

The Effectiveness of Gottman-Based Conflict Management Training on Perceived Stress, Quality of Marital Life, and Cognitive Harmony in Conflicted Couples

Rasul. Rezaei Mollajegh¹, Zohreh. Ghanbari², Hossein. Alamdarian³, Mostafa. Tashvighi^{4*}

¹ Rasul Rezaei Mollajegh, Assistant Professor of Department of Psychology and Counselling, Tehran, Iran

² M.A. in Family Counseling, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, Al-zahra University, Tehran, Iran

³ Hossein Alamdarian, M.A. in Family Counseling, Faculty of Humanities, Islamic Azad University, Hamedan, Iran

⁴ Ph.D. in Counseling, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Mohaghegh Ardebili, Ardebili, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: mostafa.tashvighi@gmail.com

Article Info

Article type:

Original Article

How to cite this article:

Rezaei Mollajegh, R., Ghanbari, Z., Alamdarian, H., & Tashvighi, M. (2027). The Effectiveness of Gottman-Based Conflict Management Training on Perceived Stress, Quality of Marital Life, and Cognitive Harmony in Conflicted Couples. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 8(1), 1-12.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5704>



© 2027 the authors. Published by KMAN Publication Inc. (KMANPUB), Ontario, Canada. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Gottman-based conflict management training on perceived stress, quality of marital life, and cognitive harmony among conflicted couples.

Methods and Materials: The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest control group and a three-month follow-up. The statistical population included all conflicted couples who referred to counseling centers in Tabriz in 2025. From among the volunteers, 45 eligible participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the inclusion criteria and were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Data were collected using the Perceived Stress Scale developed by Cohen et al., the Marital Quality of Life Scale developed by Busby et al., and the Couples' Mutual Understanding and Cognitive Harmony Questionnaire developed by Javedan. The experimental group received Gottman-based conflict management training in ten 90-minute sessions, while the control group received no intervention during this period. Data were analyzed using repeated-measures analysis of variance and Bonferroni post-hoc test in SPSS version 26.

Findings: The results indicated that the time-by-group interaction effect was statistically significant for perceived stress, quality of marital life, and cognitive harmony. The findings further showed that Gottman-based conflict management training led to a significant reduction in perceived stress and significant improvements in quality of marital life and cognitive harmony at the posttest stage. Moreover, these effects remained stable at the three-month follow-up assessment. Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons confirmed significant differences between the pretest and posttest, as well as between the pretest and follow-up stages, for all three study variables ($p < .01$).

Conclusion: Based on the findings, Gottman-based conflict management training can be considered an effective intervention for reducing perceived stress and enhancing quality of marital life and cognitive harmony among conflicted couples. Therefore, this approach may be useful in couple therapy and marital counseling settings.

Keywords: *Perceived stress; Gottman conflict management training; Conflicted couples; Quality of marital life; Cognitive harmony in couples.*

1. Introduction

Marital relationship is one of the central interpersonal contexts in adult life, and its quality can influence emotional security, psychological adjustment, family functioning, health-related behaviors, and the broader psychosocial climate of the family. Although conflict is an inevitable component of intimate relationships, the form, intensity, persistence, and management of conflict determine whether disagreement becomes a developmental opportunity or a chronic source of distress. Marital conflict refers not merely to occasional disagreement between spouses, but to repeated patterns of negative interaction, unresolved disputes, emotional distance, criticism, defensiveness, contempt, withdrawal, and reduced responsiveness to the partner's needs. From a sociological and psychological perspective, marital conflict has become increasingly important because contemporary couples face multiple stressors related to economic pressure, changing gender roles, technology-mediated communication, parenting demands, and shifting expectations of intimacy, autonomy, and equality within marriage (Ho, 2025). Therefore, the scientific study of marital conflict requires attention not only to the presence of disagreement, but also to the mechanisms through which couples interpret, communicate, regulate, and resolve conflict in daily life.

Marital conflict can disturb the emotional and cognitive foundation of the couple relationship. When couples are unable to manage disagreements constructively, ordinary differences in preferences, values, communication styles, financial decisions, sexual expectations, parenting practices, and social relationships may gradually transform into stable patterns of dissatisfaction. Recent research has shown that interpersonal disruptions such as partner phubbing may reduce marital satisfaction through deterioration in marital interaction and increased conflict, suggesting that contemporary relational problems are strongly shaped by communication quality and attentional responsiveness (Wang & Zhao, 2023). Similarly, conflict management research emphasizes that healthy marital relationships are not defined by the absence of conflict, but by the couple's ability to address disagreement in a productive, respectful, and emotionally safe manner (Msughter et al., 2024). Thus, interventions aimed at conflicted couples should focus on strengthening communication skills, reducing destructive interaction cycles, and promoting shared understanding rather than merely suppressing disagreement.

The importance of marital conflict extends beyond the couple subsystem and affects the psychological functioning of children and adolescents. Studies have shown that parental marital conflict is associated with adolescent anxiety, and that this relationship may vary according to gender and protective behavioral factors such as physical activity (Yan et al., 2026). Other evidence indicates that marital conflict can influence adolescent self-perception through psychological resilience, suggesting that the emotional climate created by parents may shape how children evaluate their own competence, worth, and identity (He et al., 2026). Research has also linked parental marital conflict with maladaptive adolescent behaviors through mechanisms such as experiential avoidance and reduced subjective well-being (Jia et al., 2026). In addition, paternal marital conflict has been associated with parenting stress and parenting efficacy, with positive parenting style acting as an important mediating mechanism in children's self-regulation (Kim, 2026). These findings demonstrate that marital conflict is not only a dyadic problem between spouses, but also a family-level risk factor with developmental implications.

