




Effectiveness of a Communication Skills Training Protocol on Improving Marital Burnout

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this research was to investigate marital burnout and to determine the effectiveness of a communication skills training protocol.

Methods: The experimental method employed was a single-subject design with multiple baselines, involving couples seeking counseling at the Raz City Clinic in Shiraz and the Clinic of the General Directorate of Exceptional Education in Fars Province, during the autumn of 2021. Among these couples, three pairs exhibiting the highest levels of marital burnout were selected using a purposive sampling method. The therapeutic program of the communication skills training protocol was conducted by the researcher over 10 sessions, followed by a follow-up in two stages, one month apart. The participants responded to the Marital Burnout Scale at the baseline, post-treatment, and follow-up stages. Data were analyzed using visual analysis methods, the recovery percentage formula, and the reliable change index.

Findings: Findings indicated that the communication skills training protocol enhanced marital quality and reduced marital burnout, with these effects being maintained during the follow-up phase.

Conclusion: The treatment protocol proved to be effective, and couple therapists can utilize these communication skills in their work with couples to reduce marital burnout and enhance marital quality, particularly during the early years of marriage, where it can have a significant impact.

Keywords: Married couples, Marital burnout, Communication skills.

1. Introduction

The family, as the first socialization institution and the oldest natural phenomenon in all human societies, has always existed, and humanity has not yet found a replacement for it, highlighting the perpetual presence and

existential importance of this social institution. Consequently, the significance of the family has led many thinkers to investigate this topic across various fields with different approaches, such as the family's educational model. The impact of the family on the life dynamics of couples has been the subject of numerous studies and theories.

Sociologists assert that the family institution is crucial in transmitting values, raising generations, and ultimately estimating a healthy and balanced society (KhojastehMehri et al., 2015; Sirin & Deniz, 2016). Research confirms that satisfaction with married life and adaptation to it declines rapidly after marriage. The rate and intensity of this decline vary across studies, with some researchers noting a continuous decline. Generally, the satisfaction of husbands and wives with life shows that satisfaction decreases in the first years of marriage, stabilizes during middle age, and increases in the later years. In today's complex world, stress is a risk that seriously threatens an individual's physical, psychological, family, and social actions, and some jobs have serious negative effects on an individual's physical and psychological efficiency, severely disrupting their social and family relationships (Makhanova et al., 2018; Sayadi et al., 2017). Living together as a couple, especially from two different genders, is a very delicate and sometimes difficult matter, as men and women each speak in their unique styles, often leading to communication difficulties. Proper communication by couples can greatly enhance the family environment and increase mental health among family members, whereas unhealthy communication can lead to many hidden and overt marital problems, attacking the existence of the family (Sirin & Deniz, 2016).

Marital conflicts between couples are inevitable and occur when there is disagreement and incompatibility between them (Pines, 2002; Rezaei & Rezaei, 2019). Marital burnout, which manifests as a gradual process and settles in our psyche, begins with feelings of grievance. Those affected feel harassed in their married life, show no inclination to solve problems, and have no hope that their issues will be resolved. Sometimes, this despair and sorrow lead them to a state of depression. They feel emptiness and meaninglessness, feeling unsupported emotionally in life (Jalalvand et al., 2023; Majlesi et al., 2023; Mardani et al., 2023). The frequency of conflicts in relationships and the way couples engage in or resolve these conflicts are considered foundational to most intimate relationships. Handling conflicts may, in some cases, facilitate intimacy and satisfaction with the relationship, while in unhappy marriages, conflict is associated with behavioral patterns (such as reciprocal negative affect, high expectations, withdrawal) that make conflict resolution more difficult, influencing whether conflict facilitates intimacy or increases distress. Hidden issues often cause disappointing and destructive arguments among spouses; these are crucial as they reveal unexpressed expectations, needs, and emotions,

which if ignored, can severely damage the marriage. Several types of hidden issues identified in working with couples include power, appreciation, care, commitment, integrity, and acceptance. Marital burnout is a debilitating state of physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion affecting those who expected love and marriage to bring meaning to their lives. Burnout occurs when they realize that despite all their efforts, their relationship has not given meaning to their lives and will not do so (Kazemi & Zanganeh, 2021; Khosravi et al., 2021). When husbands and wives distance themselves from love and infatuation, any discouraging incident may seem sufficient to negatively label their spouse (Jafarimanesh et al., 2021).

