

Extended Abstract

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Research paper

The effect of emotion-focused couple therapy on marital harmony and communication patterns in incompatible couples

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Introduction

Today, many issues have confronted the structure of Iranian families with challenges such as couple incompatibility. Therefore, the more emotional problems couples have, the more incompatibility, less harmony, and more destructive communication patterns they will experience (Hosseini-Ravarizadeh et al., 2023). Therefore, one of the effective therapeutic approaches in improving marital conflicts and adjustment is Johnson's emotion-focused couple therapy. Emotion-focused couple therapy is an experimental method based on attachment theory and does not directly focus on skill training, but rather focuses on new emotional experiences between couples and strengthens the couple's sense of security and detachment (Greenman and Johnson, 2022). The results of the study by Maren et al. (2022) have shown that emotion-focused couple therapy reduces marital problems in couples. Accordingly, considering the importance of variables such as marital harmony and communication patterns of couples in resolving marital conflicts and the cost-effectiveness of group therapy, the present study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of emotion-focused group couple therapy on indicators of marital harmony and communication patterns in couples.

Research Method

The method of this study is a quasi-experimental study with a pre-test-post-test design with an experimental and control group. Its statistical population included all incompatible couples referring to positive life centers and the mental health support group who were invited to participate in this therapy group through a call. The research sample consisted of 20 couples (10 couples in the experimental group and 10 couples in the control group) who were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. In this study, two marital harmony scales by Zhu and Lai (2004) and communication patterns by Christensen and Salawy (1984) were used. In the present study, Johnson's book *Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy* (Johnson, 2004) was used to apply the independent variable. The summary of the content of the aforementioned protocol is as follows:

Table 1: Summary of the content of Johnson's (2004) emotion-focused couple therapy protocol

Sessions 1 and 2:	Establishing a therapeutic relationship with the couple and creating a therapeutic alliance,
Sessions 3 and 4:	Addressing initial emotions and reframing the problem and presenting techniques
Sessions 5 and 6:	Deepening engagement with the techniques presented
Sessions 7 and 8:	Creating emotional engagement, activating and creating belonging, facilitating the expression of needs and desires, and creating engagement
Session 9:	Strengthening and stabilizing new positions, integrating therapeutic changes with real life

Findings

In this study, the effectiveness of emotion-focused couple therapy on marital harmony indicators and communication patterns of 20 couples (10 couples in the experimental group and 10 couples in the control group) was examined. Table 2 presents the descriptive indicators of the two dependent variables of the study, separated into two groups (experimental and control) and test stages (pre-test and post-test).

Table 2: Descriptive indicators of coordination and communication patterns, separated into two groups and test stages

component	Group		Mean	SD	Skewness	kurtosis
Marital harmony	Experimental group	Pre-test	13/10	1/28	0/164	-0/430
		Post-test	16/90	0/99	0/914	0/914
	Control group	Pre-test	12/60	1/83	-1/119	-1/119
		Post-test	12/50	1/17	-0/255	-1/24
Expectation/Withdrawal Pattern	Experimental group	Pre-test	123/90	8/68	0/253	0/069
		Post-test	111/90	8/13	-0/060	-0/516
	Control group	Pre-test	123/00	9/48	0/112	-0/306
		Post-test	123/40	8/61	0/350	0/398
Constructive Pattern	Experimental group	Pre-test	70/00	8/81	0/304	-1/002
		Post-test	81/00	8/75	0/242	-1/232
	Control group	Pre-test	69/00	10/48	0/238	-1/55
		Post-test	68/30	8/56	0/399	-1/68
Avoidant Pattern	Experimental group	Pre-test	15/60	1/26	-0/692	0/588
		Post-test	10/70	0/94	-0/234	-0/347
	Control group	Pre-test	15/20	1/31	-0/088	-0/751
		Post-test	14/30	1/25	-0/280	-0/066

The results of univariate analysis of covariance, with respect to the F value (219.82) and the significance level ($P=0.0001$), showed that emotion-focused couple therapy led to an increase in the total score of marital harmony in the post-test of the experimental group. The results of multivariate analysis of covariance also showed that emotion-focused couple therapy is effective in increasing the constructive communication pattern ($P=0.001$, $F=129.638$) and reducing the expectant/withdrawal ($P=0.001$, $F=71.112$) and avoidant ($P=0.001$, $F=896.433$) communication patterns.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study showed that emotion-focused couple therapy increased marital harmony and communication patterns in incompatible couples. In explaining this result, it can be stated that what makes emotion-focused couple therapy effective on marital harmony is that during therapy sessions, the couple's insecure relationship becomes a secure relationship. This is consistent with the heart of the emotion-focused couple therapy theory. Since emotion-focused couple therapy is based on attachment theory, the relationship between attachment style and communication patterns showed that couples with a secure-secure attachment style showed a mutually constructive communication style. In fact, in the treatment process, couples can easily express their needs and accept their spouse's attachment needs using new cycles, which reduces the emotional inadequacy of couples. As a result, by becoming aware of and experiencing abnormal emotions, and accepting normal emotions, couples reach a level of

security, which leads to them expressing their attachment needs and desires with greater trust in each other, and at the same time, they will be more responsive to each other, and ultimately have a greater ability to regulate emotions. Among the limitations of this study is the lack of control over influential variables such as differences in personality traits, field of study, socioeconomic status, and having children, which should be considered in the generalizability of the results. Also, considering the effectiveness of the emotion-focused couple therapy approach in increasing forgiveness and marital harmony, it is suggested that holding this type of couple therapy sessions in support organizations can provide a basis for preventing harm and increasing satisfaction with couples' lives.

Ethical considerations

This article is derived from a master's thesis in psychology, Simay Danesh Higher Education Institute, Rasht City and is registered with the Vice-Chancellor of Postgraduate Education of this university.

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Author contributions

Seyed Omid Sotoudeh (supervisor) and Fatemeh Pooragha Roudbardeh (advisor): Research process management, editing and revision of the article; Samira Ershad Tavana: Data collection, training, statistical analysis and preparation of the main draft of the article; Noura Farrokhi: Editing and reviewing the article amendments

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest in the results of this study.

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