



The Effectiveness of Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy on Marital Satisfaction and Positive Feelings towards the Spouse

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Abstract

Background: Marital relationship has been described as the most important and fundamental human relationship because it provides the basic structure for forming a family relationship and life satisfaction. Also, one of the factors which play an important role in the marital satisfaction of couples is positive feelings towards the spouse, which include both positive emotions. This study aimed to investigate the effect of emotion-focused couple therapy on marital satisfaction and positive feelings towards the spouse.

Methods: This semi-experimental method with a pre-and post-test design was conducted on a sample group of 14. The statistical population of the present study includes all married women who in 2018 were referred to counseling centers and neighborhoods in the 10th district of Tehran city. The sampling method in this research is a purposeful sampling. Thus, the questionnaires of enriching and nurturing relationship issues, communicating and happiness (ENRICH) and positive feeling questionnaire (PFQ) were completed by married women referring to counseling centers and shelters in the 10th district of Tehran. After scoring the questionnaire, select 14 people who are allowed to score or below average in ENRICH and PFQ.

A Paired t-test was used to significantly evaluate the differences between the means in the pre-test and post-test stages. Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS-24. The significance level was set at 0.05 for all tests.

Results: The results of the paired t-test showed that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the subjects in the pre-test and post-test stages in the variables of marital relationship, relationship with relatives, and friends and spiritual beliefs (P value<0.05), but in there were significant differences in the variables of personality issues, conflict resolution, sexual relations, marriage and children and the total score of marital satisfaction and positive feelings towards the spouse.

Conclusions: Emotion-focused couple therapy is effective in marital satisfaction and positive feelings Spouse, hence; family counselors and family therapists can use the results of the present study for therapeutic interventions based on emotion-focused couple therapy to increase marital satisfaction and positive feelings in couples.

Keywords: Emotion-focused couple therapy, Marital satisfaction, Positive feelings, Spouse.

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provides the basic structure for forming a family relationship and life satisfaction.¹ Marital satisfaction is one of the most important indicators of the strength of family performance, through which a couple feels happy and would be satisfied with marriage.² In fact, marital satisfaction is the correspondence between the status quo and the expected situation. According to this definition, marital satisfaction is achieved when the current situation in marital relationships is consistent with the expected situation.³

Researchers have found a relationship between life satisfaction and mental health.⁴ Argyle showed that a successful marital relationship leads to happiness and a positive mood in a person. Couples with high perceived satisfaction agree a lot with each other, are satisfied with the type and the quality of their leisure activities, and exercise good time and financial management.⁵ Also, couples who have high marital satisfaction experience more positive emotions, remember more positive events from the past and have a more positive evaluation of their surroundings.⁶⁻⁷

If marital satisfaction is not fully established as a factor in strengthening the foundation of the family, it can have detrimental physical and psychological effects.⁸⁻⁹ Researchers have found a relationship between life dissatisfaction and poor health, depressive symptoms, personality problems, and low social status. Low levels of life satisfaction can also lead to the use of ineffective coping mechanisms in the marital relationship of individuals and consequently increases stress in their lives.¹⁰

Marital satisfaction is affected by various factors, including negative emotions and the relationship between couples.¹¹ Also, one of the factors which play an important role in marital satisfaction of couples is positive feelings towards the spouse, which include both positive emotions (e.g., pleasure, joy, happiness, and pride) and negative emotions (e.g., guilt, shame, sadness, anxiety, anger, and tension).¹² It is important to study emotional issues as a basis for maintaining emotional connections and consistent long-term relationships between couples. Positive feeling towards the spouse include positive personal emotions, such as pleasure, joy, satisfaction, and pride, which are reflected in the aspects of friendship in marriage, understanding, honesty, trust, pleasure, and sexual relationships; it can strengthen the relationships between couples, the intimacy, and the marital satisfaction. Furthermore, positive feeling leads to closeness, affection, attention, and commitment of couples; it is associated with

Introduction

A marital relationship has been described as the most important and fundamental human relationship because it

happiness.¹³ Positive feelings towards the spouse as the desire to participate in a supportive and effective relationship, without neglecting oneself in that relationship; it results in life satisfaction and, more specifically, marital satisfaction.¹⁴ Furthermore, there is a relationship between positive feelings towards the spouse and marital satisfaction. A person who experiences more positive feelings can express his needs to his partner more effectively. Marital satisfaction can be considered as closeness, similarity, and personal romantic or emotional relationship with the partner; it requires deep knowledge and understanding of the partner as well as the expression of thoughts and feelings which indicate the similarity of the couple with each other.¹⁵

