

# Comparison of Effectiveness of Emotion-focused Couple Therapy and Gottman's Relationships Enrichment Program on Women's Fear of Intimacy

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Avoiding close relationships and fear of intimacy may have devastating effects on a person's emotional and psychological well-being. Hence, the present study aimed to compare the effectiveness of emotion-focused couple therapy and Gottman's relationships enrichment program on women's fear of intimacy.

**Methods:** This research was a quasi-experimental field research with a control group as well as three-months follow-up. The statistical population consisted of women in Khomein city who referred to a counseling center in 2017. Among them, 36 women were selected by convenience sampling method, and were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group. To collect the data, the Fear of Intimacy Scale was used.

**Results:** The results indicated that both training interventions are effective in fear of intimacy among women ( $P \geq 0.01$ ). Bonferroni's post ad hoc test showed that the emotion-focused couple therapy is more effective than Gottman's enrichment approach on fear of intimacy and its aspects ( $P \geq 0.05$ ). Also, the difference between the two experimental groups and controls was significant in post-test ( $P \geq 0.05$ ). Results in the follow-up phase also showed that both experimental groups had lower mean values compared to the control group in terms of fear of intimacy and its aspects, indicating a reduction in fear of intimacy and survival of the intervention.

**Conclusion:** Based on the findings of the present study, both treatments can reduce the fear of intimacy in women, and the effectiveness of emotion-focused couple therapy is higher than that of Gottman's relationships enrichment approach.

**Keywords:** Fear of Intimacy, Relationship Enrichment, Emotion-focused Couple Therapy, Women

## Introduction

Marriage, as the most important and most excellent social custom, is a human, complex, elegant and dynamic relationship with certain characteristics (1). In fact, the importance of marriage is because of the need of individuals to belong, to love and to be loved. Actually intimate relationships are considered as a supportive bed in confronting the difficulties in the real world (2). Also, the emotional and social support received through marriage affects the couples' physical, spiritual and social health. In spite of the important and crucial functions of marriage as well as the favorable attitudes that couples have towards common life in the first days of life, some of the couples will face conflicts over time because the couples' demands approach together through expressing their feelings and increasing

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intimacy, decreasing their emotional distance and consequently the likelihood of marital distress and desire for separation (3). Since intimacy decreases over time, the grounds for marriage will also be weakened, and the power to solve and overcome the problems will get lower. Various medical experiences suggest that as long as couples learn to create, recreate and sustain intimacy, such important issues as commitment, cooperation, loyalty, and creative management on individual differences are organized more quickly between them (4). As a psychological process, intimacy has attracted the attention of psychologists in recent decades (5) and is considered as an interactive process with interrelated dimensions. The process is based on recognition, perception, acceptance, appreciation, and empathy with the spouse's emotions or accepting the spouse's unique view of the world. As a matter of fact, intimacy is a real human need that grows as does the need for attachment survival. Moreover, high levels of emotional intimacy in individuals' relationships are one of the strongest predictors of physical health, mental health, and mutual satisfaction (6). Also, intimacy in marriage will strengthen the couples' commitment to preserve the relationship and is positively related to welfare and marital adjustment (7). On the other hand, avoiding an intimate relationship is a factor causing failure in family lives such that avoidance of intimacy is a characteristic of those describing their relationships as less satisfying (8). Avoiding close relationships may have devastating effects on the individual's emotional and psychological well-being. Furthermore, women's avoidance of intimacy due to fear is also associated with a wide range of depressive symptoms (9). Descutner and Thelen introduced the concept of "fear of intimacy" in order to more conceptualize and understand intimate relationships (10). The fear of intimacy is defined as the limited capacity of a person to share personal thoughts and feelings with an important and close person like his/her spouse (11). Fear of intimacy is generally a social phobia or anxiety disorder that is often appeared as an unconscious fear of intimacy with others and affects personal relationships (12). In fact, those afraid of intimacy or avoiding intimacy are likely to find it difficult to approach others and establish warm and satisfying relationships (13), and this fear is usually the result of unpleasant events in the past (14). These people look for interpersonal communications but they fear rejection, thus during verbal and non-verbal communication with others, they will experience anxiety. Fear of attachment to others is another factor avoiding the need to intimacy (15). Those with a secure attachment have no anxiety of intimacy because they consider themselves worthy of care and attention. High levels of anxiety in romantic relationships often lead to a strong attachment to the partner or a controlling and hegemonic interpersonal-style, which may result in negative emotions and low levels of trust and satisfaction of the relationship (16).

