



Original Article

Compare the efficacy of emotion focused couple therapy and Gottman couple therapy method in marital burnout and changing conflict resolution styles

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Abstract

Introduction: This study aimed to compare the efficacy emotion-focused couple therapy and Gottman couple therapy method on couples' burnout and changing conflict resolution styles.

Materials and Methods: The study population of this clinical study consisted of couples referred to counseling and psychological service centers of Karaj city to resolve their marital disputes. 18 couples who received higher scores than the average in Pines Couple Burnout Measure and the lower scores in constructive style of Conflict resolution styles Scale, version B solving conflict were selected via purposeful sampling method they divided randomly into three groups (two experimental groups and one control group). The experimental groups received 10 weekly 120 minutes sessions. Data were analyzed through variance analysis (MANCOVA).

Results: The emotion-focused couple therapy and Gottman couple therapy method reduced marital burnout and changed conflict resolution styles ($P < 0.05$). It was also found that emotion focused couple therapy is more effective than Gottman couple therapy in reducing marital burnout and changing conflict resolution styles.

Conclusion: Based on these findings, the emotion-focused and Gottman couple therapy method are useful in reducing marital problems and changing conflict resolution styles from destructive to constructive conflict resolution styles.

Keywords: Conflict, Couple therapy, Emotion, Marital burnout

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Introduction

Marital conflict can be defined as a situation where there are different positive and negative comments (1). According to this definition, conflict is a phenomenon that occurs in all marital relations. Thus, one aspect of health assessment of marital relations is that how couples resolve their conflicts. If the conflict is resolved in a positive manner, it can be an effective factor to deepen the relationship.

Therefore, a healthy or unhealthy relationship does not depend on the extent of the conflict between individuals, but it depends on how the conflict is resolved. Thus, conflict resolution skills are one of the key indicators of successful relationships, and people who resolve their conflicts constructively, are able to increase the duration of their relationship (3). Resolving conflict in a constructive way is one of the essential tasks to maintain the relationship (4)

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and it has been shown that it has a lot to do with the satisfaction and stability of a relationship. However, unconstructive conflict resolution style leads to frustration and burnout of couples and gradually increases the likelihood of divorce (5). Pines, Neal, Hammer and Ickson (2011) defined burnout as a state of physical, emotional and psychological exhaustion which is created in a climate of long-term conflict with the emotional demands. Physical fatigue is erupted with symptoms such as fatigue, malaise and lethargy and will not go away with sleep (6). Emotional exhaustion appears as resentment, reluctance, depression, loneliness, lack of motivation, feeling stuck, worthlessness, emotional disruption and even suicidal thoughts (7). Mental fatigue usually appears as a decrease in self-esteem and a negative approach towards the relationship with one's spouse and feelings of despair and frustration. In fact, mental fatigue includes feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and deception in relation (8). Idloich and Bruski consider burnout as progressive frustration which includes four progressive stages. These steps respectively include enthusiasm, stagnation, despair, apathy and deception (9). Since marital burnout results in the reduction of love and increase of hostile behavior, it can lead to marital dissatisfaction and can shake the foundation of the family (10).

Today, different approaches to couple therapy and family therapy have been adopted in order to reduce conflicts and confusion between couples. One of the beneficial methods of couple therapy in this context is emotion-focused approach. Research has shown that emotion-focused therapy reduces burnout (11) and increases marital satisfaction (12). Johnson and Greenberg (1985) presented their health strategies and interventions in nine steps (13). In this model, it is assumed that the mental status and interpersonal relations that exist between couples are organized through personal emotional experiences of couples. The basis of emotion-focused therapy is self-improvement and personal growth and balance is the main goal of treatment (14). The main assumption of this approach expresses that as long as couples are not able to discuss their attachment needs in the areas of satisfaction and security, marital conflicts are beginning to take shape (15). Emotionally-focused couple therapy emphasizes healthy attachment through care, support and mutual respect for one's own and spouse's needs. Instead of expressing strong

