us... we were able to get part of our money back” (P8; Emotional support + Practical support + Dyadic coping behaviors). This excerpt illustrates the sequence that characterized many turning-point accounts. Sitting the spouse down and narrating the story reflected intentional disclosure, while the spouse’s response provided Emotional support and opened the way for collaborative planning. The later discussion of solutions and the recovery of part of the money reflected Practical support and Dyadic coping behaviors. Particularly important is

the participant's use of "solutions that would favor us," which signals a clear movement from individual distress to couple-level problem solving.

P9 similarly described dyadic coping through joint scheduling and coordinated action: "We got on a schedule, what to do, when we go see the GP... we are going to go here... we plan it, follow it" (P9; Practical support + PsyCap: Hope + Dyadic coping behaviors + PsyCap: Efficacy). This excerpt reflected Dyadic coping behaviors because the couple responded through shared planning rather than fragmented or parallel efforts. It also reflected Practical support in the form of logistical coordination, PsyCap: Hope through pathway-oriented thinking, and PsyCap: Efficacy through confidence in the couple's ability to carry out what they planned. The repeated use of "we" is analytically important because it indicates that coping had become organized at the couple level rather than remaining individualized.

P6 offered another strong example of dyadic coping emerging through explicit negotiation around competing demands: "I said, you travel too much... He said, we have to figure out how you can come with me... trying to figure out who is going to watch our children... who is going to take our kids to school..." (P6; PsyCap: Hope + Practical support). Although this excerpt was not exported with a dyadic coping code, the interaction clearly reflected a shift into collaborative solution-building. The phrase "we have to figure out" marked a turning point from strain recognition to shared planning, while the focus on childcare and school logistics reflected Practical support. The language of "figure out" also supported PsyCap: Hope, as the participant described the couple working toward a viable pathway forward under stress.

P18 further described how dyadic coping was sustained after the initial turning point: “From there, we made a simple plan. We divided tasks more clearly, checked in with each other at the end of the day, and agreed to be patient when one of us was overwhelmed” (P18; PsyCap: Hope + Dyadic coping behaviors + Emotional support + Practical support). This segment is analytically important because it shows that dyadic coping was not sustained by a single conversation alone. Rather, it became more durable when couples translated disclosure into structure through task division, repeated check-ins, and agreed-upon expectations for how to respond when stress intensified. The excerpt therefore supports the interpretation that shared planning functioned as a maintenance mechanism for dyadic coping rather than as a one-time response.

P14 described a similar process in more structured terms: “We created a temporary crisis plan, fewer social obligations, simplified meals, rotating rest blocks so each of us had protected downtime” (P14; PsyCap: Hope + PsyCap: Efficacy + Dyadic coping behaviors + Practical support). This excerpt further reinforces the pattern that dyadic coping became more sustainable when couples translated shared stress into explicit routines, role adjustments, and manageable systems. In P14’s case, the couple’s response went beyond emotional reassurance and took the form of an organized adaptive plan designed to reduce overload and preserve functioning.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that dyadic coping did not emerge automatically from the presence of a shared stressor. Rather, it often followed turning points in which couples intentionally moved from implicit assumptions to explicit agreements, from isolated interpretation to shared dialogue, and from parallel coping to

coordinated action. Participants frequently described relief once the problem was named together rather than carried alone. In many cases, these turning points involved direct conversations about what each partner was feeling, what each person needed, what could realistically be done, and what routines or responsibilities needed to shift in response to the stressor.

Participants' accounts further suggested that these turning points often involved shifting from implicit expectations to explicit agreements. Couples who were able to name what each person needed, what each person could realistically provide, and what could be temporarily postponed were more likely to describe progress in how they managed the stressor together. This process appeared to reduce misinterpretation and emotional escalation by creating a clearer shared framework for understanding one another's behavior under strain. In several accounts, defining the problem together was itself experienced as relief because it reduced the sense of carrying the stress alone.

Participants also described dyadic coping as something that required maintenance rather than a one-time decision. Check-ins, recalibration, and revisiting agreements were described as necessary because shared stressors evolved over time. When couples used repeated conversations to adjust their approach, they were more likely to describe sustained stability. This pattern suggests that dyadic coping functioned as an ongoing adaptive cycle rather than a fixed coping style. In this sense, dyadic coping reflected not only communication, but also team learning, as couples developed shared ways of interpreting stress, negotiating roles, and coordinating responses in the face of continued uncertainty.

From an attachment perspective, these turning points can be understood as moments when partners reestablished connection and safety following threat activation, allowing the relationship to become a coping resource rather than an additional site of strain. From a learning organization perspective, they reflected the beginning of team learning through dialogue, role revision, feedback loops, and the development of shared mental models. Participants' accounts therefore suggest that dyadic coping emerged most clearly when couples intentionally made the stressor a shared problem to be understood, discussed, and managed together.

### **Findings for Research Question 2**

**RQ2:** How do these perceptions of spousal support influence resilience and stability in marital relationships?

#### ***Theme 5: PsyCap (Hope, Efficacy, Optimism) Appeared as the Mechanism That Sustained Dyadic Coping Over Time***

Participants did not describe resilience only in behavioral terms. They also described internal and relational beliefs that helped them continue engaging the relationship as a coping unit over time. Across cases, PsyCap appeared through expressions of hope, efficacy, and optimism, often in connection with Dyadic coping behaviors, Emotional support, Practical support, and Resilience outcomes. PsyCap was represented across all 18 participant transcripts and emerged as a recurrent cross-case pattern in the dataset. Participants' accounts suggest that PsyCap functioned as a sustaining mechanism by helping couples remain engaged, future-oriented, and persistent even when stressors were prolonged or repeatedly resurfaced.

P17 summarized this orientation succinctly by stating, “I know we can do great things together” (P17; PsyCap: Hope + Dyadic coping behaviors + Practical support). This excerpt reflected PsyCap: Hope because it expressed a future-oriented belief in the couple’s shared capacity to move toward meaningful outcomes. It also reflected Dyadic coping behaviors because the statement framed coping and progress as something achieved jointly rather than individually. In the broader context of the participant’s account, this hope was grounded in the spouse’s concrete support, suggesting that future-oriented confidence was reinforced by shared action rather than abstract positivity alone.

P11 offered one of the clearest examples of hope emerging through dyadic coping and practical support: “When I lost my job... she helped me apply for new job roles, arrange my CV, and send out applications... That gave me hope. I believed the future is bright and we will do a lot of things together” (P11; Dyadic coping behaviors + Practical support + PsyCap: Hope). This excerpt is analytically important because it makes the role of Hope explicit. The spouse’s assistance with job applications and résumé preparation reflected Practical support and Dyadic coping behaviors, while the participant’s statement that this “gave me hope” demonstrates how shared action restored a sense of future possibility. In this account, hope was not merely emotional reassurance; it was linked to concrete couple-based efforts that made progress feel attainable.

P14 similarly described PsyCap as grounded in repeated experiences of successful re-alignment: “We had evidence that even when both were tired, we could still come back to the same side” (P14; PsyCap: Hope + PsyCap: Efficacy + Dyadic coping behaviors + Practical support). This excerpt reflected Hope through the participant’s

belief that the couple could find a way forward and Efficacy through confidence in their ability to do so. It also reflected Dyadic coping behaviors because the couple's ability to "come back to the same side" was described as a shared process rather than an individual achievement. Analytically, this segment suggests that PsyCap was reinforced by prior coping successes, with repeated coordination providing evidence that the relationship could remain functional even under mutual strain.

P16 provided a strong example of efficacy being reinforced through spousal reassurance: "He did a really good job with letting me know that I'm strong, I'm resilient, there is nothing you cannot handle... He told me to keep going... we give ourselves assurances that it's going to be fine" (P16; Emotional support + Dyadic coping behaviors + PsyCap: Efficacy). This excerpt reflected Emotional support because the spouse's role centered on encouragement and reassurance, but it also strongly reflected PsyCap: Efficacy because the message emphasized capability, endurance, and the ability to continue responding effectively. The participant's use of "keep going" suggests that efficacy functioned as a sustaining mechanism rather than a one-time confidence boost. This account supports the interpretation that PsyCap was often co-constructed through supportive interaction rather than held solely within the individual.

P7 likewise demonstrated optimism as a sustaining couple-level stance: "No matter how difficult the stressor is, leaving is not an option. We are going to talk this through" (P7; Resilience outcomes + PsyCap: Optimism + Emotional support + Dyadic coping behaviors). This excerpt reflected PsyCap: Optimism because it conveyed a constructive expectation that the couple could move through difficulty together rather

than be defeated by it. It also reflected Dyadic coping behaviors because “talk this through” identified communication as the mechanism of shared coping, and Emotional support because the statement itself communicated commitment, steadiness, and relational security. The co-occurring Resilience outcomes further suggest that optimism was not experienced as temporary reassurance, but as part of a more durable relational orientation.

P3 offered one of the clearest multicode examples of PsyCap sustaining dyadic coping over time: “When big life problems come, we are not going to fall apart. We can face it like one team... our relationship is not fragile” (P3; PsyCap: Hope + PsyCap: Efficacy + PsyCap: Optimism + Dyadic coping behaviors). This excerpt is analytically valuable because it combines the three PsyCap dimensions in a single participant voice. “We can face it” reflected Efficacy, “like one team” supported Dyadic coping behaviors and pathway-oriented Hope, and “we are not going to fall apart” reflected Optimism as a stable expectation about the couple’s future under stress. This account strongly supports the interpretation that PsyCap sustained dyadic coping by reinforcing persistence, couple-level confidence, and a positive future orientation.

P18 also described the psychological shift that followed coordinated coping: “Because of that, I felt calmer and more in control, and I was able to manage the stress without reaching the same level of exhaustion as before” (P18; PsyCap: Hope + PsyCap: Efficacy + Resilience outcomes), and later, “I no longer felt alone, and working as a team made the stress feel manageable” (P18; PsyCap: Efficacy + PsyCap: Optimism + Emotional support + Resilience outcomes). Together, these excerpts suggest that PsyCap

developed through interaction rather than existing solely as an individual disposition. Spousal support altered how the participant interpreted the stressor and whether it felt manageable, controllable, and survivable. These excerpts therefore support the interpretation that PsyCap functioned as a relationally reinforced mechanism through which dyadic coping became more sustainable over time.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that Hope, Efficacy, and Optimism helped sustain dyadic coping beyond the initial crisis stage. Hope appeared when participants described pathways forward, shared next steps, and a belief that progress remained possible. Efficacy appeared when participants expressed greater confidence in the couple's ability to act, execute plans, and remain functional under strain. Optimism appeared when participants framed the stressor as manageable, survivable, and not definitive of the relationship's future. Across cases, these dimensions of PsyCap were often reinforced through interaction rather than held solely within the individual. Encouragement became most powerful when paired with concrete action, and positive expectations became more credible when supported by repeated experiences of successful shared coping.

