

The Effectiveness of Gottman Couple Therapy on Intimacy and Marital Adjustment of Couples with Marital Problems

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Abstract

Background: It is necessary to help couples to solve problems related to marital life and identify the factors affecting intimacy and marital adjustment of couples, which can be improved using different approaches.

Objectives: This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Gottman Couple Therapy on intimacy and marital adjustment of couples with marital problems

Methods: This applied quasi-experimental study was conducted based on pretest-posttest control group design and follow-up. The statistical population of this study consisted of all couples referring to counseling clinics in District 1 of Tehran, Iran, in 2020. The samples (n=30) were selected by the convenience sampling method. The instruments used in this research for data collection were questionnaires, namely the Marital Intimacy Scale (Thompson and Walker, 1983), and Marital Adjustment Questionnaire (Spanier, 1976). The gathered data were analyzed in SPSS software (version 22) using repeated measure analysis of variance.

Results: The results showed that Gottman Couple Therapy was effective in increasing intimacy ($P<0.001$) and marital adjustment ($P<0.001$) of couples with marital problems.

Conclusion: Based on the findings of this study, it can be said that Gottman Couple Therapy was effective on the intimacy and marital adjustment of couples with marital problems. Therefore, Gottman Couple Therapy could improve couples' relationships and reduce their marital problems.

Keywords: Marriage, Sexual partners, Couples therapy, Family conflict

1. Introduction

Marriage is the prelude to the formation of a family. A marital relationship forms the family, and its continuity and survival depend on the continuation and survival of the marital relationship. As the most important and highest social tradition, marriage has always been approved to meet the emotional and security needs of adults. The results of pieces of research have shown that there is a strong relationship between marriage and well-being (1). Although good marriage is one of the most important factors in the mental health of the society, if marriage and family life create unfavorable conditions to satisfy the mental needs of couples, not only mental health will not be realized but it also will have negative and sometimes irreparable effects, such as neurological disorders, depression, and suicide, which are the consequences of family disputes (2).

Based on the divorce statistics, which are the most reliable indicators of marital turmoil, marital satisfaction is not easily achieved, regardless of all marital relationships that lead to divorce. It has been reported that many marriages experience periods of considerable turmoil that

put one or both spouses at risk of mental disorders (e.g., anxiety and depression) within a stage of their lives (3). In a national context finding study, communication problems, including divorce and other marital problems, have been identified as the most important cause of acute emotional disturbances (4). Experts consider individuals' emotional reactions among the most important characteristics of problematic situations, such as marital turmoil. They believe that the first step in all matters of life, even the easiest one, is to "pause and think". Suppose that people would respond immediately when faced with a problem. In that case, they may not spend enough time on cognitive responses, responses that contribute to the creation, maintenance, and interruption of emotions, as well as choosing a series of effective actions (5).

Marital adjustment is another variable that affects couples with problems (6). Marital adjustment is a situation in which couples often feel happy and satisfied with each other. Adjustment in marriage is caused by having mutual interests, caring for each other, accepting, understanding each other, and satisfying each other's needs (7). The marital adjustment can be considered the management of

marital stresses. In this case, individuals have a correct exposure to the tensions caused by the differences between themselves and their spouse and coordinate their wishes with those of their partner, rather than ignoring them (8). A couple's marital adjustment is so important that it affects different aspects of their lives, such as parental functioning, physical health, life satisfaction, and overall quality of life. It can also be considered mutual understanding and acceptance, mutual support, valuable feeling, voluntary sense of responsibility for each other's needs, the ability to regulate emotions, and verbal expression, which are all considered skills and capable of educating couples (9).

On the other hand, intimacy is one of the other variables that affect couples with marital problems. One of the manifestations of human social life is constructive interaction among human beings and love for one's kind and communion. Intimacy in marital relationships is a highly important behavioral model of a compromise concept with strong emotional and social aspects and is formed based on acceptance, satisfaction, and love (10). Psychologists define intimacy as the ability to communicate with others and express emotions and consider it an inalienable right and a natural human state (11). A person who experiences higher intimacy in relationships can present himself/herself more favorably in relationships and express his/her needs more effectively to his/her partner (12).

