Journal Website

Article history:
Received 11 July 2026
Revised 04 October 2026
Accepted 11 October 2026
Initial Publication 22 October 2026
Final Publication 01 September 2027

Applied Family Therapy Journal

Volume 8, Issue 5, pp 1-13

E-ISSN: 3041-8798

Effectiveness of Social Problem-Solving-Based Life Skills Training on Self-Criticism, Self-Regulation, and Self-Efficacy in Women with Divorce Experience

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A r t i c l e I n f o

Article type:
Original Article

How to cite this article:
Zarei, S. M. & Asghariganji, A. (2027). Effectiveness of Social Problem-Solving-Based Life Skills Training on Self-Criticism, Self-Regulation, and Self-Efficacy in Women with Divorce Experience. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, *8*(5) 1-13.
http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.6435

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to determine the effectiveness of social problem-solving-based life skills training in reducing self-criticism and improving self-regulation and self-efficacy among women with divorce experience.

Methods and Materials: This quasi-experimental study employed a pretest–posttest design with a control group. The statistical population comprised all women with divorce experience who had active records at the Social Health Unit of the Welfare Administration of Amol County during the first quarter of 2026. Thirty eligible women were recruited through convenience sampling and randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 15) or a control group (n = 15). The experimental group received a structured life skills training program based on D'Zurilla and Nezu's social problem-solving approach in eight weekly 90-minute sessions, whereas the control group received no intervention. Data were collected using the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale, the Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire, and the General Self-Efficacy Scale. Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were conducted using SPSS version 26.

Findings: After controlling for pretest scores, the multivariate analysis indicated a statistically significant overall difference between the experimental and control groups across the combined dependent variables at posttest ($P < 0.001$). Subsequent univariate covariance analyses showed significant between-group differences in self-criticism, self-regulation, and self-efficacy ($P < 0.001$). Specifically, participation in social problem-solving-based life skills training was associated with significantly lower posttest self-criticism and significantly higher posttest self-regulation and self-efficacy compared with the control condition.

Conclusion: Social problem-solving-based life skills training appears to be an effective educational and psychological intervention for decreasing self-critical tendencies while strengthening self-regulatory capacities and perceived self-efficacy among women with divorce experience. The intervention may therefore be incorporated into psychosocial support and empowerment programs designed for women adjusting to the psychological and social consequences of divorce.

Keywords: *Life Skills; Social Problem-Solving; Self-Criticism; Self-Regulation; Self-Efficacy; Women with Divorce Experience*

1. Introduction

Divorce is a major psychosocial transition that can substantially alter individuals' emotional functioning, interpersonal relationships, perceived competence, and capacity to manage everyday demands. Although divorce may represent the termination of an unsatisfactory or conflictual marital relationship, it can simultaneously expose individuals to multiple stressors, including changes in social roles, financial pressures, disrupted family relationships, reduced social support, concerns about the future, and challenges associated with reconstructing personal identity. These consequences may be particularly salient for women, who may experience the post-divorce period as a combination of emotional loss, social readjustment, and increased responsibility for managing personal and family demands. Research on divorce and health has emphasized that marital dissolution should not be viewed merely as a discrete event, because its effects are shaped by the accumulation of psychological, behavioral, interpersonal, and contextual processes that occur before and after separation (Sbarra et al., 2015). Studies focusing specifically on women after divorce also suggest that successful psychological adjustment depends partly on personal resources that enable individuals to interpret adversity in less self-defeating ways, regulate emotional and behavioral responses, and maintain confidence in their ability to manage new life circumstances (Davarinejad et al., 2022; Yun & Jin, 2026).

One psychological factor that may complicate post-divorce adjustment is self-criticism. Self-criticism refers to a tendency to evaluate the self harshly, focus excessively on perceived shortcomings, and respond to personal difficulties with negative self-judgment. Thompson and Zuroff conceptualized self-criticism as a multidimensional construct comprising comparative self-criticism and internalized self-criticism. Comparative self-criticism involves unfavorable evaluation of oneself relative to other people and is characterized by perceptions of inferiority or inadequacy in comparison with social standards, whereas internalized self-criticism reflects failure to meet personally internalized standards and expectations (Thompson & Zuroff, 2004). In emotionally vulnerable contexts such as marital breakdown, these forms of self-evaluation may become particularly relevant because women may interpret the end of a marriage as evidence of personal inadequacy, unsuccessful role performance, or failure to satisfy internal or social expectations. Within Iranian psychological research, self-criticism has likewise been associated with dimensions of self-knowledge and psychological health, suggesting that excessive negative self-evaluation may undermine adaptive functioning (Mousavi & Ghorbani, 2006). Furthermore, intervention research among women seeking divorce has shown that self-criticism is sufficiently central to their psychological difficulties to constitute an important therapeutic target (Shavandi & Veshki, 2021). Accordingly, reducing dysfunctional self-critical tendencies may contribute to healthier adjustment following divorce.