emotions, it seems that couples express emotions that are less threatening (16). Thus, the distressed couples are trapped in a series of interactive cycles which are strengthened by them and are repeated over and over again, and their inability to bear the emotions that have trapped them lead to confusion and inconsistency in most of the insoluble issues (17). Another couple-therapy approach is Gottman's theory (18-20) that research has showed its usefulness in solving the problems of couples. Gottman (1994) presented his couple-therapy theory about the causes of divorce based on 14 years of research (5). According to the findings of Gottman, Gottman and De Claire (2006), a happy and successful marriage is a marriage where couples behave with each other as a friend and manage their marital conflicts in a mild, respectful and positive manner. Each couple has their own views or perceptions and feelings about marital relationship (21). Hence, Gottman's method of couple therapy aimed at rebuilding the relationship and strengthening marital friendship in order to assist couples to learn about conflict management and learn the meaning of having common sense. According to what has been said, the researchers aimed to study the comparative effectiveness of two approaches of emotionally-focused couple therapy and Gottman's couple therapy on marital burnout of inefficient couples.

Materials and Methods

The study population of this clinical study consisted of couples referred to counseling and psychological service centers of Karaj city to resolve their marital disputes.

18 couples who received higher scores than the average in Pines Couple Burnout Measure and the lower scores in constructive style of Conflict resolution styles Scale, version B solving conflict were selected via purposeful sampling method they divided randomly into three groups (two experimental groups and one control group).

At the beginning of the research, the researcher provided all participants with explanations about the nature and purpose of the treatment sessions and answered their questions. Then, the two experimental groups participated in 10 sessions (120 minutes weekly). The control group did not receive any training until the end of the research process and were placed on the waiting list. At the end of 10 sessions, three

groups again were evaluated by marital burnout questionnaire and conflict resolution styles. Inclusion criteria: The terms of admission to the study included high school diploma education, the completion of the form of moral obligations and participation in all meetings, 3 to 5 years of joint life, not applicant for divorce, and lack of psychological services and individual

counseling outside of the group's sessions. Exclusion criteria: recorded history in psychiatric hospitals, taking psychiatric drugs, the use of any sedative drug, alcohol and narcotic drugs.

Table 1 and 2 show the content of couple therapy sessions (5,18,21).

Table 1. Emotionally-focused couple therapy sessions

Sessions	Title	Summary of sessions
First	Acquaintance and getting started	Acquainting members with each other, setting for the laws and regulations of the group, evaluating the goals and motivating to participate in treatment
Step One: Relieving tension from the interaction cycle		
Second	Identifying the conflict-related issues of the couple's relationship	Discovering problematic interactions, evaluating the problems and attachment obstacles, creating treatment agreement
Third	Identify the negative interaction cycle during stating the problem	Identifying the key emotional responses, coordination between the therapist's detection and client, acceptance of negative interaction cycle by clients
Fourth	Acquisition of unknown emotions related to attachment that underlie the interactive position of spouses	Disclosing outstanding experience related to attachment, acceptance of fundamental unacknowledged feelings, reflecting the emotional experience
Fifth	Reframing the existing problem in terms of the interaction cycle, its underlying emotions and attachment needs	Increasing recognition of attachment needs, acceptance of emotions, deepening the involvement of emotional experience, reframing the problem, tracing
Step Two: Interactive Repositioning		
Sixth	Promoting the process of identifying the attachment needs and the overlooked aspects of oneself	Deepening the emotional conflict, upgrading methods of interaction, focusing on oneself not the other, redefining attachment
Seventh	Promoting the experience acceptance of spouses mutually	Reconstructing interactions and changing events, symbolizing wishes especially repressed wishes
Eighth	Facilitating the expression of needs and desires in order to reconstruct transactions based on new perceptions	Reconstructing interactions, discovering new solutions to old problems, training problem-solving and negotiation skills, reshaping emotions
Step Three: Strengthening and integration		
Ninth	Facilitating the creation of new solutions for old problems	Intimate involvement of clients with their spouse, acceptance of new situations, forming secure attachments, creating a happy story about the relationship
Tenth	Strengthening new situations and attachment behavior cycles	Identifying interaction between the past and present patterns, concluding that vitality does not need therapist.