Various approaches have been proposed to improve the couples' relationships and to increase the couples' satisfaction. One of the effective approaches which emphasize controlling the behavior and the emotion is emotion-focused couple therapy (EFCT). In EFCT, couples engage in a process in which they seek to express their fears and attachment needs and to cultivate a more secure attachment in the best possible way. This, in turn, leads to sustained changes in the couples' satisfaction.¹⁶⁻¹⁷ The basic premise of EFCT is that if each couple is not able to share his/ her attachment needs regarding satisfaction and security with each other, marital conflicts would appear. This approach believes that marital conflict is accompanied by a pervasive state of negative emotion and attachment damage.¹⁸ Reducing avoidance attachment and anxiety attachment, increasing trust and the depth of emotional experiences in the EFCT process,¹⁹ and improving emotional control through emotion regulation strategies²⁰ are among the main predictors of marital satisfaction; they play an important role in the long-term consequences of this therapy.

Some research studies have examined the effects of EFCT on couples' relationships. In a study entitled "Emotionally focused therapy as a treatment for couples with a generalized anxiety disorder and relationship distress", Priest concluded that EFCT significantly reduced anxiety and relationship distress in couples. It also increased positive emotional relationships among them.²¹ Fletcher showed that EFCT, accompanied by teaching effective emotional-relational techniques to couples, improved the daily private relationships, and increased the couples' satisfaction and commitment.²² In Girard and Woolley's study, EFCT was used to treat the couples' sexual desire mismatch. The findings showed that since the inconsistency of sexual desire is a communication problem, the desire for sexual and emotional intimacy could be treated through emotion-based intervention; thus, intimacy, communication, and satisfaction would increase.²³ Moreover, Shahmoradi, Keshavarz Afshar, Goodarzi and Lavasani demonstrated the effectiveness of EFCT in reducing marital violence and improving family functioning.²⁴ Given the importance of regulating emotions, accepting one's emotions and satisfying the couples' need for secure attachment, and their roles in improving the couples' relationships, it is necessary to conduct research studies which lead to the maintenance of the couples' relationships and family foundation. This study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of emotion-focused couple therapy (EFCT) in improving positive feelings towards the spouse and increasing marital satisfaction.

Materials and Methods

This semi-experimental method with a pre-and post-test design was conducted on a sample group of 14. The statistical population of the present study includes all married women who in 2018 were referred to counseling centers and neighborhoods in the 10th district of Tehran city. The sampling method in this research is a purposeful sampling. Thus, the questionnaires of enriching and nurturing relationship issues, communicating and happiness (ENRICH) and positive feeling questionnaire (PFQ) were completed by married women referring to counseling centers and shelters in the 10th district of Tehran. After scoring the questionnaire, select 14 people who are allowed to score or below average in ENRICH and PFQ. The sample size of the present study was determined by referring to the Cohen table to determine the sample size in experimental studies²⁵ at 95% confidence level, effect size 0.50, and test power of 0.80 for each group of 14 people. Initially, the demographic characteristics of the subjects were collected. Next, they were tested before conducting the independent variable (EFCT). According to Johnson's plan,²⁶ couples in the sample group underwent 8 EFT-C sessions of 120 minutes' duration conducted twice per week (table 1). By the end of the term, subjects were again tested. In the present study, the following questionnaires were used to collect data:

Enriching and nurturing relationship issues, communication, and happiness (ENRICH): This questionnaire is a 115-item instrument, and another form of it has 125 items. This questionnaire consists of 12 subscales.²⁷ ENRICH questionnaire has good psychometric characteristics. Its internal consistency is estimated from 0.73 to 0.90.²⁸ All subscales of this questionnaire distinguish satisfied from unsatisfied couples, indicating the high criterion validity of this questionnaire.²⁷ Fowers and Olson found that ENRICH can differentiate between happy and unhappy married couples with 85% to 90% accuracy. In this research, the Iranian 47-item ENRICH was used, and its internal consistency was reported to be about 0.93.²⁹ Nine subscales of this version of ENRICH are personality issues, marital communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship, marriage and children, family and friends, and spiritual beliefs. In this research, the Cronbach's alpha of this questionnaire was found at 0.86.