Participants often described PsyCap as emerging through interaction rather than existing solely within the individual. In several accounts, spousal support shaped the meaning participants attached to the stressor and influenced whether they perceived themselves as capable of coping. When a spouse offered encouragement, stabilized daily routines, or made practical sacrifices, participants described greater emotional endurance and a stronger willingness to reengage in dyadic coping after setbacks. This pattern

suggests that PsyCap operated as a relationally reinforced resource that helped couples sustain shared coping beyond the initial crisis stage.

Emotional reassurance alone was often described as helpful, but participants emphasized that encouragement became most powerful when paired with practical action and shared planning. When couples connected hope to specific pathways, such as budgeting, job changes, childcare adjustments, or scheduling rest, participants more often described greater stability and reduced reactivity. These accounts suggest that PsyCap did not function as “positive thinking” alone; rather, it operated as a cognitive-emotional resource that supported planning, persistence, and flexible role negotiation during shared stressors.

Participants also described PsyCap as most visible during ongoing or repeated stressors rather than single isolated events. During long-term disruptions, participants described periods in which motivation waned and fatigue increased, yet dyadic coping continued when spouses reinforced a shared belief that improvement remained possible. In these accounts, optimism helped reduce helplessness, efficacy supported confidence in execution, and hope maintained forward movement. Together, these patterns suggest that PsyCap supported resilience by sustaining engagement in the relationship as a coping unit, even when the stressor remained active.

From an attachment perspective, PsyCap reflected the confidence and reduced threat appraisal associated with a secure base, with supportive interaction strengthening the belief that stress could be faced without relational collapse. From a learning organization perspective, PsyCap aligned with shared vision, adaptive mindset, and

iterative problem solving, all of which helped couples continue learning their way through prolonged stress. Participants' accounts therefore suggest that PsyCap functioned as the psychological mechanism that helped transform dyadic coping from an initial response into a sustained relational capacity.

***Theme 6: Resilience Outcomes Were Most Visible as Improved Teamwork, Reduced Escalation, and Increased Closeness, with Important Exceptions***

Participants most often described resilience as a shift in how the relationship functioned over time rather than as the disappearance of stress. Across cases, Resilience outcomes were represented in all 18 participant transcripts and emerged as a recurrent cross-case pattern in the dataset. These outcomes often co-occurred with Dyadic coping behaviors, Emotional support, Practical support, and PsyCap, suggesting that resilience was experienced not simply as endurance, but as a change in how couples communicated, regulated stress, and coordinated under pressure. Most commonly, participants described resilience outcomes in terms of improved teamwork, reduced escalation, increased trust, and greater relational closeness. At the same time, the data also reflected important exceptions, indicating that growth and challenge sometimes coexisted within the same relationship.

P18 summarized this pattern clearly by stating, "Our experiences of shared stressors have mostly strengthened our relationship because they pushed us to communicate better, be more patient, and rely on each other as a team" (P18; Dyadic coping behaviors + Emotional support + Practical support). This excerpt reflected resilience as a relational shift rather than as the resolution of stress itself. The participant

described improved communication, greater patience, and stronger teamwork, all of which suggest that the relationship had adapted in meaningful ways through shared difficulty. P18 further reflected, “Going through difficult periods together builds trust and a sense that we can handle challenges side by side” (P18; Dyadic coping behaviors + Resilience outcomes), and “Overall, the challenges helped us grow closer and more resilient as a couple” (P18; PsyCap: Efficacy + Resilience outcomes). Together, these excerpts indicate that resilience outcomes included stronger trust, increased closeness, and greater confidence in the relationship’s capacity to cope with future stressors.

P17 similarly described resilience as a strengthened team identity: “We are a team. We work as one” (P17; PsyCap: Efficacy + Dyadic coping behaviors + Resilience outcomes + Practical support). This statement reflected a durable relational outcome rather than a single coping act. The participant’s language suggests that repeated shared coping had consolidated into a more stable sense of unity, with teamwork becoming part of how the relationship understood itself under strain.

P4 described a similarly strong end-state change: “We both communicate more now than ever. It is way better than it was before... We have developed... into emotionally intelligent people that are willing to support each other and make things work out” (P4; Resilience outcomes + Dyadic coping behaviors + PsyCap: Efficacy). This excerpt is particularly important because it uses explicit change-over-time language, including “more now than ever” and “way better than it was before,” which strongly supports the interpretation of Resilience outcomes. It also reflected Dyadic coping behaviors through mutual support and PsyCap: Efficacy through confidence in the

couple's ability to make things work. Analytically, this account suggests that resilience was experienced not only as survival, but as growth in communication, maturity, and mutual problem engagement.

P13 offered a more qualified account that strengthens the credibility of the findings: "We coped together, and our relationship strengthened during that period, and it also challenged our relationship" (P13; Dyadic coping behaviors + Resilience outcomes). This excerpt is valuable because it avoids presenting resilience as uniformly positive or uncomplicated. Instead, it shows that relationships could strengthen while also being tested. The participant's wording suggests that resilience did not erase strain; rather, it reflected the relationship's ability to endure difficulty, adapt to it, and in some cases grow through it while still acknowledging challenge.

P10 described resilience in terms of improved regulation and reduced escalation through partner contact: "Now, if something tries to ruin my day, I text my partner and... he responds with something supportive, and I see the situation differently... next time I can handle it better... It makes me feel better" (P10; Dyadic coping behaviors + PsyCap: Optimism + PsyCap: Efficacy + Resilience outcomes). This excerpt is analytically important because it directly links dyadic interaction to cognitive and emotional change. The partner's supportive response altered the participant's appraisal of the stressor and strengthened confidence in handling future situations. This account therefore supports the interpretation that resilience outcomes were visible not only in relationship-level teamwork, but also in reduced reactivity, improved regulation, and greater coping confidence over time.

P3 similarly described resilience as learning to interrupt escalation earlier: “Later I learned I must talk about it earlier. Because if I keep it, it ends up being a bigger problem... and we start fighting” (P3; Resilience outcomes + Dyadic coping behaviors). This excerpt supports the theme’s emphasis on reduced escalation. The phrase “Later I learned” marks a clear developmental outcome, while the participant’s reflection identifies the escalation pathway itself, namely withholding, accumulation, and later conflict. The participant’s learning suggests that resilience involved not only coping with stress more effectively, but also recognizing and altering interactional patterns that previously intensified strain.

P5 further emphasized the role of consistency over time: “We’re always there to support each other. Resiliency is stronger now because it’s easier to trust something that has consistently shown up over years” (P5; PsyCap: Efficacy + PsyCap: Optimism + Dyadic coping behaviors + Resilience outcomes). This excerpt suggests that resilience was reinforced not through isolated moments of support, but through repeated experiences of dependability that gradually strengthened trust and confidence in the relationship. This account is especially important because it highlights resilience as cumulative and relationally built rather than immediate.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that resilience outcomes were most visible as improved teamwork, reduced escalation, greater trust, and increased closeness. Participants often described learning to communicate with less blame, making clearer role agreements, and using check-ins or partner contact to prevent misinterpretations from accumulating. Over time, these adaptations appeared to reduce relational volatility

and create a calmer relational environment. In this sense, resilience was often described as a shift in how the relationship functioned under stress rather than as the elimination of the stressor itself.

At the same time, the data also showed that resilience was not immediate, automatic, or uniformly experienced. P18's earlier account that he initially tried to manage financial stress on his own before later opening up to his spouse demonstrates that coordinated coping often emerged only after the limitations of private burden carrying became clear. Similarly, P5's reflection that it was initially harder to rely on her husband because she did not know whether support would be there the next day shows that trust and collaboration often developed through repeated experience rather than existing from the outset. These contrasting accounts strengthen the credibility of the findings by showing that teamwork, trust, and resilience were developed through process, repetition, and increasing reliability rather than by the simple presence of a shared stressor.

Participants also described that resilience was reinforced through repeated coping successes, including small wins that gradually strengthened trust and lowered defensiveness. They described learning to communicate with less blame, making clearer role agreements, and using check-ins to prevent misinterpretations from escalating into avoidable conflict. These changes were both practical and relational, with couples adapting how they managed time, money, tasks, and emotional needs. Over time, participants described that these adaptations reduced volatility and created a calmer relational environment, which in turn further stabilized the relationship. In several

accounts, resilience was framed as growth through shared learning, as couples developed improved coping routines that carried forward beyond the initial stressor.

Participants also suggested that resilience outcomes were shaped by timing and capacity. Couples who transitioned to dyadic coping earlier, or who maintained consistent communication routines, were more likely to describe improved teamwork and reduced escalation. Couples who remained in extended solo coping patterns, or who experienced significant resource depletion, described slower recovery and reduced stability. This pattern suggests that resilience outcomes were influenced by both relational processes and contextual constraints, with spousal support serving as an important moderator of how external stress translated into either closeness or distance over time.

From an attachment perspective, resilience outcomes reflected the stabilizing effects of consistent responsiveness, repair, and growing security within the bond. From a learning organization perspective, they reflected adaptive routines, feedback loops, and shared learning that allowed couples to revise how they managed time, emotion, tasks, and conflict under stress. Participants' accounts therefore suggest that resilience was not simply the ability to withstand hardship, but the capacity of the relationship to adapt, learn, and function more effectively through shared stress, even when that process remained uneven or incomplete.

### **Supplementary Quantitative Patterning of the Code-Based Results**

To complement the thematic findings, supplementary quantitative analyses were reviewed to examine the distribution, co-patterning, and internal consistency of the code-

based variables across qualitative data of the 18 participant transcripts. These analyses included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, reliability diagnostics, a cluster-based typology table, and independent-samples t-test outputs. Collectively, these materials were used to contextualize the thematic results rather than to supersede the qualitative analysis.

Descriptive frequency statistics indicated that all major code domains were well represented in the dataset. Across the 2,182 coded segments, dyadic coping behaviors occurred most frequently ( $n = 487$ , 22.32%), followed by resilience outcomes ( $n = 385$ , 17.64%) and emotional support ( $n = 325$ , 14.89%). Practical support accounted for 205 coded segments (9.40%), while the PsyCap subdimensions were also prominent, including efficacy ( $n = 233$ , 10.68%), hope ( $n = 184$ , 8.43%), and optimism ( $n = 181$ , 8.30%). Solo coping behaviors accounted for 182 coded segments (8.34%). These distributions are consistent with the thematic analysis, in which dyadic coping, emotional support, practical support, PsyCap, and resilience outcomes emerged as recurring relational processes across cases.

The Pearson correlation matrices further suggested meaningful patterned relationships among several of the code-based variables. In the two-tailed matrix, practical support was positively associated with hope,  $r = .578$ ,  $p = .012$ ; efficacy,  $r = .498$ ,  $p = .036$ ; and optimism,  $r = .608$ ,  $p = .007$ . Emotional support was positively associated with optimism,  $r = .526$ ,  $p = .025$ , and resilience outcomes,  $r = .633$ ,  $p = .005$ . Strong positive associations were also observed among the PsyCap dimensions themselves, including hope with optimism,  $r = .707$ ,  $p = .001$ , and efficacy with

optimism,  $r = .696$ ,  $p = .001$ . Taken together, these associations suggest that emotional and practical support were linked with more positive psychological orientations and, in the case of emotional support, with stronger resilience-related outcomes. These quantitative patterns align with the qualitative findings that practical support reduced overload, emotional support created relational safety, and PsyCap helped sustain dyadic coping over time.

