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Effectiveness of Emotion-Focused Therapy on Cognitive Fusion in Couples Seeking Divorce

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examined the efficacy of emotion-focused therapy (EFT) in addressing cognitive fusion among couples seeking divorce.

Methods: Using a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test assessments and a control group, the study recruited 30 couples from counseling centers in Tehran's fifth district in 2023 through convenience sampling. Participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental group (n=15 couples) receiving eight 90-minute EFT sessions twice weekly or a control group (n=15 couples) placed on a waitlist. Cognitive fusion was measured using the Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire (CFQ). Data were analyzed using univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in SPSS-24.

Results: Post-test results indicated a statistically significant reduction in cognitive fusion in the experimental group compared to the control group after adjusting for pre-test scores.

Conclusions: Emotion-focused therapy effectively reduced cognitive fusion in divorce-seeking couples. Given its therapeutic benefits, EFT should be integrated into psychological and family therapy interventions to mitigate cognitive fusion in high-conflict couples.

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Introduction

The family has long been recognized as the most fundamental institution for human development and flourishing (Huntington, 2012). Although this sacred institution begins with marriage, what is even more important than marriage itself is its success and stability (Esfandiyari et al., 2023). In some marriages, couples' relationships gradually become strained, manifesting as spousal mistreatment, a lack of intimacy and commitment, and verbal or physical conflicts, which may ultimately lead to divorce (Cribbet et al., 2020). Divorce is most often defined as the legal dissolution of the marital bond, usually occurring after a period of marital discord or instability (Fallesen, 2021). Relationship breakdown, separation, or divorce is categorized in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) under relational problems with a spouse or intimate partner (Cabılar & Yılmaz, 2022). This category applies when couples live apart or are in the process of separating due to relationship difficulties (Association, 2015). Official marriage and divorce statistics in Iran also indicate a steady rise in divorce rates. In 2016, for example, one divorce was recorded for every five marriages. Marital conflicts can lead to marital burnout and an increased tendency toward divorce (Birditt et al., 2010). As frustration and tension stemming from unmet interpersonal needs and desires accumulate, such frustration is often explicitly directed toward the spouse (Esmaili et al., 2022). This erosion of affection and commitment gives way to marital burnout, replacing the initial passion and enthusiasm. Marital burnout rarely develops suddenly; rather, it usually emerges gradually and is seldom the result of a single adverse event (Javdan et al., 2023). It occurs when spouses realize that, despite their efforts, their relationship fails to give meaning to their lives and is unlikely to do so in the future. The accumulation of frustrations and daily life stresses leads to emotional exhaustion, resulting in burnout, which is often accompanied by physical, psychological, and emotional symptoms (Jalali Tehrani, 2020).

One important factor influencing divorce is cognitive beliefs, particularly cognitive fusion (Ghasemi & Movahedi, 2022). Cognitive fusion refers to the degree to which individuals are entangled with their thoughts, allowing these thoughts to dominate their behavior (Bodenlos et al., 2020; Cookson et al., 2020). When a person becomes fused with their thoughts, they behave as though these thoughts are absolute truths. In such cases, cognitive events outweigh other behavioral regulatory processes, reducing sensitivity to direct consequences and increasing

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overinvolvement with thoughts, to the point where thoughts dominate behavior (Gillanders et al., 2014). Cognitive fusion is defined as a tendency toward excessively thought-regulated behavior, characterized by attachment to the content of private events. Individuals with high levels of cognitive fusion perceive their thoughts as unquestionable facts, leading these cognitive events to dictate behaviors and actions (Solé et al., 2015). This often results in a strong agreement with one's own thoughts and an inability to modify them (Hur et al., 2020).

Given the importance of reducing the tendency toward divorce and marital burnout in sustaining marital life, various interventions—both rehabilitative and educational—have been implemented worldwide, including in Iran, to support couples at risk of divorce. One such effective approach is Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT). In EFT, couples engage in a therapeutic process in which each partner attempts to express their fears and attachment needs and to foster a more secure attachment bond. This process promotes lasting improvements in relationship satisfaction and facilitates adaptive emotional responses to life situations (Goldman & Greenberg, 2013). The central hypothesis of EFT is that marital conflicts begin when partners are unable to communicate their attachment needs in terms of satisfaction and security ((Şenol et al., 2023). In practice, EFT therapists, through an empathic relationship, help clients access maladaptive emotions and replace them with more adaptive emotions such as forgiveness, compassion, empathy, and protective anger. Clients are guided to identify, experience, and regulate their emotions, eventually accepting them and constructing new meanings. As a result, individuals become more capable of facing emotions they once avoided (Greenberg, 2004).