A second factor of importance is self-regulation, which refers broadly to the ability to monitor and modify thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors in accordance with goals and situational demands. Effective self-regulation allows individuals to identify desired outcomes, plan appropriate actions, monitor their progress, inhibit counterproductive responses, regulate emotional reactions, and modify behavior when existing strategies prove ineffective. Psychometric research on the Persian Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire has supported a multidimensional conceptualization involving self-awareness, goal setting, planning for action, and self-monitoring (Motamed-Jahromi et al., 2022). These capacities may be especially important after divorce, when individuals must often make repeated decisions concerning employment, finances, housing, parenting, social relationships, and future personal goals under conditions of emotional strain. Poor self-regulation may increase susceptibility to impulsive reactions, avoidance, inconsistent goal pursuit, and emotional dysregulation, whereas stronger self-regulatory skills may facilitate more deliberate responses to post-divorce stressors. Recent evidence also indicates that self-regulation is connected with resilience, adjustment, problem solving, self-efficacy, and psychological help-seeking processes, highlighting its role as a broad adaptive resource rather than a narrow behavioral characteristic (Akeren et al., 2025).

Self-efficacy is another important personal resource in this context. General self-efficacy refers to an individual's generalized belief in the ability to organize and execute actions necessary to cope effectively with difficult situations, overcome obstacles, and achieve desired outcomes. Individuals with greater self-efficacy are generally more likely to approach challenging situations as manageable, persist when difficulties arise, and interpret setbacks as problems requiring adaptive responses rather than as confirmation of personal helplessness. Within the post-divorce context, self-efficacy may be particularly important because women are often required to reconstruct

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E-ISSN: 3041-8798

daily routines and social roles while simultaneously coping with uncertainty and emotional pressure. Recent research on post-divorce growth among women has identified self-efficacy as an important psychological mechanism through which relational and social resources may contribute to positive adaptation after marital dissolution (Yun & Jin, 2026). Similarly, studies involving children and adolescents affected by parental divorce have demonstrated that life skills training can improve self-efficacy and resilience, further supporting the view that perceived personal competence is modifiable through structured psychological education (Jokar et al., 2025).

The simultaneous consideration of self-criticism, self-regulation, and self-efficacy is theoretically important because these constructs represent interconnected but distinct dimensions of adaptation. Self-criticism concerns how individuals evaluate themselves when confronting perceived shortcomings or failures; self-regulation concerns how they manage thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in pursuit of goals; and self-efficacy concerns whether they believe they possess the capacity to act effectively. In women who have experienced divorce, harsh self-evaluation may reduce confidence in decision-making, while weak regulatory capacity may impair the implementation of constructive coping responses. Conversely, reducing self-critical thinking, strengthening self-regulatory capacities, and enhancing perceived efficacy may jointly create conditions for more adaptive adjustment. This perspective is consistent with intervention research showing that psychological skills can influence multiple domains of personal functioning rather than affecting a single isolated outcome.

Life skills training has emerged as one approach for strengthening such adaptive capacities. Life skills programs generally aim to improve individuals' ability to cope effectively with everyday demands through the development of cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and behavioral competencies. Depending on their structure, these programs may include self-awareness, decision-making, emotional regulation, communication, problem solving, stress management, goal setting, and adaptive coping. Recent studies continue to support the psychological benefits of structured life skills programs across diverse populations. For example, life skills training has been shown to enhance self-awareness among late adolescents and emerging adults (Sadiq et al., 2026), reduce self-handicapping among university students (Taghipour & Naseri, 2026), and improve self-efficacy among patients with substance use disorders (Abdelmouttelb et al., 2026). These findings indicate that life skills training may influence important psychological resources by providing individuals with practical strategies for understanding problems, managing responses, and acting more effectively in challenging contexts.

Among the various life skills domains, social problem solving is particularly relevant to women coping with divorce because post-divorce difficulties often involve complex problems for which simple emotional reassurance is insufficient. Social problem solving refers to the cognitive-behavioral process through which individuals attempt to identify effective responses to problems encountered in everyday social life. The model developed by D'Zurilla, Nezu, and Maydeu-Olivares conceptualizes social problem solving as involving both problem orientation and problem-solving skills (D'Zurilla et al., 2004). Problem orientation concerns the motivational and attitudinal manner in which individuals perceive and approach problems, whereas problem-solving skills involve specific processes such as problem definition, generation of alternatives, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. Within problem-solving therapy, these processes are systematically trained so that individuals learn to approach problems more constructively, generate multiple alternatives, evaluate likely consequences, and implement selected solutions in a planned manner (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2010).

This framework is especially relevant to post-divorce adjustment because many challenges associated with divorce are ongoing rather than immediately resolvable. A woman may simultaneously face interpersonal conflict, altered financial conditions, social stigma, parenting responsibilities, housing concerns, and uncertainty about future relationships. An avoidant or helpless problem orientation may intensify distress by reinforcing the perception that these difficulties are uncontrollable, whereas an impulsive style may produce poorly considered decisions that create additional stress. By contrast, a positive problem orientation combined with systematic problem-solving skills may increase perceived control and reduce emotional reactivity. In this sense, social problem-solving training can be expected to influence not only overt problem-management behavior but also underlying self-evaluative and self-regulatory processes.