On the other hand, one of the harms threatening the foundation of today's family is the emergence of marital burnout. A psychological examination of burnout in marital relationships is a multidimensional approach that blends the benefits of systematic psychodynamic and behavioral approaches with the advantages of psychosocial and existential perspectives. The psychology of marital burnout, rather than focusing on the pathology of an individual or couple, focuses on the long-term and erosive weakening of relationships, especially when a person tries to create existential meaning through close relationships (Falahati & Mohammadi, 2020; Zarenezhad et al., 2019). Marital exhaustion leads to a gradual decline in emotional attachment to the spouse, characterized by feelings of alienation, disinterest, indifference, and the replacement of positive emotions with negative ones (Vahdani et al., 2020). Conflicts and marital burnout between couples can have negative effects on the psychological, mental, and physical states of both spouses, but women, due to their unique position and nature, are often more affected (Gaeta et al., 2017). Burnout is a highly destructive state that affects all areas of an individual's life due to continuous feelings of fear, despair, hopelessness, and entrapment, occurring when individuals realize that despite their efforts, their relationship has not given meaning to their lives and will not do so. The effects of burnout manifest physically, emotionally, and psychologically, such as a lack of pleasure in the relationship, continuous physical fatigue, and a belief in the permanence of unsolvable problems, impacting not only the individuals affected but also their family and social relationships (Sirin & Deniz, 2018). Therefore, the aim of the present research was to investigate marital burnout and determine the effectiveness of a communication skills training protocol.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

The research method employed was a quasi-experimental single-subject design with multiple baselines in the A-B format. The study population comprised couples visiting the Raz City Clinic in Shiraz and the Clinic of the General Directorate of Exceptional Education in Fars Province during the autumn of 2021. From this population, three couples experiencing the highest levels of marital burnout were selected through purposive sampling. The therapeutic program, a communication skills training protocol, was implemented over 10 sessions by experts, and follow-ups were conducted in two stages, one month apart. Participants responded to the Pines Marital Burnout Scale (1996) at baseline, post-treatment, and follow-up stages. Data were analyzed using visual analysis methods, the percentage of recovery formula, and the reliable change index. Findings indicated that the communication skills training protocol led to a reduction in marital burnout and an improvement in marital quality, with these effects maintained during the follow-up stage.

Participant inclusion criteria stipulated that individuals must currently be married and have been in their marital relationship for at least five years. This requirement is due to the use of the Marital Burnout Scale in the research and the need to gauge the extent of marital burnout over some time. The single-subject design with multiple baselines will be applied, and participants will be selected based on purposive sampling among couples who scored higher in marital burnout. The communication skills training will be delivered over 10 sessions in educational classes according to the protocol.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Burnout

This questionnaire contains 20 items and aims to assess dimensions of civic behavior (altruism, responsibility, generosity, courtesy, and civil virtue). The Marital Burnout Scale is a self-assessment tool designed to measure the level of marital burnout among couples. It was adapted from another self-assessment tool used to measure burnout, developed by Pines in 1996. This scale uses a 7-point Likert response format. The scale's reliability has been demonstrated by its internal consistency, with coefficients ranging from .84 to .90. Its validity has been confirmed by