The existing approaches in couple therapy are the most effective means for couples who are less agitated and there is positive affection between them. However, Gottman's systemic cognitive couple therapy approach, which has been based on years of research, includes his primary therapeutic work in communication and analysis of 1,000 video programs interviewing couples. His approach uses the basic foundations of the behavioral model to focus on starting and rebuilding techniques (17). Gottman's behavioral family therapy is much more similar to traditional family therapy than counseling and behavioral therapy. In Gottman's method, the therapist plays the role of a mentor more than a treator. Gottman developed his approach since he wanted to establish a harmonious and proportional relationship between the purpose of communication and effectiveness (18). Gottman's theory is a mixed approach that has helped form the fundamentals and principles of belief in different therapeutic theories (19).

Goudarzi and Boostanipour concluded that systemic-behavioral couple therapy was effective in increasing marital adjustment (20). Eslahi et al., research concluded that both emotionally focused and systemic couple therapy had a significant effect on increasing the coordination between couples with conflicting relationships (21). According to the results of various studies conducted on the efficiency of Gottman's Couple Therapy systemic cognitive couple therapy approach and its effect on marital turmoil, divorce statistics are the most reliable indicators of marital problems, and the increase in divorce statistics in the country has diverted growing attention to family health.

2. Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness

of Gottman Couple Therapy on intimacy and marital adjustment of couples with marital problems.

3. Materials and Methods

The applied quasi-experimental study was conducted based on a pretest-posttest control group design and follow-up. The statistical population of this research consisted of all couples referring to counseling clinics in District 1 of Tehran, Iran, within January-March 2020, and the samples (n=30) were selected by the convenience sampling method. The inclusion criteria were being in permanent marriage, having one year of marriage, and aging 20-60 years. On the other hand, the cases that did not respond to the questionnaire incompletely were excluded from the study. Regarding the ethical considerations, the research objectives and procedures were explained to all participants in written form, and they were informed of the right to leave the study at any time. Moreover, all subjects were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in this study.

Marital Intimacy Scale (1983):

This 17-item scale, developed by Thompson and Walker, measures couples' intimacy and has good internal consistency with an alpha coefficient of 0.91 to 0.97 (22). The items are rated on a scale of 1 to 7 (never to always), with higher scores indicating higher intimacy. The total score of each subject is obtained by dividing the sum of the items' scores by the number 17. Ebadi et al. calculated the reliability coefficient of the whole scale using Cronbach's alpha method at 0.96, indicating the acceptable reliability of the questionnaire. The calculation of the reliability coefficient by eliminating each item also showed that deleting any of the items had no significant effect on the reliability coefficient (23).

Marital Adjustment Questionnaire (1976):

The 32-item Marital Adjustment Scale, designed by Spanier, is a widely used tool in couples-related research (24). This instrument measures adaptation, continuity, agreement, and affection expression in four scales and has concurrent validity. The total range score is obtained at 0-151, with higher scores indicating better compatibility. The mean scores of total consistency were estimated at 84.4 ± 17.8 and 70.7 ± 22.8 for married individuals and divorced groups, respectively. Cronbach's alpha coefficient method was used to calculate the internal consistency of the whole scale, compatibility, continuity, agreement, and affection expression, rendering for 0.96, 0.94, 0.81, 0.90, and 0.73, respectively. Isanejad et al. obtained a validity coefficient of 0.94 using criterion validity (25).

Gottman Couple Therapy was performed in seven 90-minute sessions once a week for 1.5 months based on Gottman's educational package. This protocol's validity has been confirmed by its creators and has a high face and content validity (30).

In descriptive statistics, mean and standard deviation indices were used. Inferential statistics section: Repeated measure ANOVA was used. To investigate the inferential test assumptions, Leven's test (to investigate the homogeneity of variances), Shapiro-Wilk test (for normality of data distribution), Mbox test, and Mauchly sphericity test were used. The above statistical analysis was performed in SPSS software (version 22).