A growing empirical literature supports the effectiveness of problem-solving interventions across different populations and outcomes. A scoping review of social problem-solving interventions for college students found

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that such programs have been implemented through a variety of structured educational and psychological formats and have generally targeted adaptive coping, psychosocial functioning, and problem-management capacities (Weiyi et al., 2025). A systematic review and meta-analysis of social problem-solving interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder likewise reported evidence that structured interventions can improve problem-solving-related functioning, although intervention formats and outcomes vary across studies (Jin et al., 2025). Recent quasi-experimental evidence has also shown that a psychodrama-based social problem-solving course can improve relevant psychosocial competencies among undergraduate health professional students (Kamisli, 2026). Although these populations differ substantially from divorced women, the findings support the broader assumption that social problem solving is a trainable set of skills with meaningful psychological consequences.

Problem-solving training may be particularly relevant to self-efficacy because successful mastery of structured problem-solving strategies can provide individuals with repeated experiences of competence and control. Research among adolescents has indicated that problem-solving skills training based on personal competencies can strengthen self-efficacy beliefs (Nourbakhsh et al., 2024). Similarly, a randomized controlled trial among nursing students demonstrated that problem-solving skills development training improved self-efficacy while also influencing perceived stress and resilience (Şenocak & Demirkıran, 2023). Creative problem-solving training has also been associated with enhanced self-efficacy and personal growth initiative in students (Dadvand et al., 2026). These findings suggest that when individuals learn to define problems clearly, generate alternatives, anticipate consequences, and implement realistic solutions, their confidence in their own ability to manage difficult situations may increase.

There is also evidence connecting social problem solving with emotional and interpersonal functioning. Training female students in emotion regulation techniques has been shown to improve social problem-solving skills and reduce social anxiety, illustrating the reciprocal relationship between emotional regulation and effective problem management (Akbari et al., 2025). At a broader level, social skills interventions have been recognized as potentially valuable components of psychological treatment in conditions characterized by interpersonal difficulty and anxiety (Heller et al., 2026). Such findings are relevant because problem solving rarely occurs independently of emotion regulation or social functioning. The ability to remain emotionally regulated while defining a problem, considering alternatives, and evaluating consequences may reduce reactive self-blame and facilitate more deliberate behavior. Accordingly, social problem-solving-based life skills training may simultaneously strengthen self-regulatory capacity and reduce maladaptive self-critical responses.

Evidence from women facing psychosocial vulnerability provides additional support for this possibility. Social problem-solving training has been associated with improvements in loneliness, hope for life, and self-efficacy among women with substance use disorder (Farshbaf Dadkhah et al., 2024). Although substance use disorder and divorce represent different forms of psychosocial adversity, both conditions may involve diminished perceived control, social strain, negative self-evaluation, and difficulty managing complex life problems. Therefore, findings from vulnerable female populations suggest that structured problem-solving interventions may be useful for strengthening psychological resources in women who are navigating major life disruptions.

More directly, problem-solving interventions have been investigated among divorced women. Sadeghian and Toozandehjani found that problem-solving skills training was effective in modifying attributional style and improving socialization among divorced women (Sadeghian & Toozandehjani, 2016). This study is particularly important because it suggests that problem-solving training may influence not only instrumental coping but also the cognitive interpretations and social adaptation processes that follow divorce. Nevertheless, the available literature remains limited with respect to interventions simultaneously addressing self-criticism, self-regulation, and self-efficacy in women with divorce experience. Existing research has often focused on one or two psychological outcomes, or has examined problem-solving skills in populations such as students, adolescents, clinical groups, or women with other forms of psychosocial vulnerability. Consequently, there remains a need to examine whether a structured social problem-solving-based life skills program can generate coordinated improvements across several psychologically meaningful dimensions of post-divorce adaptation.

This gap is important because interventions for women after divorce may be more effective when they address both maladaptive self-evaluation and constructive behavioral coping. A program that only reduces distress without strengthening problem-management skills may leave individuals vulnerable when new stressors arise, whereas a

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program that teaches instrumental skills without addressing emotional and cognitive responses may be difficult to apply under conditions of self-blame or low perceived competence. Social problem-solving-based life skills training offers a potentially integrative approach because it encourages participants to adopt a more constructive orientation toward problems, define difficulties objectively, separate facts from interpretations, generate multiple solutions, evaluate consequences, plan behavior, regulate emotional responses, and monitor outcomes. These processes theoretically correspond to lower self-criticism, stronger self-regulation, and higher self-efficacy.

Taken together, prior research indicates that divorce may create sustained psychological and social challenges for women (Davarinejad et al., 2022; Sbarra et al., 2015), that self-critical tendencies can undermine psychological adjustment (Mousavi & Ghorbani, 2006; Shavandi & Veshki, 2021; Thompson & Zuroff, 2004), and that self-regulation and self-efficacy constitute important adaptive resources (Akeren et al., 2025; Motamed-Jahromi et al., 2022; Yun & Jin, 2026). At the same time, evidence from life skills and problem-solving interventions suggests that these capacities are responsive to structured training across a range of populations (Abdelmouttelb et al., 2026; Dadvand et al., 2026; Farshbaf Dadkhah et al., 2024; Jin et al., 2025; Jokar et al., 2025; Kamisli, 2026; Nourbakhsh et al., 2024; Sadiq et al., 2026; Şenocak & Demirkıran, 2023; Taghipour & Naseri, 2026; Weiyi et al., 2025). Grounded in the social problem-solving framework (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2010; D'Zurilla et al., 2004), and considering the need for psychologically practical interventions for women navigating the consequences of divorce, further investigation of this approach is warranted.