One of the major psychological outcomes associated with marital conflict is perceived stress. Perceived stress refers to the degree to which individuals appraise life situations as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overwhelming. In marital relationships, unresolved conflict can intensify perceived stress by reducing emotional support, increasing rumination, weakening problem-solving capacity, and creating a persistent sense of threat within the intimate environment. The relationship between perceived stress and psychological-physical health has been emphasized in previous research, which has shown that self-compassion and mindfulness can mediate the link between perceived stress and health outcomes (Chavoshi et al., 2022). This is especially relevant for conflicted couples because marital distress can reduce individuals' capacity for mindful awareness, emotional self-regulation, and compassionate response to themselves and their partners. In this context, conflict management interventions may reduce perceived stress by replacing reactive and defensive patterns with reflective, validating, and collaborative communication.

Perceived stress also functions as a mediator between coping styles and mental health outcomes. Research on dialectical coping among Hong Kong Chinese individuals showed that perceived stress plays an important mediating role in the relationship between coping and mental health, highlighting the centrality of stress appraisal in

psychological adjustment (X. Li et al., 2026). Similarly, academic stress research has shown that perceived stress may moderate the relationship between stress profiles, rumination, and maladaptive behavioral outcomes such as bedtime procrastination (Xiang et al., 2026). Although these studies were not conducted specifically among conflicted couples, their findings support the broader psychological principle that perceived stress is a critical pathway through which environmental and interpersonal pressures influence mental functioning. In marital conflict, repeated negative interactions may increase perceived stress, while effective conflict management may reduce the subjective burden of stress by enhancing predictability, emotional safety, and perceived interpersonal control.

Another important outcome in marital research is quality of life or lifestyle quality within the marital context. Quality of marital life reflects the extent to which spouses experience satisfaction, cohesion, consensus, emotional closeness, and constructive cooperation in their shared life. In addition to emotional and relational dimensions, lifestyle quality also includes patterns of health behavior, daily routines, reproductive concerns, mutual support, and the couple's ability to organize a meaningful life together. Research among couples seeking conception has shown that lifestyle modification and reproductive/general health checks may be relevant to male partners' health and relational functioning (Komiya et al., 2023). Similarly, diet and lifestyle factors have been associated with semen quality among male partners of couples preparing for pregnancy, indicating that couple functioning and lifestyle are often intertwined with reproductive and health-related outcomes (Mai et al., 2023). In couples undergoing in vitro fertilization, lifestyle and fertility-specific quality of life have also been shown to affect reproductive outcomes, further demonstrating that the quality of couples' daily life can have significant psychological and physiological implications (Urata et al., 2024). Although the present study focuses on conflicted couples rather than fertility treatment, these findings illustrate that lifestyle quality is a meaningful construct in couple research.

Marital quality of life is shaped by the distribution of emotional, practical, and cognitive responsibilities within the relationship. In many couples, distress is intensified when one partner carries a disproportionate burden of planning, remembering, anticipating, and coordinating relational or household tasks. Research on same-gender couples has highlighted the management of cognitive labor as an important aspect of couple functioning, showing that

the invisible mental work of organizing life can affect relational dynamics and perceived fairness (McLean et al., 2023). In culturally diverse contexts, communication skills and shared lifestyle values also play important roles in couple adjustment. For example, research on Muslim couples has emphasized the role of Islamic lifestyle in communication skills, suggesting that shared cultural and religious frameworks may contribute to marital interaction and relational understanding (Zuhri et al., 2023). These findings indicate that the quality of marital life cannot be separated from the couple's cognitive, cultural, behavioral, and communicative patterns.

Cognitive harmony in couples is another key construct in understanding marital adjustment. Cognitive harmony refers to the degree of intellectual coordination, mutual understanding, shared expectations, compatible life philosophy, and agreement regarding fundamental marital issues. Couples with higher cognitive harmony are more likely to interpret each other's behaviors charitably, communicate with less defensiveness, and negotiate differences through shared meaning. In contrast, low cognitive harmony may lead spouses to experience recurring conflict as evidence of incompatibility, rejection, or lack of respect. Previous research has shown that intellectual understanding and coordination can mediate the relationship between marital attractions and marital quality, indicating that cognitive alignment is an important pathway through which positive marital qualities are translated into overall relationship quality (Abedini Chamgardani & Niknejadi, 2021). This finding is particularly important for conflicted couples because conflict often persists not only because of emotional reactivity, but also because spouses lack shared cognitive frameworks for interpreting problems and resolving disagreements.

The construct of harmony has also been studied in relation to culture, gender, and marriage. Research on older couples with mild cognitive impairment has examined links among gender, harmony, and face, suggesting that marital harmony is deeply embedded in cultural expectations and interpersonal self-presentation (P. J. Li et al., 2026). Such findings are relevant because cognitive harmony does not simply mean identical beliefs between spouses; rather, it refers to the couple's ability to create a shared interpretive system while respecting differences. In conflicted couples, the absence of this shared interpretive system can cause repeated misunderstandings and emotional escalation. Therefore, interventions that strengthen mutual understanding, shared meaning, and respectful influence

may improve cognitive harmony and reduce conflict intensity.