The one-tailed correlation matrix showed a similar overall pattern but yielded a small number of additional statistically significant relationships, including solo coping behaviors with resilience outcomes,  $r = .412$ ,  $p = .045$ . However, because one-tailed testing is only appropriate when directional hypotheses are specified in advance, the two-tailed results provide the more conservative basis for interpretation. Accordingly, the one-tailed matrix may be viewed as supplementary and hypothesis-consistent, but the two-tailed results are more appropriate for formal reporting.

Reliability diagnostics provided partial support for the internal consistency of the code-based composite structure. Corrected item-scale correlations ranged from .210 to .656. Most variables showed moderate corrected item-scale correlations, including hope (.599), efficacy (.554), optimism (.656), emotional support (.533), resilience outcomes (.551), and practical support (.511). Solo coping behaviors was somewhat lower (.403), while dyadic coping behaviors showed the weakest corrected item-scale correlation (.210). The “alpha-if-item-deleted” values ranged from .708 to .826, with the highest alpha-if-deleted value appearing for dyadic coping behaviors (.826), suggesting that this variable contributed less consistently to the combined scale than the other coded

domains. These diagnostics should be interpreted cautiously, however, because the file provided item-deleted reliability indices rather than the full overall Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale. As such, the reliability analysis is most appropriately used here as an internal consistency check rather than as a definitive psychometric validation.

The typology table further suggested that participants could be differentiated into distinct profile groupings based on their code-pattern means. Cluster 2, which included the majority of cases ( $n = 12$ ), showed comparatively lower PsyCap values and moderate dyadic coping and emotional support scores. Cluster 3 ( $n = 5$ ) showed higher dyadic coping, emotional support, resilience outcomes, and practical support, suggesting a more coordinated and resource-supported coping pattern. Cluster 1 contained only one case and therefore should be treated as descriptive rather than analytically stable. Although these clusters should not be overinterpreted given the small sample size, they provide preliminary support for the possibility that participants differed not only in degree, but also in overall configuration of coping, support, and resilience processes.

Overall, these supplementary analyses supported the qualitative findings by showing that the coded domains were broadly represented, meaningfully interrelated, and patterned in ways consistent with the six themes. At the same time, the quantitative results are best interpreted as supportive and descriptive rather than confirmatory, given the small sample size, code-based nature of the variables, and the non-interpretable t-test outputs. To further illustrate the breadth and integration of these code-based findings across cases, Tables 2 and 3 summarize thematic representation and same-excerpt co-occurrence patterns.

**Table 2***Cross-Case Representation and Density of the Six Themes*

Theme	Indicator code(s) used	Participants with evidence	Total coded segments	Median segments per participant	Range (min–max)
Theme 1: Shared stressors amplified strain and solo coping tendencies	Solo coping behaviors	18/18 (100%)	182	9.5	3–27
Theme 2: Emotional support created a safe haven enabling vulnerability and dyadic coping	Emotional support	18/18 (100%)	325	16	8–39
Theme 3: Practical support reduced overload and signaled reliability	Practical support	18/18 (100%)	205	10.5	3–25
Theme 4: Dyadic coping emerged after turning points (communication/planning)	Dyadic coping behaviors	18/18 (100%)	487	26	7–52
Theme 5: PsyCap sustained dyadic coping over time	PsyCap (Hope + Efficacy + Optimism)	18/18 (100%)	598	29	13–84
Theme 6: Resilience outcomes were visible as improved functioning, with exceptions	Resilience outcomes	18/18 (100%)	385	20.5	10–34

To further contextualize the findings, Table 2 summarizes the cross-case representation of the six themes using the study's MAXQDA code structure as an indicator of thematic presence. All six themes were represented across all 18 participant transcripts, indicating broad cross-case recurrence of the findings. The table also shows the total number of coded segments, median number of segments per participant, and range across participants, demonstrating that although all themes were present across cases, their density varied by interview and by theme.

As shown in Table 2, each of the six themes was represented in all 18 participant transcripts. Theme density varied across the dataset, with PsyCap, dyadic coping behaviors, and resilience outcomes producing the highest total number of coded segments. This

pattern is consistent with the thematic analysis, which showed that participants frequently described not only support processes, but also the psychological and relational capacities that sustained coping over time. At the same time, the variation in median and range values indicates that the themes were not expressed with equal intensity or detail across all participants, which is consistent with differences in narrative depth and lived experience.

**Table 3**

*Cross-Theme Integration Within Same Coded Excerpts*

Integrated mechanism (same coded excerpt)	Participants (n, %)	Segments (n)
Emotional support + Dyadic coping	14/18 (77.8%)	56
Practical support + Dyadic coping	15/18 (83.3%)	35
Dyadic coping + PsyCap (any dimension)	17/18 (94.4%)	73
Dyadic coping + Hope	14/18 (77.8%)	45
Dyadic coping + Efficacy	12/18 (66.7%)	24
Dyadic coping + Optimism	6/18 (33.3%)	11

Table 3 provides a more conservative view of cross-theme integration by showing the number of participants and coded excerpts in which key thematic processes co-occurred within the same excerpt. These counts indicate that several of the central mechanisms in the findings, particularly the links among dyadic coping, emotional support, practical support, and PsyCap, were not only present across transcripts but were also often expressed together within participants' narratives. Because the coding process prioritized conceptual clarity and often separated adjacent but distinct processes into different excerpts, these overlap counts should be interpreted as conservative indicators of integration rather than as exhaustive estimates.

Taken together, Tables 2 and 3 indicate that the findings were both broadly represented and meaningfully interconnected across the sample. Table 2 shows that each of the six themes appeared in all 18 transcripts, whereas Table 3 demonstrates that several of the central processes were frequently linked within the same coded excerpts. These patterns support the interpretation that the themes reflect recurring cross-case processes rather than isolated observations from a small subset of participants. Together, these supplementary analyses reinforce the qualitative interpretation that marital resilience under shared stress was shaped by interrelated processes of support, coordinated coping, Psychological Capital, and relational adaptation across cases.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the findings of this qualitative phenomenological study exploring marital resilience through the lived experiences and perceptions of spousal support during events of shared stressors among individuals who have been legally married for 10 years or more. The chapter described the study setting, participant demographics, data collection procedures, analytic approach, and evidence of trustworthiness, and then reported results organized by the two research questions.

Overall, the findings indicate that shared stressors often began with individual or guarded coping responses, but many participants later described a transition toward dyadic coping once emotional safety, practical support, and intentional communication became more consistent. Emotional support helped participants feel understood and emotionally steadied, practical support reduced burden through concrete action, and dyadic coping emerged when couples named the problem together, made plans, and

adjusted roles over time. Psychological capital further supported this process by reinforcing confidence, pathway thinking, and a more manageable interpretation of adversity. Although many participants described stronger teamwork, deeper trust, and greater resilience over time, the inclusion of early private coping and difficulty trusting support demonstrates that these outcomes were developed rather than automatic.

Findings for Research Question 1 indicated that shared stressors often triggered an initial pattern of solo coping marked by withdrawal, internalized distress, and attempts to manage stress independently. The transition toward dyadic coping was not automatic, but more often emerged after turning points in which emotional support and practical support created conditions for vulnerability, disclosure, and coordinated problem solving. Dyadic coping was sustained through intentional communication, shared appraisal, explicit agreements, and repeated check-ins that helped couples maintain alignment as stressors evolved over time.

Findings for Research Question 2 indicated that perceptions of spousal support influenced resilience and stability through both internal and relational mechanisms. Psychological capital, reflected through hope, efficacy, and optimism, functioned as a sustaining resource that supported persistence, meaning-making, and follow-through on shared coping strategies. Resilience outcomes were most visible as improved teamwork, reduced conflict escalation, and increased closeness, although important exceptions showed that shared stressors could also intensify distance when support was inconsistent, difficult to trust, or slow to develop.

Chapter 5 will interpret these findings through Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Senge's Learning Organization Theory, addressing how perceived security and responsiveness support coping transitions, and how shared reflection, role adaptation, and iterative problem solving contribute to resilience and stability. Chapter 5 will also discuss implications for practice, recommendations for strengthening marital coping during shared stressors, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore marital resilience through the lived experiences and perceptions of spousal support during events of shared stressors among individuals who had been married for 10 years or more. The study was conducted to address a documented gap in relationship research. Although scholars have examined stress and relationship functioning extensively, less is known about how spouses make meaning of support when both partners are simultaneously exposed to the same external stressor and must adapt together over time (Lebow, 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). A phenomenological approach was appropriate because the study centered participants' subjective interpretations of spousal support, the language they used to describe coping shifts, and the meanings they attributed to resilience development within long-term marriages. Specifically, the study examined how participants described the felt sense of support, how those interpretations shifted coping from "I handle this alone" to "we handle this together," and how that shift influenced perceived resilience, emotional regulation, and relationship stability over time.

As presented in Chapter 4, participants described shared stressors as relational tests that elevated threat perception, increased emotional load, and disrupted routines, often triggering an initial period of self-reliance or withdrawal before collaboration emerged. Overall, participants conceptualized spousal support as coordinated emotional presence and practical assistance that facilitated movement from solo coping to dyadic coping, strengthened shared meaning-making and "team" identity, and supported emotional regulation and perceived relationship stability during shared stressors.

Participants distinguished emotional support, such as validation, reassurance, and steady presence, from practical support, such as task sharing, role flexibility, and logistical or financial problem solving, and they described resilience as emerging most reliably when these forms of support were experienced as coordinated rather than fragmented.

Participants also described dyadic coping as an intentional and maintained process characterized by communication turning points, shared planning, and iterative check-ins, rather than a single supportive act. These findings align with prior research suggesting that external stressors can amplify relational risk when couples disengage or become reactive but can also strengthen relationship functioning when couples engage in supportive and responsive processes (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Participants further noted variability in how support was perceived and leveraged across individuals, which is consistent with attachment-oriented evidence indicating that attachment insecurity can shape support perceptions and relationship functioning under stress (Overall et al., 2021; Park et al., 2022).

More specifically, the findings reported in Chapter 4 were grounded in coded participant segments that traced movement from early solo or guarded coping toward more coordinated forms of dyadic coping. For example, P18 described initially carrying financial pressure privately before later opening up to the spouse, discussing the stressor together, and developing a shared plan, while P5 described early difficulty relying on support until repeated consistency made trust more possible. Other participants, including P15, P17, and P14, illustrated how emotional encouragement, practical stepping in, and repeated dialogue functioned as coded expressions of emotional support, practical

support, dyadic coping, and PsyCap. These examples strengthen the interpretive discussion that follows by making the connection between coded segments and broader thematic conclusions more explicit.