The present study therefore aimed to determine the effectiveness of social problem-solving-based life skills training on self-criticism, self-regulation, and self-efficacy in women with divorce experience.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest design with an experimental group and a control group. After eligible participants were identified and enrolled, they were assigned to the experimental and control groups, and both groups completed baseline assessments of the study variables before the intervention. The experimental group then received life skills training based on the social problem-solving approach, whereas the control group did not receive the study intervention during the implementation period and was placed on a waiting list. Following completion of the intervention, both groups were reassessed using the same outcome measures at posttest. The statistical population consisted of all women with divorce experience who had active welfare case records at the Social Health Unit of the Welfare Administration of Amol County during the first quarter of 2026. The required sample size was estimated using G*Power version 3.1 based on an anticipated effect size of 0.69, statistical power of 0.95, an alpha level of 0.05, and two study groups, yielding a total sample of 30 participants. Accordingly, 30 eligible women were recruited and allocated equally to the experimental and control groups, with 15 participants in each group. Participants were selected through convenience sampling after coordination with the Social Health Unit of the Welfare Administration of Amol County. Women with active welfare case records were screened according to the eligibility criteria, and those who met the inclusion requirements and expressed willingness to participate were invited to enter the study. Before enrollment, the study objectives, intervention procedures, number and duration of training sessions, conditions of participation, and participants' right to withdraw were explained, and written informed consent was obtained. After completion of recruitment, participants were randomly allocated to the experimental or control group. The inclusion criteria were being a woman with divorce experience, having an active welfare case record at the Social Health Unit of the Welfare Administration of Amol County, being 20–50 years of age, having at least primary-level education and adequate literacy to complete the study instruments, providing informed consent, expressing willingness to attend the sessions, possessing sufficient psychological and functional capacity to participate in group activities and complete training assignments, having no history of severe psychological disorders or personality disorders that could interfere with participation, having no current substance or alcohol dependence or abuse, not participating concurrently in similar psychological interventions, not receiving another treatment or intervention likely to influence the study outcomes, and committing to regular attendance. Exclusion criteria consisted of voluntary withdrawal at any stage, absence from more than two sessions, unwillingness to continue participating in educational activities or assignments, emergence of psychological or practical conditions that made continued participation inappropriate,

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and persistent failure to complete questionnaires or follow study procedures.

2.2. Measures

The Levels of Self-Criticism Scale developed by Thompson and Zuroff in 2004 was used to assess self-critical tendencies. The instrument contains 22 items and measures two dimensions, namely Internalized Self-Criticism and Comparative Self-Criticism. Items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 0, indicating "not at all descriptive of me," to 6, indicating "very descriptive of me." Total scores can range from 0 to 132, with higher scores representing greater levels of self-criticism. Thompson and Zuroff reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.87 for Internalized Self-Criticism and 0.81 for Comparative Self-Criticism. Concurrent validity was supported through correlations of 0.54 and 0.60, respectively, between the two subscales and the neuroticism dimension of the NEO Five-Factor Inventory. In the Iranian context, Mousavi and Ghorbani reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.83 for the instrument and correlations ranging from 0.20 to 0.52 with the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems, providing evidence of convergent validity. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.74 for Internalized Self-Criticism and 0.81 for Comparative Self-Criticism, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

The Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire developed by Carey et al. in 2004, based on the original Self-Regulation Questionnaire proposed by Brown et al. in 1999, was used to assess participants' ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in pursuit of personal goals. The original short form contains 31 items; however, the Iranian adaptation validated by Motamed-Jahromi et al. in 2022 consists of 20 items. The content of the questionnaire addresses several aspects of self-regulation, including control of negative emotions, problem-solving planning, commitment to goals, modification of ineffective behaviors, evaluation of behavioral consequences, and deliberate regulation of behavior in stressful or challenging situations. Responses are rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5, with higher scores reflecting stronger self-regulation. The Iranian version comprises four components: self-awareness with six items, goal setting with two items, action planning with six items, and self-monitoring with six items. In the Iranian validation study, exploratory factor analysis resulted in a 20-item, four-factor structure accounting for 76.34% of the total variance. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated satisfactory model fit, with RMSEA = 0.059, CFI = 0.92, and GFI = 0.89. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the 20-item Persian version was 0.87, and a significant positive correlation with the General Self-Efficacy Scale was observed (r = 0.44), supporting convergent validity. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire was 0.79.

The General Self-Efficacy Scale developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem was used to evaluate generalized beliefs regarding the ability to cope effectively with difficult situations, solve problems, persist in the face of obstacles, and manage stressful circumstances. The scale consists of 10 items designed to provide a broad assessment of perceived competence across different life situations. Each item is rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1, "not at all true," to 4, "exactly true," producing total scores ranging from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating stronger general self-efficacy. The scale was translated into Persian in 1996 and was subsequently standardized in Iranian samples. In an Iranian validation study, factor analysis supported a general self-efficacy construct accounting for 38.69% of the variance in scale items. Reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.82 for the total sample, 0.84 among psychology students at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, and 0.80 among psychology students at Islamic Azad University of Marvdasht. Concurrent validity with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was also statistically significant, with coefficients ranging from 0.20 to 0.30 across samples. In the present study, the internal consistency of the General Self-Efficacy Scale was satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87.