Among contemporary couple therapy approaches, the Gottman method has received substantial attention because it is grounded in observational research on couple interaction and emphasizes both emotional connection and conflict regulation. Gottman's theoretical model conceptualizes stable and satisfying relationships through principles such as building love maps, nurturing fondness and admiration, turning toward rather than away, accepting influence, managing solvable problems, overcoming gridlock, and creating shared meaning (Gottman & Gottman, 2017). This model is especially relevant for conflicted couples because it does not treat conflict as a single behavioral problem, but as a relational process embedded in friendship, emotional responsiveness, meaning-making, and interactional habits. In the Gottman framework, destructive communication patterns such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling are considered particularly harmful, while constructive conflict management depends on emotional regulation, repair attempts, softened start-up, validation, and shared responsibility.

Empirical evidence supports the usefulness of Gottman-based interventions in distressed couples. A pilot study examining Gottman method couples therapy for couples dealing with infidelity showed that this approach may be effective compared with treatment-as-usual approaches, particularly by addressing relational injury, rebuilding trust, and improving couple interaction (Irvine et al., 2024). In another study, Gottman method couple therapy was compared with integrative behavioral couple therapy for emotional abuse among women with addicted husbands, indicating that Gottman-based intervention has relevance for couples facing serious relational distress and emotionally harmful interaction patterns (Tae et al., 2025). These findings support the application of the Gottman approach in contexts where couples experience repeated conflict, emotional disconnection, and difficulty managing negative interactions.

Other psychosocial interventions have also shown promise in promoting marital harmony and reducing destructive relational patterns. For example, cognitive restructuring and psychoeducational therapies have been reported to foster marital harmony among couples in domestically abused marriages, suggesting that cognitive and educational components can help couples reinterpret relational problems and adopt healthier interactional strategies (Anyanwu et al., 2026). In addition, solution-

focused group couple therapy has been shown to improve adjustment, intimacy, and marital quality of life among women whose husbands were undergoing addiction recovery, demonstrating the value of structured couple-based interventions for enhancing relational functioning in high-stress marital contexts (Sohrabi Azandaryani & Mirshahi, 2024). These findings collectively indicate that couples can benefit from systematic, skills-based, and meaning-oriented interventions designed to improve communication, reduce stress, and strengthen marital quality.

Despite the growing body of research on marital conflict and couple therapy, several gaps remain. First, many studies have examined marital satisfaction, adjustment, or intimacy, while fewer have simultaneously investigated perceived stress, lifestyle quality, and cognitive harmony as interrelated outcomes in conflicted couples. Second, although perceived stress is widely recognized as a key psychological variable, it has not always been integrated into couple intervention studies as a central outcome. Third, cognitive harmony is especially important in marital relationships because it reflects mutual understanding, shared expectations, and intellectual coordination, yet it has received less empirical attention than emotional intimacy or marital satisfaction. Fourth, although the Gottman method has a strong theoretical and empirical foundation, further studies are needed in diverse cultural and clinical settings to examine its effectiveness for couples presenting with marital conflict. Therefore, evaluating Gottman-based conflict management training in relation to perceived stress, lifestyle quality, and cognitive harmony may contribute to both clinical practice and marital research.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Gottman-based conflict management training on perceived stress, lifestyle quality, and cognitive harmony in conflicted couples.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest control group and a three-month follow-up period. The statistical population consisted of all couples with marital conflict who referred to counseling centers in Tabriz during 2025. From among individuals who expressed willingness to participate, 45 eligible volunteers were selected through purposive sampling based on the inclusion criteria and were then randomly assigned to the

experimental and control groups. To select the participants, the researchers referred to counseling centers in Tabriz and prepared a list of couples who were willing to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria were willingness and informed consent to participate in the research, the presence of marital conflict, and the absence of severe physical or psychological disorders according to the participants' records. The exclusion criteria included absence from more than two intervention sessions, incomplete or distorted questionnaires, lack of cooperation, and failure to complete the assignments presented during the training sessions. After group assignment, the research questionnaires were administered to both groups at the pretest stage. The experimental group then received Gottman-based conflict management training in ten 90-minute sessions, whereas the control group received no intervention during this period. Ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality of information, and the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any stage, were fully observed.

2.2. Measures

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-14) was used to assess participants' perceived stress. This scale was developed by Cohen and colleagues and includes 14 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from low to very high levels of perceived stress. The scale consists of two subscales: negative perception of stress and positive perception of stress. Previous studies have reported acceptable internal consistency for this instrument, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .84 to .86 in different samples. Factor analytic evidence has also supported the two-factor structure of the scale, with all items loading adequately on their respective factors. In Iranian studies, Cronbach's alpha coefficients have been reported as .71 for positive perception of stress, .75 for negative perception of stress, and .84 for the total score. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total scale was .81, indicating acceptable reliability.

Busby's Marital Quality of Life Scale, also known as the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale, was used to measure the quality of marital life. This scale was developed by Busby and colleagues and includes 14 items across three subscales: consensus, satisfaction, and cohesion. The consensus subscale contains six items, the satisfaction subscale contains five items, and the cohesion subscale contains three items. The items are scored on a six-point Likert scale, and

the total score ranges from 0 to 70, with higher scores indicating a higher level of marital quality. Previous research has reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .79, .80, and .90 for the consensus, satisfaction, and cohesion subscales, respectively. Evidence of validity has also supported the internal consistency and convergent validity of the scale. In Iranian studies, Cronbach's alpha and split-half reliability coefficients for the total scale have been reported as .92 and .89, respectively. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the consensus, satisfaction, and cohesion subscales were .88, .83, and .76, respectively, and the reliability coefficient for the total score was .91.

