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The Effectiveness of Family Therapy Strategies on Marital Burnout and Conflicts among Couples Inclined toward Emotional Divorce

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of family therapy strategies on marital burnout and marital conflicts among couples inclined toward emotional divorce.

Methods: This study was applied in terms of its purpose and quasi-experimental in design, utilizing a pretest-posttest control group approach. The statistical population comprised all couples prone to emotional divorce who referred to counseling and psychological centers in Tehran in 2025-2026 (1404 SH). Using convenience sampling, 30 couples (60 individuals) meeting the inclusion criteria were selected and randomly assigned to an experimental group (15 couples) and a control group (15 couples). The experimental group received 10 sessions of family therapy intervention, whereas the control group received no intervention. Data were collected using the Pines Marital Burnout Measure (1981), the Marital Conflict Questionnaire by Sanaei et al. (2008), and Gottman's Emotional Divorce Scale (1994). Data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) in SPSS software (version 27).

Results: The findings of the multivariate analysis of covariance demonstrated that family therapy strategies significantly reduced marital burnout. Furthermore, this intervention led to a statistically significant decrease in marital conflicts in the experimental group compared to the control group.

Conclusions: The findings indicate that family therapy strategies are an effective intervention for reducing marital burnout and marital conflicts among couples inclined toward emotional divorce. Counselors and family therapists may therefore incorporate these strategies into couple-focused interventions to strengthen marital relationships and help prevent the progression toward emotional divorce.

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Introduction

The family is the smallest social unit and plays a major role in the health and continuity of society. The family can be defined as a social system composed of individuals who are emotionally attached to one another, share a common past, and strive to meet the needs of family members (Dong et al., 2023). In its natural form, a couple's relationship begins with love and affection, but after some time, couples may come to doubt the depth of their relationship because they see no harmony between their expectations of life and the realities of their relationship with their spouse (Mosaddegh et al., 2023). This produces emotional coldness, which can lead to divorce (Taheri Fard et al., 2023). Divorce occurs either openly or covertly; in the latter case, the family merely preserves its outward structure while, in reality, having disintegrated from within. This type of divorce is called emotional divorce (Ramshi Hadi et al., 2024).

Conflict in intimate relationships occurs when one spouse is satisfied with the marital relationship while the other is dissatisfied at the same time (Sadati et al., 2014). Rebecca (2008) defines marital conflict as follows: marital conflict usually appears as struggle and opposition between husband and wife, reflecting their differing preoccupations, and arises when one party interferes with the other's pursuit of a goal (Olia et al., 2011).

When couples begin an intimate relationship, they enter it with many dreams and expectations; however, when punishment, stressful experiences, and incompatibility replace these dreams and expectations, the marital relationship is damaged and eventually leads to burnout and disenchantment (Fotouhi et al., 2018). Marital burnout, which therapists frequently deal with, is a problem observed in 50% of couples (Nazari et al., 2018), and its harms have psychological and physical effects not only on society but also on individuals (Ali Cheshmeh Alaei et al., 2023).

Currently, several theoretical perspectives with different approaches seek to explain and resolve marital conflicts, such as experiential family therapy, Bowen family therapy, and cognitive-behavioral family therapy. The importance of family therapy lies in helping individuals find new ways of interacting with family members in order to increase autonomy despite strong emotional dependencies (Ameri et al., 2003). In light of the above, and considering the conceptual importance of the family, the researchers of this study set out to conduct research in this area.

Materials and Methods

The present study is applied in terms of its objective and quasi-experimental in terms of its implementation, with a pretest-posttest design including a control group and a follow-up period (if needed). In this design, the independent variable (family therapy strategies) was applied to the experimental group, whereas the control group received no intervention.

The statistical population of this study comprised all couples inclined toward emotional divorce who referred to counseling and psychological centers in Tehran in 2025 (1404 SH). Using convenience sampling, 30 couples (60 individuals) who met the inclusion criteria were selected. These individuals were then randomly assigned to an experimental group (15 couples) and a control group (15 couples).

Inclusion criteria: at least 2 years of marital life, a high score on the emotional divorce questionnaire, at least a high school diploma, and no concurrent participation in other therapeutic programs.

Exclusion criteria: absence from more than two therapy sessions, use of acute psychiatric medication, and the occurrence of severe crises during the course of treatment.

Instruments

1. Pines Marital Burnout Questionnaire: This scale was developed by Pines and Aronson (1981) with 21 items and aims to measure couples' emotional, physical, and psychological exhaustion and disenchantment in the marital relationship. The instrument is grounded in the theory of "emotional burnout" and assesses an individual's feelings toward the spouse and the shared life.

Scoring: Responses are scored on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = never to 7 = always). After scoring, the total score ranges from 21 to 147. Higher scores indicate greater marital burnout and disenchantment; a total score above the mean (approximately 74) indicates severe marital burnout, and lower scores indicate relative satisfaction with the relationship.

Reliability and validity: Pines reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients for this scale ranging from $\alpha = .91$ to $\alpha = .96$. In Iran, this questionnaire was normed by Nazari et al. (2018), and its reliability was found to be $\alpha = .87$ using Cronbach's alpha and $.83$ using the test-retest method, indicating its satisfactory validity and reliability for the Iranian population.

2. Marital Conflict Questionnaire by Sanaei et al. (2008): This questionnaire was designed and validated in Iran by Sanaei, Zakeri, et al. and aims to measure the degree of conflict and struggle between couples across different dimensions of marital life. The instrument is a multidimensional scale that assesses eight main components of conflict.

