

Original research

The Effect of Group Emotionally Focused Therapy on the Forgiveness and Harmony of Marriage in Dysfunctional couples

Seyed Omid Sotoodeh Navroodi,^{*1} Samira Ershad Tavana,² Fatemeh Pouragha³

Abstract

Introduction: Since the couple founded the family and it is the main pillar of the society, any threat to the family or the couple will affect the dynamics of the society and so, the health of the family and the couple determines the state of the society. The purpose of this study was to find whether emotional-oriented group couple therapy would help incompatible couples referring to Rasht's forgiveness and marital harmony.

Research study: This study followed a semi-experimental pre-test-post-test design with a control group. Its statistical population comprised all incompatible couples who referred to positive life centers and the population of mental health assistants from February 1402 to July 1403, under a call to couples with problems and interested in participating in this treatment; among them 20 couples (10 couples of the experimental group and 10 couples of the control group) were selected as the sample size and in the available manner and were randomly replaced in two groups (experimental and control). Whereas the experimental group underwent nine ninety-minute emotional pair therapy sessions, the control group waited for treatment. Subjects were evaluated twice: pre-test and post-test using Trait Scale and Marital Harmony Scale questionnaires. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (analysis of covariance) research of the data using SPSS version 24.

Findings: Based on the results of the present study, it can be said that the emotion-oriented couple therapy method is a suitable solution for solving the problems of incompatible couples and can increase the level of tolerance and harmony between couples.

Conclusion: Findings revealed that the method was effective in increasing forgiveness ($P < 0.001$) and marital harmony ($P < 0.001$) of incompatible couples under therapy.

Keywords: Emotionally Focused Therapy, forgiveness, marital harmony

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¹ - (**Corresponding author**), PhD in Counseling, Education, Guilan Province, University Lecturer, Rasht, Iran. Phone: 09117217833, Email: omid.sotodeh@yahoo.com

² - Master's student in General Psychology, Department of Psychology, Simay Danesh Non-Profit University, Rasht, Iran

³ - Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, North Strategy Institute of Higher Education, Rasht, Iran.



Introduction:

Marital life starts with marriage and family formation. Considered as the most significant and highest social custom for fulfilling the emotional and security requirements of adults as well as for the maintenance of the human race, marriage is a tremendous gift (1). Many problems nowadays, including marital incompatibility, have tested the foundation of Iranian households. Couples' marital adjustment decreases therefore the more emotional-emotional issues they experience. A poor-quality marriage can compromise personal well-being and health as well as occasionally cause divorce (3). Usually, partners in secure and fulfilling marriages are healthier and live longer (4). Frequent fights, less interest, ignorance of each other's ideas and feelings, lack of shared plans, lack of support for each other, and magnification of the spouse's shortcomings show up as incompatibility between husbands and wives. These variations originate from the spouses' inadequate capacity to adjust and from their different expectations and objectives (2). Studies (5) have shown that the compatibility problems experienced in marital life affect how couples solve these problems, how they express their feelings towards each other, or their emotions as a factor in the continuation of incompatibility in the relationship, which is manifested in many areas such lack of empathetic understanding, problems experienced in sexual relations, marital mismatches, lack of intimacy, and lack of forgiveness.

Marital harmony is another deciding and powerful element in marriage that has been taken under consideration in this study. One of the most crucial and simultaneously difficult problems in the field of family counseling are marital harmony and disharmonies. so much so that many studies have been dedicated to create successful models to describe and forecast it. The definition states that the similarity of spouses in their attitudes, values, and significant beliefs determines relationship advancement; so, couples who are similar to one another have more intimate, happier, and more enduring marriage relationships and are more attracted to each other (6). Scholars present marital harmony as the direction of couples toward daily life and their adaptation to changes in their surroundings (7). They have a good marital harmony when they resolve problems and disagreements by suitable communication. Actually, marriage harmony is a dynamic notion and the nature of the marriage varies with time (8). Marital harmony refers to good elements or evaluation of one's marital relationships (9), and is equivalent of marital quality, marital satisfaction, and marital adjustment. Actually, elements like child-rearing, financial problems, friends, sexual connections, and relationships with each other's families affect marital peace. This includes expectations of spouses from each other. Another important determinant is the presence of a child and its related stress (10).