Table 2. Couple-therapy sessions according to Gottman's method

Sessions	Title	Summary of sessions
First	Acquaintance and initial evaluation	Acquainting group members with each other, setting forth the laws and regulations of the group, assessing the needs of couples, commitment of each spouse to the marriage, couples expectations from each other and from the treatment
Second	Processing conflicts and increasing marital friendship	Changing the interactive patterns with reducing negative behavioral exchanges and promoting positive behavioral exchanges
Third	Reducing the four horsemen of fate	Helping couples to identify the Four Horsemen of Fate (criticism, blame, entrenchment, and silence and their devastating impact on a couple's relationship)
Fourth	Training conflict-resolution skills, persuading and compromising	Teaching couples to realize that conflict is essential to a successful marriage and training them to accept each other's differences and to learn how to cope with them
Fifth	Learning how to deal with persistent unresolved conflicts	Training couples in the correct styles of conflict resolution and compromising with them
Sixth	Creating positive emotions during conflicts	Preventing the extension of conflict and apologizing to each other
Seventh	Creating positive emotions over time without conflict	Reconstructing sense of respect and acceptance of spouse in spite of differences, praising and encouraging each other
Eight	Fixing meta-excitement inconsistency	Increasing understanding of couples of the world of each other in order to cope with stress and conflicts
Ninth	Creating and strengthening a common sense system	Teaching couples to realize the dreams and aspirations of each other and try to support each other in order to fulfill them
Tenth	End	Reviewing the past sessions and running the post-test

Research instrument

A) *Pines Couple Burnout Measure (CBM)*: In this study, in order to measure marital burnout, the 21-question marital burnout scale of Pines (1996) was used (22). In this scale, higher scores indicate greater burnout and the highest score is 147 and the lowest score is 21. To interpret scores, they should be converted into grade which is obtained by dividing the scores obtained by the questionnaire into the number of questions (21 questions). In interpreting the scores, a grade greater than 5 indicates the need for immediate help, grade 5 indicates the presence of crisis, grade 4 represents a state of burnout, grade 3 represents the risk of burnout, and grade 2 and less than it indicates a good relationship. Test-retest reliability is 0.89 for a one-month period, 0.76 for a two-month period and 0.66 for a three-month period. The measured alpha coefficient was reported between 0.91 and 0.93. In Iran, using Cronbach's alpha, Navidi reported 0.86 as the reliability of the questionnaire (23). In a study, in order to obtain the validity of CBM, this test was correlated with Enrich's marital satisfaction scale; the correlation coefficient between the two questionnaires was -0.40 which was significant at $P < 0.001$ (24).

B) *Conflict resolution styles Scale, version B (ROCI-II)*: To measure conflict resolution styles, the second edition of Rahim's conflict resolution styles was used. This is a self-report instrument that measures the amount of conflict and communicational conflict. It includes 28 items, 5 sub-scales of avoidance, compromise, dominant, required and integrated (25), and three general sub-scales as follows: 1.

Constructive conflict resolution style: This general style is obtained from the total of two integrated and required styles. 2. Counterproductive conflict resolution style: This general style is obtained from the total of two dominant and avoidance styles. 3. Compromise style: This style is placed at the midpoint of attention and expectations of others and one's own needs, and refers to the division of scores between the two parties (26).

The items of this scale were scored as a five-point Likert scale. The Likert scale includes the following expressions: Totally disagree (score 1), Disagree (score 2), No idea (score 3), Agree (score 4), and Strongly agree (score 5). Each item can obtain a score from 1 to 5, and then according to the number of items of each subscale, the overall score of that subscale is obtained.