4. Results

The mean age scores were calculated at 38.55 ± 7.18 and 40.15 ± 8.11 years in the experimental and control groups, respectively.

Analysis of variance with repeated measures was used to investigate the significant difference of marital intimacy scores between the Gottman Couple Therapy and the control groups. The results of the Mbox and Levine tests were evaluated for observing the assumptions before the calculation of repeated measure ANOVA. Since the Mbox test was not significant for any of the research variables, the homogeneity requirement of variance-covariance matrices was properly observed. Furthermore,

no significant difference in Levene's test variables was revealed, showing that the condition of parity of intergroup variances was observed, and the variance of dependent variable error was equal in all groups. Finally, the Mauchly sphericity test results showed that this test was also used for the marital intimacy variable. Therefore, the assumption of variance parity within-subjects (sphericity assumption) was observed (Mauchly's $W=0.81$).

The results of Table 4 show that the analysis of variance is significant for intragroup (time) and intergroup factors. Based on these findings and considering the group's effect, the effect of time alone is also significant. Moreover, group and time interactions are significant ($P < 0.01$).

Table 1. Summary of Gottman Couple Therapy

Sessions	Content
First	Becoming familiar and initial evaluation of the group members' familiarity with each other; introducing the group's rules and regulations; evaluating the needs of couples, the commitment of each spouse to the marriage, expectations of each other, and treatment.
Second	Processing conflicts and increasing marital camaraderie change in interactive patterns reduces negative behavioral exchanges and increases positive behavioral exchanges.
Third	Downs down four destiny rides help couples identify four destiny rides (criticism, blame, front-off, and silence and their destructive effects on the couple's relationship).
Fourth	Teaching conflict resolution skills, persuasiveness, and compromise of education to couples to understand that conflict is necessary for a successful marriage and learn how to accept and deal with each other's differences.
Fifth	Teaching couples how to deal with intractable permanent conflicts, teaching the correct styles of conflict resolution, and building them create positive emotions during conflicts and lead to apologizing from each other. Creating positive emotions during times without rebuilding conflicts.
Sixth	Despite the differences between them, admiration and encouragement of each other, the sense of respect and acceptance of the spouse, and the elimination of Meta-Ihjan disharmony help increase couples' recognition of each other's world and cope with stressful events and conflicts.
Seventh	Creating and strengthening a common semantic system of training couples to understand each other's dreams and wishes and try to support each other to realize them, finishing reviewing past meetings, getting feedback from participants, and running the post-test.

Table 2. Frequency distribution and comparison of demographic characteristics

Demographic variables		Experimental n (%)	Control	P-value
Age (years)	30-40	9 (45)	10 (50)	0.43
	40-50	11 (55)	10 (50)	
Work experience (years)	5-10	9 (45)	8 (40)	0.34
	11-15	6 (30)	8 (40)	
	16-20	5 (25)	4 (20)	

Table 3. Central indicators and distribution of research variable scores in experimental and control groups

Variable	Group	Pre-test		Post-test		Follow-up	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Marital intimacy	Experimental	45.05	11.52	56	11.01	55.75	11.10
	Control	44.45	8.61	44.30	8.63	44.25	8.65
Marital adjustment	Experimental	59.30	5.66	65.05	5.33	64.20	4.97
	Control	55.40	5.04	55.10	5.02	55	5.26

Table 4. Analysis of variance with repeated measures to compare pre-test, post-test, and follow-up of marital intimacy in experimental and control groups

Variables	Source effect	SS	Df	MS	F	P	Eta
Marital intimacy	Time	25.62	2	12.81	70.48	0.001	0.71
	Time*Group	12.86	2	6.43	35.39	0.001	0.55
	Group	184.40	1	184.40	12.08	0.001	0.21
Marital adjustment	Time	87.62	2	43.81	164.78	0.001	0.85
	Time*Group	37.48	2	18.74	70.50	0.001	0.71
	Group	131.61	1	131.61	15.25	0.001	0.24

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Gottman Couple Therapy on intimacy and marital adjustment of couples with marital problems. The results showed that Gottman Couple Therapy effectively impacts intimacy, adjustment, and marital turmoil in couples with marital problems. The results of this research were in line with those of studies conducted by Eslahi et al., comparing the effectiveness of emotion-focused couple therapy and Gottman's cognitive system on marital coordination of couples with conflicting relationship, and Goudarzi and Boostanipoor (21), evaluating the effectiveness of systemic-behavioral couple therapy on increasing marital adjustment.