The Couples' Mutual Understanding and Cognitive Harmony Questionnaire was used to assess cognitive harmony between couples. This 30-item questionnaire was developed by Javedan to evaluate factors associated with mutual understanding and cognitive harmony in marital relationships. The questionnaire was standardized among Iranian couples and includes three subscales: fulfillment of marital expectations, ideological issues and philosophy of life, and personality characteristics. The items are scored on a five-point Likert scale, although some items are reverse-scored according to the scoring instructions of the questionnaire. Higher scores indicate greater mutual understanding and cognitive harmony between couples. Previous research has reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .89 for fulfillment of marital expectations, .78 for ideological issues and philosophy of life, .90 for personality characteristics, and .91 for the total questionnaire. Evidence of convergent validity has also been reported through correlations with measures of marital satisfaction and quality of life. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was .81, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

2.3. Intervention

The intervention consisted of Gottman-based conflict management training, developed based on the Gottman Sound Relationship House theory and the Gottman couple therapy framework. The program was implemented in ten weekly 90-minute group sessions for the experimental group. The first session focused on becoming familiar with the couples, explaining the goals and rationale of the sessions, establishing a positive therapeutic relationship, introducing the general structure of the program, clarifying participants' expectations, and emphasizing commitment, active participation, application of learned skills in real-life

marital interactions, and completion of assignments. The second session focused on improving and strengthening love maps. The third session addressed fondness and admiration, including the meaning of attachment and appreciation, signs of fondness in marital relationships, and ways to strengthen emotional connection. The fourth session emphasized turning toward each other instead of turning away, with attention to emotional responsiveness, affection, and prevention of emotional coldness and monotony in marital life. The fifth session focused on allowing the spouse to have influence and managing power-oriented interactions. The sixth session introduced strategies for solving solvable marital problems. The seventh session continued work on conflict resolution by addressing barriers and obstacles in the couple's relationship. The eighth session focused on overcoming gridlock, understanding the concept of relational deadlock, and identifying its causes. The ninth session addressed the creation of shared meaning and the development of a new family culture. The tenth session was devoted to reviewing the content of previous sessions, discussing participants' experiences, summarizing the training process, and administering the posttest.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were used to summarize the study variables across the pretest, posttest, and three-month follow-up stages. To examine the

effectiveness of the intervention over time and compare changes between the experimental and control groups, repeated-measures analysis of variance was applied. The time factor included three measurement stages: pretest, posttest, and follow-up, while the group factor included the experimental and control groups. When significant effects were observed, the Bonferroni post-hoc test was used to identify pairwise differences between measurement stages. Statistical significance was considered at the $p < .05$ level.

3. Findings and Results

The reported mean age of the sample in the present study by group was 36.5 ± 4.27 years for women and 37.5 ± 2.93 years for men in the experimental group, and 37.2 ± 3.22 years for women and 38.2 ± 2.52 years for men in the control group. The minimum age of the female participants in this study was 28 years and the maximum age was 40 years. The minimum age reported for the male participants was 29 years and the maximum age was 40 years. Moreover, considering that the significance level was greater than .05, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups, indicating that the groups were homogeneous in terms of age. The sample was also examined in terms of educational level, and the results showed that the two groups were homogeneous with respect to education. The descriptive findings of the study across the three research stages in the two groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of the Mean and Standard Deviation of the Study Variables Between the Two Groups Across Pre-Intervention, Post-Intervention, and Follow-Up Stages

Variable	Group	Pre-Intervention Mean	Pre-Intervention SD	Post-Intervention Mean	Post-Intervention SD	Follow-Up Mean	Follow-Up SD
Perceived Stress	Gottman Conflict Management Training	25.5	4.10	19.7	1.94	19.6	1.92
Perceived Stress	Control Group	26.4	3.74	26.5	3.84	26.6	3.80
Lifestyle Quality	Gottman Conflict Management Training	46.3	5.12	54.7	7.76	55.3	7.98
Lifestyle Quality	Control Group	47.6	6.02	46.8	5.36	45.0	5.01
Cognitive Harmony in Couples	Gottman Conflict Management Training	51.6	5.66	60.8	6.39	59.7	5.89
Cognitive Harmony in Couples	Control Group	50.9	4.88	51.6	5.36	51.3	5.7

Table 1 shows the means of the study variables in the Gottman conflict management training group and the control

group. As observed, the mean scores of the three variables, namely perceived stress, lifestyle quality, and cognitive

harmony in couples, did not differ substantially between the two study groups at the pretest stage. However, after the intervention, the intervention group showed a considerable difference compared with the control group relative to the pre-intervention stage. This difference was also observable at the follow-up stage. In addition, the results of the Shapiro–Wilk test showed that the data had a normal distribution across different measurement stages by group ($p > .05$). Accordingly, parametric tests could be used. Levene’s test was used to examine the homogeneity of error variances, and the results showed that the error variance was homogeneous for perceived stress ($F = 1.56, p = .061$), lifestyle quality ($F = 1.69, p = .081$), and cognitive harmony in couples ($F = 2.17, p = .131$). Moreover, the results of Box’s M test indicated that the covariance matrix assumption was met in the multivariate condition ($p > .05$). The results of Mauchly’s test of sphericity, with the control group