2.3. Intervention

The experimental intervention consisted of a structured social problem-solving-based life skills training program developed according to the framework of D'Zurilla and Nezu. The program was delivered to participants in the experimental group over eight weekly sessions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. The first session focused on establishing a psychologically safe group environment, introducing the objectives and rules of the program, and discussing post-divorce psychological pressures and their effects on thoughts, emotions, and behavior. Participants were introduced to the concept of problem orientation and completed a practical exercise in which they identified a real-life problem and examined the thoughts associated with it. The second session addressed dysfunctional problem-

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solving styles, including impulsive, avoidant, and helpless approaches, and participants analyzed personal situations to identify their dominant behavioral style. The third session focused on accurate problem definition, emphasizing the importance of formulating problems in specific, controllable, and solvable terms and distinguishing objective facts from personal interpretations. Participants practiced reformulating vague problems into clearly defined issues. The fourth session introduced the generation of multiple solutions through divergent thinking and brainstorming techniques, with the aim of promoting cognitive flexibility and reducing all-or-nothing thinking. Participants were asked to generate at least five possible solutions to a common problem. The fifth session concentrated on evaluating alternatives and decision-making by examining the advantages and disadvantages of each option, anticipating short- and long-term consequences, and selecting responsible solutions. The sixth session emphasized implementation planning and behavioral goal setting, including step-by-step planning and the use of SMART goals; participants selected a preferred solution and developed an action plan for its implementation. The seventh session addressed emotional regulation during the problem-solving process and included training in diaphragmatic breathing, thought stopping, cognitive restructuring, and relaxation strategies for managing stress. These techniques were intended to reduce self-critical responses and strengthen self-regulation during emotionally difficult situations. The final session focused on consolidation of acquired skills and relapse prevention. Participants reviewed the complete problem-solving sequence, discussed successfully implemented strategies, identified situations in which dysfunctional problem-solving styles might re-emerge, and developed individualized plans for maintaining adaptive skills. After the eighth session, posttest assessments were administered. Throughout the intervention period, the control group did not receive social problem-solving-based life skills training and remained on a waiting list. Following the completion of the intervention phase, both groups completed the posttest measures under conditions comparable to those used at baseline.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics, including the mean and standard deviation, were calculated for the study variables in the experimental and control groups at the pretest and posttest stages. Skewness and kurtosis indices were examined to evaluate the distributional characteristics of the data, and the Shapiro–Wilk test was used to assess the assumption of normality. Before inferential analyses were conducted, the assumptions required for covariance analysis were evaluated. Levene's test was applied to examine the homogeneity of error variances across groups, and Box's M test was used to assess the homogeneity of variance–covariance matrices. Multivariate analysis of covariance was then employed to determine whether the experimental and control groups differed significantly on the combined dependent variables of self-criticism, self-regulation, and self-efficacy at posttest after controlling for corresponding pretest scores. When a statistically significant multivariate effect was identified, separate univariate analyses of covariance were conducted for each dependent variable to determine the specific effect of the intervention on self-criticism, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. Statistical significance was evaluated at an alpha level of 0.05.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 30 women with divorce experience participated in the study and were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups, with 15 participants in each group. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of self-criticism, self-regulation, and self-efficacy and their respective components for the experimental and control groups at the pretest and posttest stages. Descriptively, the two groups showed relatively similar scores at pretest, whereas at posttest the experimental group demonstrated lower self-criticism and higher self-regulation and self-efficacy than the control group.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables in the Experimental and Control Groups at Pretest and Posttest

Variable	Component	Stage	Experimental Group M	Experimental Group SD	Control Group M	Control Group SD
Self-Criticism	Internalized Self-Criticism	Pretest	26.133	1.060	26.600	1.055
		Posttest	23.000	1.000	25.600	1.681

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	Comparative Self-Criticism	Pretest	31.266	1.162	31.133	1.125
		Posttest	27.600	1.404	29.800	1.014
	Total Score	Pretest	57.400	1.549	57.733	1.667
		Posttest	50.600	1.594	55.400	1.723
Self-Regulation	Self-Awareness	Pretest	7.933	0.703	8.066	0.703
		Posttest	10.466	0.817	8.400	0.632
	Goal Setting	Pretest	2.866	0.833	2.666	0.723
		Posttest	5.066	0.703	3.266	0.703
	Action Planning	Pretest	10.400	0.828	10.200	1.014
		Posttest	12.333	1.045	11.200	0.861
	Self-Monitoring	Pretest	9.133	0.743	9.066	0.798
		Posttest	11.466	0.833	9.933	0.883
	Total Score	Pretest	30.333	1.397	30.000	1.511
		Posttest	39.333	2.288	32.800	1.897
Self-Efficacy	—	Pretest	11.933	0.883	12.066	0.883
	—	Posttest	15.133	1.505	13.533	2.559

Prior to conducting the covariance analyses, the statistical assumptions underlying MANCOVA and ANCOVA were examined. The distributions of the study variables were evaluated using skewness and kurtosis indices and the Shapiro–Wilk test, and no substantial departure from normality was identified. Homogeneity of error variances was examined using Levene's test, while the equality of variance–covariance matrices was assessed using Box's M test. Examination of these diagnostic criteria indicated that the assumptions required for covariance analysis were adequately satisfied. Therefore, MANCOVA was used to examine the overall intervention effect across the three dependent variables, followed by univariate ANCOVAs to determine the intervention effect on each outcome separately while controlling for the corresponding pretest scores. The multivariate analysis showed a significant overall group effect, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.179$, $F(3, 23) = 35.047$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.821$, indicating that the experimental and control groups differed significantly on the combined posttest outcomes after adjustment for baseline scores.

