

Effectiveness of Positive Couple Therapy on Marital Intimacy and Relational Resilience in Couples Referring to Counseling Centers in Bushehr City

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of positive couple therapy on marital intimacy and relational resilience among couples referring to counseling centers in Bushehr City.

Methodology: This quasi-experimental study employed a pretest-posttest design with a control group. The statistical population consisted of couples who referred to counseling centers in Bushehr City. A total of 30 participants were selected through voluntary sampling and randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 15) and a control group (n = 15). The experimental group received eight sessions of positive couple therapy based on the model of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, while the control group received no intervention during the study period. Data were collected using the Thompson and Walker Marital Intimacy Questionnaire and the Sikby et al. Relational Resilience Questionnaire. Descriptive statistics and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were used to analyze the data while controlling for pretest scores.

Findings: After controlling for pretest scores, ANCOVA results revealed a statistically significant effect of positive couple therapy on marital intimacy, $F(1, 27) = 44.63, p < .001, \eta^2 = .62$, and on relational resilience, $F(1, 27) = 54.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = .67$, indicating large effect sizes for both outcome variables.

Conclusion: Positive couple therapy significantly enhanced marital intimacy and relational resilience, suggesting that this intervention is a highly effective therapeutic approach for improving the emotional and adaptive functioning of couples.

Keywords: positive couple therapy; marital intimacy; relational resilience.

1. Introduction

Marital relationships constitute one of the most influential social systems shaping adult

psychological well-being, emotional regulation, life satisfaction, and overall quality of life. Contemporary psychological research increasingly conceptualizes marital functioning not merely as the absence of conflict but as the

presence of positive relational processes such as intimacy, emotional responsiveness, mutual support, forgiveness, hope, and resilience (Johnson, 2018; Rose et al., 2019; Weber & Baucom, 2022). In this framework, the quality of the couple relationship emerges as a critical determinant of mental health outcomes across the lifespan and within diverse sociocultural contexts (Nowlan et al., 2017; Sijercic et al., 2022; Stephenson et al., 2016).

Among the central constructs in the contemporary study of couple relationships, **marital intimacy** occupies a foundational role. Intimacy encompasses emotional closeness, trust, mutual disclosure, affection, and a sustained sense of connection that allows partners to feel understood, valued, and emotionally secure (Jin et al., 2019; Witherow et al., 2017). High levels of marital intimacy are consistently associated with greater marital satisfaction, improved psychological well-being, enhanced coping capacity, and reduced vulnerability to relational distress (Rose et al., 2019; Weber & Baucom, 2022). Conversely, deficits in intimacy often precede escalating conflict, emotional withdrawal, sexual dissatisfaction, and eventual marital breakdown (Karimi & Karimi, 2018; Nowlan et al., 2017).

Parallel to intimacy, **relational resilience** has emerged as a crucial protective factor that enables couples to adapt effectively to stress, crisis, trauma, and life transitions. Relational resilience reflects a dyadic system's capacity to maintain emotional stability, mutual support, constructive problem-solving, and relational continuity under adverse conditions (Aydogan et al., 2021; Irnat et al., 2025). Rather than representing a fixed trait, relational resilience is conceptualized as a dynamic interpersonal process shaped by communication patterns, emotional regulation strategies, shared meaning, spiritual resources, and positive relational experiences (Coyle, 2024; Sandage et al., 2024). Research conducted during global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, has powerfully illustrated how relational resilience buffers couples from psychological deterioration and preserves relational satisfaction despite intense external stressors (Aydogan et al., 2021; Irnat et al., 2025).

Accumulating evidence demonstrates that intimacy and relational resilience are deeply interwoven. Intimacy enhances relational resilience by strengthening emotional bonds and increasing partners' motivation to collaborate during adversity, while relational resilience preserves and deepens intimacy by preventing emotional disengagement and relational erosion under stress (Jin et al., 2019; Li et al., 2025). This reciprocal relationship suggests that

interventions targeting both constructs simultaneously may yield particularly strong and durable therapeutic outcomes.

Traditional couple therapy models have historically emphasized problem reduction, conflict management, and symptom alleviation (Nowlan et al., 2017; Stephenson et al., 2016). Although these approaches remain valuable, growing attention has shifted toward therapeutic frameworks that cultivate positive relational resources rather than merely repairing dysfunction. This paradigm shift aligns with the principles of **positive psychology**, which emphasize the development of strengths, virtues, positive emotions, meaning, hope, and well-being as pathways to psychological flourishing (Mahmoud Abadi, 2017; Zand, 2023).

