



# The Effectiveness of Emotionally-Focused Couple Therapy in Resolution of Marital Conflicts between the Couples Who Visited the Consultation Centers

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**ABSTRACT:** The present study investigates the effectiveness of emotionally-focused couple therapy in resolution of marital conflicts between the couples who visited consultation centers in the city of Bandar Abbas. This study employs a semi-empirical method and has been carried out by using test and control groups through pre-test and post-test stages. The statistical population of the study includes all the couples who attended consultation centers in the city of Bandar Abbas during 2011-2012 to resolve their marital problems. The study sample is comprised of 30 couples who were selected using convenience sampling method and then, were divided to two groups of control group and test group. The used data collection tool is the marital conflict questionnaire which involves 42 questions and has been designed. The questionnaire has a high validity and reliability. The couples in test group got 9 sessions of marital therapy for a duration of 90 minutes per session (one session per week), but those in control group did not. Descriptive statistics methods such as frequency, mean value and standard deviation calculations along with inferential statistics methods like covariance analysis were employed for data analysis. The obtained data were processed using SPSS 16 software. The results showed that the mean value of marital conflict for test group post-test is significantly lower than that for control group post-test and there is a significant difference between the two groups ( $P < 0.0001$ ). The study assumption about the effectiveness of emotionally-focused couple therapy in resolution of marital conflicts between the couples visiting consultation centers in the city of Bandar Abbas is confirmed.

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## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is one of the most important milestones in everybody's life and has its roots in the beginning of human history or even in prehistory.

Marital conflicts are the prelude to couples separation which start with simple disputes and may extend to intense verbal conflicts, quarrels, fights, and sometimes may end in divorce. Divorce itself may result in personal, domestic, and social dissolution and usually harms women more than men.

The successful resolution of a marital conflict relies on the way chosen by couples to resolve it.

On the one hand, increase of divorce rate and dissatisfaction, and on the other hand, couples demand for improvement of the marital relations indicates their need for intervention and specialized trainings. In United States and Britain, the receipt of a professional help with marital and domestic relations and issues is so crucial to individuals because of the deleterious effects of marital problems on their physical and mental health.

Emotionally-Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) is one of the Couple Therapy methods. Emotionally-focused therapy is a short-term and structured approach for couple therapy which has been developed based on clear concepts of marital distresses, emotional

cognition, adulthood love and emotional responses. According to this viewpoint, marital distresses are created and then continue by the comprehensive states of negative emotions and attachment traumas, neglect of internal needs and demands, negative interactive patterns and undesirable emotional experiences (Johnson and Greenberg, 1985).

Emotionally-focused couple therapy was propounded in the early 1980s as a response to the lack of active and efficient marital interventions (Johnson and Greenberg, 1985). During last decade, emotionally-focused therapy has been more successful than other couple therapy approaches.

Emotionally-focused couple therapy helps couples with achieving a secure attachment in their relationships. Emotionally-focused therapy aims to specify vicious interactional cycle and problematic attachment traumas as well as to rebuild fundamental attachment emotions so that interaction cycles are changed and rebuilt (Johnson, 2004).

Based on numerous evidences, the couples with disturbed relationships are overcome with some extremely negative emotions and responses such as criticism, enmity, rage, stress, jealousy, abandonment and defensiveness.

Recent researches revealed it is not the conflicts and tensions that lead problematic marriages into divorce but the reduction in expressing sentimental feelings, the reduction in positive emotional relationships, and the couples sensitivity to each other which anticipate the failure in a relationship. Emotionally-focused therapy aims to build the fundamental attachment emotions so that interaction cycles are changed and rebuilt.

In a research by Karimi in 2012, the effectiveness of integrative couple therapy in the reduction of traumas caused by marital betrayal was compared to that of emotionally-focused couple therapy and results showed both integrative and emotionally-focused couple therapy approaches have roughly similar effects on the both short-term and long-term reduction of the subsequent depression. Rasuli et al. in a research entitled "comparing the effectiveness of individual and marital emotionally-focused intervention based on decreasing relationship distress of the couples with chronically ill children" founded that therapy had significantly been effective and could successfully reduce the relationship distress of couples with both individual and marital methods. Moreover, both individual and marital approaches managed to enhance the level of couples satisfaction, empathy, agreement, and marital romance. It was also revealed that there was no significant difference between the effectiveness of individual therapy (only for woman) and marital therapy (for couples). Investigation of the effect of emotionally-focused couple therapy on marital adjustment by Ziyaolhagh (2010) revealed that emotionally-focused couple therapy enhances the marital adjustment of distressed couples. In addition, although the marital adjustment score was greater for therapy group than for control group during pursuit stage, no significant difference was observed between therapy and control groups during the period from post-test stage to pursuit stage. Hence, the continuity of the study findings with time was not confirmed.