negative correlations with positive communication traits such as positive views about communication, conversation quality, sense of security, self-actualization, sense of purpose, emotional attraction to the spouse, and the quality of their sexual relationship. Translated versions of the CBM have been successfully used in cross-cultural studies in Norway, Hungary, Mexico, Spain, Portugal, Finland, and Israel (Paniz & Nanz, 2003; Laes & Laes, 2001). The CBM possesses high internal consistency and reliability, making it suitable for measuring the extent of marital burnout. The test-retest reliability coefficients were .89 for a one-month period, .76 for a two-month period, and .66 for a four-month period. Internal consistency for most subjects was measured with Cronbach's alpha, ranging from .91 to .93. In Iran, Navidi (2005) measured the Cronbach's alpha of this questionnaire for a sample of 240 participants, including 120 nurses and 120 teachers, which was found to be .86 (Kamalian et al., 2020; Rezaei & Rezaei, 2019).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Imago Therapy

The intervention protocol is structured into ten sessions designed to enhance marital communication and reduce marital burnout. Each session targets specific aspects of marital interaction, incorporating exercises and tasks that promote introspection, mutual understanding, and behavioral change. The overarching goal is to provide couples with tools to improve their relationship quality and deepen emotional connections.

Session 1: Introduction and Goal Setting

The first session focuses on establishing rapport and trust between the couples and the facilitator. The facilitator introduces the goals of the intervention, outlines the group rules, and discusses the general framework of the therapy. A therapeutic contract is established to ensure commitment and regular participation from the couples.

Session 2: Personal History

This session delves into each partner's childhood experiences and the potential impacts on their current functioning. Couples are asked to write down their positive and negative traits and to reflect on how their current behaviors may resemble those of their parents. This exercise aims to build awareness of personal history and its influence on present behaviors.

Session 3: Increasing Self-Awareness

Couples review their childhood memories, focusing on unmet needs and negative emotions. They are encouraged to

develop a positive mental image of themselves and their parents, identifying strengths and weaknesses. The homework involves writing these observations down and bringing them to the next session for discussion.

Session 4: Clarification and Setting Expectations

The fourth session involves forming explicit agreements about relationship expectations and utilizing behavioral contracts. This session helps to set clear and mutual expectations and responsibilities within the relationship. Previous homework is reviewed, and information is provided for filling out expectation forms for both partners.

Session 5: Understanding Each Other’s Needs and Hurts

Couples discuss their needs and past hurts, understanding how to appropriately respond to each other’s vulnerabilities. The task for this session is to discuss which expectations from the previous session are rational or irrational and why, fostering a deeper understanding of each other’s perspectives.

Session 6: Bonding and Clarifying Mental Imaginations

This session provides opportunities for emotional relearning and emotional release. It aims to increase awareness of gender differences, hidden perceptions, and irrational beliefs. Couples discuss previous homework and emphasize recognizing and addressing each other’s needs unconditionally.

Session 7: Teaching Positive Speech in Marriage

Communication strategies to enhance marital relations are introduced, such as addressing each other respectfully, expressing gratitude, consulting one another, cooperating at home, and empathizing with each other's struggles. Couples review changes from the last session and share their feelings about the improvements.

Session 8: Learning New Behaviors

Couples work on creating a safe space to increase joy and emotional connection, employing methods to address

disturbing behaviors and define clear expectations. This session reviews behavioral changes and improvements, discussing how these adjustments have enhanced life quality and happiness.

Session 9: Communication and Intimacy

The ninth session examines the importance and role of sexual relations in fostering intimacy. Couples learn about differences in sexual desires and various forms of sexual communication. The task involves practicing the discussed concepts in the session and preparing for the next homework.

Session 10: Summary and Conclusion

The final session serves as a summary and feedback opportunity regarding the course and the facilitator. Couples gather insights from the positive and negative aspects of the sessions. A post-test is conducted to measure improvements, and couples reflect on their feelings and the overall changes in their life perspectives, emphasizing the peace and impact on their family.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using visual analysis methods, the recovery percentage formula, and the reliable change index.