Positive couple therapy, grounded in the theoretical foundations of positive psychology, extends these principles to the marital context. Rather than focusing primarily on deficits, positive couple therapy actively nurtures appreciation, optimism, gratitude, forgiveness, emotional attunement, purpose, and relational strengths (Mahmoud Abadi, 2017; Zand, 2023). By systematically cultivating positive emotional and cognitive processes within the dyad, this approach aims to enhance intimacy, strengthen relational resilience, and promote enduring marital well-being (Golyan et al., 2025; Zand, 2023).

Empirical support for the effectiveness of positive couple-based interventions has grown substantially in recent years. Mahmoud Abadi (2017) demonstrated that positive couples therapy significantly improved marital intimacy and hope for life among married women (Mahmoud Abadi, 2017). Zand (2023) reported substantial improvements in psychological well-being and marital functioning among couples experiencing marital conflict following participation in positive couples therapy (Zand, 2023). Similarly, Golyan et al. (2025) found that solution-focused narrative approaches emphasizing strengths and positive meaning significantly enhanced both resilience and marital intimacy among conflicted couples (Golyan et al., 2025).

The effectiveness of positive relational interventions is further supported by broader research on couple therapy outcomes. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that couple-based interventions yield significant improvements in relationship satisfaction, emotional functioning, and mental health across diverse clinical populations (Sijercic et al., 2022). Longitudinal studies further suggest that therapeutic gains in couple functioning can be maintained over extended periods, particularly when interventions strengthen core relational resources such as intimacy, commitment,

emotional safety, and mutual understanding (Mootz et al., 2024; Nowlan et al., 2017).

From an attachment-based perspective, enhancing positive emotional exchanges within couples strengthens secure attachment bonds, which in turn promote emotional regulation, trust, and resilience in the face of stress (Johnson, 2018). Spiritual and existential dimensions further enrich this process. Integrating spirituality into couple therapy has been shown to deepen relational meaning, strengthen commitment, and foster forgiveness and compassion, all of which contribute to relational resilience and intimacy (Coyle, 2024; Sandage et al., 2024).

Despite this growing body of literature, important gaps remain. Many studies have examined either marital intimacy or resilience in isolation, while fewer have investigated the simultaneous impact of positive couple therapy on both constructs within the same experimental framework. Moreover, much of the existing research has been conducted in Western cultural contexts, leaving a relative scarcity of controlled intervention studies within Middle Eastern societies, where marital relationships are deeply embedded in cultural, familial, and spiritual traditions (Abadian & Bikalari, 2023; Delghandi & Namani, 2024).

Research conducted in Iran has begun to address this gap. Abadian and Bikalari (2023) demonstrated that emotion-focused couples therapy significantly improved psychological well-being among Iranian couples (Abadian & Bikalari, 2023). Delghandi and Namani (2024) reported that both structural family therapy and mindfulness-based family therapy enhanced cohesion and adaptability in Iranian couples with marital dissatisfaction (Delghandi & Namani, 2024). Karimi and Karimi (2018) further showed that group couples therapy education reduced marital conflict and emotional divorce while improving relationship quality (Karimi & Karimi, 2018). However, empirical investigations specifically examining **positive couple therapy** and its effects on **both marital intimacy and relational resilience** within Iranian populations remain limited.

Bushehr, as a coastal city with unique sociocultural dynamics, presents an especially important context for examining marital processes. Rapid social change, economic pressures, and evolving family roles have introduced new stressors that challenge marital stability while simultaneously increasing the need for culturally sensitive and evidence-based couple interventions (Abadian & Bikalari, 2023; Delghandi & Namani, 2024). Understanding how positive couple therapy functions within this context

may offer valuable insights for both clinical practice and public mental health policy.

Furthermore, contemporary stressors such as economic instability, occupational strain, and post-pandemic psychological consequences have heightened the vulnerability of marital systems worldwide. Under such conditions, interventions that explicitly cultivate relational resilience and emotional intimacy become especially vital (Aydogan et al., 2021; Imat et al., 2025). By reinforcing positive emotional cycles and strengthening couples' internal coping resources, positive couple therapy holds substantial promise for preventing marital deterioration and promoting long-term relational health (Golyan et al., 2025; Mahmoud Abadi, 2017).