The minimum and maximum score for each subscale is from 1 to 5 according to the number of its items. In several studies, the reliability of this scale has been reported from 0.72 to 0.83 (25). The validity of the scale is also approved so that its validity is calculated using factor analysis and its acceptability is approved. The questionnaire has had a good validity in previous studies (between 0.50 and 0.95).

Since the study design was a pretest-posttest control group design, analysis of covariance was used to analyze the data. Before analyzing the data, in order to ensure that the data meet the assumptions underlying analysis of covariance, these assumptions were firstly examined.

Results

The findings have been indicated as follows:

Table 3. The mean and standard deviation of marital burnout and attachment styles in the experimental and control groups

Variable	Score	Gottman's Couples Therapy		Emotionally-focused couple therapy		Control	
		Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Marital Burnout	Mean	3.962	2.790	3.655	2.198	3.530	3.759
	Standard deviation	0.450	0.162	0.786	0.158	0.651	0.160
Conflict resolution styles	Mean	90.666	98.750	90.333	119.33	98.750	91.93
	Standard deviation	10.03	7.89	5.49	8.700	9.84	8.23

As can be seen in Table 3, the mean scores of the pre-test of the experimental group of Gottman's couple therapy method, emotionally-focused couple therapy method and the control group were not different. But after applying the experimental variables (couple therapy),

differences were found in the mean of marital burnout and conflict resolution styles of the three groups in the post-test. In order to determine the significance of these differences, analysis of covariance was used.

Table 4. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test of normality and Levene test to examine homogeneity of variances

	The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test			Levene test	Degree of freedom 1	Degree of freedom 2	Sig. level
	Statistics	df	Sig.				
Burnout pre-test	0.11	36	0.20	0.95	2	33	0.39
Burnout post-test	0.12	36	0.20	0.28	2	33	0.75
Conflict resolution styles pre-test	0.16	36	0.15	0.96	2	33	0.40
Conflict resolution styles post-test	0.10	36	0.20	0.34	2	33	0.66

As Table 4 indicates, significance levels of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and Levene test for homogeneity of variances are more than 0.05. With a high level of confidence, it can be said

that there is a normality of data and homogeneity of variances in the two variables of marital burnout and conflict resolution styles.

Table 5. One-way analysis of covariance for comparison of conflict resolution styles and marital burnout in emotionally-focused couple therapy, Gottman's couple therapy method, and the control group

Variables	The source of changes	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig. level	The amount of impact
Conflict resolution styles	Pre-test	62.309	1	62.309	1.815	0.007	0.025
	Group	560.246	2	280.123	3.666	0.003	0.186
Marital burnout	Pre-test	2.306	1	173.43	7.68	0.009	0.194
	Group	5.282	2	254.49	8.807	0.001	0.355

According to the above table, by controlling pre-test, emotionally-focused couple therapy and Gottman's couple therapy method have a significant impact on the conflict resolution styles and marital burnout. In order to clarify which treatment method has made the F value significant, Tukey test was used. The results of the Tukey test showed that there were significant differences between the couples of the experimental groups and the control group. In addition, a significant difference was observed between the experimental groups; that is, emotionally-focused couple therapy is more effective than Gottman's couple therapy method in changing the conflict resolution styles and reducing marital burnout.

Discussion

The results showed that emotionally-focused couple therapy and Gottman's couple therapy method led to reduced marital burnout and changing in conflict resolution skills. Also, emotionally-focused couple therapy was more effective than Gottman's couple therapy method in reducing marital burnout. This finding is in line with the findings of Rajaei, Mahroomi,

Bahrami, Babcock, Gottman, Ryan, and Gottman, Gottman and Silver and Brand (18-20,27-29). They found that Gottman's couple therapy method reduced marital problems of couples. To explain these findings, it can be said that after attending Gottman's therapy sessions, couples learned to renegotiate their obligations and responsibilities, to communicate with each other effectively, to talk about the causes of disagreement and the importance of expressing their views about the best way to manage disagreements, and to actualize their suggested ideas. This issue causes the couples to significantly show more positive emotions, good communication, and more appropriate problem-solving behaviors. These positive emotions and constructive methods of conflict resolution in turn reduce marital burnout. According to Gottman, the condition for a success relationship is the overall level of positive emotions and the ability to reduce negative emotions when solving conflicts (30). Gottman believes that therapeutic interventions should increase positive emotions and help couples discover strategies to reduce negative emotions during conflict.