Chapter 5 is organized to interpret and situate these findings within the peer-reviewed literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and within the study's theoretical and conceptual framework. First, the Interpretation of the Findings section compares study results with existing research to explain how the findings confirm, extend, or complicate current knowledge regarding spousal support, shared stressors, and marital resilience (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). This section also interprets the findings through Bowlby's attachment theory as the theoretical foundation and Senge's learning organization framework as the conceptual lens for understanding how couples adapt through iterative learning, shared meaning, and relational recalibration (Bowlby, 1969; Senge, 1990). Next, the Limitations of the Study section identifies limitations to trustworthiness that emerged during study execution and clarifies the boundaries they impose on interpretation. The Recommendations section then offers directions for future research grounded in the strengths and limitations of the current study and aligned with gaps identified in the literature. The Implications section describes potential implications for positive social change and for practice at the individual, family, and applied service levels, while remaining within the boundaries of the data and the qualitative design. Finally, the chapter closes with a concise Conclusion that synthesizes the study's central contribution and provides a clear take-home message regarding how perceived spousal support functions during shared stressors to support resilience in long-term marriages.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In this section, I interpret the findings in relation to the peer-reviewed literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and within the study's theoretical and conceptual framework. Interpretations remain bounded by what participants described and by the phenomenological aim of illuminating lived meaning rather than establishing causal claims (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). These interpretations are further supported by the stabilization of central codes and themes across participants during analysis, particularly dyadic coping behaviors, emotional support, practical support, and resilience outcomes, while more individualized variation appeared in the specific forms of solo coping and PsyCap expression. Across interviews, participants depicted shared stressors as relationship-disruptive contexts that heightened emotional load, strained routines, and exposed vulnerabilities in communication and role expectations, which is consistent with evidence that stress can undermine relationship functioning by increasing negative communication, conflict escalation, and emotional withdrawal (Lee et al., 2022; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). At the same time, the findings extended existing knowledge by clarifying how participants experienced resilience as a developmental learning process, including repeated reassessment, iterative repair, and progressive refinement of teamwork practices over time. This developmental emphasis aligns strongly with Senge's learning organization theory, because participants described cycles of reflection and adjustment that resemble systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision renewal, and team learning even when those concepts were

not explicitly named as “disciplines” (Alderman, 2022; Santos et al., 2021; Senge, 1994, 2007). Interpreted through attachment theory, spousal support functioned as a safe haven and secure base process that enabled co-regulation, supported vulnerability, and reduced threat appraisal during periods of heightened uncertainty (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; Bowlby, 2003; Ferrajão, 2024; Overall et al., 2022).

### **Shared Stressors Amplified Strain and Initially Pushed Couples Toward Solo Coping and Parallel Problem Solving**

Participants frequently described an early phase of shared stressors in which coping occurred privately, including withdrawal, emotional suppression, or an internalized sense of responsibility to “carry” the stress alone before relational collaboration emerged. This pattern is consistent with the broader stress and coping literature and with couple research showing that stressors disrupt daily routines and cognitive bandwidth, increasing the likelihood of defensive regulation strategies, reduced disclosure, and misinterpretation of partner intent (Folkman, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Within the vulnerability–stress–adaptation tradition, these descriptions reflect how external pressures strain adaptive processes and can trigger negative cycles when partners lack immediate alignment in appraisal and response (Kanter et al., 2023; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Lee et al., 2022; Prime et al., 2020). Participants’ narratives suggested that “shared stress” did not automatically generate shared coping; rather, shared stress often began as “parallel coping,” where both partners were burdened, but the coping system remained individualized. This pattern also aligns with evidence that perceived support and stress

exposure are bidirectionally associated with marital instability over time, meaning that stress can erode support processes and support erosion can intensify stress impacts (Li et al., 2024; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

This pattern was especially visible in Chapter 4 accounts such as P18's description of initially trying to manage financial stress alone and P5's account of early guarded reliance, both of which illustrated how shared stress was often experienced privately before becoming relationally shared. P18 described initially trying to manage financial stress alone, worrying privately, and feeling solely responsible before later opening up to the spouse and moving into shared discussion and planning. P5 likewise described that early in the marriage it was difficult to rely on the spouse because support did not yet feel consistently available. Taken together, these examples strengthen the interpretation that early solo coping reflected more than personal preference; rather, it often reflected a relational context in which vulnerability had not yet fully become a shared coping pathway. Interpreted through attachment theory, initial solo coping can be read as threat activation and protective strategies when perceived safety is uncertain, which is consistent with evidence that insecurity shapes support seeking, withdrawal, and reactivity during stress (Bowlby, 2003; Overall et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023; Vedelago et al., 2023).

From a learning organization lens, the early solo coping phase resembles a system operating without shared diagnosis, shared vision updating, or coordinated feedback loops. Participants described needing time before "sitting down" to talk, clarify needs, and make a plan, which mirrors Senge's premise that effective adaptation requires

surfacing assumptions and aligning mental models before coordinated action can occur (Alderman, 2022; Senge, 1994, 2007). When couples did not immediately engage in dialogue, participants described communication gaps and escalating reactivity, patterns consistent with research linking stress to negative communication and relational instability (Işık & Kaya, 2022; Kanter et al., 2023; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Williamson et al., 2013). In several accounts, early strain was framed as identity-threatening, especially when stressors challenged role expectations, which is consistent with attribution research suggesting that meaning-making processes can intensify or diffuse conflict depending on how partners interpret threat and responsibility (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Thus, the findings confirm that stress often initiates disruption and parallel coping, while extending the literature by showing how participants experienced this phase as a precursor to later learning and relational recalibration. In Senge's terms, many couples appeared to move from "reacting inside the system" to "learning about the system" after the early destabilizing stage, which set the foundation for team learning once dialogue began (Alderman, 2022; Jacobs & Park, 2009; Senge, 1994).

### **The Transition from Solo Coping to Dyadic Coping and Bidirectional Support**

Across participant narratives, a central process finding was the transition from solo coping to dyadic coping and, in many cases, to bidirectional support. Participants often described an initial period of parallel coping in which each partner attempted to manage stress privately, followed by a shift toward coordinated coping once the stressor was explicitly named, discussed, and shared responsibility was negotiated. This pattern

aligns with dyadic coping scholarship indicating that coping in marriage functions as an interpersonal process shaped by communication, responsiveness, and coordination rather than solely as an individual coping style (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Papp & Witt, 2010;). Participants' accounts also reflected appraisal-based mechanisms, suggesting that the shift occurred when partners developed a shared understanding of the stressor and reduced threat-oriented interpretations, consistent with stress appraisal theory and relationship stress models (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Notably, the transition was not uniform: some participants described a clear turning point linked to a specific conversation or supportive act, whereas others described a gradual learning curve marked by recurring check-ins, repeated reassessment, and iterative repair. The Chapter 4 findings made this transition especially visible through coded excerpts in which participants moved from private burden carrying toward shared discussion, role division, and repeated check-ins, as reflected in the accounts of P18 and P14. P18 described a movement from private burden carrying toward shared discussion, role division, and emotional patience once the couple explicitly named the impact of stress on their communication. P14 described a similar shift through the creation of a temporary crisis plan, simplified routines, and ongoing dialogue, which he described as something that had kept the couple going. Taken together, these examples show that the transition to dyadic coping was not simply emotional closeness; it involved explicit coordination, practical planning, and recurrent communication. Interpreted through Senge's learning organization theory, these transitions can be understood as movement from unshared mental models and reactive

responding toward shared vision, team learning, and systems-level coordination, even when couples did not explicitly label their process in those terms (Alderman, 2022; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007;).

### **Emotional Support Functioned as a Safe Haven and Created the Psychological Conditions for Dialogue and Learning**

Participants described emotional support as the turning mechanism that softened defensiveness and enabled disclosure, most often experienced as validation, reassurance, steady presence, and emotionally responsive listening. This theme strongly confirms relationship science evidence that perceived partner support and responsiveness are protective during crises and that supportive couple processes buffer psychological distress and relational risk under shared adversity (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; Beach et al., 2023; Donato et al., 2021; Xiang et al., 2022). Participants' descriptions also align with research showing that supportive communication and perceived support predict better relationship adjustment during COVID-19-related disruptions (Ahuja & Khurana, 2021; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020;). Importantly, participants did not frame emotional support as "fixing" the stressor; they framed it as shaping how the stressor was metabolized inside the relationship and inside the self. This interpretation was grounded in coded segments such as P15's description of being encouraged by the spouse during emotional strain and P17's account of reassurance helping him feel that things would be alright, both of which were coded as emotional support and linked to later dyadic engagement. This kind of meaning-making aligns with coping theory emphasizing appraisal and the protective role of positive psychological states during

prolonged stress (Folkman, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Waters et al., 2022). This pattern was especially visible in the Chapter 4 examples. P15 described a moment of emotional strain in which the spouse recognized his distress, spoke with him, and encouraged him, after which he reported feeling stronger and better able to recover. P17 similarly described that when his spouse reassured him, he felt that things would be alright and experienced that reassurance as emotional help. Together, these examples suggest that emotional support did more than soothe distress; it reduced emotional isolation and increased willingness to re-engage the relationship as a coping resource.

Attachment theory offers a clear interpretive pathway for why emotional support mattered so strongly in participants' accounts. Emotional support functioned as a safe haven that supported co-regulation, lowered perceived threat, and made vulnerability possible, which aligns with evidence that attachment insecurity is linked to poorer relationship functioning during stressful contexts and that perceived responsiveness shapes whether support is experienced as effective (Bowlby, 2003; Ferrajão, 2024; Overall et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023;). Participants' emphasis on timing and tone also reflects support perception scholarship showing that support outcomes depend on how support is received and interpreted, not simply whether support behaviors occurred (Haber et al., 2007; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Xu & Burleson, 2001; Xu & Burleson, 2004). From the learning organization framework, emotional safety is the condition that enables dialogue, reflection, and the surfacing of assumptions, which then supports the development of shared mental models and team learning (Alderman, 2022; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007). In practical terms, participants described becoming more able

to name the stressor aloud and invite collaboration once emotional holding occurred, which is consistent with evidence that emotional support and disclosure processes predict relationship satisfaction and stability (Çag et al., 2018; Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015). Therefore, the findings confirm the protective role of emotional support while extending the literature by clarifying the mechanism participants experienced: emotional support created psychological conditions for learning and coordination rather than functioning only as comfort.