Given the increasing divorce rate in Iran and its numerous negative social, personal, familial, and cultural consequences, it is crucial to examine the variables and factors that contribute to divorce more thoroughly. Marital burnout and cognitive fusion are among the factors that may influence couples' relationships and thus their tendency toward divorce. Emotion-Focused Therapy, with its emphasis on the positive and healthy aspects of life, appears to be an effective intervention for reducing marital burnout and cognitive fusion. Accordingly, the present study was designed to determine the effectiveness of EFT in reducing cognitive fusion and marital burnout among couples seeking divorce, addressing the key research question: Does Emotion-Focused Therapy significantly influence cognitive fusion and marital burnout among couples applying for divorce?

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Material and Methods

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with pretest–posttest measurements and a control group. The research population comprised couples applying for divorce who attended counseling centers in District 5 of Tehran during the summer of 2023. Using convenience sampling, 30 couples were selected and randomly assigned to two equal groups (15 couples per group).

Inclusion criteria were: (a) age between 20 and 50 years, (b) a minimum of one year of shared marital life, (c) basic literacy (reading and writing skills), (d) no current psychological disorders, and (e) no history of psychiatric illness according to their psychological records. Exclusion criteria were: (a) unwillingness to continue therapy sessions, (b) absence from more than two sessions during the intervention, and (c) incomplete or invalid responses to the research instruments.

Instruments

Cognitive Fusion Questionnaire (CFQ): This scale Developed by Gillanders et al. (2014), this instrument consists of 7 items scored on a Likert scale, with total scores ranging from 7 to 49. Higher scores reflect greater cognitive fusion. Gillanders et al. (2014) reported acceptable factor structure, reliability, temporal stability, discriminant validity, and sensitivity to treatment, with a test–retest reliability coefficient of 0.81 over a four-week interval. In Iran, Soltani et al. (2016) confirmed acceptable validity and reliability for the Persian version, with Cronbach's alpha and test–retest reliability coefficients both at 0.86.

Marital Burnout Scale (MBS) – This 21-item self-report scale was developed by Pines (2004) to measure marital burnout in couples. It comprises three subscales: *physical exhaustion* (e.g., fatigue, weakness, and sleep disturbances), *emotional exhaustion* (e.g., depression, hopelessness, and feeling trapped), and *psychological exhaustion* (e.g., feelings of worthlessness, frustration, and anger toward one's spouse). In Iran, Zali et al. (2019) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 for the scale and test–retest reliability coefficients of 0.89, 0.76, and 0.66 over one-, two-, and four-month intervals, respectively.

Procedure

After obtaining approval from the directors of the counseling centers, reception staff referred couples applying for divorce to the researcher. Thirty couples who agreed to participate were selected and randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group. The experimental

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group received eight 90-minute sessions of *Emotion-Focused Therapy* (two sessions per week), while the control group did not receive any intervention and was placed on a waiting list. Both groups were assessed for cognitive fusion and marital burnout before the intervention and again a few days after its completion. The content of the EFT sessions is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of EFT sessions

Session	Content
1	Introduction, establishing continuity, exploring the motivation for treatment, explaining the concept of emotion, paying attention to pleasant and unpleasant emotional states
2	Acceptance and reflection of interactive and emotional experiences, discovering problematic interactions, assessing the problem and obstacles to attachment, creating a therapeutic agreement, continuing to assess and identify the cycle of negative interaction
3	Uncovering salient experiences related to attachment, discovering fears and feelings of insecurity, accepting fundamental unacknowledged feelings
4	Clarifying key emotional responses, coordinating the diagnosis between the therapist and the patients, accepting the cycle of interaction by the patients
5	Expressing emotions, increasing identification of attachment needs, accepting emotions, deepening engagement with the emotional experience
6	Deepening emotional engagement, improving interaction methods, focusing on the self not the other, redefining attachment
7	Reconstructing interactions and changing events, symbolizing desires, especially repressed desires, facilitating new solutions to solve problems
8	Reconstructing interactions, discovering new solutions to old problems, facilitating closure, identifying the interaction between the past and present pattern

Ethical considerations included maintaining confidentiality of questionnaires, obtaining informed consent from participants, and allowing them to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Data analysis was performed using univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with SPSS version 24.