Honarparvaran et al. (2009), studying the effectiveness of emotionally-focused approach in couples sexual satisfaction, concluded that the emotionally-focused intervention impacts upon the enhancement of sexual satisfactions factors such as improvement of sexual behavior, willingness, emotions, quality, and satisfaction and this impact is greater for women than for men.

Rezaie et al. (2008) in their research entitled "the impact of emotionally-focused couple therapy on improving communication patterns in combat-related PTSD veterans and their wives" found that emotionally-focused couple therapy leads to an increase in the application of mutual constructive

communication pattern by couples as well as to a decrease in their application of mutual

Communication-avoidant patterns and abandonment expectation. Moreover, it seemed the increase in the application of mutual constructive communication pattern enhanced their mental health.

Berne et al. investigated the effect of behavioral and emotionally-focused couple therapies on the distress of couples and found that integrative couple therapy and tendency towards providing couples with a view through marital therapy may have more influence than behavioral couple therapy. This study confirms that this result needs to be replicated and that emotionally-focused couple therapy leads to a reduction in couple's distress in the long term. Furthermore, addition of a cognitive therapy and its combination with emotionally-focused couple therapy does not enhance its impact. Eventually, emotionally-focused couple therapy may have a greater impact than problem-solving therapy or a smaller impact than integrative systematic therapy.

Makinen and Johnson (2006), studying the resolution of attachment traumas in couples using emotionally-focused therapy, concluded that determined couples are considerably more attached and have more thorough levels of experience compared to undetermined ones. They also make some progress in satisfaction and forgiveness. Such results support the resolution method of attachment trauma and suggest that emotionally-focused couple therapy is quite beneficial for couples.

Johnson and Greenberg (1985) compared the effect of emotionally-focused and problem-solving empirical interventions on resolution of marital conflicts. Results revealed the effect of emotionally-focused therapy on couples adjustment, intimacy, and complained levels dominates that of problem-solving therapy and during pursuit stage, couples adjustment score for emotionally-focused therapy group was considerably higher than the score for those in problem-solving therapy group.

Bray and Jouriles (1995), in their research entitled "resolution of marital conflict and prevention of divorce", have investigated the impact of marital therapy and evaluated the long-term effect of couple therapy on couples separation and divorce. Their study tested the long-term effect of couple therapy on the prevention of couples separation and divorce, which was scattered but hopeful, by taking the impact of couple therapy on marriage stability into account. Moreover, they discussed the prediction of successful couple therapy results, significant results of clinical couple therapy, and the worthwhile impacts of marital therapy.

The present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of emotionally-focused couple therapy in resolution of marital conflicts between the couples who attended consultation centers in the city of Bandar Abbas.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study employs a semi-empirical method and a testing approach including a test group and a control group along with pre-test and post-test. The statistical population of the study includes all the couples who attended consultation centers in the city of Bandar Abbas during 2011-2012 to resolve their marital problems. The study sample is comprised of 30 couples who visited consultation center and agreed to participate in the survey. Sampling was carried out using the convenience-sampling method and participants were randomly divided to two groups of control group and test group (15 couple in each group) before investigation. Data were collected using the marital conflict questionnaire which involves 42 questions and has been designed by Barati and Sanaie. Pre-test was first done on both of the test and control groups after random selection of the samples. Then, emotionally-focused intervention test was done on just test group couples during nine 90-minute sessions of emotionally-focused therapy. The total approach of the intervention can be divided to following nine steps:

**First session:** getting familiar with couples and doing a preliminary interview with them, getting familiar with their intention to participate in therapy sessions, familiarizing couples with the general regulations of therapy, clarifying the rules of therapy sessions for couples and running the pre-test .