Table 2

Univariate ANCOVA Results for Posttest Self-Criticism, Self-Regulation, and Self-Efficacy after Controlling for Pretest Scores

Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Partial η^2
Group	Self-Criticism	158.834	1	158.834	74.831	<0.001	0.750
Group	Self-Regulation	322.186	1	322.186	67.223	<0.001	0.729
Group	Self-Efficacy	27.177	1	27.177	11.352	0.002	0.312
Error	Self-Criticism	53.064	25	2.123	—	—	—
Error	Self-Regulation	119.820	25	4.793	—	—	—
Error	Self-Efficacy	59.853	25	2.394	—	—	—

As shown in Table 2, after controlling for the corresponding pretest scores, statistically significant differences were observed between the experimental and control groups in all three study outcomes. The group effect on self-criticism was significant, $F(1, 25) = 74.831$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.750$, indicating that 75.0% of the adjusted variance in posttest self-criticism was associated with group membership. Consistent with the descriptive findings, the experimental group showed lower self-criticism following the intervention. A significant group effect was also observed for self-regulation, $F(1, 25) = 67.223$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.729$, indicating that 72.9% of the adjusted variance in posttest self-regulation was associated with group membership; participants who received social problem-solving-based life skills training demonstrated higher self-regulation than those in the control group. Finally, the adjusted posttest self-efficacy scores differed significantly between the groups, $F(1, 25) = 11.352$, $p = 0.002$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.312$, with the experimental group demonstrating higher self-efficacy. Thus, after adjustment for baseline differences, social problem-solving-based life skills training was associated with a significant reduction in self-criticism and significant increases in self-regulation and self-efficacy among women with divorce experience.

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E-ISSN: 3041-8798

4. Discussion

The present study examined the effectiveness of social problem-solving-based life skills training in reducing self-criticism and increasing self-regulation and self-efficacy among women with divorce experience. The findings showed that, after controlling for pretest scores, participants in the experimental group demonstrated significantly lower self-criticism and significantly higher self-regulation and self-efficacy than participants in the control group. The multivariate results indicated a substantial overall intervention effect across the three dependent variables, and the univariate analyses further confirmed significant effects on each outcome separately. These findings suggest that a structured intervention centered on social problem-solving processes can simultaneously influence maladaptive self-evaluative tendencies and strengthen adaptive cognitive-behavioral resources in women coping with the consequences of divorce. The results are consistent with the conceptual assumption that post-divorce adjustment is not determined only by the severity of external stressors, but also by the way individuals interpret problems, regulate their responses, and evaluate their ability to cope with difficult circumstances (Davarinejad et al., 2022; Sbarra et al., 2015).

The first major finding was that social problem-solving-based life skills training significantly reduced self-criticism. This result is consistent with studies showing that self-criticism is an important psychological target in women facing marital disruption and that interventions aimed at modifying maladaptive self-evaluation can reduce its intensity (Shavandi & Veshki, 2021). The finding is also compatible with the conceptualization of self-criticism proposed by Thompson and Zuroff, who distinguished between internalized self-criticism and comparative self-criticism as two forms of negative self-evaluation involving failure to meet internal standards and unfavorable comparison with others (Thompson & Zuroff, 2004). In the present study, both dimensions decreased following the intervention, suggesting that training may have affected not only participants' evaluations of themselves against personal standards but also their tendency to judge themselves relative to others. This interpretation is also consistent with evidence linking self-criticism to broader aspects of self-knowledge and mental health (Mousavi & Ghorbani, 2006).

One explanation for this reduction is that social problem-solving training changes the manner in which individuals interpret difficult situations. Women experiencing divorce may be vulnerable to global and self-blaming interpretations of marital failure, such as perceiving themselves as fundamentally inadequate, unsuccessful, or incapable. In contrast, the social problem-solving framework encourages individuals to define problems concretely, distinguish facts from interpretations, generate alternative explanations and responses, and evaluate the consequences of possible actions (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2010; D'Zurilla et al., 2004). This process may weaken rigid self-blaming cognitions because difficulties are reframed as specific, manageable problems rather than as evidence of personal defectiveness. By repeatedly practicing this approach, participants may have learned to separate the existence of a problem from a negative judgment about the self. This distinction is particularly relevant for divorced women, whose experiences may otherwise be filtered through internalized social expectations or perceived personal failure.