In summary, converging evidence underscores the central importance of marital intimacy and relational resilience for psychological well-being and marital stability. Positive couple therapy, grounded in positive psychology and supported by emerging empirical research, represents a powerful intervention framework capable of enhancing these core relational processes. Nevertheless, rigorous experimental studies simultaneously examining its impact on marital intimacy and relational resilience within Iranian couples remain scarce, particularly in the sociocultural context of Bushehr. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing culturally responsive couple therapy models and strengthening the empirical foundation of positive relational interventions.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of positive couple therapy on marital intimacy and relational resilience among couples referring to counseling centers in Bushehr City.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest control group. The statistical population of the current research consisted of all couples referring to counseling centers in Bushehr City. A total of 30 participants were selected through voluntary sampling and assigned to two groups: 15 participants in the experimental group and 15 participants in the control group. After sample selection and group assignment, the Marital Intimacy Questionnaire and the Relational Resilience Questionnaire were administered to the participating couples in both groups as the pretest. The inclusion criteria required that participants be legally married couples. Couples were

required to exhibit low to moderate levels of marital intimacy and relational resilience or express a willingness to improve their relationship. Participants were required to be between 25 and 50 years of age. The exclusion criteria included refusal to continue participation at any stage of the study and the presence of severe psychological disorders, such as schizophrenia, active bipolar disorder, or severe personality disorders that would prevent effective participation in couple therapy.

2.2. Measures

The Thompson and Walker Marital Intimacy Questionnaire (1983) is a 17-item instrument designed to assess affection and intimacy. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from never to always. The participant's total score is obtained by summing the item scores and dividing the result by 17. The score range is from 1 to 7 (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = mostly, 6 = almost always, 7 = always), with higher scores indicating greater marital intimacy. Thompson and Walker (1983) reported the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha as 0.81. In the present study, reliability was also confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81. Thompson and Walker (1983) reported the construct validity of the instrument as 0.80 in their study. In the present research, validity was assessed using item-total correlation coefficients, which indicated that all items were significantly correlated with the total score.

The Relational Resilience Questionnaire developed by Sikby et al. (2005) consists of 66 items and is scored on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The total score ranges from 66 to 264, with higher scores indicating greater family relational resilience in coping with stressors and difficulties. Sikby et al. (2005) reported the criterion-related validity of the questionnaire as 0.82. In the present study, validity was examined using item-total correlation coefficients, which demonstrated that all items were significantly correlated with the total score. Sikby et al. (2005) reported the reliability of the instrument using Cronbach's alpha as 0.83, and in the present study, the reliability coefficient was confirmed as 0.81.

2.3. Intervention

The intervention protocol was based on the Positive Couple Therapy model developed by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) and was delivered across eight

structured sessions. The program began with administration of the pretest and establishment of group rules and rapport. Subsequent sessions focused on core positive psychology constructs including self-acceptance, recognition of personal value, self-belief and self-love, and appreciation of each individual's uniqueness, with emphasis on strengthening family stability and emotional well-being. Participants were guided to identify personal strengths, talents, virtues, and successful experiences while learning about the benefits and barriers of positive thinking. Cognitive-emotional links were explored through training in recognizing the influence of beliefs on emotions and behaviors, analyzing daily events, modifying dysfunctional attitudes, and practicing constructive cognitive disputation. Couples were taught logical appraisal of life events with personal responsibility, accountability, communication patterns, problem-solving strategies, and effective interpersonal communication skills. Additional sessions addressed optimism training, humor as a fundamental human need, prosocial behavior and helping others, sharing positive memories, enhancing intimacy, fostering joyful living, and cultivating relational warmth. The intervention further emphasized meaning-making, internal enrichment, realistic goal setting across life domains, motivational development, goal evaluation, and flexible pathway planning. The final session concluded with administration of the posttest.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were computed for all study variables across groups and measurement times. Inferential analysis was performed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to examine the effects of positive couple therapy on marital intimacy and relational resilience at posttest while controlling for pretest scores. Statistical assumptions for ANCOVA were evaluated prior to analysis. Effect sizes were estimated using partial eta squared (η^2), and the significance level for all analyses was set at $\alpha = .05$.