The concept of fear of intimacy encompasses three characteristics: content or personal information transfer, emotional capacity or strong feelings about the

exchanged personal information, and vulnerability (10). This is while Descutner and Thelen believe that only if these three characteristics are coherent, intimacy can exist at its opposite point, namely, the fear of intimacy. Also, in a study conducted by Descutner and Thelen (17), it was concluded that the level of women's fear of intimacy is a good indication of determining the long-term relationships between couples. The meta-analyses on couple therapy confirm that multiple approaches to the treatment of couples' disturbances have yielded significant clinical and statistical improvements for a considerable proportion of couples, and the average number of couples receiving treatment gain greater improvement compared to 80% of those not treated (18). There are many approaches to cover these skills and train them to couples, one of which is Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT). Johnson and Greenberg in 1985 introduced their therapeutic strategies and interventions in 9 steps (19). The first four steps include diagnosis and relief of stress within cycles and interactions, the three middle steps focus on creating specific behavioral changes in areas where interactive situations and conditions have changed, and new links have been created, and the two final treatment steps aim to stabilize the changes and integrate these changes into the couples' everyday life (20).

In the process of emotion-focused therapy, few small steps are taken towards secure emotional involvement, according to which couples can provide rest, security and reassurance for each other. In fact, emotion-focused couple therapy is an approach for the experiences where increased sensitivity, expressing feelings, spontaneity, creativity/irrational experience, and honesty are among the goals between couples. This approach basically assumed that the family changes is the result of emotional or affective experiences, not via training. This process encompasses what happens during family therapy sessions and how experiences of feelings, expression of vulnerabilities, and sharing uncensored thoughts by each participant-e.g. even the therapist himself- is considered as the center of gravity of treatment (20). Changes in EFCT occur when the therapists help the spouses to eliminate the disruptive elements in their relationship. When the negative cycle is impaired, and responses begin to change, a more positive cycle will be generated that helps couples move towards a safer bond (21). In the study of Johnson and Greenberg (22), the couples receiving EFCT showed increased levels of intimacy and established secure attachment bonds.

Safania and Akbari (23) also conducted a study to investigate the effectiveness of group-based emotional-focused therapy on the fear of intimacy. Their results indicated the effectiveness of this approach on the reduction of fear of intimacy among the subjects. Other studies also suggested that EFCT is effective in improving couples' satisfaction (20), increasing intimacy (24.9, 25) and in the treatment of depression (26, 28, 27, 29).

Another leading model of marital issues training is developed by John Gottman (30). Gottman's theory is a combined approach taking advantage of foundations and