Positive feelings questionnaire (PFQ): This questionnaire consists of 17 items measuring positive feelings towards the spouse and was developed by O'Leary et al. in 1975 at the couple therapy clinic of the state university of New York, the US. This questionnaire was designed in two parts. In the first part, the subjects are asked to determine their feelings toward their spouse on a scale of 1 (strongly negative) to 7 (strongly positive). In the second part, which includes nine items, the participants are asked to select a phrase that best describes their overall feelings towards their spouse with numbers 1-7. The total questionnaire score is simply computed by adding question scores. The possible scores range between 94 and 114 with higher scores indicating more positive feelings. The positive feelings questionnaire was validated by O'Leary (1981).³⁰ We calculated the reliability of this scale in the current study at $\alpha=0.94$.

Table 1 points out the treatment protocol used in this study, this protocol is an emotionally-focused therapeutic approach, which has been provided to the couple during 8 sessions.

Table1. Johnson’s protocol of emotionally focused therapy (EFT) for married women

Session	Content
1	Introducing oneself and establishing support, welcoming couples, familiarizing group members with each other and the consultant, reviewing the goals of EBCT, explaining the rules and the principles of the sessions
2	Accepting and reflecting on the couples' interactive and emotional experiences, discovering problematic interactions and identifying disturbing negative interaction cycles, identifying the relationship between the couples' emotional responses and their attachment levels, evaluating the problems and the attachment barriers
3	Creating a safe space for couples to communicate, discovering and identifying the underlying and unexpressed feelings, expressing pure feelings and emotions, observing the way of couples' interactions, discovering the basic fears and insecurities in couples' relationships, helping couples to re-experience emotions
4	Encouraging each couple to have an emotional conflict with each other, reshaping the cycle of interactions, building key emotional responses, coordinating the diagnosis of treatment and the couple, accepting the interaction cycle of the couple
5	Deepening the conflict through emotional experiences, focusing on oneself and not others, promoting new ways of interaction, expressing desires and wishes in the presence of the spouse
6	Expanding the experienced acceptance of each partner by his spouse, symbolizing desires, especially the repressed ones
7	Facilitating the expression of needs and desires to rebuild the interactions based on new perceptions, changing the behavior of the damaging spouse, reconstructing and facilitating new solutions to old problems, and answering the couples' questions
8	Strengthening the current created cycle, engaging the couples, accepting new situations, reviewing the main lessons of treatment, discussing the positive and the negative points concerning the implementation of the educational plan

In this research, ethical considerations including observance of scientific honesty and trustworthiness, conscious consent to participate in the research, observance of anonymous right to protect the laws, and confidentiality of other information are required. Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS (version 24.0 IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA, 2016). Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics. Shapiro-Wilk tests showed that data were normally distributed. A paired t-test was used to significantly evaluate the differences between the means in the pre-test and post-test stages. The significance level was set at 0.05 for all tests.

Results

In terms of education, 42.9% of the subjects had a diploma, 14.3% had an associate degree and 42.9% had a bachelor's degree. In terms of the number of children, 42.9% had one child, 50% had two children and 7.1% had three children. The mean marital satisfaction of the subjects in the pre-test and

post-test stages showed that there is no significant difference in the financial management component between the mean of pre-test and post-test. In the components of personality issues, conflict resolution, sexual relations, parenting, and the overall score of marital satisfaction compared to the components of marital relationship, relationship with relatives and friends, and religious orientation, the average post-test is higher. The mean of positive feelings towards the subjects' spouses also shows that compared to the pre-test, the mean of the post-test has increased (table 2).

The results of the paired t-test showed that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the subjects in the pre-test and post-test stages in the variables of marital relationship, relationship with relatives and friends, and spiritual beliefs (Pvalue<0.05), but there were significant differences in the variables of personality issues, conflict resolution, sexual relations, marriage, and children and the total score of marital satisfaction and positive feelings towards the spouse (table 3).

Table 2. Descriptive indicators and normality test in research variables

Variables	Pre-test	Post-test	Shapiro-wilk	
	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Statistic	Pvalue
Marital satisfaction	148.71±22.81	163.35±14.03	0.96	0.858
Marital communication	17±5.60	19.07±2.20	0.95	0.675
Personality issues	16.28±3.12	19.35±2.67	0.94	0.545
Conflict resolution	15.07±3.70	17.71±2.52	0.94	0.427
Financial management	17±3.06	17±3.88	0.95	0.704
Leisure activities	16.07±1.77	17.35±2.09	0.91	0.158
Sexual relationship	16.78±3.35	18.50±1.87	0.96	0.787
Marriage and children	15.50±2.87	17.85±2.38	0.89	0.095
Family and friends	15.50±2.95	17.28±2.86	0.94	0.444
Spiritual beliefs	19.50±4.62	19.21±2.88	0.91	0.156
Positive feelings	89.71±16.82	103.42±8.01	0.94	0.521