Conversely, it is unavoidable that damage exists in human connections (11). Sometimes people respond to these losses in the form of revenge and avoidance, which very likely have negative effects on relationships, especially the motivation for revenge, which can lead to mutual retaliation and generate a vicious cycle that ruins interpersonal relationships, including marriage relationships (12). One approach of handling these damages and their harmful effects is forgiveness, which entails letting go of anger and recurrent hostility, unwillingness to take retribution, and a choice to feel sorry, compassion, empathy, or sorrow for the offending individual (13 and 14). According to Worthington (15), forgiving is a kind deed whereby the victim rebuilds their self-esteem without endangering the self-esteem of another. According to him, forgiving is a decision as well as a shift in emotional experience; this change in emotions relates to both physical and psychological aspects. According to Agu and Nwankwo (16), forgiveness in marriage helps the couple's psychological issues, enhances

their communication, treats their physical health, and results in the lifetime of marriage. Studies of different kinds show that forgiveness is correlated with marital satisfaction (17, 18, and 19). Though occasionally people fail in their attempts to make tough changes in thinking and feeling, which are required for forgiveness, researchers (20) believe that people do not always react to interpersonal mistakes and damages with forgiveness. Although forgiveness in relationships helps to improve and build them, there are limits to forgiveness as seen by the situation whereby the offending partner plans to leave the relationship or exploits it (21).

Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy is thus one of the efficient therapy strategies in enhancing marital disputes and compatibility. Based on attachment theory, Emotionally Focused Therapy is an experienced, humanistic, systemic method that does not directly concentrate on teaching coping skills but rather on fresh emotional encounters between couples and increases their sense of security and connection. This treatment method mostly emphasizes on the nature of emotion since one of the main and strong elements in married relationships (22). Systemic therapies shape Emotionally Focused Therapy since it holds that dysfunctional interaction patterns or cycles between family members or spouses generate marital problems and conflicts. Based on attachment theory and based on understanding the needs of couples in connection to each other, this therapy is also a valid experiential technique in couples therapy with one of its therapeutic goals to build a safe and strong link in married relationships (23). Emotionally focused therapy has shown success in the marital and family setting as well as in lowering communication problems according to several studies (24). Research on Emotionally Focused Therapy revealed couples' communication satisfaction improved more than 86% (25). Furthermore, the findings of another study revealed that Emotionally Focused Therapy enables couples to boost forgiveness and cooperation between them as well as help them to enable the development of safe attachment ties and the expansion of intimacy (26 and 27). Emotionally focused therapies do, in reality, especially stress the need of combining emotion with intellect, drive, and conduct. To change her feelings, the therapist triggers them. Identification and improvement of emotional schemas is quite crucial in this therapy. Change calls for a slow process of emotional waking. This is mostly done with methods meant to overcome avoidance, lower disruptive behavior, and enable circumstances for emotional development. After helping the patient to recognize their main emotions and communicate them, the therapist guides them toward access of their inner capacities. This approach separates primary from secondary emotions and concurrently classifies them into structured, adaptive, maladaptive, complex, and social emotions (28).

Conducting such studies will give therapists and family program planners the knowledge and awareness required to apply tested therapeutic models and significantly prevent divorce and marital discord considering the growing number of unhappy couples seeking psychological services. Conversely, this kind of group therapy can help couples live better and support the lifetime of their relationships. The present study intends to investigate the efficacy of emotion-oriented group therapy on measures of marital forgiveness and harmony among couples based on the importance of variables like marital forgiveness and harmony in resolving marital conflicts and the cost-effectiveness of group therapy.

Research Method:

This study used a pre-test-post-test and control group within a quasi-experimental framework. The population consisted in all incompatible couples referred to positive living centers and mental health

companions from February 2023 to July 2023. Couples experiencing marital difficulties who expressed interest in attending this group treatment were invited by call for participation. Selected via convenience sampling, 20 couples—10 couples in the experimental group and 10 couples in the control group—were randomly allocated to the experimental and control groups. The study's inclusion criteria were being between the ages of 25 - 40, having at least a high school diploma, scoring low (one standard deviation below the mean) on the Trait Forgiveness Scale (Berry et al., 2005) and the Ziv and Lai Marital Adjustment Scale (2004), and pledging to show up for all couple therapy sessions. Exclusion criteria included skipping more than two sessions, one of the partners missing from the sessions, and obtaining any other therapeutic or counseling service outside of this group therapy. The tools applied in this study were:

Trait Forgiveness Scale (TFS): The forgiveness of spouses was assessed in this study using the Trait Forgiveness Scale (TFS). Ten items make up this scale, which gauges the respondents' inclination toward over-time and situational forgiveness of interpersonal injury. Berry et al. developed this scale (29). On a Likert scale, five choices from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" are offered for every question on this quiz. Certain objects have reverse-scored values. For those on this scale, the range of scores is 10 to 50; higher scores indicate more forgiving. For couples, Berry et al. (28) employed this scale in four successive trials. Using the internal consistency approach (Cronbach's alpha), they indicated in all four investigations the dependability of this questionnaire as 0.80, 0.78, 0.79, and 0.74, respectively. The internal consistency approach (Cronbach's alpha) was also applied in the study by Khajastehmehr et al. (30) to evaluate the dependability coefficient of this scale; the obtained dependability coefficients were 0.80.