included, showed that the values for perceived stress ($\chi^2 = 12.5, p = .001$), lifestyle quality ($\chi^2 = 11.5, p = .001$), and cognitive harmony in couples ($\chi^2 = 7.88, p = .001$) did not satisfy the sphericity assumption. Accordingly, the F index in the analysis of variance required correction. Subsequently, the results of the 2×3 repeated-measures analysis of variance for comparing the experimental and control groups across the pretest, posttest, and follow-up stages for the study variables were presented. The results of Wilks’ Lambda showed that the time-by-group interaction effect was significant for perceived stress ($F = 21.2, p < .01$), lifestyle quality ($F = 13.3, p < .01$), and cognitive harmony in couples ($F = 14.9, p < .01$). Eta squared indicated that 51% and 42% of the variance in the scores of these variables, respectively, was related to group membership. The results of repeated-measures analysis of variance for within-group and between-group effects are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Repeated-Measures Analysis of Variance

Group	Effect	Test	Value	F	df1	df2	Significance Level	Partial Eta Squared
Intervention Group	Group × Factor	Pillai’s Trace	.635	39.07	2	45	.001	.635
Intervention Group	Group × Factor	Wilks’ Lambda	.365	39.07	2	45	.001	.635
Intervention Group	Group × Factor	Hotelling’s Trace	1.73	39.07	2	45	.001	.635
Intervention Group	Group × Factor	Roy’s Largest Root	1.73	39.07	2	45	.001	.635

As shown in Table 2, in the intervention group, after controlling for the effect of pretests, Wilks’ Lambda was significant at the .01 level (Wilks’ Lambda = .365, $F = 39.07, p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .635$). In other words, it can be stated that there was a statistically significant difference between

the experimental and control groups in perceived stress, lifestyle quality, and cognitive harmony in couples. Moreover, partial eta squared indicated that 63.5% of the simultaneous changes in the dependent variables were related to group membership.

Table 3

Summary of Simple Analysis of Variance for Within-Group and Between-Group Effects

Group	Effect Type	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance Level	Effect Size
Gottman Conflict Management Training Group	Between-Subjects	Group	870.2	1	870.2	28.8	.001	.386
Gottman Conflict Management Training Group	Between-Subjects	Error	1386.7	46	30.1	—	—	—
Gottman Conflict Management Training Group	Within-Subjects	Factor	253.1	1.02	247.9	69.04	.001	.600
Gottman Conflict Management Training Group	Within-Subjects	Factor × Group	288.1	1.02	282.2	78.5	.001	.631
Gottman Conflict Management Training Group	Within-Subjects	Error (Factor)	168.6	46.9	3.59	—	—	—

The results of the simple repeated-measures analysis of variance for within-subject effects based on the Greenhouse–Geisser correction showed that the main effect of the factor was significant at the .01 level ($p < .01$). This

finding means that, regardless of group membership, there was a statistically significant difference among the factor scores, namely pretest, posttest, and follow-up, for the study variables. Furthermore, the interaction effect of group and

factor, that is, measurement stages, was significant at the .01 level ($p < .01$). In other words, there was a statistically significant difference between the intervention and control groups in at least two of the measurement stages for the

study variables. Therefore, to determine which measurement stages accounted for these differences across the groups, a within-subject pairwise comparison test was used, the summary of which is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of the Bonferroni Post-Hoc Test for Pairwise Comparison of the Mean Scores of the Study Variables Across the Three Measurement Stages

Variable	Stage I	Stage J	Mean Difference (I-J)	Significance
Perceived Stress	Pretest	Posttest	8.86*	.001
Perceived Stress	Pretest	Follow-Up	-9.34*	.001
Lifestyle Quality	Pretest	Posttest	7.75*	.001
Lifestyle Quality	Pretest	Follow-Up	10.1*	.001
Cognitive Harmony in Couples	Pretest	Posttest	4.69*	.001
Cognitive Harmony in Couples	Pretest	Follow-Up	6.88	.001

According to Table 4, it can generally be observed that the scores of perceived stress, lifestyle quality, and cognitive harmony in couples improved from the pretest stage to the posttest and follow-up stages. This finding indicates the effectiveness of Gottman conflict management training in improving these variables among conflicted couples.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Gottman-based conflict management training on perceived stress, quality of marital life, and cognitive harmony in conflicted couples. The findings indicated that the interaction effect of time and group was statistically significant for all three dependent variables. In other words, compared with the control group, couples who participated in the Gottman-based conflict management training showed a significant reduction in perceived stress and significant improvements in quality of marital life and cognitive harmony from pretest to posttest. The Bonferroni post-hoc findings further confirmed that these changes remained significant at the three-month follow-up stage, suggesting that the intervention effects were not limited to an immediate post-intervention response but were relatively stable over time. These findings support the effectiveness of Gottman-based conflict management training as a structured couple-focused intervention for improving emotional, relational, and cognitive dimensions of marital functioning.