Moreover, the results revealed that emotionally-focused group therapy and Gottman's couple group therapy reduced marital burnout and changed conflict resolution styles. Also, emotionally-focused couple therapy was more effective than Gottman's couple therapy method in reducing marital burnout. The findings of this study on the effectiveness of emotionally-focused couple therapy in reducing marital burnout and changing the conflict resolution styles are in line with the findings of Etemadi and Barabadi, Honarparvaran, Tabrizi, Navabi Nezhad, and Shafiabadi, Daavarnia, Zhrakaar, Moairi, and Shakarami, Dalgleish, Johnson, Moser, and Tasca, Soleymani Ahmadi, Zarei, and Fallahchai, Mira, Greenberg, Warwar and Malcolm (11,12,31-35). In all the mentioned studies, the researchers came to the conclusion that emotionally-focused couple therapy is useful in helping couples to resolve their marital problems. To explain these findings, it can be said that emotionally-focused couple therapy focuses on changing the attachment behavior as a means to improve troubled relationships (14). This view considers communication disturbances as a result of the failure of couples to share emotions and cope with feelings of insecurity which leads to negative interactive cycle. Thus, it aims to help couples achieve the inner excitements and facilitate positive interactions that increase the availability and reliability of couples (36). The investigation of 6 couples also showed that emotionally-focused couple therapy reduced marital burnout by detecting negative emotions, increasing positive interactions and breaking the negative cycle of interaction. Finally, although there is no research comparing the effectiveness of emotionally-focused couple therapy and Gottman's couple therapy method, similar research in this field can be pointed and it can be said that these findings are consistent with the following research findings. Johnson and Greenberg found that emotion-focused therapy is more beneficial than couple therapy with a problem-solving approach and its impact was sustained in a two-month follow-up (13). James explored the effect of adding communication skills training to the emotion-focused therapy and found that this method had no effect on the efficacy of emotionally-focused couple therapy. However, his study showed the effect of emotionally-focused couple therapy which was confirmed by Johnson and Greenberg previously (37). In addition, Asadpour, Shaghaghi, Mehdi

Nezhad Ghoshi showed that approaches to self-regulation and emotion-focused couple therapy increased the intimacy of couples and emotionally-focused couple therapy had the greatest impact on increasing the intimacy of couples (38). To explain these findings, it can be said that the theory of Gottman and Johnson have some differences and perhaps these differences have made emotionally-focused couple therapy more effective than the Gottman's couple therapy method (5,39). These differences are as follows:

The Gottman's theory was shaped deductively. In contrast, the emotionally-focused couple therapy of Johnson and Greenberg was derived inductively from the Bowlby theory which in turn was derived from the Freud's work. Inductive and deductive methods are simply two different ways in the creation of scientific theory. Therefore, the Gottman's model, now known as the Gottman's couple therapy method, is a pattern based on analogy which was designed to reduce the likelihood of divorce. The basis of the emotionally-focused couple therapy of Johnson and Greenberg is the attachment theory, but Gottman's theory is based on system and research theory which took place in the field of divorce. 3. Gottman gave an emphasis to more negative communication and interactive patterns in creating marital conflict, and Johnson and Greenberg emphasized the negative emotions and attachment behaviors. 4. Naturally, because of different theoretical underpinnings, different treatment strategies are used in both approaches. It is recommended that the effectiveness of emotionally-focused couple therapy and Gottman's couple therapy method be explored with participant who are single-sexed or are not married, on a wide range of marital problems apart from marital burnout, and with samples other than couples referring to the counseling centers.

Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that emotionally-focused couple therapy and Gottman's group couple therapy method led to changes in conflict resolution styles and reduced the marital burnout of couples.

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