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principles of various therapeutic theories (31). From his point of view, in order to have a successful marital life, couples should not allow negative thoughts and feelings about their spouse to overcome their positive thoughts (32). Gottman's enrichment approach actually attempts to influence people's thinking such that each couple can be seen in the area they have interaction and effectiveness from another couple. As a matter of fact, instead of focusing on individualism, this approach takes into consideration interactions with others (33). Gottman et al., (34) found that positive affection is the best predictor of satisfaction and communicative stability during a 6-month period among newly married couples, and vice versa, non-affective involvement is associated with communicative dissatisfaction (35). The Gottman's program and method basically believe that happy marriages are based on a deep friendship and intimacy between couples. Also, this program teaches couples to solve conflicts and eliminate marital problems, avoid relationships that lead to failure, frustration, anger, feel worthlessness, depression, and loss. It also increases the sense of empathy and better recognition of needs and desires of one another and enhances the desire for the continuity of marital relationship, ultimately reducing inconsistency and marital conflicts and bringing a relationship with intimacy and greater satisfaction for couples (36). Barzegar (37) examined the relationship between marital disturbance, fear of intimacy and self-esteem of married women, and the effect of Gottman's approach-based group therapy on these components. The results showed that marital disturbance has a significant relationship with the fear of intimacy and self-esteem of married women. Also, there is a significant relationship between the fear of intimacy and self-esteem of married women while their proposed approach could reduce the disturbance and fear of intimacy of married women, with no effect on self-esteem; therefore, not only there is a correlation between marital disturbance, fear of intimacy and self-esteem of married women, but also that approach led to eliminating marital disturbance and fear of intimacy. Similarly, Sepehri et al., (38) confirmed the effectiveness of Gottman's model on the reduction of married women's fear of intimacy. Other studies also indicated that the mentioned model leads to increase marital satisfaction, decrease marital problems and disturbing conflicts (39), decrease loneliness (2), decrease marital burnout (40) and enhance marital intimacy (30).

Hence, given the report of the American National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), marital conflicts and disturbances are the cause of many psychiatric problems in patients admitted to the psychiatric wards of the American hospitals (37), and so far, no research has been conducted to examine and compare the effectiveness of the emotion-focused couple therapy and Gottman's enrichment approach on women's fear of intimacy as one of the factors influencing disturbances in couples' relationships. For this reason, the present study aimed to measure and examine the effectiveness of two interventions including emotion-focused couple therapy and Gottman's enrichment approach on the fear of

intimacy among women.

## Methods

As a semi-experimental study, the present research has a pretest-posttest design with a control group. The statistical population consisted of women in Khomein city who referred to a Counseling Center in 2017 for communicative problems with their husbands. Among the referrals, 36 women were randomly selected and then divided into three groups including the group receiving emotion-focused couple therapy, those receiving Gottman's enrichment program and ones in the control group. The inclusion criteria included having an age of 24-40 with a marital life of 1-5 years in which at least 6 months of marital disturbances were experienced, and also having a child, a minimum and maximum educational level of high-school certification and master, respectively and finally being a housewife. In contrast, the exclusion criteria included suffering from acute physical and psychological disorders, absences of more than 3 sessions, non-performing assignments and unexpected incidents in the lives of individuals during the intervention period. It should be noted that lack of suffering from acute psychological disorders was determined by a psychologist through clinical interviews and the physical disorders were specified based on the physician's diagnosis as well as personal argument and observational tools.

The tools used in this research are as follows:

**Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS):** This inventory was originally developed by Descutner and Thelen (41) in order to measure anxieties associated with close relationships. In the self-reporting form, FIS includes 35 questions of which 30 questions focus on the relationships with the spouse and 5 questions are related to relationships with others. The subjects are asked to complete FIS while they are supposed to be in a close relationship, and each of the 35 items is graded on a 5-point scale from 1-i.e. not describing me at all-, to 5-i.e. perfectly describing me. The high score in this questionnaire means a high level of fear of intimacy. The results of the FIS's standardization conducted by Sherman and Tallen (41) on youth indicated that strong psychometric properties are shown in the FIS and its construct validity was determined by its relation with related structures, i.e., loneliness and self-examination. In Iran, Fallahzadeh (42) investigated the factor structure of this scale from two perspectives including internal consistency and re-examination. Accordingly, the factor analysis of 35 questions indicated two factors: factor 1, fear of intimacy in "relationship with the spouse" and factor 2 fear of intimacy in "relationship with others." The internal consistency of the whole scale, factor 1 and factor 2 was calculated to be 0.83, 0.81 and 0.79, respectively. Also, the total retest coefficient of the whole scale, factor 1 and factor 2 was calculated to be 0.92, 0.87 and 0.85, respectively.