The decrease in self-criticism may also have been facilitated by the emotional regulation components embedded in the intervention. The training included diaphragmatic breathing, thought stopping, cognitive restructuring, and relaxation during stressful situations. These strategies can reduce the emotional intensity associated with self-critical thoughts and create the psychological distance necessary for more balanced self-evaluation. The relevance of this mechanism is supported by findings showing that emotion regulation training can improve social problem-solving abilities and reduce maladaptive emotional responses (Akbari et al., 2025). In addition, the broader literature on interventions targeting self-criticism indicates that increasing adaptive coping and reducing punitive self-evaluation are important pathways to improved psychological functioning (Shavandi & Veshki, 2021). Therefore, the observed reduction in self-criticism may reflect the combined effects of cognitive reframing, improved problem orientation, and enhanced emotional regulation.

The second major finding was that social problem-solving-based life skills training significantly increased self-regulation. This finding is theoretically coherent because effective problem solving requires many of the same processes that underlie self-regulation, including self-awareness, goal setting, planning, monitoring, behavioral adjustment, and evaluation of outcomes. The Persian Short Self-Regulation Questionnaire used in this study includes these dimensions, particularly self-awareness, goal setting, planning for action, and self-monitoring (Motamed-Jahromi et al., 2022). The intervention directly trained each of these functions. Participants were taught to identify problems

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accurately, generate alternatives, choose realistic solutions, formulate SMART goals, develop implementation plans, and review the consequences of their actions. These activities required participants to monitor their own thoughts and behavior and to modify their responses when necessary.

The improvement in self-regulation is also consistent with findings indicating that self-regulation is closely related to problem solving, resilience, adjustment, and self-efficacy (Akeren et al., 2025). Individuals who can regulate themselves effectively are better able to delay impulsive reactions, tolerate short-term discomfort, remain focused on longer-term goals, and adapt their behavior when circumstances change. These capacities may be especially important for women after divorce because the post-divorce period often involves multiple simultaneous demands requiring careful decision-making and behavioral control. The present intervention may have strengthened self-regulation by converting diffuse life difficulties into structured sequences of manageable steps. Rather than reacting immediately to stress, participants were encouraged to pause, define the problem, consider alternatives, and act according to a planned solution.

The result is also in line with previous research on structured psychological skills training. Studies of life skills interventions have shown improvements in capacities closely related to self-regulation, including self-awareness, coping, and adaptive decision-making (Sadiq et al., 2026; Taghipour & Naseri, 2026). In addition, the literature on social problem-solving interventions suggests that these programs can improve broader psychosocial functioning across different populations (Kamisli, 2026; Weiyi et al., 2025). Although the characteristics of those populations differ from the present sample, the common mechanism appears to be the acquisition of deliberate, sequential, and goal-directed strategies for managing stressful situations. The current findings therefore extend this evidence to women with divorce experience and suggest that social problem-solving-based training may strengthen the self-management processes needed for post-divorce adjustment.

The third major finding was that social problem-solving-based life skills training significantly increased self-efficacy. This result is consistent with several previous studies showing that problem-solving and life skills interventions can strengthen beliefs in personal competence. Problem-solving skills training has been associated with increased self-efficacy in adolescents (Nourbakhsh et al., 2024), nursing students (Şenocak & Demirkıran, 2023), and students participating in creative problem-solving programs (Dadvand et al., 2026). Similarly, social problem-solving training has been found to improve self-efficacy in women with substance use disorder (Farshbaf Dadkhah et al., 2024), while life skills training has increased self-efficacy in both clinical and nonclinical populations (Abdelmouttelb et al., 2026; Jokar et al., 2025). These converging findings support the present result and suggest that self-efficacy is responsive to structured training that enhances perceived mastery over difficult situations.

A plausible explanation is that problem-solving training provides repeated mastery experiences. Participants are encouraged to identify a real problem, divide it into manageable components, generate several possible responses, select a feasible solution, implement it, and evaluate the outcome. Successfully completing these steps can create direct evidence that difficult situations can be managed through personal effort and structured action. This is particularly important after divorce, when individuals may experience uncertainty, loss of control, and doubts about their ability to rebuild their lives. The intervention may therefore enhance self-efficacy by replacing generalized helplessness with specific experiences of effective coping. The finding is also consistent with evidence that self-efficacy plays a meaningful role in post-divorce growth and adaptation among women (Yun & Jin, 2026).

The improvement in self-efficacy may further be explained by the interaction between cognitive and behavioral components of the intervention. The training did not merely provide information; it required active participation, behavioral planning, decision-making, and implementation. This structure likely enabled participants to observe their own capacity to complete tasks, tolerate uncertainty, and adapt plans when necessary. Such experiences may strengthen generalized beliefs about competence. In addition, the reduction in self-criticism observed in the study may have indirectly supported self-efficacy, because individuals who judge themselves less harshly may be more willing to attempt new behaviors and persist after setbacks. This interpretation is consistent with the broader pattern of relationships among self-regulation, problem solving, adjustment, and self-efficacy identified in recent research (Akeren et al., 2025).

The present findings also correspond with research specifically involving divorced women. Sadeghian and Toozandehjani found that problem-solving skills training improved attributional style and socialization among divorced women (Sadeghian & Toozandehjani, 2016). Their findings suggest that structured problem-solving training

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can modify both cognitive interpretations and interpersonal adaptation following divorce. The current study extends this line of evidence by showing significant effects on self-criticism, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. These outcomes are highly relevant because they represent different but complementary dimensions of post-divorce adaptation. Reduced self-criticism may improve the way individuals interpret themselves, greater self-regulation may improve the way they manage thoughts and behaviors, and stronger self-efficacy may improve the way they perceive their capacity to handle future challenges.