The significant reduction in perceived stress among couples in the intervention group can be explained by the core mechanisms of the Gottman approach. Perceived stress is strongly influenced by individuals' appraisal of interpersonal events as uncontrollable, threatening, or

emotionally overwhelming. In conflicted couples, repeated negative exchanges, unresolved disagreements, criticism, defensiveness, and emotional withdrawal may transform ordinary marital disagreements into chronic stressors. Gottman-based training directly targets these maladaptive interactional cycles by teaching couples to recognize destructive communication patterns, regulate emotional reactivity, use repair attempts, and replace escalating responses with constructive dialogue. This interpretation is consistent with evidence showing that perceived stress plays a central role in psychological and physical health outcomes and may be reduced when individuals develop greater mindfulness, self-compassion, and adaptive emotional regulation (Chavoshi et al., 2022). Similarly, findings from research on coping and mental health suggest that perceived stress is an important mediating pathway between coping patterns and psychological outcomes; therefore, interventions that enhance adaptive coping in intimate relationships may reduce the subjective experience of stress (X. Li et al., 2026). From this perspective, Gottman-based training likely reduced perceived stress by increasing couples' sense of predictability, emotional safety, and perceived control within the relationship.

The finding that perceived stress decreased after the intervention is also consistent with broader evidence indicating that stress becomes more harmful when accompanied by rumination, avoidance, and maladaptive interpretation of interpersonal difficulties. For example, research on academic stress profiles has shown that perceived stress can intensify the relationship between stress-related processes and maladaptive behavioral outcomes through cognitive mechanisms such as rumination

(Xiang et al., 2026). In conflicted couples, rumination may take the form of repeatedly reviewing the partner's mistakes, attributing negative intentions, or anticipating future conflict. Gottman-based conflict management training may interrupt this process by helping couples reinterpret conflict as a solvable or manageable relational event rather than as a sign of rejection or relational failure. Moreover, by teaching couples how to turn toward each other and accept influence, the intervention may reduce the psychological burden created by emotional isolation. This is especially important because marital conflict is not only a behavioral disagreement but also a stress-generating context that affects cognitive appraisal, emotional regulation, and physiological arousal.

The results also showed that Gottman-based conflict management training significantly improved the quality of marital life in the experimental group. Quality of marital life includes satisfaction, cohesion, consensus, emotional connection, cooperation, and the ability to experience the marital relationship as supportive and meaningful. The Gottman approach is particularly relevant to this outcome because it emphasizes strengthening the friendship system of the couple, enhancing fondness and admiration, improving love maps, and increasing positive emotional exchanges. These components can improve marital quality by helping spouses feel seen, valued, and emotionally connected. The present finding is aligned with Gottman's theoretical model, which argues that stable and satisfying relationships are built through emotional attunement, acceptance of influence, constructive conflict management, and shared meaning (Gottman & Gottman, 2017). Therefore, the improvement in quality of marital life can be understood as a consequence of both reduced negative interaction and increased positive relational engagement.

This result is consistent with previous intervention studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness of couple-based therapeutic approaches in improving marital quality. For instance, a pilot study on Gottman method couples therapy showed that this approach can be effective for couples dealing with infidelity and relational injury, particularly by improving interactional patterns and strengthening relationship repair processes (Irvine et al., 2024). Similarly, Gottman method couple therapy has been shown to be effective in reducing emotional abuse among women with addicted husbands, suggesting that the approach can be useful in relationships characterized by distress, emotional harm, and dysfunctional interaction patterns (Tae et al., 2025). The findings are also consistent

with research showing that solution-focused group couple therapy can improve adjustment, intimacy, and marital quality of life among women whose husbands were undergoing addiction recovery (Sohrabi Azandaryani & Mirshahi, 2024). Taken together, these studies support the view that structured couple interventions can enhance marital quality by improving communication, emotional connection, problem-solving, and relational safety.

The improvement in quality of marital life can also be interpreted in relation to daily lifestyle, shared routines, and the couple's capacity to manage relational and practical demands. Marital quality is not limited to emotional satisfaction; it also reflects how couples coordinate everyday life, manage responsibilities, support each other's goals, and sustain healthy patterns of interaction. Studies on couples preparing for pregnancy have indicated that lifestyle-related factors and health behaviors are associated with reproductive and general health outcomes, emphasizing the importance of couple-level lifestyle functioning (Komiya et al., 2023; Mai et al., 2023). Research on couples undergoing in vitro fertilization has also shown that lifestyle and fertility-specific quality of life can affect reproductive outcomes, further highlighting the interdependence of relational quality, health behaviors, and daily functioning (Urata et al., 2024). Although the present study focused on conflicted couples rather than fertility-related contexts, these findings support the broader assumption that improving couple interaction can contribute to better organization of marital life, greater cooperation, and improved perceived quality of life.

The third major finding was that Gottman-based conflict management training significantly improved cognitive harmony in couples. Cognitive harmony refers to mutual understanding, intellectual coordination, shared expectations, agreement regarding life philosophy, and the ability to interpret marital events through a compatible relational framework. This finding is theoretically meaningful because many marital conflicts persist not only because couples disagree emotionally, but because they interpret the same events through incompatible cognitive schemas. Gottman-based training addresses this issue by encouraging couples to build love maps, identify each other's inner worlds, respect differences, manage gridlock, and create shared meaning. These components can strengthen cognitive harmony by helping spouses understand not only what their partner wants, but why those needs and values are important. The finding is consistent with research showing that intellectual understanding and

coordination can mediate the relationship between marital attractions and marital quality, indicating that cognitive alignment is a central mechanism in marital functioning (Abedini Chamgardani & Niknejadi, 2021).