Within 2 months, clients of the Consulting Center were evaluated during the initial interview for assessing the extent of fear of intimacy and then their willingness to attend training sessions. After completing the FIS, the

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participants were randomly assigned into three groups where 12 of them received the emotion-focused couple therapy, 12 received the Gottman’s relationships enrichment program and another 12 attended in the control group with no intervention. Both experimental groups were trained weekly in 8 sessions of 90 minutes. Simultaneously with the two experimental groups, pretest and posttest were performed in the control group without any training. After three months, all three groups recompleted the FIS. To analyze the data, Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was used through the software package SPSS. Also, due to the ethical principles of the training sessions, the participants in the control group also received the training similar to what was presented in the experimental groups for free.

**Intervention**

Table 1 presents the details of each intervention.

**Results**

In this study, the results of the experimental and control groups were analyzed both descriptively and inferentially. In Table 2, the results of descriptive findings are presented for the both experimental and control groups.

Descriptive findings in Table (2) show that the mean total score of fear of intimacy for the experimental group receiving EFCT was significantly lower at posttest and follow-up phases compared to pretest. It also holds true for the mean scores of Gottman’s enrichment approach in pretest, posttest, and follow-up. In contrast, no significant change was seen between controls in the pretest, posttest and follow-up phases.

**Table 1.** Details of each intervention

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Emotion-focused therapy based training</b>	<b>Gottman’s relationships enrichment approach based training</b>
<b>Session</b>		
1	Introducing the participants, expressing the logic and objectives of training sessions, creating a therapeutic unity, understanding how to form the current relationship, presenting a task in the form of paying attention to the pleasant and unpleasant emotional states	Introducing the participants, the expression of the logic and objectives of the training sessions, presenting the anatomy of the dispute, training to reduce negative emotions during the conflict by processing the quarrels and regretful events
2	Identifying and describing the negative interactive cycle, finding the internal and external barriers of secure attachment and emotional tracking among participants and their spouses	Introducing Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (criticism, being defensive, humiliation, evading)
3	Achieving unconscious emotions underlying interactive situations, focusing more on emotions, needs, and fears of attachment, raising participants’ awareness of early emotions and hot recognitions, providing a homework in the form of re-experiencing interactions along with expression of pure emotions	Getting familiar with the love map, designing a new love map, completing the questionnaire of maps of affection and love, admiration and respect, an antidote to disobedience and disregard, providing a homework in the form of a 20-question quiz
4	Reframing the fears based on underlying emotions and pleasurable needs, informing participants about the effects of fear and their defense mechanisms on cognitive and emotional processes, describing the cycle in the context and background of attachment	Getting familiar with the concept of emotional bank account, providing a hierarchy of intimate interactions (including spouse’s attention, expressions of interest, dialogue, expressing love, joint humor, expressing empathy and emotional support), providing a homework in the form of five amazing hours practice
5	Encouraging identification of excluded needs, attracting the attention of participants to the way they interact with their wives, and reflecting their interactive patterns with respect and empathy.	Training use of Salsa Card Bunch (for a kind, love, and desirable sex), Presenting the game survival on the island of Gottman
6	Facilitating the expression of needs and intentions, creating emotional involvements, creating new attachments with a safe link between spouses	Training Problem solving, persuasion and compromise in conflicts, presentation of homework in the form of two-loop method exercise to facilitate the compromise
7	Training creation of new interactive situations between participants with their spouses, terminating old interactive patterns, clarifying the interactive patterns, facilitating responses to requests from other parties	Training emotions guidance, emotions management through stress-reducing daily conversations, anger Management training, offering homework in the form of the paper tower practice
8	Strengthening the changes made, making summary and conclusion, closing, post-test	Training to respect marriage customs and a creating a common concept, making summary and conclusion, closing, post-test

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Then, in order to ensure the observance of the underlying assumptions of covariance analysis, Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were used. Results indicated that the data were distributed normally. Levene's test also showed equality of variances among the variables in the experimental and control groups.