The results are also consistent with the theoretical foundations of social problem-solving therapy. D'Zurilla and colleagues conceptualized adaptive social problem solving as involving both constructive problem orientation and systematic problem-solving skills (D'Zurilla et al., 2004). A positive orientation encourages individuals to view problems as challenges that can be managed rather than as threats that confirm personal inadequacy, while systematic problem solving involves problem definition, generation of alternatives, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation (D'Zurilla & Nezu, 2010). In the context of the current study, these mechanisms provide a coherent explanation for the observed changes. Viewing problems as manageable may reduce self-critical interpretations, systematic planning may strengthen self-regulation, and successful implementation may increase self-efficacy.

The intervention's broader life skills framework may also have contributed to the findings. Recent evidence shows that life skills programs can improve self-awareness (Sadiq et al., 2026), reduce self-handicapping (Taghipour & Naseri, 2026), and increase self-efficacy (Abdelmouttelb et al., 2026). Social skills and social problem-solving interventions have likewise demonstrated benefits across a range of psychosocial outcomes (Heller et al., 2026; Jin et al., 2025; Kamisli, 2026; Weiyi et al., 2025). The consistency of these findings across populations suggests that structured skills training may operate through transdiagnostic mechanisms such as increased perceived control, improved cognitive flexibility, greater emotional regulation, and enhanced behavioral competence.

From a post-divorce perspective, the findings are particularly meaningful because divorce is often followed by recurring and interdependent stressors rather than a single acute challenge. Financial pressures, changes in family roles, social isolation, uncertainty about future relationships, and practical responsibilities can repeatedly activate self-critical thoughts and undermine confidence. Research has emphasized that the health consequences of divorce emerge through ongoing psychological and contextual processes rather than through marital dissolution alone (Sbarra et al., 2015). Similarly, evidence from Iranian women has shown that psychological resources such as self-compassion are relevant to adjustment after divorce (Davarinejad et al., 2022). The current findings add to this literature by indicating that problem-solving-based life skills may represent another modifiable psychological resource that helps women respond to post-divorce demands more constructively.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the results suggest that the intervention was effective because it simultaneously targeted cognition, emotion, and behavior. Participants were trained to identify problems, reduce distorted or global interpretations, generate multiple solutions, evaluate alternatives, regulate emotional responses, set realistic goals, implement plans, and monitor outcomes. These processes directly correspond to the three primary outcomes assessed in the study. The reduction in self-criticism may reflect improved cognitive appraisal and emotional regulation, the increase in self-regulation may reflect enhanced goal-directed planning and monitoring, and the increase in self-efficacy may reflect successful mastery experiences and greater perceived control. The convergence of the current findings with previous research on divorced women, problem-solving interventions, life skills training, and self-efficacy strengthens the interpretation that social problem-solving-based life skills training is a promising intervention for improving psychological adaptation among women with divorce experience.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

One limitation of the present study was the relatively small sample size and the inclusion of participants from a single welfare setting in Amol County, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to women with different socioeconomic, cultural, educational, or post-divorce circumstances. The use of convenience sampling may also have introduced selection bias because women who volunteered to participate may have differed from nonparticipants in motivation, psychological readiness, or openness to group-based intervention. In addition, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, making the findings potentially susceptible to response bias and social

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E-ISSN: 3041-8798

desirability. The absence of a follow-up assessment also prevented examination of whether the observed improvements were maintained over time. Moreover, the use of a waiting-list control group did not control for nonspecific factors such as attention, group interaction, therapist contact, and expectancy effects.

Future studies are recommended to replicate the present research with larger and more heterogeneous samples drawn from multiple clinical, social-service, and community settings. Randomized controlled trials with active comparison groups would provide stronger evidence regarding the specific effects of social problem-solving-based life skills training. Longitudinal designs with follow-up assessments at several intervals could determine whether reductions in self-criticism and improvements in self-regulation and self-efficacy remain stable after the intervention ends. Future research could also examine potential mediators and moderators, such as resilience, perceived social support, emotion regulation, duration since divorce, parental status, financial stress, and baseline psychological distress. The use of behavioral indicators, clinician-rated outcomes, qualitative interviews, and mixed-method designs could further clarify how participants apply problem-solving skills in everyday post-divorce situations.

In practice, social welfare centers, counseling clinics, family support services, and community mental health programs may consider incorporating structured social problem-solving-based life skills training into psychosocial services for women after divorce. The program can be delivered in small groups and can focus on practical concerns such as managing interpersonal conflict, setting realistic goals, regulating emotional responses, evaluating alternatives, and implementing stepwise action plans. Practitioners should adapt examples and exercises to the actual post-divorce challenges faced by participants and should provide opportunities for repeated practice and feedback. Integrating booster sessions after completion of the core program may help participants consolidate skills and apply them to emerging difficulties. The intervention may also be combined with broader support services addressing employment, parenting, financial adjustment, legal concerns, and social reintegration where appropriate.

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.

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E-ISSN: 3041-8798

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E-ISSN: 3041-8798