

## Comparing the Effectiveness of Group Schema Therapy and Emotional Couple Therapy on Couples' Maladaptive Schemas

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### Abstract

**Background and Objective:** Couples' relationships could always face difficulties for various reasons. In various studies, several causes have been listed, the most important of which are the cognitive and emotional functions affecting couples' communication framework. The objective of the present study was to compare the effectiveness of schema therapy and emotion-oriented couple therapy as a group on maladaptive couple schemas in Mashhad.

**Materials and Methods:** The present study was quasi-experimental with pre-test, post-test, follow-up design and a control group. Participants included 24 couples who were referred to counseling centers in Mashhad in 2018 and were selected by purposive sampling method and randomly placed in experimental and control groups, each group of eight couples. The instrument used in this study was the Young Schemas Questionnaire, which was administered in three rounds: pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. Emotion-based couple therapy intervention was performed for one of the two experimental groups, and schema therapy was performed for the other group. The members of the control group did not receive any intervention. Data were analyzed using repeated-measures analysis of variance via SPSS software version 21.

**Results:** In the emotion-based couple therapy group, the mean (SD) of maladaptive schemas increased from 140.1 (16.9) in the pre-test to 101.6 (8.6) in the post-test and 99.8 (8.2) and decreased in the follow-up phase, ( $P < 0.001$ ). In the schema therapy group, the mean (SD) score of maladaptive schemas increased from 137.4 (17.1) in the pre-test to 94.9 (7.5) in the post-test and 94.9 (7.2) in the follow-up stage,  $P < 0.001$ . The effectiveness of schema therapy on reducing maladaptive schemas was higher than emotion-focused couple therapy,  $P < 0.05$ .

**Conclusion:** The study showed that both schema therapy and emotion-oriented couple therapy interventions reduced the maladaptive schemas of couples, but the effectiveness of schema-therapy was more than emotion-based couple therapy.

**Keywords:** Emotional couple therapy; Schema therapy; Couple therapy.

### Introduction

Couples' relationships could always face difficulties for various reasons. Low levels of marital satisfaction could lead to the use of coping mechanisms and ineffective adjustment in the marital relationship of individuals, which consequently increases stress in their lives (1). Also, various cognitive factors are influential in marital dissatisfaction and incompatibility. One type

of cognition that is important in a marital relationship is the schema. There is evidence for the effectiveness of schema therapy at the level of individual intervention and in the presence of detectable mental disorders (2). There are a variety of training programs that have proven to be effective for couples. In these interventions, the goal is to focus on the quality of communication and mutual expectations of couples to achieve marital

intimacy (3). One approach that emphasizes controlling behavior and emotion and ultimately increases couples' life satisfaction is the emotional approach. It has been found that couple therapy with an emotion-oriented approach is effective in improving behavior, desire, emotions, quality, and marital satisfaction (4). Research has shown that emotionally oriented couple therapy reduces depressive symptoms and improves couples' emotional regulation (5). Numerous studies have also shown the effectiveness of schema therapy and emotion-oriented couple therapy on improving couples' maladaptive schemas (6, 7, 8). The objective of the present study was to compare the effectiveness of schema therapy and emotion-oriented couple therapy as a group on maladaptive couple schemas in Mashhad.

### Materials and methods

The present study was quasi-experimental with pre-test, post-test, follow-up design, and a control group. Participants included 24 couples referred to counseling centers in Mashhad in 2018 and were selected by purposive sampling method and randomly placed in experimental and control groups, each group of eight couples. The instrument used in this study was the Young Schemas Questionnaire (9), which was administered in three rounds: pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. Emotion-based couple therapy intervention was performed for one of the two experimental groups, and schema therapy was performed for the other group. The members of the control group did not receive any intervention. The Young Schema Questionnaire (short form) was used to collect data. Data were analyzed using repeated-measures analysis of variance via SPSS software version 21.

### Results

In the emotion-based couple therapy group, the mean (SD) of maladaptive schemas increased from 140.1 (16.9) in the pre-test to 101.6 (8.6) in the post-test and 99.8 (8.2) and decreased in the follow-up phase,  $P < 0.001$ . In the schema therapy group, the mean (SD) score of maladaptive schemas increased from 137.4 (17.1) in the pre-test to 94.9 (7.5) in the post-test and 94.9 (7.2) in the follow-up stage,

$P < 0.001$ . The effectiveness of schema therapy on reducing maladaptive schemas was higher than emotion-focused couple therapy,  $P < 0.05$ .

### Discussion

The effectiveness of schema therapy on reducing couples' maladaptive schemas is consistent with the results obtained by Hemmati et al. (6), who found that schema therapy based on schema therapy can significantly increase couples' resilience and ability to solve problems and conflicts. It was also found that emotion-based couple therapy also improved the couple's maladaptive schemas. It is believed that increasing positive emotions increases the level of ability of couples in decision-making and problem-solving. It can also be said that working on emotional skills can play an essential role in increasing marital satisfaction (10) and further enhances couples' skills in improving the quality of interpersonal communication and other marital indicators (11). Therefore, after EFT treatment, spouses perceive each other differently than before. Spouses use new elements to define themselves and their spouse, including attachment-oriented words, and their perceptions of their spouse and those around them about others are modified. They can look at the relationship from a new perspective (12). The significant difference in the effectiveness of schema therapy on emotion-oriented couple therapy can be interpreted as meaning that in schema therapy; the therapist tries to improve the couple's conscious thought patterns, thoughts, actions, and couples in life situations. With the help of these treatments, the couple's information processing system can be affected, and the influence of destructive factors such as stereotypes and life conflicts between couples can be prevented. In addition, in both methods, couples learn to control their emotions and become aware of their minds by regulating emotions, correcting mental schemas, and enjoying their lives more by perceiving others and improving communication with their spouse. However, in the emotion-based couple therapy approach, the attempt is made to follow and reflect the internal emotional facts and interpersonal reactions while focusing on the internal processes that occur in the sessions

while the clients' perceptions of the action. The emotional states of the relationship are confirmed. After re-expressing and redefining the emotional actions, it leads to a developed understanding of the relationship in a broad context, such as the interaction cycle that the couple creates. Perhaps the greater effectiveness of schema therapy compared to emotion-based couple therapy is related to the fact that emotions are in the therapist's focus in emotion-based couple therapy, and we see the precedence of emotions over cognitive states and errors in this treatment. Nevertheless, in schema therapy, we see the study of emotions, cognitive errors, and even behavior correction simultaneously and without precedence. In other words, in schema therapy, it is believed that schemas have a cognitive and emotional basis that should ultimately lead to the improvement of individual behavior in the form of compensation and confrontation.

### Conclusion

The study showed that both schema therapy and emotion-oriented couple therapy

interventions reduced the maladaptive schemas of couples, but the effectiveness of schema-therapy was more than emotion-based couple therapy.

### Acknowledgment

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### Conflict of Interest

None of the authors has any conflict of interest to disclose.

### Ethical publication statement

We confirm that we have read the Journal's position on issues involved in ethical publication and affirm that this report is consistent with those guidelines.

**Ethical code:** IR.USB.REC.13993020.

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