As it can be seen in Table 3, there is a significant difference between subjects of experimental and control groups at posttest and follow-up phases in terms of fear of intimacy such that EFCT and

Gottman's relationships enrichment program could significantly be effective on the reduction of fear of intimacy among participants in both experimental groups compared to the controls upon posttest and follow-up ( $P \geq 0/05$ ). Also, both interventions were able to significantly decrease aspects of fear of intimacy ( $P \geq 0/05$ ). Then, since the results indicate the significant interactive effect of tests and groups, Bonferroni's post hoc test was employed to indicate the different mean values.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of pre-test, post-test, and follow-up of fear of intimacy and its components in the studied groups

Variable	Group	Pretest		Posttest		Follow-up	
		Mean	SD*	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Total score for Fear of intimacy	EFCT	111.00	11.59	79.00	8.60	78.66	8.89
	Gottman's relationships enrichment	113.75	11.22	89.58	6.86	89.25	7.33
	Control	111.41	12.85	109.25	11.83	109.41	11.76
Fear of intimacy in relationships with spouse	EFCT	97.08	11.34	70.41	8.21	70.25	8.17
	Gottman's relationships enrichment	99.16	10.36	78.91	6.69	79.00	7.19
	Control	97.41	13.13	95.66	12.46	95.75	11.99
Fear of intimacy in relationships with others	EFCT	13.91	2.31	8.58	1.67	8.41	1.78
	Gottman's relationships enrichment	14.58	1.97	10.66	1.30	10.25	1.28
	Control	14.00	1.95	13.58	1.88	13.66	1.55

**Table 3.** Results of MANCOVA on posttest scores of fear of intimacy and its aspects

Variable	Phase	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean of squares	F	Sig	Effect size
Total score of fear of intimacy	Posttest	5587.05	2	2793.52	106.87	0.001	0.88
	Follow-up	5793.29	2	2896.64	85.82	0.001	0.86
Fear of intimacy in relationships with spouse	Posttest	3919.61	2	1959.80	71.66	0.001	0.83
	Follow-up	3995.41	2	1997.70	67.40	0.001	0.82
Fear of intimacy in relationships with others	Posttest	148.02	2	74.01	52.44	0.001	0.78
	Follow-up	166.59	2	83.29	48.52	0.001	0.77

**Table 4.** Bonferroni's test results on comparison of marital conflict scores and its components among groups

Variable	Phase	Group	Mean of differences	Sig	
Total score of fear of intimacy	Posttest	EFCT	Enrichment program	-9.340	0.001
		EFCT	Control	-30.08	0.001
		Enrichment program	Control	-20.74	0.001
	Follow-up	EFCT	Enrichment program	-9.33	0.002
		EFCT	Control	-30.60	0.001
		Enrichment program	Control	-21.26	0.001
Fear of intimacy in relationships with spouse	Posttest	EFCT	Enrichment program	-7.52	0.006
		EFCT	Control	-25.13	0.001
		Enrichment program	Control	-17.61	0.001
	Follow-up	EFCT	Enrichment program	-7.65	0.001
		EFCT	Control	-25.39	0.001
		Enrichment program	Control	-17.73	0.001
Fear of intimacy in relationships with others	Posttest	EFCT	Enrichment program	-1.81	0.003
		EFCT	Control	-4.94	0.001
		Enrichment program	Control	-3.13	0.001
	Follow-up	EFCT	Enrichment program	-1.68	0.014
		EFCT	Control	-5.20	0.001
		Enrichment program	Control	-3.52	0.001

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The results of Table 4 show that the difference between EFCT group and Gottman's relationships enrichment program group is significant in the sense of fear of intimacy and its aspects ( $P \geq 0.05$ ), namely, the former is more effective than the latter on the fear of intimacy and its aspects. Also, the difference between the EFCT group and Gottman's enrichment program group with the control group is significant ( $P \geq 0.05$ ). The results of the follow-up phase also indicated that both experimental groups compared to the control group have less significant mean values for the variable fear of intimacy and its aspects, indicating a reduction in fear of intimacy and survival of the intervention.

