


## Efficacy of the Gottman Method on Family Cohesion and Emotional Self-Regulation Among Couples

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### Article Info

#### Article type:

Original Research

#### How to cite this article:

Sarchuni, S. (2024). Efficacy of the Gottman Method on Family Cohesion and Emotional Self-Regulation Among Couples. *Journal of Assessment and Research in Applied Counseling*, 6(3), 125-132.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jarac.6.3.14>



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Background and Objective: Couples face numerous challenges in marital life, particularly in areas of family cohesion and emotional self-regulation. Implementing psychological interventions to enhance these characteristics is essential. This study aimed to determine the effectiveness of couples therapy using the Gottman method on family cohesion and emotional self-regulation among couples.

**Methods and Materials:** This quasi-experimental research was conducted using a pre-test and post-test design. The study population consisted of couples seeking divorce at counseling centers in Tehran in the year 2023. The sample comprised 50 couples, selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned into two equal groups (each group containing 25 couples). The intervention group underwent eight 36-minute sessions (two sessions per week) of couples therapy using the Gottman method. Research tools included questionnaires on family cohesion and emotional self-regulation, completed by both groups during pre-test and post-test phases. Data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance.

**Findings:** Results indicated significant differences between the experimental and control groups in the post-test stage for the variables of family cohesion ( $F=54.29, p<0.001$ ) and emotional self-regulation ( $F=11.40, p<0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** The findings underscore the importance of couples therapy using the Gottman method in enhancing family cohesion and emotional self-regulation among couples. Consequently, clinical psychologists and therapists can utilize this method to improve psychological characteristics, particularly improving family cohesion and emotional self-regulation.

**Keywords:** *Gottman method, family cohesion, emotional self-regulation.*

## 1. Introduction

It is clear that emotions and their regulation play a key role in the development and maintenance of close relationships, such as those between couples, and in turn, these bonds affect the emotional realm of their members (Sels, 2016). Given that romantic relationships are valuable for most people and influence their general well-being and self-assessment of their emotional relationship (Jiménez-Picón, 2021; Jitaru, 2020), a relationship can be both a source and a major source of stress (Farero, 2019). In fact, they also involve the parent-child subsystem, as parental conflicts can create anxiety in children (Lucas-Thompson, 2020) and affect parenting styles during children's expressions of negative emotions (Gao, 2019). Therefore, examining what happens when individuals regulate their emotions in a close interpersonal context is relevant, as evidence shows that there are emotional consequences for those involved in such interactions (Martínez-Íñigo, 2015, 2013).

Despite the relevance of social context in emotional regulation, traditionally, its study has been limited to intrapersonal processes, focusing on how individuals maintain control over their own emotional experience or modify it by avoiding what causes anxiety or by reframing their perspective on a specific situation (Campos, 2011). Therefore, the focus remains on individual or intrapersonal emotional regulation. This refers to the process whereby a person modifies their emotions and can determine how and when to express them, from their appearance, frequency, magnitude, and duration to their behavioral and physiological responses (Gross, 2015). However, it is crucial to note that when an individual modulates their emotional experience and expression, it also affects their partner's emotional experience and expression. In this context, when one member of a relationship expresses concern about something that affects them, the impact on the other is to evoke a certain level of anxiety and thereby mobilize external regulation strategies toward the partner who shows such concern. When expressing concern is prevented, such strategies are not employed (Parkinson, 2016). When individuals use emotional suppression (an intrapersonal emotion regulation strategy), there are recorded lower marital quality, reduced intimacy, and an increased frequency of thoughts related to relationship failure (Chervonsky, 2017; Peters, 2016). Conversely, when individuals express themselves emotionally, better outcomes for the relationship occur when emotions are positive, while

more interpersonal issues arise when emotions are negative, although the effect size was very small and results varied (Chervonsky, 2017). Despite these interesting findings, the first limitation in studying affect in couples under an intrapersonal model highlights the assumption that members of a couple are independent from each other, leading to observations and analyses of emotional regulation in a solitary environment (Fischer, 2010), thus providing a limited and partial view (Benson, 2020). The above cases indicate that relying on an intrapersonal perspective cannot explain the complexity of a dyadic interaction, nor can it be imagined how emotions are regulated in the specific context of a couple's relationship (e.g., self-regulation with support from the other). Since the context of individual regulation is not distinct from an interpersonal framework, the interpersonal consequences of using these strategies, or in other words, how these strategies function on each member of the relationship, are not clear (Brandão, 2020; Frye, 2020). Despite this, the intrapersonal perspective still dominates in couple studies (Barthel, 2018; English, 2020), while the interpersonal perspective is still in its infancy.