**Second session:** developing therapeutic relationship, evaluating the problem nature, giving clients a sense of safety, support, acceptance and being understood by therapist, giving assignments

**Third session:** diagnosing the negative interactional cycle and helping couples to reveal their negative interactional cycle, assessing the relationship and the attachment between couples, familiarizing couples with the role of emotions in interpersonal interactions, restoring interactions, increasing couples tolerance, and giving assignments .

**Fourth session:** accessing the unknown sentiments which are fundamental to interactional situations, focusing further on attachment emotions, needs and fears, facilitating couples interaction with each other and validating their attachment experiences, needs and tendencies, focusing on the secondary emotions which are revealed in

interactional cycle and scrutinizing them to reach the unknown fundamental emotions, discussing and processing the primary emotions and raising couples knowledge of them, and giving assignments.

**Fifth session:** shaping and forming the problem on the basis of fundamental sentiments and attachment needs, emphasizing the references ability to express emotions, informing couples about the effect of their fear and defensive mechanisms on emotional and cognitive procedures, describing receipt cycle and attachment background, and giving assignments

**Sixth session:** persuading them to discern the stated needs and their denied aspects, attracting couples attention to the method of interaction with each other, reflecting their interactional patterns with mutual respect and sympathy, expressing attachment needs and recognizing denied needs, raising correction experience acceptance, and giving assignments

**Seventh session:** clarifying the status and role of couples in a relationship, raising the couples acceptance of each other's experiences, tracking the known emotions and underlying attachment needs, and giving assignments

**Eighth session:** facilitating the expression of needs, demands and creating emotional involvement, developing primary emotional experiences in attachment and recognizing internal needs and interests, making new attachments by establishing a safe bonding between couples, and giving assignment

**Ninth session:** creating new interactional situations and solutions for old problems, sustaining new situations and emotional behaviors cycles, finishing old interactional patterns and establishing a relationship based on a safe bonding so that discussing the problems and seeking their solutions will not harm it anymore, evaluating the changes, running a post-test, and giving assignments

## RESULTS

Table 1 lists the mean value and standard deviation of instability index and marital conflict scores for both of the test and control groups during pre-test and post-test stages. The results listed in table 1 reveal that in the test group, therapeutic intervention (independent variable) causes considerable changes in dependent variables and the mean value of post-test scores is smaller than that of pre-test scores, while no change in dependent variable was observed for control group which had not received any therapeutic intervention.

**Table 1.** the mean value and standard deviation of instability index and marital conflict scores for both of the test and control groups during pre-test and post-test stages

Stages	Group	Statistical Indicator	Marital Conflict
Pre test	Test	Mean Value	<b>135.2</b>
		Standard Deviation	<b>4.86</b>
	Control	Mean Value	<b>134.73</b>
		Standard Deviation	<b>3.35</b>
Post test	Test	Mean Value	<b>93.33</b>
		Standard Deviation	<b>8.93</b>
	Control	Mean Value	<b>138.33</b>
		Standard Deviation	<b>4.29</b>

**The Study Assumption:** emotionally-focused couple therapy affects the resolution of marital conflicts between the couples of Bandar Abbas city. In this study, the statistical method of covariance analysis was used to investigate (reject or confirm) the study assumption. The assumption of regression slopes homogeneity was also made before analysis of the data on study assumption to ensure the obtained

data meet the requirements by covariance analysis fundamental assumptions, that is, the regression slopes should be the same for both of the test and control groups. If the regression is heterogeneous, covariance analysis will not be an appropriate analysis technique. The regression homogeneity assumption is key to covariance analysis .

**Table 2.** F-test results, the homogeneity of regression slopes for test and control groups

Variable	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
<b>Marital Conflict</b>	60.18	1	60.18	2.42	0.125

According to the result in table 2, the assumption of regression slopes homogeneity is not rejected, in other words, the equality of regression slopes is

confirmed since the significance level values are greater than 0.01.