3. Findings and Results

Table 1 shows the reduction in marital burnout scores for the couples studied during therapy sessions compared to the baseline stage. The percentage of recovery (reduction in marital burnout scores) for the first couple is 23.7%, for the second couple 33.67%, for the third couple 10.2%, and overall 24.97%. Since the Reliable Change Index value for all couples is above 1.96, it can be said that the reduction in emotional marital burnout scores for all three couples is clinically significant.

Table 1

Marital Burnout Scores for Couples Under Study in Therapy Sessions

Process	Code	Man 1	Woman 1	Couple 1	Man 2	Woman 2	Couple 2	Man 3	Woman 3	Couple 3
Session 1	B1	106	88	97	64	71	67.5	46	101	73.5
Session 2	B2	123	89	106	52	74	63	46	95	70.5
Session 3	B3	-	-	-	59	73	66	47	99	73
Session 4	B4	-	-	-	-	-	-	47	98	72.5
Average	-	114.5	88.5	101.5	58.33	72.66	65.5	46.5	98.25	72.37
Session 2	T1	123	85	104	53	55	54	80	53	66.5
Session 5	T2	109	50	79.5	52	57	54.5	84	56	70
Session 8	F1	88	60	74	48	45	46.5	78	54	66
Last Session	F2	89	53	71	41	47	44	66	56	61
Average	-	102.3	62	82	48.5	51	49.5	77	54.75	65.67

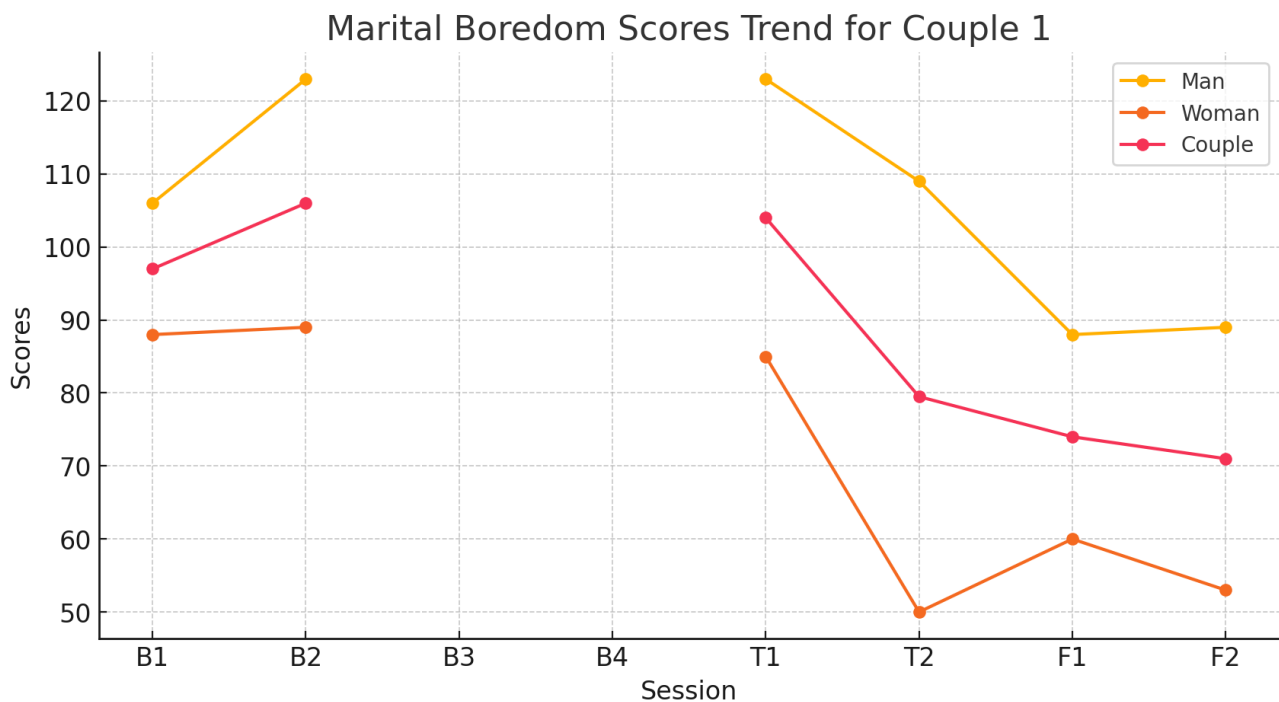
Reliable Change Index	-	2.24	4.65	3.41	3.21	4.35	3.73	4.21	8.86	2.14
Percent Recovery	-	-11.9	-42.74	23.7	-20.26	-42.47	33.67	-39.61	4.79	-10.2
Total Percent Recovery	24.97									
First Follow-Up	F1	88	60	74	48	45	46.5	78	54	66
Second Follow-Up	F2	89	53	71	41	47	44	66	56	61
Average	-	88.5	56.5	72.5	44.5	46	45.25	72	55	63.5
Reliable Change Index	-	2.79	6.62	4.17	3.33	5.66	4.78	3.45	7.89	2.03
Percent Recovery	-	-29.3	-56.63	-40	-31	-57.9	-44.75	-35.4	6.78	-13.95
Total Percent Recovery (Follow-Up)	35.19									