Family cohesion also describes the nurturing connection, warmth, emotional support, and involvement among family members. In general, family cohesion improves during the transition to emerging adulthood (Navabinejad et al., 2024; Pirzadeh & Parsakia, 2023). Many emerging adults report warmer and closer relationships with their parents compared to their teenage years, and emotional support also increases during this period (Aloia & Strutzenberg, 2020). Many emerging adults turn to their parents for empathy, advice, and support. From the perspective of family development, cohesive family relationships act as an emotional safety net and help prevent anxiety issues in adulthood (Lindell, 2017). Data related to adolescents support this link: youth from cohesive families report better psychological outcomes and therefore report fewer anxiety issues compared to youth from less cohesive families, for example, students in university may still rely on their families to manage stress, with families helping emerging adults manage their stress by talking to them and providing emotional support (Guan, 2016). This support can help reduce stress, thereby reducing anxiety issues.

Although these studies show that cohesive families may reduce poor psychological outcomes in emerging adulthood, the extent of the relationship between family cohesion and anxiety issues among emerging African American adults has not been well studied, despite the fact that close family ties are culturally important for many African American families

(Anderson, 2007). Data related to African American children and adolescents shows that close family relationships may reduce anxiety issues in some youth (Oliveira, 2020). This link has also been found in samples of middle-aged adults, suggesting that families may be an important encouraging factor for anxiety issues throughout life (Guan, 2016; Lindell, 2017; Oliveira, 2020). Therefore, we hypothesized that family cohesion in late adolescence is associated with reduced anxiety issues in adulthood.

One of the methods that can help couples overcome their intrapersonal issues is Gottman couples therapy (Saemi, 2020). Based on this theory, failure to communicate is one of the most common problems expressed by dissatisfied spouses, and marital turmoil severely affects physiological function. As a result, individuals with life satisfaction have a longer lifespan and are less likely to get sick (Davoodvandi, 2018). According to this theory, mutual respect and honor are very important factors, and shortcomings in enriching relationships cause illogical dealings with stressful events, getting caught in prolonged and fruitless disputes, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and marital disputes (Brand, 2012). This theory emphasizes revising and strengthening the roadmap, enhancing attachment and praise, reducing conflicts and negative emotions, providing specific steps for solving problems and conflicts, increasing appropriate emotional responses, and unifying financial matters to improve marital relationships (Hicks, 2004). Research indicates the effectiveness of the Gottman therapeutic method in improving psychological characteristics. For example, Davoodvandi et al. (2018) concluded in a study that Gottman couples therapy was effective in increasing marital compatibility and intimacy among couples (Davoodvandi, 2018), and Saadati Shamir et al. (2018) found that educational psychological interventions based on the Gottman method were effective in increasing communication skills among married women (Saadati Shamir, 2019). In another study, Grandzini et al. (2017) reported that an intervention based on the combination of Glasser and Gottman theories was effective in improving marital behaviors (Garanzini, 2017). The increasing problems, dissatisfaction, and incompatibility in marital relationships, and their adverse consequences highlight the necessity and importance of paying attention to the issue of couple relationships and reducing their problems. Additionally, the differences and disputes in marital relationships impose significant psychological and social pressures on the family. Therefore, recognizing and treating disputes and problems in marital relationships in any society