Table 3. The results of paired t-test for marital satisfaction and positive feelings towards the spouse

Variables	Paired mean differences	95% Confidence interval of the difference		t	df	Pvalue
		Lower	Upper			
		Marital satisfaction	-14.64			
Marital communication	-2.07	-5.83	1.69	1.18	13	0.256
Personality issues	-3.07	-5.21	-0.92	3.09	13	0.008
Conflict resolution	-2.64	-4.47	-0.80	3.11	13	0.008
Financial management	0.00	-2.71	2.71	0.00	13	1
Leisure activities	-1.28	-3.01	0.44	1.60	13	0.133
Sexual relationship	-1.71	-3.65	0.22	1.90	13	0.079
Marriage and children	-2.35	-3.83	-0.87	3.44	13	0.004
Family and friends	-1.78	-4.17	0.60	1.61	13	0.130
Spiritual beliefs	0.28	-2.96	3.53	0.19	13	0.852
Positive feelings	-13.71	3.58	-22.04	3.55	13	0.004

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of EFCT in the marital satisfaction of couples and the positive feelings towards the spouses. Findings showed that EFCT had a significant effect on marital satisfaction and positive feelings towards the spouse; it increased marital satisfaction and improved positive feelings towards the spouse. The research findings also indicated the effect of EFCT on the subscales of marital satisfaction, including personality issues, conflict resolution, sexual relations, and parenting. The findings of this study are in line with those of Fletcher,²² Love, Moore & Stanish,³¹ Greenberg, Warwar and Malcolm,³² and Priest.²¹ These findings can be explained by referring to the fact that in EFCT, the main focus is on the role of emotions in permanent patterns of incompatibility of disturbed couples. This treatment tries to reveal the vulnerable emotions and to facilitate the couple's ability to create these emotions safely. It is believed that the processing of emotions in a safe context creates a healthier and newer interactional pattern which reduces confusion, increases affection, and, ultimately, increases marital adjustment and satisfaction.¹⁸

On the other hand, the goal of the EFCT is to access and re-process the basic emotional reactions in couples' interactions, to create marital satisfaction, and to facilitate the recognition, expression, and reconstruction of emotional responses. The therapist focuses on vulnerable emotions, such as fear and anxiety, which play a key role in the couple's cycle of negative interactions. These are often the most prominent emotions concerning the needs and the fears of attachment. The therapist approaches the client's experience and uses experimental interventions to expand and reorganize that experience. These interventions include reflection, motivating questions (e.g., how do you feel when ...), accreditation, acknowledgment (e.g., through repetition and practice), mental imagery techniques, and empathetic interpretation. First, the emotion-based therapist must reduce the crises of the patterns of negative interactions and the related reacted emotions. Then, he helps the couples form new cycles of positive interactions in which positive emotions are evoked and negative emotions can be moderated.²⁰ Almost all therapists agree that long-term committed relationships are not possible without attachment disciplines; in fact, emotion organizes attachment disciplines. Authentic scientific documents have shown that this category of attachment and emotional process is an undeniable element to promote intimate relationships and positive feelings in the spouses.

Considering the subscales of marital satisfaction, the findings indicated the effect of EFCT on reducing marital conflicts in couples. In marital conflicts, the couples engage in repetitive negative thoughts. Many negative thoughts occupy their mental capacity so that they would be unable to control them. Thus, EFCT helps individuals to identify and control negative emotions and thoughts in stressful situations, such as marital conflicts, through the awareness of emotions and mental contents.³³

Moreover, EFCT intervenes through re-processing the communication experiences and reorganizing the couple's

interactions to create a secure attachment. Thus, the couples would be aware of their emotions; they show a set of new behaviors BY expressing real emotions in different life situations; this issue increases their intimacy and improves their sexual relationships.³⁴ EFCT is one of the approaches which focus on both family members' relationships and individuals' emotions.³⁵ The goal of this approach is to reconstruct the interactions by helping the individuals to access the underlying emotions and the underlying needs of self-supportive reactions in the relationships; it creates a new cycle of relational conflict.³⁶ This approach identifies the communication patterns, emotions, and feelings of family members; it has a positive effect on the interactive patterns of parents and children. The findings of this study can be used in counseling centers focusing on life enrichment and the improvement of the quality of couples' marital life. Since this treatment was performed with couples living in Tehran, it is recommended that researchers replicate this study with couples in different contexts, and examine its effectiveness in different areas of marital life.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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