Results

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation scores for cognitive fusion and marital burnout in the pretest and posttest phases for couples applying for divorce.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation scores for cognitive fusion and marital burnout

Variable	Phase	Experimental		Control		P
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Cognitive Fusion	Pretest	40.35	1.98	40.58	2.79	> 0.05
	Posttest	32.69	1.58	40.87	2.57	< 0.05
Marital Burnout	Pretest	62.22	1.42	61.47	1.34	> 0.05
	Posttest	56.67	1.96	60.65	1.58	< 0.05

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In the pretest phase, there were no statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups for either cognitive fusion or marital burnout ($p > .05$). However, in the posttest phase, the differences between the two groups were statistically significant ($p < .05$). Preliminary assumption testing for univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) indicated that all assumptions were met: the normality assumption according to the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, the equality of covariance matrices according to Box's M test, the homogeneity of variances according to Levene's test, and the homogeneity of regression slopes (all $p > .05$).

Multivariate test results were significant, indicating that Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) had a statistically significant effect on at least one of the dependent variables—cognitive fusion and marital burnout—among couples applying for divorce. Based on the Wilks' Lambda value, the partial eta squared (η^2) showed that approximately 68% of the variance in the dependent variables could be attributed to the intervention ($p < .05$).

Table 3 presents the ANCOVA results for cognitive fusion and marital burnout separately. As shown, EFT significantly reduced both cognitive fusion and marital burnout among couples applying for divorce.

Table 3. ANCOVA results for cognitive fusion and marital burnout

Variable	SS	DF	MS	F	P	η^2	Power
Cognitive Fusion	1893.46	1	1893.46	68.83	0.05	0.87	0.62
Marital Burnout	542.11	1	542.11	59.34	0.05	0.52	0.69

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) in reducing cognitive fusion and marital burnout among couples applying for divorce. The findings revealed that, after controlling for the effect of pretest scores, there was a statistically significant difference in posttest cognitive fusion between the experimental and control groups. This suggests that EFT was effective in reducing cognitive fusion.

These results are consistent with previous research in this field. For instance, Zaeimi et al. (2021) found that EFT had a positive effect on components of flexibility and social commitment in couples applying for divorce. Similarly, Mahmoudvandi-Baher et al. (2018) reported that group-based EFT improved hope and reduced automatic negative thoughts among divorced women.

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The reduction in cognitive fusion observed in this study can be explained by the therapeutic processes of EFT, which address emotional difficulties between partners, identify unexpressed and suppressed emotions, and clarify unmet emotional and relational needs. By fostering emotional awareness and encouraging partners to express affection more openly, EFT enhances interpersonal interactions. In addition, EFT promotes secure attachment styles, reduces emotional and anxiety-related difficulties, and may even contribute to improved physical health. In this therapeutic approach, couples learn to understand their partner's emotions, communicate their own positive and negative feelings, and become active, empathetic listeners. Although these skills may appear simple, they are crucial steps toward mutual understanding and reduced cognitive fusion.

The study also found that, after controlling for pretest scores, there was a statistically significant difference in posttest marital burnout between the experimental and control groups. This indicates that EFT was effective in reducing marital burnout. These findings are in line with previous studies, such as Mahmoudvandi-Baher et al. (2018), which showed that EFT positively affected marital burnout and moral commitment among couples applying for divorce. Likewise, Ghasemi et al. (2023) reported that EFT was effective in reducing marital burnout.

The observed reduction in marital burnout can be attributed to the fact that EFT encourages partners—particularly women—to discuss their emotions, address relevant issues during therapy sessions, and reconstruct emotional bonds through secure attachment. Emotional responses generated during therapy can meet individual needs, and the core aim of such interventions is to increase emotional awareness, which in turn alleviates marital difficulties ((Amini et al., 2020).

The main limitations of this study include the self-report nature of the measurement tools and the absence of a follow-up phase to assess the durability of the intervention effects. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings. Future studies could employ multiple data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews, to complement questionnaire data. Additionally, conducting longitudinal studies with follow-up assessments would help evaluate the long-term effectiveness of EFT in reducing cognitive fusion and marital burnout.

Based on the results, EFT can be recommended as an effective intervention in couple counseling, particularly for couples on the verge of divorce. Its application in clinical and counseling settings may support emotional reconnection, reduce relational distress, and prevent marital dissolution.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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