### **Practical Support Served as Resource Transfer and as a Signal of Reliability**

Anticipatory support reduced cognitive load and conflict spillover. Participants described practical support as “doing,” including stepping into roles, coordinating tasks, solving logistics, and addressing financial pressures in ways that reduced immediate overload. This theme confirms extensive evidence that instrumental support buffers stress by reducing role strain, resource depletion, and emotional exhaustion, particularly in couples navigating work–family pressures and shifting demands (Cutrona, 1996; Halbesleben, 2010; Parasuraman et al., 1992; Pluut et al., 2018). Participants also described practical support as relationally meaningful because it signaled shared responsibility and fairness, which is consistent with scholarship linking perceived equity, role negotiation, and shared responsibility to relationship satisfaction and stability (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009; Saginak & Saginak, 2005). Notably, participants emphasized practical support as most impactful when it was anticipatory rather than crisis-driven, because anticipatory support reduced decision fatigue and prevented stress spillover into avoidable conflict. This emphasis is consistent with stress

process research showing that chronic strain intensifies negative communication patterns and undermines relationship functioning if cognitive load remains high and coordination is low (Kanter et al., 2023; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Williamson et al., 2013). In several accounts, practical financial support was a pivotal event that shifted a couple toward teamwork. The participant evidence in Chapter 4 helps specify this theme. P17 described the spouse stepping in financially and taking over important responsibilities during a period when he felt too overwhelmed to respond effectively. P18 described reviewing expenses and making a plan together after opening up about stress. These examples show that practical support was experienced as more than task completion. It functioned as concrete evidence that the spouse could be counted on when the stressor had material consequences for daily life and family functioning. In this sense, practical support was both resource transfer and relational proof of dependability.

The financial context described by several men in this sample is particularly interpretable through identity-based appraisal processes. Participants described financial hardship as challenging their perceived role as provider and “head of household,” which narrowed perceived pathways and could intensify conflict until the stressor was named and jointly addressed, patterns supported by research linking financial strain to negative communication and relationship distress (Dean et al., 2007; Jackson et al., 2023; Totenhagen et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2013). At the same time, once communication became collaborative, participants described bidirectional support and shared problem solving, which aligns with dyadic coping evidence that coordinated coping and support processes buffer relationship risk during economic and broader stress contexts (Donato et

al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Li et al., 2024; Papp & Witt, 2010). Attachment theory clarifies why practical support carried emotional weight; participants often interpreted tangible help as dependability under threat, reinforcing felt security and increasing willingness to re-engage relationally (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; Bowlby, 2003; Overall et al., 2022). Interpreted through Senge, practical support is a form of systems thinking because partners adaptively redesign roles and workloads to stabilize the relationship system during disruption, reflecting learning through practice rather than static role adherence (Alderman, 2022; Jacobs & Park, 2009; Senge, 1994). Thus, the findings confirm established knowledge on instrumental support and extend it by showing that anticipatory support reduced cognitive load and conveyed a “shared system” orientation that supported resilience.

### **Dyadic Coping Emerged Through Communication Turning Points, Shared Planning, and Recurring Check-Ins**

These processes closely mirror learning organization disciplines. A consistent cross-case pattern was that dyadic coping emerged after turning points characterized by intentional conversation, explicit reassessment, and shared planning. Participants described these moments as slowing down, speaking honestly, clarifying needs, and negotiating feasible next steps, rather than relying on implicit expectations. These descriptions confirm dyadic coping research and meta-analytic evidence showing that coping coordination and constructive communication are associated with relationship satisfaction and improved functioning under stress (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Papp & Witt, 2010). They also align with findings that communication quality can

moderate the negative associations between financial stress and relational outcomes, including conflict, intimacy, and stability (Işık & Kaya, 2022; Kanter et al., 2023; Wikle et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2013). Participants' accounts further support the idea that couples may move through destabilization before adaptive reorganization occurs, reflecting vulnerability–stress–adaptation dynamics in which recovery depends on whether couples build new routines and more effective interaction patterns (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). The participant evidence reported in Chapter 4 provides especially strong examples of this process. P18 described recognizing that stress was affecting how the couple spoke to each other, after which they sat down, talked honestly, divided tasks more clearly, and agreed to check in with each other. P14 similarly described creating a temporary crisis plan, reducing obligations, simplifying routines, and relying on dialogue as a continuing relational practice. These participant accounts support the interpretation that dyadic coping was not a single supportive act, but an intentional and repeated process of communication, role coordination, and recalibration.

This is the point at which the findings map most directly onto Senge's learning organization theory in a way that strengthens the publishability of the interpretation. First, "sitting down" to reassess reflects a shift toward systems thinking because the couple begins to treat the stressor as a shared system problem rather than an individual deficit, which changes the logic of blame and responsibility (Jacobs & Park, 2009; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007). Second, participants described shifts in communication skill over time, which aligns with personal mastery as an ongoing commitment to improving self-

regulation, clarity, and follow-through under pressure (Alderman, 2022; Santos et al., 2021; Senge, 1994). Third, participants' reports that disconnects emerged even when couples began with shared goals highlight the role of mental models; couples had to surface assumptions about roles, stress meaning, and support expectations to reduce misinterpretation and escalation (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Senge, 1994). Fourth, participants described a return to shared vision through renewed alignment around "what matters most" and how the couple will respond, which enabled team learning through iterative check-ins and repeated adjustments (Alderman, 2022; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007). In short, participants did not describe drafting formal "learning plans," yet their lived practices frequently mirrored the learning organization disciplines, suggesting that couples enact learning organization processes implicitly and that making these processes explicit could strengthen resilience capacity in future stressors.

### **Cognitive Appraisal, Upbringing Variation, and Meaning Making Shaped How Support Was Perceived and How Conflict was Resolved Over Time**

Participants reflected that differences in upbringing and earlier relational learning influenced how they interpreted conflict, support, and responsibility, and many described recognizing these influences later in the marriage rather than early on. This pattern aligns with attribution research in marriage, which emphasizes that interpretations of partner behavior can intensify distress or support repair depending on whether partners attribute behaviors to stable character flaws or to contextual stress and limitations (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Participants' descriptions also align with the

stress appraisal literature emphasizing that coping is influenced not only by the stressor itself, but also by the meanings and perceived pathways attached to the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman, 1997). Several participants described disconnection phases that were repaired later through communication, reflecting the idea that relationship functioning during crises is shaped by both immediate interaction processes and later sense-making processes that can reframe the shared narrative (Donato et al., 2021; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). Although gender demographics were not formally collected, the narratives suggested patterned appraisals: many men emphasized financial or economic hardship as the most significant shared stressor and described identity-based pressure around provision, while women's accounts more often emphasized health issues, COVID-related disruptions, and loss experiences. These observations are offered as sample-specific qualitative patterns rather than generalized gender conclusions, and they should be interpreted cautiously within the study's boundaries. The present findings also suggest that this meaning-making was part of how resilience matured across time. For example, P5's description of early difficulty relying on support, followed by later trust based on repeated consistency, illustrates how the meaning of support itself shifted across the relationship. Similarly, the movement from private burden carrying to shared planning in P18's account suggests that appraisal changed when the stressor became more openly interpreted as shared rather than individually owned.

The financial appraisal pattern described by several men is consistent with evidence linking economic strain to negative communication and relationship distress,

particularly when stress narrows perceived options and increases threat sensitivity (Dean et al., 2007; Jackson et al., 2023; Totenhagen et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2013).

Participants described that communication was the key mechanism that reopened pathways and improved conflict resolution, which aligns with research demonstrating that communication can buffer the harmful association between financial stress and relational outcomes (Işık & Kaya, 2022; Kanter et al., 2023; Wikle et al., 2021).

Women's reported stressors such as health issues and loss experiences similarly align with evidence that sustained uncertainty and grief-related strain can disrupt relational functioning but can be buffered when couples engage responsive support and coordinated coping (Lebow, 2020; Manchia et al., 2022; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Voss et al., 2020). Attachment-oriented scholarship further supports the idea that support perceptions vary based on underlying security, with insecurity shaping sensitivity to threat and the interpretation of support attempts (Overall et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023; Vedelago et al., 2023). From the learning organization perspective, the late recognition of upbringing differences is consistent with the revision of mental models over time; couples described gaining cognitive awareness of "why we react this way," which then supported improved dialogue and teamwork (Alderman, 2022; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007). Thus, the findings extend existing literature by showing how cognitive appraisal and meaning-making matured across the marriage and became a mechanism for resilience-building rather than merely a source of conflict.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study are presented to clarify boundaries to trustworthiness that emerged during execution and to support appropriate interpretation of the findings. In qualitative phenomenological research, trustworthiness is strengthened through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, with limitations discussed in relation to how the study design and procedures may have shaped the data and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Although the study generated rich descriptions of how participants perceived spousal support during shared stressors, the findings should be interpreted as contextually situated accounts rather than generalizable estimates of prevalence or effect size (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). The limitations below do not invalidate the findings; instead, they identify where caution is warranted and how future research may strengthen methodological rigor.

#### **Credibility Limitations**

A first credibility limitation concerns the limited outcome of the transcript review process. Participants were sent their transcripts and given an opportunity to provide clarification or corrections if needed, and committee members also reviewed the transcripts and provided feedback and change recommendations. However, no participants submitted follow-up clarifications or corrections. This limitation is particularly relevant for a phenomenological study because nuanced meaning-making and the interpretation of support can depend on phrasing, tone, and context, which participants might further refine upon review (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Moustakas,

1994). To strengthen credibility despite the absence of participant-generated transcript revisions, analytic checks were implemented through systematic coding procedures, committee feedback, and review of coded materials and analytic memos within the audit trail process. However, credibility remains bounded by the fact that the final analysis was based on one-time interview accounts without participant-supplied transcript amendments.

A second credibility limitation is inherent to retrospective self-report in interviews. Participants described shared stressors and coping transitions that often-occurred months or years prior, which introduces potential recall bias, selective memory, and post hoc sense-making. This is not a flaw unique to this study, but it does mean that participants' narratives represent reconstructed meaning rather than real-time observation of coping behaviors (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). In addition, shared stressors can be emotionally charged, and participants may unconsciously present their coping and relationship outcomes in ways that protect identity, justify decisions, or emphasize growth, which can shape what is shared and what is omitted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Smith & Noble, 2014). Therefore, the findings are best understood as participants lived interpretations of the stressor experience and spousal support, not as objective verification of events. A further credibility boundary is that the findings were developed from individual perspectives rather than partner-paired accounts, even though the phenomenon under study was dyadic. As a result, the analytic claims reflect how one spouse interpreted support and coping transitions, not how both spouses jointly narrated the same sequence of events. This does not weaken the phenomenological purpose of the

study, but it does mean that the results should be interpreted as perceptions of dyadic process rather than direct observational confirmation of couple-level interaction.