Marital Harmony Questionnaire (MHQ): Developed by Xu & Lai (31), the Marital Harmony Questionnaire evaluates two indicators: couple togetherness and marital satisfaction. Comprising five items, the couple's togetherness index runs on a Likert scale. The first two questions score 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The next three questions range in score from 1 (never) to 7 (every day). On this metric, a better score denotes more marital homogeneity. Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 and its validity as 0.68 at the significance level of $p < 0.001$ helped the developers to indicate the dependability of the scale. For the test-retest reliability coefficients of the marital harmony measure in Jafari Nejad et al., men and women correspondingly recorded 0.74 and 0.83 (32). In the present study, Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples book (22) was consulted in order to apply the independent variable. Aiming to develop conditions between couples that support safe attachment, responsiveness, and availability, Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples is set in three phases and consists in nine steps (22). The table below offers a synopsis of the ideas in this protocol.

Sessions	Issues and Objectives
Sessions 1 & 2	Developing a therapeutic agreement by means of a therapeutic connection with the couple, evaluating the nature of the problem and the style of relationship, thereby determining the aims and expectations of every partner. Techniques: tracking and analyzing interactions, reflection, validation, questions and follow-up comments.
Sessions 3 & 4	Dealing with main emotions, reinterpretation of the issue. Validation, intensity, inquiries and follow-up reflections, empathic guesses,

		tracking and analysis of patterns and interaction cycles, reinterpretation of the problem by considering context and interaction cycles.
Sessions		Closer involvement with the issue. Techniques: follow-up questions, intensity, sympathetic approximations.
5 & 6		
Sessions		Generating conflict, emotional engagement, stimulation, and connection, therefore enabling the expression of demands and wishes. Strategies: Follow-up questions, sympathetic guesses, reframing of the issue by considering context and interaction cycles, restructuring of interactions.
7 & 8		
Session		Consolidating and strengthening new roles; incorporating therapeutic adjustments into daily living. Strategies: Considering present developments, verifying fresh responses and trends, follow-up inquiries, reinterpretation, reorganization of contacts.
9		

Table 1: Emotional Focused Therapy Protocol Summary by Johnson (2004)

SPSS program version 24 was used to examine the data for this study. Using a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), one might investigate the success of the intervention. For hypothesis testing, the maximum alpha error level was designated at 0.05 ($P > 0.05$).

Findings:

In this study, 20 couples—10 couples in the experimental group and 10 couples in the control group—had Emotionally Focused Therapy's efficacy examined on indications of forgiveness and marital harmony. Review of demographic data including subject age and marital length revealed that the mean and standard deviation of the age of the couples in the experimental group were 28.54 ± 2.50 years and for the control group 28.34 ± 2.80 years. Furthermore, the length of marriage was computed independently for the two groups; the experimental group had 6.00 ± 0.94 years and the control group had 6.20 ± 0.78 years. Examined was the couples' educational degree as another demographic factor. Forty percent of the couples in the experimental group and forty percent of the couples in the control group had a bachelor's degree; twenty percent of the couples in the experimental group and ten percent of the couples in the control group had an associate's degree; forty percent of the couples in the experimental group and forty percent of the couples in the control group had a high school diploma. Furthermore looking at the homogeneity of the educational level among the two groups' subjects was the chi-square test. With $P > 0.05$, the findings revealed no appreciable variation in terms of schooling between the two groups. Table 2 shows for the two groups (experimental and control) the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the two dependent variables of the study—forgiveness and harmony—along with the test stages—pre-test and post-test.

Table 2: By Group and Test Phase, Mean and Standard Deviation of Forgiveness and Harmony Variables

Component	Group	Test	Mean	Standard Deviation
Forgiveness	Experimental Group	Pre-test	30.10	1.79
		Post-test	36.60	1.50
	Control Group	Pre-test	29.20	1.31

Harmony	Experimental Group	Post-test	29.70	1.41
		Pre-test	13.10	1.28
	Control Group	Post-test	16.90	0.99
		Pre-test	12.60	1.83
		Post-test	12.50	1.17

Then, independently for every variable, a one-way analysis of covariance was utilized to investigate whether Emotionally Focused Therapy affected the passage of time and harmony among the couples under observation. The findings of the test to investigate the homogeneity of the pre-test and post-test for passage of time ($F(1,18) = 1.13, p > .06$) and harmony ($F(1,18) = 1.33, p > .06$) in the experimental and control groups revealed that the regression slopes in both groups were equal. Levene's test for looking at the homogeneity of variance of the dependent variable in the groups revealed that the variance of passage of time ($F(1,18) = 0.086, p > .773$) and harmony ($F(1,18) = 3.883, p < .064$) in the groups was equal. Table 3 shows the one-way analysis of covariance results to investigate the variations between the experimental and control groups for the variables of passage of time and harmony among spouses.