is essential. Besides, problems in the realm of family function and marital compatibility can be referred to. Couples therapy is effective in reducing marital problems. One of the effective methods of couples therapy for reducing marital problems is Gottman method couples therapy. Although research has been conducted on the effectiveness of Gottman method couples therapy on psychological characteristics of couples, including marital commitment, marital compatibility, marital intimacy, etc., no research has been conducted on its effectiveness on social cohesion and emotional self-regulation among couples.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is a quasi-experimental research featuring a pre-test, post-test design with a control group and random assignment of participants into groups. Initially, both groups were assessed for family cohesion and emotional self-regulation in the pre-test phase. Subsequently, the experimental group participated in eight sessions following the Gottman method, while the control group did not receive any intervention during this period. After completing the eight sessions, the post-test phase was conducted, and both groups were reassessed for family cohesion and emotional self-regulation. The study population consisted of all couples in Tehran in the year 2023. The sample size was 50 couples who were divided into the experimental group and the control group (25 couples in each) after counseling, explanation of the study conditions, and obtaining the consent of the participants. Simple random sampling was used as the sampling method. Inclusion and exclusion criteria included: 1) Age range of 25 to 40 years. 2) Minimum education level of high school diploma. 3) At least 5 years of cohabitation. 4) Absence of psychological problems (such as anxiety, depression, etc.). 5) Absence of marital problems. Couples were assured that their responses would be confidential and not shared with others, and their participation in the research was completely voluntary.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Sense of Coherence

This questionnaire was designed by Antonovsky in 1987. It contains 13 questions rated on a seven-point Likert scale (from never to always), with questions 1, 2, 3, 7, and 10 being reverse scored. It has three subscales: a) Comprehensibility, b) Manageability, and c)

Meaningfulness. In Iran, Mohammadzadeh and colleagues standardized the questionnaire on Iranian students, obtaining Cronbach's alpha values of 0.75 for male students and 0.78 for female students, and concurrent validity of this scale with the Psychological Hardiness Questionnaire was found to be 0.54. The test-retest reliability of the entire scale was also found to be 0.66. These researchers also investigated the validity of the questionnaire by examining the relationship between the subscales of Comprehensibility, Manageability, and Meaningfulness with the total questionnaire score, yielding results of 0.86, 0.81, and 0.76, respectively, indicating satisfactory validity and reliability of the scale (Kiani, 2018).

### 2.2.2. Cognitive Emotion Regulation

This shortened questionnaire is one of the most reliable tools for measuring various cognitive strategies and was developed by Garnefski, Kraaij, and Spinhoven. It consists of 18 questions scored on a 5-point Likert scale (from never to always). Respondents are asked to describe their responses to recent threatening experiences and stressful life events by answering 18 questions that assess 9 cognitive strategies for controlling and regulating emotions. The cognitive strategies include: 1) Self-blame, 2) Acceptance, 3) Rumination, 4) Positive refocusing, 6) Focus on planning, 6) Positive reappraisal, 7) Putting into perspective, 8) Catastrophizing, 9) Blaming others. The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire was normed in the Iranian culture by Hasani. In Hasani's 2011 study, the reliability of the scale based on internal consistency methods (with a Cronbach's alpha range from 0.76 to 0.92) and retest reliability (with a correlation range from 0.51 to 0.77) and the validity of the questionnaire through principal component analysis using varimax rotation between the subscales (with a correlation range from 0.32 to 0.67) and criterion validity were reported as satisfactory (Kiani, 2018; Saemi, 2020).

## 2.3. Intervention

### 2.3.1. Gottman Approach Therapy

#### Session 1: Introduction and Goal Setting

The first session is dedicated to familiarizing participants with each other and the therapy process. The facilitator introduces the members, outlines the rules for the sessions, explains the objectives of couples therapy using the Gottman method, and provides a brief overview of building a "Sound

Relationship House," which is a foundational concept in Gottman's approach.

#### Session 2: Explaining the Sound Relationship House

In the second session, couples delve into the concept of the Sound Relationship House in more detail. They explore various personal, emotional, cognitive, philosophical domains as well as interests and aspirations of both themselves and their partners. The session focuses on understanding each partner's emotional world, including their concerns and preoccupations.

#### Session 3: Examining Marital Conflicts

This session addresses marital conflicts and ways to resolve them. Discussions revolve around destructive behaviors, such as harsh actions between partners. The session includes training on effective methods to enhance affection and positive interactions, and strategies to revive and increase positive feelings and appreciation within the relationship.

#### Session 4: Identifying the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

The fourth session introduces the concept of the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," which represent destructive relationship behaviors: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling. Couples discuss these behaviors and examine the consequences they have on marital relationships.

#### Session 5: Increasing Positive Interactions

This session emphasizes the importance of accepting influence from one's spouse, discussing its impact on marital relationships. It includes training on how to increase positive interactions with one's spouse, focusing on building mutual respect and understanding through positive communication.