### 4. Discussion

The results of the present study confirmed the effectiveness of both emotion-focused couple therapy and Gottman's relationships enrichment program on the reduction of the fear of intimacy, while the former was more effective than the latter. In fact, the fear of intimacy, with the effect it provides on the perception of each spouse about his/her life and relationships, will affect the individual's motivation to attempt towards marital consistency and creation of supportive resources for greater adaptability, promoting the psychological well-being. The research literature suggests that the reduction of fear of intimacy improves the couples' quality of life and has a direct and significant relationship with psychological well-being and mental health (43). Besides, investigation of emotions and affections today has attracted a large position in the field of psychology. The emotional relationship with personality traits, disorders, the cognitive information processing system, interpersonal relationships, etc., has made plenty of unmistakable findings for the human world. The way of changing feelings over time can be drawn to paths in the emotional core space, which is defined on the basis of capacity aspects. Suppression of a variety of emotions is dangerous, and after some time, control and suppression will be discharged explosively and non-controllably (44). Our results regarding the effectiveness of emotion-focused couple therapy on the reduction of fear of intimacy are in line with (9, 11, 45- 48). Thus, it can be argued that the need to establish and maintain links and close relationships with others is considered as a fundamental and basic incentive of mankind. Most people assume marriage as the most intimate adulthood relationship which is the main source of affection and support for them. The ability to cultivate intimacy is an interpersonal factor, which seems to enhance commitment in relationships and increase communicative compatibility. This is while avoiding intimate relationships can cause a bad effect on emotional health, leading to loneliness, emotional isolation and ineffective responses to stress (9). Through strengthening secure attachment disciplines in the relationships between couples as well as innovative use of techniques, the emotion-focused therapist creates a new interactive cycle in the interactive pattern of couples, which ultimately leads to marital intimacy (20).

Also, Gottman's relationship enrichment group therapy caused to reduce the fear of intimacy among women; this finding is in parallel with (9, 25, 38, 49-51). In fact, self-disclosure may increase an individual's feelings of vulnerability, but in order to reach intimacy, individuals must clearly endanger their vulnerability to another person. Those who are afraid of vulnerability will probably be afraid of intimacy, as well. These people are afraid of being deeply seen and also fear to share love, emotions, smiles, joy and even creativity with others. Intimacy is not what people are afraid of, but the possibility of being harmed from the result of intimacy is what makes people fear intimacy. When the relationships are undesired, spouses' intimacy is at risk of harmful consequences. One of Gottman's principles is to get closer together instead of getting away. As a matter of fact, this principle states that talking is less and everyone is busy with their own work among the couples with no considerable intimate relationships who finally result in divorce. In Gottman's approach, the right way of talking and getting close to each other is trained. Actually, one of Gottman's therapeutic goals is to create positive emotions at a time other than conflict. When a positive emotion is involved, it increases trust among couples; when trust increases, people will become less fearful when they desire greater self-disclosure and intimacy (37).

Also, the findings of this study showed that the emotion-focused couple therapy was more able to decrease fear of intimacy compared to Gottman's relationships enrichment approach. Along with the findings of this study, Havassi et al. (40) compared the two approaches to marital burnout and conflict resolution styles and found similar results. In this regard, it can be argued that these two approaches have different therapeutic strategies for different theoretical infrastructures such that Gottman emphasized on negative interaction and communication patterns (34) and Johnson and Greenberg (22) focused on negative emotions and attachment behaviors.

### 5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, when attending training sessions, various trainings are received for improving romantic relationships, increasing the extent of love and respect, improving the intimacy aspects, sharing power, overcoming permanent problems, and making life meaningful. All these aspects help them feel more intimate with their spouses and thus experience a lower degree of fear of intimacy.

There are constantly some limitations in every study, which are tried to be controlled by authors in order to reduce interference of unwanted variables and have more confidence that the results are derived from investigated conditions. Similarly, the present study was faced with some limitations including single-gender of subjects, the presence of uncontrolled variables and their impact on the study. Also, the inclusion criteria such as educational level, age and marriage duration limited the possibility to generalize the results. Hence, it is proposed to compare the effectiveness of couple-therapy between diverse

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couples of different ages, educational levels, and cultures and also investigate the efficiency of these methods compared to other therapeutic approaches. As a result, our results can be used to either directly or indirectly prevent marital conflicts.

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