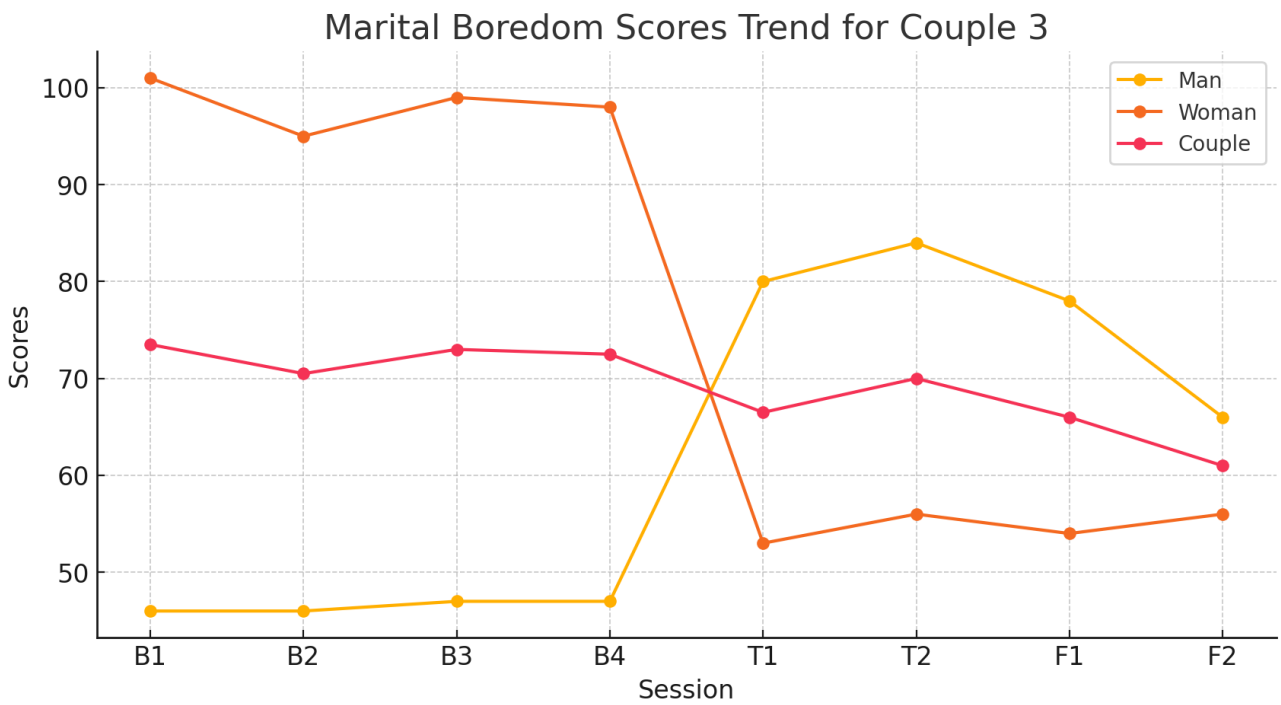
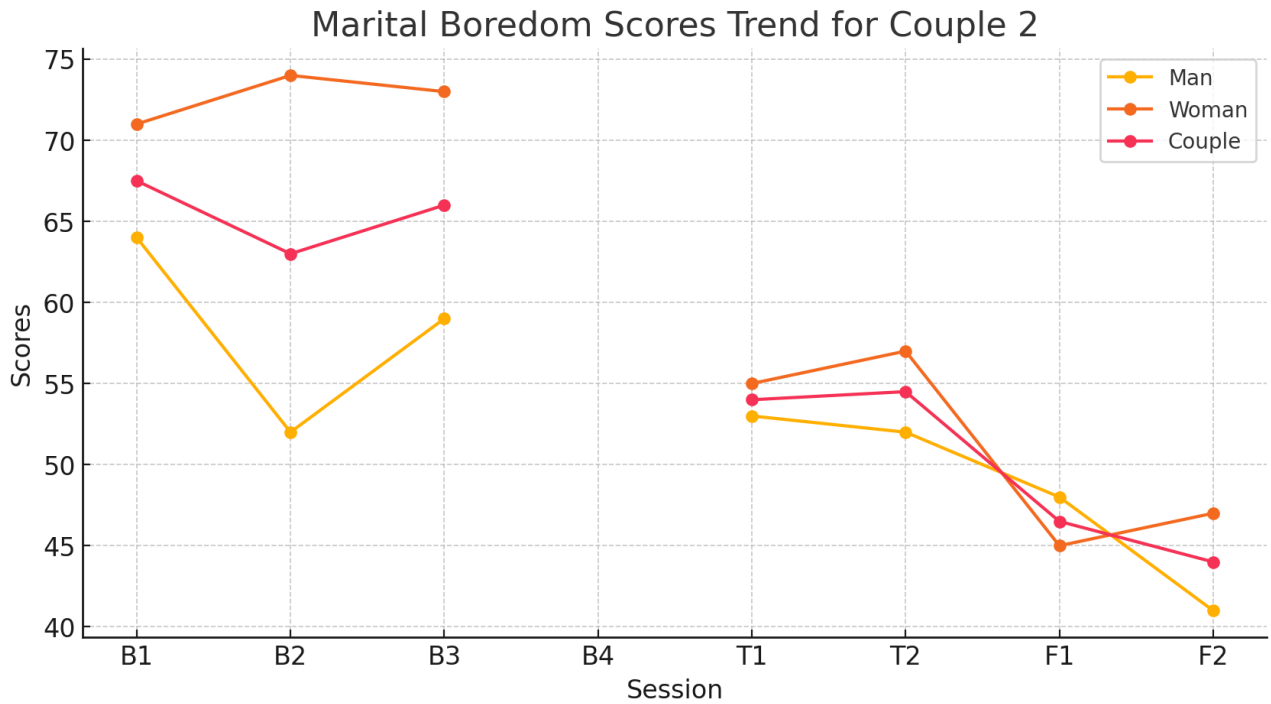
According to the results presented in Table 1, all three couples have lower scores during the follow-up phase compared to the baseline phase, and the first and second couples show a better trend of improvement (i.e., a greater reduction in marital burnout scores) compared to the third couple. The Reliable Change Index value for all three couples is above 1.96, indicating the durability of the changes in marital burnout during the follow-up phase. The results related to the marital burnout scores of the couples under study, along with the trend charts for the baseline,