In explaining the effectiveness of Gottman Couple

Therapy on marital intimacy of couples with marital problems referring to the counseling centers, it can be said that given that Gottman Couple Therapy is known as a cognitive-systemic integrated approach, it can be expected that the most emphasis of the therapist in this approach

is couple therapy on cognitive issues and relationships among family members. Therefore, this approach may be incompatible with the elimination and change of cognitions through Gottman Couple Therapy. Furthermore, it improves the strengthening cognitions of factors that provide marital intimacy and changes cognitions by affecting attitudes about marital relationships, enhancing the quality of marital relationships, strengthening commitment, and guaranteeing marital relationships.

Gottman Couple Therapy can also improve

marital quality and increase marital intimacy since there is a relationship between the two variables of quality of marital relationships and marital intimacy (26). This treatment can also improve the verbal relationships and lead to express love and more affection to each other, which causes marital intimacy. According to Gottman, the quality of interaction between couples is an important predictor of marital intimacy. Gottman found that negative mood triggers negative cognitive processing, which leads to selective attention to negative events. As a result of this selective attention, negative documents are created and lead to negative expectations about the future. His studies showed that couples who have a more negative relationship with each other have an unhappy marriage, or future marital turmoil can be attributed. He found that couples with little marital intimacy use negative emotions more than positive emotions in their marital interactions. Couples can increase their chances of living together by changing negative verbal interaction, which is a dynamic behavioral factor. In contrast, relatively constant marriage age and negative personality traits can hardly be changed (27).

Marital adjustment is the cornerstone of good family functioning, is the most important predictor of the mental health of married individuals, and improves the communication skills of couples and helps them to understand their new emotions in their marital relationship. To explain more about the effectiveness of Gottman Couple Therapy on marital adjustment of couples with marital problems referring to the counseling centers, it

can be said that couples can use positive emotions to calm themselves and reduce conflict, and given that forgiveness affects positive emotions, such as hope, gratitude, and humility, forgiveness is also a valuable feature that helps a person improve his/her personality and harmonize with different life stages (28).

According to Gottman, a therapeutic reduces repetition of negative behaviors and adds positive behaviors, couple therapy is a factor in reducing blaming spouses and leads to gentler emotions, the couple's communication program has helped incompatible couples to continue their marital relationships and increase their problem-solving skills to work on their problems in a constructive way so that they feel satisfied with the solutions obtained (29). Therefore, considering that Gottman Couple Therapy promotes husband-wife relationships, its training improves couple relationships and consequently brings adjustment to couples (30).

The main limitation of this research was related to the external conditions since the statistical population of the study consisted of a specific group of society, that is, couples with marital problems referring to the counseling centers of Tehran, limiting the possibility of generalizing the results to the whole community. The other limitation was regraded to the measurement tools which were self-report questionnaires. Therefore, the feedback or opinions and self-report of individuals about themselves obtained from these tests might be different from what we can see in the individual's action and behavior. Additionally, since the research project was semi-experimental it does not benefit from real experimental projects. It is recommended to conduct future studies, in which an expert is used as a therapist and treatment trainer to reduce the likelihood of bias in the research and that perform the research in other cities. This research should be followed up after group training as individual counseling. Finally, it is suggested that interviews be used in future research instead of self-report tools.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be said that Gottman Couple Therapy was effective on the intimacy and marital adjustment of couples with marital problems. Therefore, Gottman Couple Therapy could improve couples' relationships and reduce their marital problems.

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