The improvement in cognitive harmony is also consistent with studies emphasizing the importance of harmony, shared values, communication, and cultural meaning in couple relationships. Research on gender, harmony, and face among older couples has suggested that marital harmony is embedded in cultural expectations and interpersonal meanings, showing that couples' relational functioning is partly shaped by how they cognitively organize dignity, respect, and mutual adjustment (P. J. Li et al., 2026). Moreover, research on Muslim couples has indicated that lifestyle and communication skills are interrelated, suggesting that shared values and culturally grounded relational frameworks may strengthen mutual understanding (Zuhri et al., 2023). The present findings extend this line of evidence by showing that cognitive harmony can be enhanced through a structured Gottman-based intervention, particularly when the training helps couples move from rigid individual interpretations toward shared relational meaning.

The present findings are also consistent with broader research on marital conflict and family functioning. Marital conflict has been described as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by communication patterns, social expectations, and relational structures (Ho, 2025). It has also been shown that unhealthy conflict patterns, including technology-related disruptions such as partner phubbing, can reduce marital satisfaction through impaired marital interaction and increased conflict (Wang & Zhao, 2023). In addition, studies have shown that marital conflict can affect not only spouses but also children and adolescents. Parental marital conflict has been associated with adolescent anxiety (Yan et al., 2026), adolescent self-perception through psychological resilience (He et al., 2026), maladaptive behaviors through experiential avoidance and subjective well-being (Jia et al., 2026), and children's self-regulation through parenting stress, parenting efficacy, and parenting style (Kim, 2026). These findings highlight the clinical importance of reducing marital conflict, because improving couple functioning may also contribute to a healthier family emotional climate.

The results of the present study are further supported by research showing that psychoeducational and cognitive-behavioral components can improve marital harmony. Cognitive restructuring and psychoeducational therapies have been found to foster marital harmony among couples in

domestically abused marriages, suggesting that teaching couples new cognitive and communicative skills can reduce relational distress (Anyanwu et al., 2026). The Gottman-based intervention used in the present study similarly included psychoeducational elements, structured exercises, communication training, emotional awareness, and conflict resolution strategies. It also aligns with recommendations that marital conflict should be managed through techniques that promote healthy disagreement, emotional regulation, mutual respect, and productive problem-solving (Msughter et al., 2024). Furthermore, research on cognitive labor in same-gender couples shows that the mental work of organizing and maintaining shared life can influence relational dynamics, which supports the importance of cognitive coordination and mutual understanding in sustaining marital quality (McLean et al., 2023).

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings suggest that Gottman-based conflict management training is effective because it targets several interrelated mechanisms at the same time. It reduces perceived stress by decreasing emotional threat and increasing relational security; it improves quality of marital life by strengthening positive interactions, emotional connection, and cooperation; and it enhances cognitive harmony by helping couples construct shared meanings, understand each other's expectations, and manage differences without escalating conflict. The persistence of these effects at the three-month follow-up suggests that the intervention may have helped couples acquire skills that could be transferred to daily marital interactions beyond the treatment setting. Therefore, the present study adds to the growing evidence that structured, theory-based couple interventions can produce meaningful changes in emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of marital functioning.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample was selected from conflicted couples who referred to counseling centers in one city; therefore, the generalizability of the findings to couples from other cultural, socioeconomic, and clinical backgrounds should be made with caution. Second, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability, response bias, or participants' temporary emotional states. Third, although the inclusion and exclusion

criteria attempted to control for severe psychological or physical disorders, the study did not include detailed clinical interviews to examine all possible comorbid conditions that could influence marital conflict, perceived stress, or marital quality. Fourth, the follow-up period was limited to three months, and it remains unclear whether the observed improvements would remain stable over longer periods. Finally, the sample size was relatively limited, which may reduce the statistical power and restrict more detailed subgroup analyses based on gender, duration of marriage, severity of conflict, or educational level.

Future studies are recommended to replicate the present research with larger and more diverse samples from different cities, cultures, and socioeconomic groups in order to increase the generalizability of the findings. It is also suggested that future research use longer follow-up periods, such as six months or one year, to determine the long-term stability of the intervention effects. Future studies could compare Gottman-based conflict management training with other couple therapy approaches, such as emotionally focused therapy, cognitive-behavioral couple therapy, integrative behavioral couple therapy, or solution-focused couple therapy. Researchers are also encouraged to use mixed-method designs by combining quantitative measures with clinical interviews, observational coding of couple interactions, and qualitative reports of participants' experiences. In addition, future studies may examine mediating variables such as emotional regulation, communication patterns, forgiveness, dyadic coping, attachment security, and marital commitment to clarify the mechanisms through which Gottman-based training improves marital outcomes.

Based on the findings, Gottman-based conflict management training can be used by counselors, family therapists, and clinical psychologists as a structured intervention for conflicted couples. Practitioners may benefit from incorporating modules on love maps, fondness and admiration, turning toward the partner, accepting influence, solving solvable problems, overcoming gridlock, and creating shared meaning into couple counseling programs. Counseling centers can provide this intervention in group or couple-based formats, especially for couples who experience repeated conflict, emotional distance, high perceived stress, and difficulty reaching mutual understanding. It is also recommended that therapists assign practical home exercises between sessions so that couples can apply the learned skills in real-life interactions. Because the intervention showed sustained effects at follow-up, practitioners should

emphasize continuity of practice, periodic review sessions, and relapse-prevention strategies to help couples maintain healthier communication and conflict management patterns over time.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have equally contributed 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.