### **Transferability Limitations**

Transferability was constrained by the recruitment pathways and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants self-selected into the study through the Walden participant pool and through flyer distribution in social media and professional networks, which can increase the likelihood that the sample includes individuals who are comfortable disclosing personal experiences, motivated by the topic, or oriented toward reflection and meaning-making (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). This potential self-selection bias does not undermine the credibility of participants' accounts, but it can shape which experiences are represented and may underrepresent individuals experiencing active separation, severe conflict, or higher barriers to participation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985;). In qualitative inquiry, transferability is not achieved through statistical representativeness; instead, it is supported through thick description that enables readers to evaluate whether the findings apply to other contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as contextually situated accounts of marital resilience among those who opted into participation rather than as generalizable conclusions about all long-term marriages. Future research could strengthen transferability by purposively sampling across varied recruitment sources and intentionally seeking participants with broader stressor profiles and relationship outcomes to ensure greater variation in experiences represented (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Transferability was also constrained by limited demographic characterization. While basic eligibility criteria ensured participants were married 10 years or more, the study did not formally collect gender demographic data, and other demographic variables may not have been captured in a way that enables systematic comparison across subgroups. This limitation matters because prior research indicates that stress exposure, role expectations, and support perceptions can vary based on demographic factors, cultural norms, and social positions (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). Consequently, any observed patterns that appear gendered or culturally patterned in the narratives should be interpreted as sample-specific observations rather than generalized subgroup findings. Future research can strengthen transferability by intentionally sampling for diversity and collecting demographic characteristics that enable richer contextualization. Transferability is also limited by the fact that most participants described marriages that remained intact and sufficiently functional to support reflection on resilience. As a result, the findings may be less applicable to couples in active separation, ongoing high-conflict relationships, or relationships in which shared stressors contributed to dissolution rather than adaptation.

### **Dependability and Confirmability Limitations**

A limitation related to dependability is that qualitative interviews represent a snapshot in time and are sensitive to interview context, rapport, and participant readiness to disclose. Participants' descriptions of dyadic coping transitions could have been shaped by the framing of questions, the emotional tone of the interview, or the participant's immediate circumstances on the day of the interview (Creswell & Creswell,

2013; Patton, 2015). While semi-structured interviews support consistency across participants, the flexible nature of qualitative interviewing means that different probing pathways can yield different depth across cases, which can influence the completeness of turning-point descriptions.

Confirmability is limited by the interpretive role of the researcher in coding and theme development. Although systematic coding procedures and documentation practices support confirmability, the themes still reflect an interpretive synthesis of participant meaning rather than an objective, mechanistic classification (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Patton, 2015). Researcher positionality and theoretical commitments, including the use of attachment theory and learning organization theory, may have influenced analytic attention toward particular patterns (e.g., meaning-making, responsiveness, learning cycles). To reduce bias and strengthen confirmability, an audit trail and peer/committee review of coding decisions and analytic memos supported transparency and rationale for thematic conclusions. Nonetheless, as with all qualitative research, confirmability remains bounded by the interpretive nature of analysis and the impossibility of full neutrality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Smith & Noble, 2014). An additional confirmability limitation is that some of the strongest findings involved overlapping codes, such as dyadic coping with emotional support, practical support, or PsyCap dimensions. Although this overlap reflects the lived complexity of participants' narratives and was managed through explicit coding rules, it also means that interpretation required analytic judgment regarding which process was primary in a given segment. The audit trail and

codebook helped manage this issue, but the final thematic structure still reflects reasoned interpretation rather than mutually exclusive categorization.

### **Summary of Limitations**

In summary, the key limitations to trustworthiness included the reliance on retrospective self-report, self-selection and recruitment pathways that may have favored more reflective participants, limited demographic characterization, and the inherent interpretive role of the researcher in phenomenological analysis. Additional limitations included the fact that although participants were given an opportunity to review their transcripts and provide clarification if needed, no participants submitted follow-up corrections or clarifications; the use of individual rather than partner-paired interviews for a dyadic phenomenon; and the likelihood that the sample underrepresented couples in severe relational disruption or dissolution. These limitations indicate that findings should be interpreted as credible, contextually situated accounts of perceived spousal support and coping transitions rather than as generalizable claims about all long-term marriages. At the same time, the study's qualitative strengths, including depth of narrative data and systematic analytic documentation, provide a meaningful contribution to understanding how couples experience and interpret support during shared stressors (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations for future research are presented to extend understanding of spousal support and marital resilience during shared stressors while remaining grounded in the strengths and limitations of the current phenomenological study. Because this study

relied on retrospective, individual interviews and did not include dyadic joint interviews or longitudinal follow-up, future research can deepen the field's understanding of coping transitions by expanding design features that capture within-couple processes, changes in meaning over time, and context-specific variation (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). In addition, stress and support processes are shaped by appraisal, communication, and relational context, suggesting value in research designs that examine how partners' narratives converge or diverge and how shared meaning is constructed in real time (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). The recommendations below are intentionally framed within the boundaries of this study and reflect feasible extensions that can strengthen credibility, transferability, and theoretical refinement.

### **Dyadic Multi-Stage Interviewing to Capture Within-Couple Meaning-Making and Coping Transitions**

A first recommendation is to use a multi-stage dyadic qualitative design in which researchers interview partners separately, then interview the couple together, and then conduct individual debrief interviews. This structure may strengthen credibility and analytic depth because it allows each partner to describe private meaning-making without immediate influence from the partner, while also capturing the jointly constructed narrative that emerges when partners co-tell their story and negotiate shared meaning in real time (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Patton, 2015). The joint interview stage is particularly relevant for examining the nuanced transition from solo coping to dyadic coping and bidirectional support, because it can reveal interactional

patterns, implicit role assumptions, and “shared reality” processes that may remain partially hidden in individual accounts (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Goldring et al., 2022). The final individual debrief stage can clarify whether participants experienced pressure to agree during the joint interview, enabling researchers to compare private and shared appraisals and to identify where mental models diverge, which directly aligns with learning organization concepts and attachment-oriented interpretations (Bowlby, 2003; Overall et al., 2022; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007). This approach could also improve interpretive precision by distinguishing between perceived support (meaning and appraisal) and received support (behavioral enactment), which is a known distinction in support science (Haber et al., 2007; Xu & Burleson, 2001; Xu & Burleson, 2004). Taken together, a staged dyadic design would likely provide richer insight into how couples build shared vision, negotiate team identity, and learn communication practices across stress cycles (Alderman, 2022; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Senge, 1994). This recommendation is especially important given that the current study relied on one spouse’s account at a time, even though the phenomenon under investigation was inherently relational and dyadic. A multi-stage dyadic design would make it possible to compare private meaning-making, jointly constructed narratives, and post-discussion reflections in ways that could further clarify how couples move from guarded or parallel coping to coordinated coping.

## **Comparative Qualitative Research Across Couple Types, Including Same-Sex and Heterosexual Marriages**

A second recommendation is to conduct comparative research across legally married couples that intentionally includes both heterosexual and same-sex couples, using a design that is sufficiently powered to explore similarities and differences in coping transitions, support meanings, and resilience processes. Although the current study generated findings relevant to legally married individuals, transferability is limited without intentional sampling across diverse couple structures and sociocultural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Comparative designs could clarify which resilience mechanisms are consistent across couples (e.g., coordinated emotional and practical support; communication turning points; shared meaning-making) and which mechanisms vary based on minority stress exposure, social support networks, and contextual constraints, particularly during shared societal stressors (Gariépy et al., 2016; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). This line of inquiry would also support theory refinement by testing whether learning-organization-aligned processes (systems thinking, mental model revision, shared vision renewal, team learning) are expressed similarly across couples or shaped by different social pressures and relationship norms (Alderman, 2022; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007). Additionally, comparative studies may clarify how attachment-related differences interact with social context to influence support perceptions and the likelihood of moving from solo coping to dyadic coping, which has implications for both attachment research and couple intervention tailoring (Overall et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023; Vedelago et al., 2023). As a

result, comparative research could strengthen the discipline's ability to develop more inclusive, context-sensitive recommendations for relationship resilience. This recommendation also reflects the current study's limited demographic characterization. Because the present findings are based on contextually situated accounts rather than subgroup comparisons, future comparative work could help determine whether the coping and support patterns identified here are broadly transferable or more strongly shaped by couple structure, identity, or social context.

### **Longitudinal Qualitative Follow Up to Examine Stability and Change in Meaning Over Time**

A third recommendation is to extend this work through longitudinal qualitative designs that revisit participants after a defined interval, such as one year following the initial interview, to examine whether and how perceptions of spousal support and coping transitions change over time. This recommendation is grounded in a key boundary of the current study: participants' accounts were retrospective and represented meaning-making at one point in time rather than observed change across time. Follow-up interviews could reveal whether participants' interpretations of turning points remain stable, become more nuanced, or are reappraised in light of new stressors, which aligns with appraisal theory's emphasis on ongoing re-evaluation and coping adaptation (Folkman, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Longitudinal designs would also allow researchers to examine whether dyadic coping practices persist as sustained routines or whether they weaken without continued reinforcement, an issue that intersects with both resilience theory and learning frameworks (Afifi et al., 2016; Prime et al., 2020; Senge, 1994). In addition, re-

interviewing couples could illuminate whether early improvements in communication and teamwork translate into lasting relationship stability, which would strengthen empirical understanding beyond cross-sectional self-report narratives (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Xiang et al., 2022). From a learning organization perspective, longitudinal inquiry is particularly valuable because learning is, by definition, iterative; observing how couples update mental models and re-establish shared vision across time would directly test the applicability of the framework in intimate relationships (Alderman, 2022; Senge, 1994, 2007). Overall, longitudinal follow-up would provide richer evidence regarding how resilience is maintained, how meaning evolves, and how couples sustain bidirectional support after shared stressors. This recommendation is also responsive to the present finding that resilience was not described as a one-time event, but as a process that developed through repeated communication, reassessment, and growing trust. Longitudinal follow-up would make it possible to examine whether those gains remain stable, deepen, or erode over time.

A fourth recommendation is to include couples experiencing higher levels of relational vulnerability, including couples reporting ongoing high conflict, severe resource strain, separation risk, or prolonged difficulty coordinating support. The present study primarily captured participants who were able to reflect on resilience within marriages that remained intact. Future research that includes more distressed or unstable relationships could clarify why some couples remain in parallel coping, why support is sometimes difficult to trust or receive, and what conditions prevent the transition from solo coping to dyadic coping. Such work could help refine intervention targets by

identifying whether breakdown points are primarily related to attachment insecurity, chronic overload, limited practical support, communication patterns, or contextual barriers beyond the couple's control.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

Future research can strengthen and extend the current study's contributions by employing dyadic multi-stage interviewing, conducting comparative research across couple types including same-sex and heterosexual marriages, and using longitudinal follow-up interviews to examine change in perceptions over time. Future work would also benefit from including couples under greater relational strain so that the field can better understand not only how resilience develops, but also how and why coordinated coping fails to emerge in some marriages. These recommendations are feasible extensions that directly address the current study's limitations and build on prior scholarship demonstrating that support processes, dyadic coping, and meaning-making shape couple resilience during shared stressors (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Each recommendation also creates opportunities to test and refine the application of Senge's learning organization theory to marital resilience by examining whether systems thinking, shared vision, mental model revision, and team learning emerge implicitly or can be strengthened through explicit relational practices (Alderman, 2022; Santos et al., 2021; Senge, 1994).