Table 3: Univariate Analysis of Covariance to Review Intervention Effectiveness on Coordination and Compliance Total Scores

Component	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P-Value	η^2
Forgiveness	174.574	1	174.574	316.514	0.001	0.949
Harmony	82.269	1	82.269	219.824	0.0001	0.928

Table 3 shows that the F statistic for forgiveness in the post-test (316.514) and the coordination of couples in the post-test (219.824) is significant at the 0.001 level, therefore suggesting a noteworthy variation between the two groups in terms of forgiveness and coordination of couples. Furthermore suggesting that this difference is noteworthy in the wider community is the impact size of 0.94 for the variable of passage and 0.92 for the variable of coordination. According to the F statistic, the adjusted mean of the experimental group in forgiveness (36.23) and in couple coordination (16.75) and the mean of the control group in forgiveness (30.06) and in couple coordination (12.64) show significance at the 0.001 level. This result suggests that pair therapy with an eye toward emotions improves coordination and forgiveness between spouses.

Discussion and Conclusion:

According to the findings of this study, in incompatible couples, emotionally focused treatment raised marital peace and forgiveness. These findings line up with earlier studies on the efficacy of emotionally focused treatment on several facets of marriage, including the markers of forgiveness and marital harmony (23, 24, 25, 26, and 27). Many studies have shown that forgiveness offers major advantages for health, well-being, and the nature of interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, studies

reveal that a good marriage is based on forgiveness and that it is a crucial component in the process of healing after great damage in relationships. Furthermore helping couples to communicate better and lowering negative emotions such resentment, wrath, and anger is forgiveness (6). Conversely, marital harmony is described as favorable features or assessment of one's marriage (8 and 9). Thus, it will be rather beneficial in enhancing the couples' relationships if we can raise both forgiveness and harmony between them by different means. Therefore, considering the justification of the effectiveness of emotionally focused therapy in improving forgiveness and increasing marital harmony, it can be said that this approach, instead of simplifying emotion as part of the problem of marital disturbance, emphasizes it as a potent agent of change. In a sense, the absence of a warm atmosphere, a sense of commitment among family members, lack of time and energy for family members, suppression of emotions, rigidity and inflexibility, lack of awareness, emotional death, excessive use of defense mechanisms, which are all rooted in the lack of personal value and the weakness of the relationship, can disrupt family interactions and it seems that having emotional regulating skills is quite helpful in dealing with this type of problem (33). Actually, these people struggle to identify, express, process, and control emotions and find it difficult to separate internal feelings from physical sensations since they cannot cognitively process emotional information and manage emotions. Often entering therapy following particular emotional crises, incompatible couples describe low levels of marital strife, lack of forgiveness, and emotionally mixed animosity towards their partner; their attempts to rekindle closeness have repeatedly failed (34). They so interact with limited strategies that have no good result: avoidance and withdrawal, blame and criticism, defensiveness, and defensive cycles. In emotionally oriented treatment, though, the therapist initially tries to eradicate this sense of anxiety. Consequently, the couples also recognize the feelings connected with the negative interactional cycle that indicates insecure attachment and re-regulate themselves depending on the expression of underlying attachment requirements (35). Actually, couples can employ new cycles in the therapy process to readily communicate their wants and accept their partner's attachment needs, therefore minimizing the emotional shortcomings of the couples. Thus, the objective of this therapy is to enable couples to explore their underlying emotions and support good interactions that boost availability and trust between them.

The limits of this study should be taken into account generally when generalizing the results since they include the absence of control over important factors including variations in personality traits, educational background, socioeconomic level, and having children. Furthermore recommended is the holding of such couples therapy sessions in support organizations such the Welfare Organization, medical sciences, family courts, counseling and psychotherapy centers, in addition to providing help grounds for preventing damage, the ground for increasing the level of quality and satisfaction of couples' life should be provided given the effectiveness of the emotionally focused therapy approach in increasing forgiveness and marital harmony at the applied level.

Ethical considerations: Under the direction of Dr. Seyed Omid Sotoodeh and consulting with Dr. Fatemeh Pour Agha Rudbardeh, in the field of psychology, with the ethics code IR.GUILAN.REC.1403.071, this research is generated from the Master's thesis of Ms. Samira Ershad Tavanadoost.

Conflicts of Interest: There is no conflict of interest, the writers assert.

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