References

- Abedini Chamgardani, S., & Niknejadi, F. (2021). Investigating the mediating role of dyadic coping and intellectual understanding and coordination in the relationship between marital attractions and marital quality. *Rooyesh-e-Ravanshenasi*, 10(12), 73-84.
- Anyanwu, C. J., Okoiye, O. E., & Urien, P. (2026). Effect of cognitive restructuring and psycho-educational therapies in fostering marital harmony among couples in domestically abused marriages in South-South Nigeria. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 14(2). <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v14i2.8163>

- Chavoshi, H., Sarafraz, M. R., & Goodarzi, M. A. (2022). The mediating role of self-compassion and mindfulness in the relationship between perceived stress and psychological-physical health. *Rooyesh-e-Ravanshenasi*, 11(8), 13-24.
- Gottman, J., & Gottman, J. (2017). The natural principles of love. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 9(1), 7-26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12182>
- He, F., Li, J., Jiang, Y., & Li, B. (2026). The impact of parental marital conflict on adolescent self-perception: The mediating role of psychological resilience.
- Ho, W. C. (2025). Explaining the prevalence of marital conflict: Conceptual bifurcation and sociological explanations. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 10, 1490385. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1490385>
- Irvine, T. J., Peluso, P. R., Benson, K., Cole, C., Cole, D., Gottman, J. M., & Schwartz Gottman, J. (2024). A pilot study examining the effectiveness of Gottman method couples therapy over treatment-as-usual approaches for treating couples dealing with infidelity. *The Family Journal*, 32(1), 81-94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807231210123>
- Jia, W., Liu, L., Wang, X., Han, T., Yan, G., & Ma, Y. (2026). Parental marital conflict and adolescent BrainRot behavior: The chain mediation of experiential avoidance and subjective well-being. *BMC psychology*, 14(1), 34. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-03782-x>
- Kim, J. (2026). The relationship between paternal marital conflict, parenting stress and parenting efficacy on children's self-regulation in Korea: The mediating role of positive parenting style. *Child & Family Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.70123>
- Komiya, A., Kato, M., Shibata, H., Imamura, Y., Sazuka, T., Sakamoto, S., & Kawai, K. (2023). Results of lifestyle modification promotion and reproductive/general health check for male partners of couples seeking conception. *Heliyon*, 9(4). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e15203>
- Li, P. J., Sun, R. W., Wong, Y. J., Leung, M. M., & Chan, C. K. (2026). Dialectical coping and mental health outcomes among Hong Kong Chinese: The mediating role of perceived stress. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2026.2632212>
- Li, X., Kong, D., Chan, H. Y. L., & Wu, B. (2026). Gender, harmony, and face: Latent profile moderation testing culture-marriage links in older couples with mild cognitive impairment. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 02654075251413804. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075251413804>
- Mai, H., Ke, J., Zheng, Z., Luo, J., Li, M., Qu, Y., & Zuo, L. (2023). Association of diet and lifestyle factors with semen quality in male partners of Chinese couples preparing for pregnancy. *Reproductive Health*, 20(1), 173. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-023-01718-5>
- McLean, C., Musolino, C., Rose, A., & Ward, P. R. (2023). The management of cognitive labour in same-gender couples. *PLoS One*, 18(7), e0287585. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0287585>
- Msughter, G. B., Christine, C., Nse, J. E., & Nneoma, E. C. (2024). Managing conflict in marriage: Techniques and interventions for addressing and resolving disagreements in a healthy and productive manner. *GAS Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(12), 518-524.
- Sohrabi Azandaryani, S., & Mirshahi, F. (2024). The effectiveness of solution-focused group couple therapy on adjustment, intimacy, and marital quality of life among women with husbands undergoing addiction recovery. *Rooyesh-e-Ravanshenasi*, 13(9), 231-240.
- Taee, L., Moghadam, K. K., Jofreh, M. G., & Shahbazi, M. (2025). Comparing the effectiveness of Gottman method couple therapy and integrative behavioral couple therapy on the emotional abuse of women with addicted husbands. *International Journal of Body, Mind & Culture*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.61838/ijbmc.v12i1.5704>
- Urata, Y., Harada, M., Komiya, S., Akiyama, I., Tuchida, C., Nakaoka, Y., & Osuga, Y. (2024). Lifestyle and fertility-specific quality of life affect reproductive outcomes in couples undergoing in vitro fertilization. *Frontiers in Endocrinology*, 15, 1346084. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fendo.2024.1346084>
- Wang, X., & Zhao, K. (2023). Partner phubbing and marital satisfaction: The mediating roles of marital interaction and marital conflict. *Social Science Computer Review*, 41(4), 1126-1139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393211072231>
- Xiang, B., Li, G., & Xiang, W. (2026). Academic stress profiles and bedtime procrastination among college students: The mediating role of rumination and the moderating effect of perceived stress. *Frontiers in psychology*, 17, 1784775. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2026.1784775>
- Yan, C., Liu, Y., Xiao, T., Pan, M., Zhang, T., He, Z., & Gan, Y. (2026). Parental marital conflict and adolescent anxiety: The moderating roles of physical activity and gender. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.70037>
- Zuhri, A., Ramirez-Coronel, A. A., Al-Hawary, S. I., Dwijendra, N. K. A., Muda, I., Pallathadka, H., & Sunarsi, D. (2023). Evaluation of the role of Islamic lifestyle in communication skills of Muslim couples. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 79(1), 8185. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8185>