### **Implications**

The implications of this study are presented in three integrated areas: (a) implications for positive social change; (b) methodological, theoretical, and empirical

implications for scholarship; and (c) implications for practice. These implications are grounded in the study findings and are framed within the boundaries of a qualitative phenomenological design, which emphasizes meaning-making and lived experience rather than causal estimation or population-level generalization (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Across interviews, participants described that shared stressors initially increased relational load and risk for disconnection, but that coordinated emotional and practical support, communication turning points, and iterative reassessment supported a transition toward dyadic coping and bidirectional support. These patterns align with established relationship science suggesting that stress undermines couple functioning when it fuels negative communication and withdrawal, but that supportive responsiveness and dyadic coping can buffer risk and strengthen stability (Donato et al., 2021; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Within the study's theoretical framing, implications also reflect attachment theory's emphasis on secure-base and safe-haven processes and Senge's learning organization theory as a lens for how couples develop resilience through iterative learning and shared meaning (Bowlby, 2003; Overall et al., 2022; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007).

### **Social Change Argument: A Cognitive Learning-Organization Approach to Couple Resilience Under Shared Stressors**

The findings support a clear social change implication: when couples are supported to bring learning processes to the foreground, they may strengthen resilience before stressors occur and reduce the downstream harms of chronic conflict,

disengagement, and instability. Participants repeatedly described that communication improvements and teamwork did not emerge automatically; rather, they developed through lived trial, repair cycles, and repeated reassessment after stress had already created disruption. This pattern suggests an opportunity for preventive social change at the individual and family level by translating the learning organization disciplines into accessible cognitive tools for couples. This implication is grounded in the Chapter 4 finding that resilience was described not as automatic, but as something developed through repeated support, communication, planning, and increasing confidence in the relationship's ability to cope together. A structured approach could help couples build a shared foundation early in the relationship, including explicit role expectations, shared goals, and a plan for how the couple will respond when external demands intensify. This proposal is consistent with literature emphasizing that couple functioning can be strengthened through targeted skills and that supportive processes buffer stress impacts during crises (Beach et al., 2023; Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). It also aligns with learning scholarship indicating that continuous learning frameworks support sustained adaptation and accountability in complex systems (Alderman, 2022; Santos et al., 2021; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007).

A learning-organization approach offers a cognitively grounded pathway for social change because it reframes couple resilience as a learnable system of practices rather than a trait. Systems thinking can help couples view stressors as “system problems” requiring coordinated redesign of routines, roles, and resource allocation rather than blaming individual weakness (Jacobs & Park, 2009; Randall & Bodenmann,

2009; Senge, 1994). Personal mastery can be operationalized as self-regulation and skill development in communication, emotional control, and follow-through, which participants in this study described as evolving over time and reducing escalation (Işık & Kaya, 2022; Kanter et al., 2023; Senge, 1994). Mental models can be addressed by guiding couples to surface assumptions rooted in upbringing, identity, and role expectations, which participants often recognized later in their marriage and described as shaping conflict and support perception (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Senge, 1994). Shared vision can be established by helping couples define explicit objectives early-on, so that when a shared stressor occurs the relationship has an agreed-upon “north star” and a shared meaning structure, reducing uncertainty and reactive conflict (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020; Senge, 1994). Team learning can be translated into recurring check-ins, feedback loops, and joint problem-solving routines that participants already described as central to sustaining dyadic coping over time (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Senge, 2007). Taken together, this cognitive approach provides a plausible mechanism for positive social change by strengthening couples’ proactive capacity to adapt, reducing prolonged disconnection, and supporting family stability when shared stressors occur, while remaining aligned with the study’s qualitative evidence boundaries.

### **Positive Social Change Implications**

At the individual and family level, the findings suggest that strengthening couples’ capacity for intentional communication and coordinated support during shared stressors may promote stability, emotional regulation, and relational health. Participants

repeatedly described that distress did not resolve because stressors disappeared, but because couples learned to share meaning, communicate needs, and coordinate responsibilities in ways that reduced isolation and reactivity. These observations align with evidence that supportive couple processes can buffer psychological distress and reduce relational risk during crises, including large-scale stressors such as COVID-19 (Bar-Shachar et al., 2023; Beach et al., 2023; Donato et al., 2021; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Positive social change is relevant because chronic relational distress and unstable couple functioning can contribute to broader family strain, parenting stress, and downstream impacts on well-being, suggesting that strengthening couple resilience has potential ripple effects beyond the dyad (Afifi et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2022; Prime et al., 2020). Although this study did not measure child outcomes or community-level effects, the findings support a reasonable, bounded implication: interventions that improve couples' coping coordination may contribute to healthier relational climates and improved individual well-being in families experiencing shared stress (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). In short, the findings suggest that supporting couples to remain emotionally connected and practically coordinated during shared stressors may reduce the social burden of relationship deterioration and strengthen resilience at the family level. The present findings add practical specificity to this implication.

Participants did not describe resilience as abstract positivity or endurance alone; rather, they described resilience as something that grew when emotional reassurance, practical stepping in, and repeated dialogue made the stressor more shareable and more manageable. In this sense, positive social change efforts may be strongest when they help

couples practice concrete relational skills, such as naming stress openly, clarifying needs, redistributing tasks, and revisiting plans as circumstances change, rather than relying only on broad encouragement to communicate better.

A distinctive implication for positive social change is the application of a cognitive learning-organization approach to couple resilience. Participants described that couples learned teamwork and communication over time, often after periods of conflict and disconnection, and that turning points occurred when partners “sat down,” reassessed assumptions, and re-established alignment. These processes closely mirror Senge’s learning organization disciplines, including systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning, even though couples did not explicitly label their process using these constructs (Alderman, 2022; Santos et al., 2021; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007). If these disciplines are brought to the foreground as an accessible cognitive framework for couples, couples may develop clearer objectives early in marriage and strengthen resilience foundations before stressors occur. For example, systems thinking can help couples treat stress as a shared system challenge rather than an individual failure, personal mastery can normalize skill-building in emotional regulation and communication, mental model work can surface upbringing-based assumptions that shape conflict, shared vision can establish explicit relational objectives, and team learning can be operationalized as recurring check-ins and iterative problem-solving routines (Alderman, 2022; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Senge, 1994). Such a proactive, cognitively oriented framework may reduce the likelihood that couples wait until crisis conditions to renegotiate roles and expectations, thereby strengthening

relational stability during shared stressors. This implication remains within study boundaries because it is derived directly from participants' descriptions that resilience emerged through learning cycles, communication development, and reassessment after disconnection, and it does not claim effectiveness beyond what participants reported (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

### **Methodological Implications**

Methodologically, the findings support the value of phenomenological inquiry for capturing the subjective meaning of spousal support, particularly the nuanced transition from solo coping to dyadic coping during shared stressors. Participants' accounts illustrated that "support" is not solely behavioral; it is interpretive, shaped by perceived responsiveness, timing, tone, and shared appraisal, which a phenomenological approach is well positioned to illuminate (Haber et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). At the same time, the study highlights the importance of designs that can more directly observe within-couple meaning-making and interaction processes. Future research that adds dyadic joint interviews, staged interviewing, or longitudinal follow-up may strengthen understanding of how shared meaning and team identity are constructed and maintained over time (Creswell & Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Additionally, because participants' narratives indicated that turning points can be abrupt or gradual, future designs may benefit from capturing temporal features of coping transitions more explicitly, which could bridge qualitative meaning-making with process-oriented relationship science (Falconier et al., 2015; Papp & Witt, 2010). Thus, the study provides methodological support for qualitative approaches while also identifying

feasible design enhancements that align with the phenomena observed. The methodological implications are also strengthened by the current study's coding structure. Distinguishing between solo coping, dyadic coping, emotional support, practical support, PsyCap dimensions, and resilience outcomes made it possible to trace how participants moved from one process to another rather than treating resilience as a single undifferentiated construct. This suggests that future qualitative studies may benefit from similarly explicit code distinctions and decision rules when examining complex relational processes under stress.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Theoretically, this study supports and extends attachment theory by illustrating how participants experienced spousal support as safe-haven and secure-base processes under shared stressor conditions. Participants' accounts suggested that emotional availability and perceived reliability shaped their willingness to disclose, regulate distress, and transition from self-protective coping toward collaborative coping, aligning with evidence that attachment insecurity is associated with poorer relationship functioning during stress and with differences in support perceptions (Bowlby, 2003; Ferrajão, 2024; Overall et al., 2022; Park et al., 2023). At the same time, the study extends understanding by integrating the widely used business practice of Senge's learning organization theory into couple resilience, showing that participants described learning cycles consistent with systems thinking, mental model revision, shared vision renewal, and team learning. This integration offers a cognitive-developmental explanation for how couples strengthen resilience capacities over time, complementing

stress and coping models that emphasize appraisal and resource protection (Halbesleben, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). The findings suggest that learning organization theory can serve as a productive conceptual lens for translating resilience into teachable relational practices, particularly when couples face repeated stress cycles and must adapt to evolving demands (Alderman, 2022; Senge, 1994). These theoretical implications remain bounded because they interpret participant meaning within established frameworks rather than asserting universal mechanisms. The findings also suggest that attachment theory and learning organization theory work especially well in combination. Attachment theory helps explain why perceived safety, reassurance, and dependability matter at the point of disclosure and support seeking, whereas learning organization theory helps explain how couples convert that safety into repeated coordination, role adjustment, and adaptive routines over time. Considered together, the two frameworks provide a stronger explanation of resilience development than either framework would provide independently.

### **Empirical and Practice Implications**

Empirically, the findings reinforce that shared stressors are not inherently bonding or inherently damaging; rather, outcomes appear contingent on how couples interpret the stressor and coordinate emotional and practical support. Participants described that resilience was supported when couples established shared meaning, engaged in direct communication, and maintained iterative check-ins that enabled role flexibility and reduced disconnection. This pattern aligns with empirical findings linking dyadic coping, perceived support, and communication quality to relationship satisfaction and stability

during crises (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Işık & Kaya, 2022; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Practically, these findings suggest that clinicians, coaches, and relationship educators may benefit from emphasizing both emotional and practical support processes and helping couples identify early warning signs of parallel coping and disconnection. Interventions may also be strengthened by incorporating structured “learning routines,” such as shared stressor debriefs, weekly check-ins during high-stress periods, and explicit role renegotiation, which align with team learning and systems thinking principles (Donato et al., 2021; Senge, 1994; Senge, 2007). In addition, because participants described identity-linked stress appraisals (e.g., financial provision pressures) and upbringing-based mental models that influenced conflict, applied work may benefit from incorporating cognitive reframing and mental model exploration as part of couple support planning (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Williamson et al., 2013). These practice implications remain consistent with the study boundaries because they translate themes participants described into plausible applications without asserting treatment efficacy.