**Table 3.** The results of Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to investigate the normality of errors

Variable	The Z value of Kolmogorov–Smirnov test	Sig.
<b>Marital Conflict</b>	0.759	0.612

According to the results in table 3, there is no significant difference between variables distribution and normal distribution. Covariance analysis was also employed to investigate the effectiveness of emotionally-focused therapeutic interventions in

reduction of marital conflict between couples. This was achieved by making a comparison between test group and control group based on their post-test scores and by considering the effect of pre-test. Results are shown in table 4.

**Table 4.** Results of covariance analysis of the marital conflicts scores for the couples in test and control groups

Group	Modified mean	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	F	Df	Sig.
<b>Test</b>	90.39	133.37	90.17	125.3	1	0.001
<b>Control</b>	136.50	133.87	136.73			

The values of  $f=1250.3$  and  $P<0.0001$  demonstrates that there is no significant difference between the mean values of marital conflicts scores of two groups. Thus, the study assumption is confirmed, that is, emotionally-focused couple therapy impacts upon the resolution of marital conflicts between the couples who visited the consultation center.

**DISCUSSION**

Nowadays, the quality of marital relationship is of great importance since most people live in two-people associations and nobody other than their

mates can be counted on for emotional support (Johnson and Whiffen, 1999).

The increasing prevalence of marital distress and its connection with the physical and mental health of adults and next generation along with the strong evidence for the impact of couple therapy upon the resolution of marital problems have made the couple therapy one of the main components of health services. On this basis, the quality of couple's relationships has a high priority in mental health programming. Therefore, the present study assumed that emotionally-focused couple therapy impacts upon

the resolution of marital conflicts between the couples who visited consultation center in the city of Bandar Abbas.

The result listed in table 4 ( $f=1250.3$  and  $P<0.0001$ ) shows the effectiveness of emotionally-focused couple therapy in resolution of marital conflicts is significant. In other words, there is no significant difference in marital conflict reduction between test group and control group during the period from the pre-test session to the post-test session. In fact, emotionally-focused couple therapy has significantly decreased the marital conflict scores of the couples in test group compare to that of the couples in control group.

The results of this study is in good accordance with the findings of Johnson and Greenberg (1985), Greenberg et al. (1993), Byrne et al. (2004), Makinen and Johnson (2006), Greenberg et al. (2010), Karimi (2012), Javadzadeh Shahshahanie et al. (2010), Hosseinzadeh Taghvaie et al. (2009), Ziyaolhagh (2010), Sanaie Zaker and Erfan Manesh (2009), Honarparvaran et al. (2009), Rezaie et al. (2008), HosseinAbadie (2009) who have all investigated the effectiveness of emotionally-focused couple therapy in the improvement of couples relationships.

This finding can be further clarified as follows: since emotionally-focused therapy assumes emotions are not only a basic element in marital conflicts creation but also a powerful and usually a mandatory element in bringing changes in distressed relationships (Johnson, 2004), marital distresses are created and then continue by the comprehensive states of negative emotions and attachment traumas, neglect of internal needs and demands, negative interactive pattern and undesirable emotional experiences (Johnson and Greenberg, 1985). Emotionally-focused couple therapy helps couples with achieving a secure attachment in their relationships. Emotionally-focused therapy aims to specify vicious interactional cycle and problematic attachment traumas as well as to rebuild fundamental emotions of attachment so that interaction cycles are changed and rebuilt (Johnson, 2004).

Researches on the process of changing in emotionally-focused couple therapy show couples discovery of their responses and connection with each other's emotional needs is related with very high levels of changing into positive interactions (Greenberg et al. 1993, Johnson and Greenberg, 1985), intimacy, powerful emotional self-disclosure (Greenberg and Goldman, 1998), and empathic and intimate responses. In this study, the clients could control their emotions, which had been caused by conflict and insecure attachment, and also managed to overcome their fears and improve their interactions level by attending emotionally-focused therapy sessions.

During emotionally-focused therapy to improve the couple's relationships and resolve their marital problems, the vulnerable or hidden primary sentiments such as sadness, fear and shyness are reflected by therapist. Furthermore, emotional experiences are extended so that they can be corrected.

Emotionally-focused therapy re-processes experiences and organizes interactions in order to create a secure attachment and a feeling of safety (Johnson, 2004). Therefore, according to the results of this study and similar researches and considering the effect of emotionally-focused couple therapy on resolution of marital conflicts, the study assumption is confirmed.

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