

# Effectiveness of emotionally focused couple therapy on marital conflicts and tendency to divorce in Couples Referred to Counseling Centers in Bandar Abbas County

Fatemeh Solymani Ahmadi<sup>1</sup> Eghbal Zarei<sup>2</sup> Reza Fallahchai<sup>2</sup>

MSc of Family Counseling<sup>1</sup>, Hormozgan University, Bandar Abbas, Iran. Associate Professor Department of Counseling & Psychology<sup>2</sup>, Hormozgan University, Bandar Abbas, Iran.

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## Original Article

### Abstract

**Introduction:** This study aims at analyzing the effectiveness of emotionally focused couple therapy on marital conflicts and tendency to get divorce in couples who have referred to counseling centers in Bandar Abbas County.

**Methods:** This study was carried out as a quasi-experimental design with control group, pretest and posttest measures. The statistical population of this study included all couples who have referred to counseling centers in Bandar Abbas City, private counseling centers, center for intervention in family crises and center for reducing divorce rate in order to solve their marital problems in late 2011 and early 2012. The sample had 30 couples who have been selected using available sampling method and divided into control and experimental groups using simple casual sampling method. Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ), designed by Barati and Sanaie Dhakir (1996) with 42 questions and Marital Instability Index Questionnaire were used in this study. For measuring the marital instability, couples in the experimental group received nine 90-minute couple therapy sessions once a week, whereas the control group did not receive any intervention. The descriptive statistical methods including frequency, mean value and SD as well as inferential statistical methods including analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were used to analyze data. The results were analyzed using SPSS 16.

**Results:** The results indicated that the average scores of marital conflict and marital instability in posttest of experimental group was significantly less than those in control group and there was a significant difference between experimental and control groups ( $P < 0.0001$ ).

**Conclusion:** Therefore, the study's hypothesis, the effectiveness of emotionally focused couple therapy on alleviation of marital conflicts and tendency to divorce in couples was confirmed (general conclusion).

*Correspondence:*

*Fatemeh Solymani Ahmadi,*  
*MSc.*

*Department of Family Counseling,*  
*Hormozgan University.*

*Bandar Abbas, Iran*

*Tel: +98 9164353509*

*Email:*

*nasima\_00317@yahoo.com*

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## Introduction:

Marriage is one of the most important events of people's life whose root dates back to pre-history era (1). However, you cannot find any couple who have married with the aim of getting divorce in future and approximately all couples make a bond of matrimony with the hope of a long-term cohabitation along with tranquility and happiness; however, many marriages are doomed to failure and divorce. The increased rate of divorce from 7.2 to 16% in the Iranian society within only a year demonstrates the abovementioned claim (2).

The marital conflicts are the prelude to divorce which is started with some simple disputes and extended to intensive arguments, quarrels, fighting and sometimes divorce (3). Divorce is a social innovation and is used as a social measure to face failure in marriage and often one of parties incurs more emotional tension and pain by divorce and experiences critical condition for a longer time. Divorce will result in personal, family and social disintegrations and its detrimental effects influence women more than men (2). Divorce is followed by profound social, legal, economic and parental psychological consequences (2).

The increased rate of divorce and dissatisfaction on the one hand, and the need of couples to enrich and improve their marital relationships on the other hand demonstrate couples' need to interventions and specialized educations on this regard. In the United States and UK the detrimental impacts of marital problems on both physical and mental health have brought about a new need for people and it is finding a professional assistant to deal with marital and family problems (4).

Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) is a sort of couple therapy technique which has been based on a set of clear and evident concepts of marital distress, identification of emotions, adult romantic relationships and emotional reactions (5).

The emotionally focused treatment is rooted in the Bowlby's attachment theory and accordingly, Susan Johnson considers the innate impressive force for meeting the attachment needs; hence, in emotionally focused treatment the marital satisfaction and healthiness of the mutual relationship will be equal to meeting attachment needs and pathology of relationship with failure of such needs (Johnson, 2004). The emotionally

focused couple therapy theory is based on certain concepts such adult romantic relationship, attachment styles and marital distress (6).

The basic hypothesis of this approach implies that whenever the couples are not able to meet their attachment needs with satisfaction and security, marital conflicts begin to develop (7).

EFT helps couples to reach a bond with secure attachment in their relationships. The purpose of EFT is recognition of the defective interactive cycle, problematic attachment damages and redevelopment of attachment's infrastructural motions, as the interactive cycles are changed and redeveloped from scratch (7).

Greenberg, Ford, Alden and Johnson (8) concluded that interaction between couples at the end of the treatment course is more connected and continuous than their interaction at the beginning of the treatment and interaction will be deeper in some levels of experiences and the strongest bond among couples is made when there is less conflicts.