The findings suggest that applied work may be especially effective when it helps couples recognize where they are in the coping process. Some participants were still in private burden carrying or guarded reliance, whereas others had already begun building routines of dialogue, planning, and role flexibility. This suggests that intervention may need to be matched to the couple’s current coping phase, helping some couples first establish emotional safety and helping others strengthen shared planning, practical coordination, or trust in follow-through.

Beyond the immediate findings, the current global climate underscores why strengthening couple resilience to shared stressors is increasingly urgent. Contemporary couples are navigating a landscape characterized by economic uncertainty and volatility, climate-related disruptions and natural disasters, intensified political polarization and social division, periodic governance instability, and ongoing concerns about emerging infectious disease threats. These conditions matter for relationship functioning because shared external stressors can saturate daily life, increase relational load, and erode adaptive couple processes when coping resources are depleted or misaligned (Afifi et al., 2016; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Prime et al., 2020). Participants in this study described that resilience was not automatic; rather, resilience was strengthened through intentional communication, role renegotiation, and iterative learning that transformed parallel coping into dyadic coping and bidirectional support, suggesting that preparedness can be cultivated before crises occur. This implication extends the practical relevance of the findings because much of the existing literature has historically emphasized stress contexts where one partner is the primary affected individual, while large-scale societal stressors increasingly create conditions in which both partners are simultaneously burdened and must adapt together (Lebow, 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Consequently, there is a growing need to expand couple-centered resources and prevention-oriented education that equip partners with structured tools for shared stress appraisal, coordinated support, and relational learning routines, so that couples have a stronger foundation to withstand future shared stressor events (Donato et al., 2021; Falconier et al., 2015; Manchia et al., 2022).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore marital resilience through the lived experiences and perceptions of spousal support during events of shared stressors among individuals who had been legally married for 10 years or more. Findings indicated that shared stressors often initiated periods of heightened strain and temporary disconnection, with many participants first attempting to cope privately or in parallel before transitioning toward coordinated coping. Across narratives, resilience was most consistently described when spouses provided both emotional-support, such as reassurance, validation, and steady presence, and practical support, such as role flexibility, task sharing, and joint problem solving, in ways that were experienced as aligned rather than fragmented. Participants described that communication served as the central mechanism that moved couples from solo coping to dyadic coping and, in many cases, to bidirectional support, particularly when couples engaged in intentional conversations that clarified needs, surfaced assumptions, and re-established shared goals. Interpreted through attachment theory, these findings suggest that spousal support operated as a safe-haven and secure-base process that supported emotional regulation and reduced threat during shared adversity (Bowlby, 2003; Overall et al., 2022). Interpreted through Senge's learning organization theory, participants' accounts also indicated that couples strengthened resilience through iterative learning processes resembling systems thinking, personal mastery, mental model revision, shared vision renewal, and team learning, even when these disciplines were not explicitly named (Alderman, 2022; Santos et al., 2021; Senge, 1994). More specifically, the findings suggest that resilience was not

automatic even in long-term marriages. Participants such as P18 and P5 illustrated that early stress often involved private burden carrying, guarded reliance, or uncertainty about whether support could be trusted, while participants such as P14, P15, and P17 illustrated how emotional reassurance, practical intervention, and repeated dialogue helped transform stress into a more shared and manageable experience. In this way, resilience appeared to develop through repeated support processes rather than simply through marital duration alone.

The study also contributes to the literature by clarifying that spousal support during shared stressors was experienced not as a single behavior, but as an interconnected relational process involving emotional holding, concrete assistance, shared planning, and the gradual development of confidence in the relationship's ability to cope. This distinction is important because it helps explain why some couples initially remained in solo or parallel coping before later moving toward stronger teamwork, trust, and coordinated resilience. Overall, this study contributes to relationship science by clarifying how couples experience and interpret the shift from parallel coping to collaborative coping during shared stressors and by highlighting the value of bringing learning-oriented practices to the foreground as a proactive foundation for long-term marital resilience.

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Appendix A: Inclusion Criteria Screening Survey

Please provide the following basic details (no identifying information is needed):

City and state:

Year you were married:

A brief description of the shared stressor you and your spouse experienced:

Your general availability for a 60–90 minute interview (preferred days/times):

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a little about your marriage and how long you and your spouse have been together?
2. Thinking back over the past decade, what kinds of external stressors (such as the COVID-19 pandemic, financial challenges, caregiving, or health issues) have you and your spouse faced together?
3. When you think about those stressful times, how would you describe the ways your spouse supported you?
4. In what ways did your spouse's support help you manage your stress, either emotionally, cognitively, or practically?
5. Can you recall a situation when you first tried to cope with stress on your own but later involved your spouse? What changed when it shifted from solo to dyadic coping?
6. How do you perceive the balance between handling stress independently versus relying on your spouse? What helps you decide when to shift from one to the other?
7. Were there moments when your spouse's support felt less helpful or even added stress? If so, how did you interpret or respond to that?
8. During challenging times, how has your spouse helped you stay focused on your goals or encouraged you to find new ways forward?
9. Can you share an example of when your spouse's encouragement made you feel more confident in your own ability to handle a difficult situation?
10. Looking back, how do you feel spousal support has influenced your resilience—your ability to “bounce back” or adapt during tough times?
11. How has your spouse's support affected your sense of stability and satisfaction in your marriage over time?
12. In what ways do you think your experiences of shared stressors have strengthened—or strained—your relationship?
13. How do you and your spouse reflect on or learn from stressful experiences once the immediate crisis has passed?
14. How did your spouse encourage you to recover and keep going after setbacks, rather than giving up?
15. How has your spouse's support influenced the way you view your marriage and your future together, especially during difficult times?
16. How has spousal support during shared stressors shaped your personal growth or outlook on marriage?
17. What does “resilience” in marriage mean to you, and how does spousal support fit into that meaning?
18. If you were to give advice to another couple about navigating shared stress, what role would you emphasize spousal support plays in resilience and marital stability?

19. Is there anything else about your experiences of coping together as a couple that you feel is important to share?
20. When you think about the future of your marriage, how do hope, confidence, resilience, and optimism show up in the way you and your spouse support one another?

### **Interview Probing Questions**

#### **Section A: Background & Context**

- Please confirm the year you got married and that you are legally married for 10+ years ?
- Can you walk me through the story of your marriage, from when you first began your relationship to where you are today?
- How would you describe how your marriage has evolved over the years?
- What have been some major turning points or milestones in your relationship?
- How have life changes such as career shifts, children, health, or relocation shaped your dynamic as a couple?
- Can you tell me the story of one shared stressor that stands out most vividly to you?
- Which of these stressors had the greatest impact on your relationship, and why?
- How did your approach to managing stress differ at various points in your marriage?
- When you reflect on these experiences, how do you think they changed you or your spouse?

#### **Section B: Perceptions of Spousal Support (RQ1)**

- Can you walk me through a specific moment during a stressful time when your spouse supported you, starting with what was happening and how it unfolded?
- How did your spouse's response differ depending on the type of stressor you were facing?
- What made you feel most understood or cared for in those moments?
- Can you tell me a story about a later stressful situation where you noticed yourself coping differently because of the support you received earlier?
- In what ways did that support change your outlook or confidence in facing challenges together?
- How do you think your spouse's support contributed to your personal or emotional growth?
- Can you describe a specific situation where you realized you could no longer handle the stress on your own and decided to involve your spouse? What happened next?
- What cues, triggers, or boundaries influenced that decision? Did negotiation or boundaries play a part of the shift?

- How did that transition feel for you emotionally or mentally?
- What differences did you notice in the outcome or your well-being once you began coping together?
- Can you recall a particular stressful situation where you debated whether to handle it on your own or involve your spouse, and describe how you made that decision?
- Are there certain stressors that you prefer to face together? Why?
- How do you and your spouse negotiate boundaries when supporting one another?
- Can you tell me about a specific time when your spouse tried to help, but it didn't feel supportive to you in that moment? What stands out about that experience?
- How did you and your spouse communicate or repair after that moment?
- What did you learn about giving and receiving support from those moments?
- Can you share a specific story from a difficult period when your spouse helped you regain hope or see a new way forward?
- How did that encouragement influence your motivation or goals?
- What actions or words from your spouse reminded you that you could keep moving forward?
- Can you describe a particular moment when your spouse's words or actions made you feel more capable of handling a difficult situation?
- How did that sense of confidence change the way you approached future challenges?
- Can you describe any situations where this shared confidence improved outcomes?

### **Section C: Influence on Resilience & Stability (RQ2)**

- Can you think of a stressful experience early in your marriage and compare it to a later one, describing how your ability to recover changed over time?
- What do you think helped you adapt more effectively over time?
- How does your current sense of resilience compare to earlier years of your marriage?
- Can you tell me a story about a time when coping together as a couple clearly strengthened or challenged your relationship, and what you learned from that experience?
- What patterns of support have become part of your daily life since those experiences?
- How have you and your spouse changed in how you respond to future difficulties together?
- Can you tell me a story, walk me through a specific shared stressor from beginning to end, focusing on how you and your spouse worked together during that time?
- What patterns or routines developed from those shared experiences that you still use today?
- What lasting lessons did you learn about your relationship's ability to recover or adapt?

- How did those experiences change the way you see each other's strengths or limitations?
- Can you tell me a story, describe a specific time after a stressful event when you and your spouse sat down and reflected on what happened and what you learned from it?
- What changes did you make in your communication or problem-solving as a result?
- Do you and your spouse ever revisit those moments to identify what worked well or what you want to avoid repeating?
- How has this process of reflection affected the way you handle new stressors together?
- Can you tell me a specific story about a setback where you felt discouraged and how your spouse helped you recover and keep going?
- What did your spouse do or say that helped you continue?
- How have these experiences shaped how you respond to future challenges?
- Can you tell me a detail story, describe a moment during a difficult time when your spouse's support changed how you viewed your future together?
- What actions or conversations help you maintain hope or optimism?
- How has this support shaped your long-term vision for your marriage or shared goals?

#### **Section D: Reflection & Meaning-Making**

- Can you share a story, a specific experience in details where your spouse's support led you to see yourself differently as a partner?
- What personal strengths have developed as a result of navigating stress together?
- How do these experiences influence how you now show up for your spouse?
- Can you tell me a story that, for you, best captures what resilience in your marriage looks like?
- Would you describe resilience as endurance, adaptability, or something else?
- How has your understanding of resilience evolved over time?
- Thinking about your own experiences, can you describe a moment that taught you an important lesson you would want other couples to learn?
- What coping strategies or habits would you recommend based on your experience?
- How do these lessons contribute to a stronger marriage?
- Is there a story you haven't yet told that captures what spousal support has meant in your marriage?
- How have these experiences shaped who you are as a couple today?
- If you had to summarize your shared coping journey in one or two lessons, what would they be?
- Can you describe a recent conversation or moment where hope, confidence, resilience, or optimism showed up as you and your spouse talked about your future?
- How do these qualities influence how you plan or dream together?

- How does your shared learning mindset prepare you for future challenges?