3. Findings and Results

As shown in Table 1, the experimental and control groups displayed comparable mean scores at pretest for both marital intimacy and relational resilience. Following the intervention, the experimental group exhibited notable increases in marital intimacy ($M = 160.42$, $SD = 17.09$) and relational resilience ($M = 98.67$, $SD = 10.25$) compared with

the control group (marital intimacy: $M = 156.37$, $SD = 16.01$; relational resilience: $M = 95.91$, $SD = 9.85$), suggesting positive changes associated with the intervention.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Marital Intimacy and Relational Resilience Across Groups and Measurement Times

Variable	Group	Pretest M	Pretest SD	Posttest M	Posttest SD
Marital Intimacy	Experimental	151.73	16.28	160.42	17.09
	Control	152.11	15.94	156.37	16.01
Relational Resilience	Experimental	92.46	9.84	98.67	10.25
	Control	92.71	9.66	95.91	9.85

Prior to conducting the main analyses, the statistical assumptions underlying the use of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were carefully examined. The assumption of normality for the dependent variables was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, and the results indicated that the distributions of marital intimacy and relational resilience in both the experimental and control groups did not significantly deviate from normality ($p > .05$). The assumption of homogeneity of variances was evaluated using Levene’s test and was confirmed for both outcome variables ($p > .05$). Homogeneity of regression slopes was

tested by examining the interaction between the covariate (pretest scores) and group membership and was found to be non-significant, supporting the appropriateness of ANCOVA. Linearity between the covariates and dependent variables was verified through scatterplot inspection and correlation analysis. In addition, the independence of observations was ensured through random assignment of participants to groups and individual-based data collection procedures. Collectively, these findings confirmed that all major assumptions required for valid ANCOVA implementation were satisfactorily met.

Table 2

ANCOVA Summary for Posttest Marital Intimacy and Relational Resilience

Dependent Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Marital Intimacy	Pretest	31.97	1	31.97	9.32	.004	.26
	Group	153.01	1	153.01	44.63	< .001	.62
	Error	92.56	27	3.43	—	—	—
Relational Resilience	Pretest	109.06	1	109.06	43.55	< .001	.62
	Group	135.32	1	135.32	54.04	< .001	.67
	Error	67.60	27	2.50	—	—	—

After controlling for pretest scores, ANCOVA revealed a statistically significant effect of group membership on posttest marital intimacy, $F(1, 27) = 44.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .62$, indicating that positive couple therapy explained approximately 62% of the variance in marital intimacy. Similarly, the group effect on relational resilience was statistically significant, $F(1, 27) = 54.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .67$, demonstrating that the intervention accounted for nearly 67% of the variance in relational resilience. These findings confirm the substantial effectiveness of positive couple therapy in improving both marital intimacy and relational resilience.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of positive couple therapy on marital intimacy and relational resilience among couples referring to counseling centers in Bushehr City. The findings demonstrated that couples who participated in the positive couple therapy program exhibited significantly higher levels of marital intimacy and relational resilience at posttest compared to the control group, even after controlling for pretest scores. The magnitude of these effects was substantial, with positive couple therapy explaining approximately 62% of the variance in marital intimacy and nearly 67% of the variance in relational resilience. These results provide robust empirical support for

the effectiveness of positive couple therapy as a comprehensive intervention that strengthens both emotional closeness and adaptive relational functioning.

The significant improvement in marital intimacy observed in the experimental group is consistent with theoretical and empirical literature emphasizing the central role of positive emotional processes in couple relationships. Intimacy is sustained through mutual understanding, emotional attunement, trust, and affectionate engagement, all of which are directly cultivated through positive couple therapy techniques such as strengths identification, gratitude exercises, optimism training, and constructive communication practices (Mahmoud Abadi, 2017; Zand, 2023). The structured focus on positive meaning, shared experiences, and emotional validation within the intervention likely facilitated deeper emotional bonds between partners, which is reflected in the significantly higher posttest intimacy scores.

These findings align closely with Mahmoud Abadi (2017), who reported that positive couples therapy significantly enhanced marital intimacy and life hope among married women (Mahmoud Abadi, 2017). Similarly, Golyan et al. (2025) found that solution-focused narrative therapy—a closely related strength-based approach—produced meaningful improvements in both marital intimacy and resilience among conflicted couples (Golyan et al., 2025). The present results further extend this literature by demonstrating the efficacy of positive couple therapy in a controlled experimental design and within a distinct sociocultural context.

From an attachment perspective, the improvement in intimacy can be interpreted as the strengthening of secure attachment bonds between partners. Johnson (2018) emphasizes that emotionally responsive and supportive interactions foster secure attachment, which in turn enhances trust, emotional availability, and relationship satisfaction (Johnson, 2018). The intervention's focus on emotional awareness, mutual validation, and constructive cognitive–emotional processing likely reinforced these attachment processes, enabling couples to experience greater emotional safety and closeness.