Karimi (9) concluded that both Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy and Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy have a roughly equal impact in alleviating the depression occurs usually after an accident either in short or in long term.

Rasouli et al. (10) concluded that the treatment was effective significantly and was able to alleviate the relationship distress in women and men in terms of personally and couple-based. Likewise, this treatment improved satisfaction, attachment, agreement and marital expression of love both in women and men in terms of personally and couple-based. Moreover, the treatment effectiveness was equal in terms of personally (only woman) and couple-based (man and woman) and there was not a significant difference.

In a study, Effectiveness of EFT on Sexual Satisfaction of Couples, Honarparvaran et al. (6) concluded that emotionally focused intervention enhances the sexual satisfaction components of couples and it is more effective in women than in men.

Berni, Carr and Clark (11) studied about the effectiveness of behavioral couple therapy and EFT on couple's distress and concluded that the integrative behavioral couple therapy and tendency to inform in marital treatment may have a stronger impact rather BCT and also EFT may result in

alleviation of distress and the long-term effect of the decreased marital distress.

Johnson and Greenberg (12) and Mcnin and Johnson (13) support the method of resolving attachment damage and suggest that EFT period is useful for couples. Greenberg, Warwar and Malcolm (14) concluded that emotionally focused treatment is effective in alleviating couples' distress and improving forgiveness ability in a short-term treatment; however, extra sessions need paving the way for sustainable changes. This study also intends to analyze the effectiveness of EFT on alleviation of marital distress and tendency to divorce.

### Methods:

This study was carried out as a quasi-experimental design with control group, pretest and posttest measures. The statistical population of this study includes all couples who have referred to

counseling centers of Bandar Abbas City, private counseling centers, center for interference in family crisis and center for alleviation of divorce rate to solve their marital problems in late 2011 and late 2012. For selecting the sample of this study, all people who have referred to the mentioned centers received the call-for and address of a couple therapy center. Those couples who have accepted the call for and have referred to the couple therapy center that was selected to conduct this study, the available sampling technique was applied because of author's problems and limitations in accessing the couples and a total of 30 couples (whose decision to get divorce was not decisive) were selected casually (through drawing) and then they were divided into two groups of experimental (14) and control (15) groups. At least 30 persons are required to conduct a quasi-experimental research (Delavar, 2001).

**Table 1. Rubrics of emotionally focused therapy sessions**

<b>First session</b>	1. Meeting couples and preliminary interview, 2. Expressing couples targets for participating in treatment sessions, 3. Being familiar with general rules of treatment, 4. Expressing rules of treatment sessions, 5. Conducting pretest
<b>Second session</b>	1. Starting a treatment relationship, 2. Assessing the problem's nature in terms of relationship, feeling of security, supports and being understood and accepted by the therapist, 3) setting assignments
<b>Third session</b>	1. Determining the negative interactive cycle and providing a condition in which couples reveal their negative interactive cycle, 2) assessing the relationship and attachment bond between couples, 3) Making couples familiar with the role of emotions in interpersonal interactions, reconstructing interactions and increasing couple's flexibility, 4) setting assignments
<b>Fourth session</b>	1. Reaching the unrecognized feelings which are infrastructures of the interactive settings, 2. More concentration on emotions, needs and attachment needs, 3. Facilitating the interaction between couples and validating their attachment related experiences, needs and inclinations, 4. Concentrating on secondary emotions which are revealed in the interactive cycle and analyzing them in order to find infrastructural and unrecognized emotions, 5. Discussing on primary emotions and processing them and increasing couple's knowledge on the primary emotions, 6. Setting assignments
<b>Fifth session</b>	1. Framing problems in terms of infrastructural feelings and attachment needs, 2. Emphasizing the ability of couples in expressing emotions, 3. Informing couples on the effect of fear and their defensive mechanisms on cognitive and emotional processes, 4. Describing the reception cycle and background attachment, 5. Setting assignments
<b>Sixth session</b>	1. Encouraging couples to recognize the suggested needs and the self aspect which were denied, 2. Inviting couples to pay attention to their interaction style and reflecting their interactive models with respect and empathy, 3. Expressing attachment needs and recognizing the denied needs, 4. Increasing reception of corrective experience, 5. Setting assignments
<b>Seventh session</b>	1. Making clear the status of each spouse in a relationship and increasing couple's reception to experience of another spouse, 2. Tracking the recognized emotions and highlighting the attachment needs, 3. Setting assignments
<b>Eighth session</b>	1. Facilitating expression of needs and requirements and forming emotional involvement, 2. Extending primary emotional experiences on attachment and recognizing needs and internal belongings, 3. Developing new attachments with a secure bond among couples, 4. Setting assignments
<b>Ninth session</b>	1. Developing solutions and new interactive settings for old problems, 2. Strengthening new settings and emotional behavioral cycles, 3. Finishing old interactive models and forming a relationship based on a secure bond as they must be safe against discussing about problems and findings solutions, 4. Assessing changes, 5. Conducting posttest and setting assignments