intervention, and follow-up stages, are detailed in the diagrams below. Since the scores during the treatment phase for all three couples are below the baseline level and trend line, it can be stated that the change in marital burnout scores among the couples occurred systematically, overall indicating the success of the treatment. Subsequently, the scores for marital intimacy of the couples under study and the trend of changes in these scores at the baseline, intervention, and follow-up stages are mentioned.

Figure 1

Marital Burnout Scores Trends





4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study show a reduction in marital burnout scores for the couples studied during therapy sessions compared to the baseline stage. The percentage of recovery (reduction in marital burnout scores) for the first couple is 23.7%, for the second couple 33.67%, for the third couple 10.2%, and overall 24.97%. Since the Reliable Change Index value for all couples is above 1.96, it can be

said that the reduction in emotional marital burnout scores for all three couples is clinically significant. According to the results, all three couples had lower scores during the follow-up stage compared to the baseline, and the percentage of recovery for the first and second couples showed a better trend compared to the third couple (meaning a greater reduction in marital burnout scores). The Reliable Change Index value for all three couples is also above 1.96, indicating the durability of the changes in marital burnout during the follow-up stage. As the scores during the

treatment phase for all three couples are below the baseline level and trend line, it can be stated that the change in marital burnout scores among the couples occurred systematically, overall indicating the success of the treatment. The implementation of the communication skills protocol had a significant impact on marital relationships, and the results of the research showed that couples who participate in therapy and undergo the communication skills protocol can significantly benefit.

The findings of the mentioned studies confirm that therapy sessions using the communication skills protocol lead to a reduction in marital burnout and an increase in marital intimacy among couples. Therefore, treatment with the communication skills protocol can impact marital life and the quality of marital life, preventing marital burnout and reducing emotional divorce. However, apparently, no research has been conducted on the antecedents and consequences of marital burnout in Iran or elsewhere, or the researcher has not found such studies. In explaining this research, it can be said that the lack of awareness and lack of information about self-awareness and personality issues can lead to more differences and increase burnout. Training in communication skills and participation in couples counseling sessions provide couples with the ability to realistically and confidently handle issues in various situations, consequently enhancing assertive and adaptive behavior among couples. The treatment using communication skills has had a significant impact on the couples.

This research aligns with previous studies such as those by Sayadi et al. (2017), who looked at couple therapy and its impact on reducing marital burnout and improving marital commitment (Sayadi et al., 2017); and similarly approximate alignment with prior studies (Fatollahzadeh et al., 2017; Kamalian et al., 2020), in which researchers have worked on other variables affecting marital burnout and found significant effects.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

This study, while insightful, has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the small sample size and the specificity of the population (couples from a particular region and clinic) limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population. Additionally, the study relies heavily on self-reported measures, which can be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall bias. The study's design also does not include a control group, which could help in

distinguishing the effects of the communication skills training from other external or placebo effects. Finally, the follow-up period was relatively short, which may not adequately capture long-term outcomes and sustainability of the treatment effects.

Future research should aim to address the limitations noted in the present study by incorporating a larger, more diverse sample size to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies with extended follow-up periods could provide more insight into the long-term efficacy and stability of the communication skills training effects. Additionally, incorporating a control group would strengthen the validity of the findings by controlling for potential confounding variables. Researchers might also consider utilizing a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to deepen the understanding of the dynamics within the therapy sessions and the couples' experiences.

The findings of this study suggest practical implications for therapists and counselors working with couples experiencing marital burnout. Implementing structured communication skills training as part of couple therapy may significantly enhance marital satisfaction and reduce burnout. Clinicians are encouraged to integrate these protocols into their practice, focusing on improving interpersonal communication and emotional understanding between partners. Additionally, marriage counselors and therapists could use these results to develop workshops or group sessions that focus on building and maintaining healthy communication habits in marriage. Policymakers and educators in the field of family and marriage counseling could also use these insights to formulate guidelines and training programs that equip professionals with effective, evidence-based strategies for managing and improving marital dynamics.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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