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## Effect of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on family functioning and communication patterns of divorce applicant couples

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### Abstract

The present study was conducted to investigate the effect of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on family functioning and communication patterns of divorce applicant couples. The study design was semi-experimental with pre-test and post-test and control group. The study population consisted of all divorce applicant couples referred to counseling centers in Tehran. 30 divorce applicant couple select using purposive voluntary sampling method and randomly were assigned to two experiment (15 couples) and control (15 couples) group. The mindfulness-based cognitive therapy was performed on experiment group once a week for 8 sessions of 120 minutes. The participants responded to Family Assessment Device Questionnaire and Family Assessment Device Questionnaire in pre-test and post-test stages. The data were analyzed using covariance analysis statistical method and SPSS-22 statistical software. The findings showed that controlling the pre-test effect, there was significant difference between mean of experiment and control groups in post-test in family functioning components (problem solving, emotional attachment, behavior control, and no to for role and communication) components and communication patterns components, except to constructive interactions component. In all, it was concluded that the mindfulness-based cognitive therapy impacted on family functioning and communication patterns of divorce applicant couples.

**Keywords:** Cognitive therapy, communication patterns, mindfulness, divorce, family functioning.

### Extended Abstract

#### Introduction

Divorce is one of the factors leading to disturbance and chaos in humans' life. Deciding to divorce is the result of a severe internal pressure imposed at

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least on one of the spouses, which may occur due to failure to meet the needs or attain goals (Rossi, Holtzworth-Munroe, & Rud, 2016) and lack of attention to social, economic, cultural, personal, and personality factors (Abbasi, Dargahi, & Ghasemi Jobaneh, 2018). A way to look at the structure of families is to focus on the communication channels by which the families interact with each other. The communication channels frequently occurring in a family are called communication patterns (Trenholm & Jensen, 1996). Communication problems are among the most important causes of conflict and dissatisfaction in marital life, so that failure to communicate is the most common problem posed by dissatisfied couples (Parvandi, Arefi, & Moradi, 2016). A finding reveals that family communication patterns are the main predictor of poor and proper performance of the family (Al-Krenawi & Kanat-Maymon, 2017). Among other factors affecting marital conflicts leading to divorce, family performance can be referred to (Yoosefi, Karimipour, & Azizi, 2017). Family performance is the capability of family in coordinating or adapting among members, and achieving success in discipline patterns, complying with boundaries among individuals, as well as enforcing the rules and principles governing it with the aim of protecting family system and conserving its equilibrium (Schuler, Zaider, Li, McDonnell, & Hichenberg, 2017). Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is one of the new and important therapeutic interventions affecting the improvement of family performance, compatibility, and marital intimacy of couples (Shahbeik, Taghavi Jourachi, Abroshan, Naseri, 2019, Kalantarian, Zarinfar, & Zarinfar, 2017). It is a kind of cognitive therapy establishing the relationship among mood, thoughts, feelings, and surrounding body sensations at the moment and reducing automatic depression and stressful thoughts caused by family problems (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2018; Khaddouma, Gordon, & Strand, 2017). Every day, we witness higher rates of divorce and marital conflict in counseling and psychotherapy clinics so that one in every four couples has been reported to be divorce applicant (Masoomi, Byan & Hoseinian, 2017). On the other hand, the volume and diversity of marital problems and the upward trend of divorce statistics in Iran need an effective treatment. This study was conducted with the purpose of investigating the effect of MBCT on family performance and communication patterns of divorce applicant couples.

### **Method**

This was a quasi-experimental study with pretest-posttest design and control group. The population of this study consisted of all divorce applicant couples referring to counseling and social work centers in Tehran in the second half of 2018. Out of 92 couples, thirty divorce applicant couples were selected by voluntary sampling method and based on the study inclusion criteria (1) 25-35 years of age, 2) not addiction to opioids, psychotropic drugs, and methadone, 3) at least two years of common life, 4) the minimum and maximum level of education ranging from the third grade guidance school to BA degree, 5) absence of psychiatric disorders, and 6) willingness to participate in treatment sessions) in the initial call for participation in the

study, and then, were randomly assigned to the experimental group (15 couples) and control group (15 couples). The participants in experimental group received MBCT intervention during eight 120 min sessions (one session per week in-group form) based on the guidelines of MBCT book (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). The control group was in the wait list for two months. In order to collect data in pre-test and post-test stages, family assessment and communication patterns questionnaires were used.

### **Findings**

The covariance analysis results of post-test scores of family performance sub-scales in control and experimental groups indicated a significant difference between the mean of post-test scores of problem solving ( $F = 7/33$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), emotional accompaniment ( $F = 5.15$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), emotional intercourse ( $F = 8.68$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), and behavioral control ( $F = 10.95$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) components. The greatest effect was related to behavioral control, emotional intercourse, problem solving sub-scales and emotional accompaniment. No significant difference was observed in the role ( $F = 3.05$ ,  $P = 0.095$ ) and communication ( $F = 0.457$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) sub-scales. Furthermore, the covariance analysis results of post-test scores of communication patterns sub-scales in the experimental and control groups showed a significant difference between the mean of post-test scores of constructive communication sub-scale ( $F = 0/71$ ,  $P = 0.42$ ), withdrawal/expectation ( $F = 53.5$ ,  $P < 0.027$ ), expected husband/withdrawn wife ( $F = 5/77$ ,  $P < 0.024$ ), expected wife/withdrawn husband ( $F = 6.13$ ,  $P < 0.021$ ) and mutual avoidance ( $F = 9/46$ ,  $P < 0.005$ ). The greatest effect was related to mutual avoidance relation, expected husband/withdrawn wife, respectively, expected wife/ withdrawn husband and constructive communication sub-scale.

### **Discussion**

Findings showed that MBCT affects the family performance components, including problem solving, emotional accompaniment, emotional intercourse, and behavioral control; however, it has no effect on role and communication components. In explaining this finding, it can be said that divorce applicant couples have negative attitude toward life due to disorder and chaos in their common life, and they report poor quality of life. These thoughts affect their behavior to the environment and family and the proper performance of family. This in turn affects the behavior of members to each other. This is while by performing exercises such as focus on breathing, body check, and sitting meditation during MBCT, couples learn to become aware of any type of thoughts, emotions, and feelings they have and emerging in them, and therefore, control all of these thoughts and emotions, and erosive sensations preventing psychological and emotional well-being. Consequently, it affects the relationship between a person and his/her spouse, children and relatives while helping marital adjustment increase and family performance improvement. Moreover, findings showed the significant effect of MBCT on all communication patterns components except the mutual constructive communication. To explain this finding, it

can be said that by teaching skills such as breath-focused meditation, body check, and yoga exercises, moment-by-moment awareness of feelings, thoughts, and body sensations during MBCT, couples learned to accept their inner states instead of showing regular and automatic reactions and trying to get rid of undesirable states, and show informed and more desirable reaction both in interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions by practicing kindness and compassion to themselves and others. In fact, in the interpersonal dimension, mindfulness practices change the methods of coping with emotions and increase the emotion adjustment skills, and they are followed by constructive behaviors during negative emotions, and reduce negative emotions such as anxiety, depression and stress, and this has a great deal of results for couple communication.

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