### Measuring Tools:

**Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ):** In this study, marital conflict questionnaire with 42

questions, under guidelines and direction of Dr. Baqer Thanai Dhakir and clinical experiences in Iran, was used. The questionnaire has been

designed for assess marital conflicts and assess seven dimensions of the marital conflicts including reduction in cooperation, reduction in sexual relationship, (3) increase in excited reactions, (4) increase in attracting children support, (5) increase in personal relationship with one's own kins, (6) reduction in family relationship with spouse kins, (7) separation of one's financial affairs from his spouse affairs (16). The questionnaire enjoys a proper content validity. In test materials' analysis stage, after preliminary implementation and measuring correlation of each question rather the whole questionnaire and its scales, 13 questions, out of 55 initial questions, were removed (16). Indicated the scores of all MCQ components, from 0.31 to 0.82, had a significant correlation with the total score of marital conflict ( $P > 0.01$ ). The Cronbach's alpha for the whole questionnaire measured 0.71 during normalization of this questionnaire which was done by Dehghani (16) who worked on a group of 30 people who have referred to the counseling centers. Based on the Cronbach's alpha method, questionnaire's reliability coefficient in this study was measured 0.73.

#### **Marital Instability Index:**

In this study, Marital Instability index, which generally has been designed by Edwards, Johnson and Booth (1980) to measure marital instability and especially to measure how much couples are ready to get divorce, was used (16). In this questionnaire a total score is extracted from total scores of two parts which demonstrates the possibility of divorce occurrence; scores equal and less than 2 mean that the likelihood of divorce among couples is 22%, whereas total score equal and more than 10 show that the likelihood of divorce is 43%; as a result high scores in this scale show that the likelihood of divorce among couples is high and vice versa. The marital instability index, with a Cronbach's alpha of 93%, has an excellent internal consistency and also has a positive correlation with scales of marital problems and conflicts and a negative correlation with scales of marital interaction and satisfaction (16). Davoudian used this questionnaire to study couples who intended to get divorce in Qom Province and measured its validity as large as 0.90. Split half method was used in this study to

determine the questionnaire's reliability, which was measured 0.82.

#### **Implementation Style:**

After selecting groups casually, initially all couples, in both experimental and control groups, were examined by pretest, then the emotionally focused experimental intervention was implemented by a trained researcher in the experimental group. The intervention was conducted for couples through nine 90-minute sessions in the a private counseling and psychotherapy clinic; whereas the control group did not receive the medical intervention and after the treatment sessions were completed, both experimental and control groups were reassessed, in the framework of posttest stage, using marital conflict and marital instability index questionnaires. The posttest stage aimed at determining the effect of independent variable (medical intervention) on dependent variables. The findings of the study were analyzed using SPSS 16. Regarding the ethical challenges and in response to request of some couples in control group, they were allowed to participate in couple therapy sessions. The interventions style of this study split by sessions is explained as follows:

#### **Results:**

Table 2 summarizes the mean values and SDs of scores of marital instability index and marital conflicts in both experimental and control groups in both pretest and posttests stages.

Above indexes show that in experimental groups, applying treatment intervention (independent variable) will result in considerable changes in the dependent variables'; indexes and for both variables, the mean scores achieved in posttest have been decreased in contrast to pretest in the experimental group, whereas in control group, which was not treated by the intervention, no change was seen in all dependent variables.

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to analyze data and before analyzing data, homogeneity of covariate regression coefficients was considered as an assumption to make sure that the data in this study estimate the infrastructural assumptions of ANCOVA.

As results of table 3 show the assumption of homogeneity of covariate regression coefficients is not rejected and similarity of regression line

coefficient is confirmed, because values of significance level are larger than  $\alpha=0.01$ .