Eight dimensions: These include reduced cooperation, reduced sexual relations, increased emotional reactions, increased seeking of children's support, personal relationships with one's own relatives, increased personal relationships with one's own friends, reduced attention to the spouse (weakening of emotional relationships), and neglect of the spouse (reduced affection).

Scoring: This scale consists of 54 items, answered on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The total score ranges from 54 to 270. Higher scores indicate greater marital conflict; scores above the mean indicate severe conflict in the relationship.

Reliability and validity: Sanaei et al. (2008) reported the convergent validity and reliability of this questionnaire as .90 using the split-half method and $\alpha = .96$ using Cronbach's alpha, indicating the high validity of this instrument.

3. Gottman Emotional Divorce Scale: This questionnaire was developed based on John Gottman's (1994) theories on couple relationship dynamics and aims to identify indicators of emotional divorce and coldness in the relationship between couples. The instrument is designed on the concept of emotional erosion and the four main predictors of divorce (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling).

Scoring: This scale consists of 40 items, answered on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = never to 5 = always). The total score ranges from 40 to 200. High scores indicate a greater tendency toward emotional divorce and reduced emotional bonding; a score above the cutoff (approximately 120) indicates that the couple is inclined toward emotional divorce.

Reliability and validity: Gottman (1994) reported Cronbach's alpha for this instrument as $\alpha = .89$. In Iran, this questionnaire was translated and validated by Ramshi Hadi et al. (2024), and its reliability was reported as $\alpha = .82$ using Cronbach's alpha and .85 using the test-retest method, indicating satisfactory validity and reliability for the Iranian population.

Results

1. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables
- 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Indices of the Study Variables at the Pretest and Posttest Stages

Variable	Stage	Experimental Group Mean	Experimental Group Standard Deviation	Control Group Mean	Control Group Standard Deviation
Marital Burnout	Pretest	95.42	12.31	94.87	11.65
Marital Burnout	Posttest	71.58	10.27	93.12	12.08
Marital Conflict	Pretest	187.36	21.54	185.93	20.87
Marital Conflict	Posttest	143.29	18.63	182.45	22.11

2. Testing the Assumptions of Analysis of Covariance

Table 2. Results of the Shapiro-Wilk Test for Assessing the Normality of Data Distribution

Variable	Group	Test Statistic	Degrees of Freedom	Significance Level
Marital Burnout	Experimental	.962	30	.348
Marital Burnout	Control	.971	30	.562
Marital Conflict	Experimental	.958	30	.291
Marital Conflict	Control	.974	30	.607

The assumption of normality is confirmed for all variables.

Table 3. Results of Levene's Test for Assessing the Homogeneity of Variances

Variable	Levene Statistic	Degrees of Freedom 1	Degrees of Freedom 2	Significance Level
Marital Burnout	0.745	1	58	.392
Marital Conflict	0.821	1	58	.418

The assumption of homogeneity of variances is met for all variables.

Table 4. Results of the Univariate Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) for Marital Burnout

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Significance Level	Eta Squared
Pretest	2354.18	1	2354.18	15.51	.001	.218
Group	6754.31	1	6754.31	48.26	.001	.480
Error	8650.42	57	151.76	-	-	-
Total	17758.91	59	-	-	-	-

Table 5. Results of the Univariate Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) for Marital Conflict

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Significance Level	Eta Squared (η^2)
Pretest	3187.45	1	3187.45	14.62	.001	.204
Group	11245.67	1	11245.67	52.14	.001	.530
Error	12390.28	57	217.37	-	-	-
Total	26823.40	59	-	-	-	-

The findings of this study show that family therapy strategies were significantly effective in reducing marital burnout and marital conflicts among couples inclined toward emotional divorce. The large effect size for both variables indicates the practical effectiveness of the intervention.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of family therapy strategies on marital burnout and marital conflicts among couples inclined toward emotional divorce. The results of the analysis of covariance showed that the family therapy intervention significantly reduced couples' marital burnout and marital conflicts.

The results showed that family therapy significantly reduced marital burnout in the experimental group relative to the control group. This finding is consistent with earlier studies such as Fotouhi et al. (2018) and Nazari et al. (2018), which showed that family therapy approaches can reduce disenchantment and emotional burnout by restructuring communication patterns and increasing intimacy between couples.

The explanation for this finding can be sought in the mechanisms of action of family therapy. In therapy sessions, couples learn to express their needs clearly and healthily instead of responding with emotional reactivity and avoidance. This change in communication style reduces feelings of loneliness and hopelessness in the relationship and, as a result, decreases marital burnout. In addition, identifying and correcting emotional triangles and dysfunctional boundaries in the family helps couples distribute the emotional burden of the relationship in a balanced way.

In addition, other results of the study indicated that family therapy significantly reduced marital conflicts in the experimental group. This result is consistent with the findings of Sadati et al. (2014) and Olia et al. (2011), which emphasized the moderating role of family-based interventions in reducing marital struggles.

Based on the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that family therapy strategies, as an effective intervention, play a significant role in reducing marital burnout and marital conflicts among couples inclined toward emotional divorce. By restructuring communication patterns, teaching problem-solving and emotion management skills, and providing cognitive restructuring, this intervention increases intimacy and reduces emotional burnout in the couple's relationship. Given that emotional divorce is regarded as a hidden and costly harm to families and society, supporting family-based interventions and providing specialized counseling services can be an effective step toward preventing family breakdown and promoting the mental health of society. The findings of this study can provide counselors, therapists, and family health policymakers with a valuable practical and scientific guide.

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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