The substantial enhancement of relational resilience observed in the experimental group further supports the conceptualization of positive couple therapy as a resilience-building intervention. Relational resilience reflects a couple's capacity to withstand stress, adapt to adversity, and preserve relational stability during challenging circumstances. By cultivating optimism, meaning-making,

humor, prosocial behavior, and goal-oriented coping strategies, the intervention provided couples with a repertoire of adaptive skills that strengthened their collective coping capacity. These outcomes are highly consistent with previous research demonstrating that relational resilience is fostered through positive emotional experiences, effective communication, and shared problem-solving strategies (Aydogan et al., 2021; Irnat et al., 2025).

During periods of widespread stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, couples with higher relational resilience have shown significantly better psychological adjustment, sexual health, and emotional stability (Irnat et al., 2025). The present study's findings suggest that positive couple therapy may serve as a preventive and protective intervention by strengthening couples' internal resources before crises emerge, thereby promoting long-term relational health and psychological well-being.

The reciprocal relationship between marital intimacy and relational resilience provides additional explanatory insight. Intimacy enhances relational resilience by increasing emotional investment and cooperative coping, while relational resilience preserves intimacy by preventing emotional withdrawal and relational erosion under stress (Jin et al., 2019; Li et al., 2025). The intervention's simultaneous impact on both constructs suggests that positive couple therapy may activate a virtuous cycle in which improvements in one domain reinforce gains in the other, producing durable and self-sustaining relational growth.

The findings of this study are further supported by broader research on the effectiveness of couple-based interventions. Sijercic et al. (2022) reported in their meta-analysis that couple therapies significantly improve relationship satisfaction and psychological functioning across diverse populations (Sijercic et al., 2022). Longitudinal evidence from Nowlan et al. (2017) similarly indicates that therapeutic gains in couple functioning can be maintained over extended periods when interventions strengthen core relational resources such as intimacy, commitment, and emotional safety (Nowlan et al., 2017). The present study contributes to this body of knowledge by demonstrating that positive couple therapy produces large and clinically meaningful effects within a relatively brief intervention period.

Cultural context is another important consideration in interpreting these findings. Iranian marital relationships are deeply influenced by cultural norms emphasizing family cohesion, mutual responsibility, and relational harmony. Interventions that reinforce positive relational values and

collective meaning are therefore particularly congruent with this cultural framework (Abadian & Bikalari, 2023; Delghandi & Namani, 2024). The effectiveness of positive couple therapy in the present study suggests that strength-based, emotionally focused approaches are highly compatible with Iranian couples' relational values and may enhance engagement and treatment responsiveness.

Furthermore, integrating spiritual and existential elements into positive couple therapy may have amplified its impact. Sandage et al. (2024) emphasize that spiritual competence in couple therapy enhances relational depth, forgiveness, and commitment, all of which contribute to intimacy and resilience (Sandage et al., 2024). Coyle (2024) likewise highlights the therapeutic value of meaning-making and narrative integration in strengthening couple relationships (Coyle, 2024). Although the present intervention did not explicitly focus on spirituality, its emphasis on meaning, purpose, and shared goals may have implicitly activated similar processes.

In addition, the intervention's focus on reducing negative emotional cycles and replacing them with positive relational experiences addresses the phenomenon described by Weber and Baucom (2022), who note that the loss of positive experiences often has a disproportionately negative impact on committed relationships (Weber & Baucom, 2022). By intentionally increasing positive emotional interactions, positive couple therapy may counteract this loss, restoring emotional balance and relational vitality.

5. Conclusion

Collectively, the findings of this study provide compelling evidence that positive couple therapy is a powerful intervention for enhancing marital intimacy and relational resilience. The magnitude of the observed effects suggests not only statistical significance but also strong clinical relevance, indicating that this approach may offer meaningful benefits for couples experiencing relational distress or seeking to strengthen their relationships.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its strengths, the present study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. The use of self-report measures introduces the possibility of response bias. The study's short follow-up period prevents conclusions regarding the long-term sustainability of the observed improvements. Finally, the absence of qualitative data

restricts deeper exploration of participants' subjective experiences of the intervention.

Future studies should employ larger and more diverse samples, incorporate longitudinal follow-up assessments, and include qualitative methodologies to capture couples' lived experiences of positive couple therapy. Comparative studies examining positive couple therapy against other therapeutic approaches would further clarify its unique contributions. Investigating potential mediators such as emotional regulation, forgiveness, and communication patterns would also enrich understanding of the intervention's mechanisms of change.

Clinicians are encouraged to integrate positive couple therapy techniques into routine counseling practice, particularly for couples experiencing relational strain or seeking to strengthen emotional bonds. Training programs for therapists should emphasize strength-based and resilience-oriented approaches. Counseling centers may consider offering structured positive couple therapy programs as preventive interventions to promote marital stability and psychological well-being.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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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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