**Table 2. The mean values and SDs of scores of marital instability index and marital conflicts in both experimental and control groups in both pretest and posttests stages**

Stage	Group	Statistical index	Marital instability	Marital conflict
Pretest	Experimental	Mean value	39.53 %	135.2
		SD	7.66 %	4.86
	Control	Mean value	35.33 %	134.72
		SD	6.68 %	3.35
Posttest	Experimental	Mean value	21.53 %	93.33
		SD	5.54 %	8.93
	Control	Mean value	36.73 %	138.33
		SD	5.8 %	4.29

**Table 3. F test results, Homogeneity of covariate regression coefficients for experimental and control groups**

Variable	Total squares	Degree of freedom	Average of squares	F criterion	Significance level
Marital conflict	60.189	1	60.189	2.425	0.125
Marital instability	0.005	1	0.005	4.324	0.042

**Table 4. Results of ANCOVA test for marital conflicts scores in couples of both groups**

Group	Sample size	average score of pretest	average score of posttest	Average score of adjusted	F ratio	Degree of freedom	Significance level
Experimental group	30	133.37	90.17	90.39	1250.3	1	P<0.0001
Control group	30	133.87	136.73	136.50			

**Table 5. Results of ANCOVA for marital instability index scores for experimental and control groups**

Group	Sample size	average score of pretest	average score of posttest	Average score of adjusted	F ratio	Degree of freedom	Significance level
Experimental group	30	36.83 %	19.37 %	18.6 %	382.62	1	P<0.0001
Control group	30	34.9 %	36.53 %	37.3 %			

The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used to assess normality of both marital instability and marital conflict data distributions.

Analysis of covariance was used for comparing experimental group (emotionally focused) and control group based on posttest score after controlling the effect of pretest, and also for examining the effectiveness of treatment interventions on alleviation of marital conflict in couples. Table 5 summarizes the results.

The result of ANCOVA shows that there is significant difference between the two groups in terms of average scores of marital conflict; indeed EFT alleviates marital conflicts in couples who refer to the counseling centers.

## Conclusion:

Today, the quality of marital relationship has become very important, because most people live in two-person communities and cannot count on others to find their spouse emotional support (17).

The increasing prevalence of marital distresses and their bond with physical and mental health of adult partners and next generation on the one hand and the wide evidences on the effectiveness of couple therapy in solving marital problem have introduced couple therapy as a main part of medical and health service in each society and in the same direction improving the quality of relationship between couples has been put atop agenda in mental health plans (7). Thus, this study is based on the assumption that treating through emotionally focused style alleviates marital conflicts and

tendency to get divorce in couples refer to counseling centers in Bandar Abbas County.

The results of this study showed that there is a significant relationship between experimental and control groups in terms of decreasing marital conflict and tendency to divorce from pretest to posttest session and in fact EFT has decreased significantly the scores of both marital conflict and marital instability for couples in experimental group in contrast to those in control group. In other words, the experimental intervention will decrease marital conflict and tendency to divorce in the experimental group. Our results are consistent with other studies (4-6, 8-10, 11-16, 18,19).

EFT helps couples to reach a bond with secure attachment in their relationships and therapist helps couples to improve their emotional experiences and move towards a safer attachment style through making a secure space. Therefore it can be useful in reducing conflicts caused by insecure attachment.

In general, EFT is a sort of treatment whose main emphasis is on contribution of emotions in permanent models of inconsistency in the distressful couples. This sort of treatment tries to uncover the vulnerable emotions in couples and improving their ability to handle such emotions as safe and kind as possible. It is believed that processing such emotions in a safe setting develops more healthy and newer interactive models which reduce distress level, increase affection, intimacy and finally a satisfactory relationship (7).

In this study, the participants, after passing emotionally focused treatment stages, succeeded to control emotions caused by the insecure attachment conflicts and to cope with their fears and to improve their interactions level. In this study all couples of experimental group participated in the treatment session; however, a few men in the experimental group expressed less emotions and women wanted to speak more and show their emotions. Perhaps it is rooted in the culture.

Studies on showing emotions have shown that showing the primary emotions is equal in all societies and is considered a universal trend (6); however, various cultures have their own special tools and rules to manage and set emotions (6). MacKurmac reports that during treatment sessions, women more than men were able to share their feelings in sessions and it was more important for

them to validate their experiences by the therapist and their husband. Although expressing emotions was important for men, they showed more resistance during treatment and they felt inconvenience with this process. For MacKurmac it was due to cultural backgrounds in which boys are trained to hide their emotions and feelings. Women express their feeling about their spouses, whereas men pay less attention to it; they preferred to hide their annoying feelings and avoided to reveal them. During the treatment sessions, women reached a new feeling for speaking and expressing their emotions and they confessed that they did not know that expressing emotions was one of their needs. In this study, women also welcomed better the treatment rather men. Finally, the results confirmed the effect of EFT in alleviating marital conflicts and tendency to divorce in couples.

Since many couples do not access counseling services, it is suggested that experts on family affairs and mass media, especially TV, as the most popular media, are used to make people informed about the importance of referring to couple therapy sessions.

It is necessary to compare the EFT with other sorts of couple therapy in order to test its effectiveness rather other approaches in our culture. Treatment with long follow-ups and treating more couples, classes and cultures is suggested.

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