#### Session 6: Body Language and Physiology in Marital Relationships

Discussion in this session centers on the impact of body language and physiological responses during conflicts. Couples explore how destructive behaviors related to body language can affect their relationship and discuss physiological responses during arguments. Coping strategies for dealing with issues and methods for calming down are also taught.

#### Session 7: Efforts to Repair Marital Relationships

The seventh session deals with one of the destructive behaviors in marital relationships: failure in attempts to repair relationships. The session discusses the impact of this failure on life, explores ways to deal with insolvable problems, pays attention to dreams and marital aspirations,

recognizes the dreams of the spouse, and teaches soothing techniques and how to agree on specific issues.

**Session 8: Empowering the Creation of Shared Meaning in Marital Life**

The final session focuses on empowering couples to create a shared conceptual framework in their marital life. This includes discussing and finding solutions for engaging in conversations with the spouse to reach shared marital values such as customs, roles, goals, and family rituals. This session aims to strengthen the partnership by aligning and honoring each other’s contributions to the relationship

(Brand, 2012; Davoodvandi, 2018; Garanzini, 2017; Hicks, 2004; Saadati Shamir, 2019; Saemi, 2020).

**2.4. Data analysis**

Data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance through SPSS-26.

**3. Findings and Results**

In this section, the research findings are presented in two parts: descriptive and inferential. Table 1 describes the scores for the research variables.

**Table 1**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Pre-test and Post-test Scores of Family Cohesion and Emotional Self-Regulation in Experimental and Control Groups*

Variable	Stage	Experimental		Control	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Emotional Self-Regulation	Pre-test	95.00	11.70	95.22	10.252
	Post-test	106.20	12.44	96.16	11.205
Family Cohesion	Pre-test	61.20	5.35	61.20	5.354
	Post-test	68.60	6.34	61.60	6.341

The results from Table 1 indicate that the mean scores of family cohesion and emotional self-regulation were almost the same in both the control and experimental groups during the pre-test. The experimental group showed an increase in the post-test stage. Also, the mean emotional self-regulation and family cohesion in both control and experimental groups were nearly the same in the pre-test and decreased in the experimental group in the post-test. Before performing statistical analyses, statistical assumptions were examined. The Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted first, and the results

showed that the significance level of all research variables was not significant ( $p > .05$ ) in both the experimental and control groups, indicating normality was established in all variables in both pre-test and post-test stages. Moreover, the multivariate statistic Wilks' Lambda is .079, the F-value is 19.329, and the significance level is .001. Given that the significance level is less than .05 and after adjusting the pre-test scores, there is a significant difference in the post-test scores of family cohesion variables in both the experimental and control groups.

**Table 2**

*Results of Multivariate Analysis of Covariance for Determining Effectiveness*

Test Type	Value	F	P-Value	Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	.78	60.64	.001	.80
Wilks' Lambda	.36	60.64	.001	.80
Hotelling's Trace	2.68	60.64	.001	.80
Largest Root	2.90	60.64	.001	.80

According to the results of Table 2, Gottman method couples therapy has a significant effect on at least one of the

variables of family functioning and marital compatibility in couples ( $f = 60.64, p < .001$ ).

**Table 3**

*Results of Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) for Research Variables*

Source of Variation	Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance Level	Eta Squared
Pre-test Effect	Emotional Self-Regulation	.044	1	.044	.029	.867	.265
	Family Cohesion	.016	1	.016	.011	.918	.104
Group Effect	Emotional Self-Regulation	5.202	1	17.734	11.480	.001	.773
	Family Cohesion	4.642	1	15.642	29.546	.001	.844

Based on the results of Table 3, considering the pre-test scores as a covariate, the Gottman approach training led to a significant difference between groups in the variables of family cohesion and emotional self-regulation ( $p < .001$ ). This implies that part of the family cohesion and emotional self-regulation was due to the difference in group membership (intervention effect). The effect sizes for the Gottman approach training on the variables of family cohesion and emotional self-regulation were .773 and .744, respectively, suggesting that Gottman approach training is effective in enhancing family cohesion and emotional self-regulation in couples.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the current research was to examine the effectiveness of the Gottman method on family cohesion and emotional self-regulation among couples. The findings suggest that this therapeutic approach has increased the sense of cohesion and cognitive regulation of emotions among participants in the experimental group compared to the control group. The results of this study regarding the effectiveness of the Gottman method align with prior findings (Brand, 2012; Davoodvandi, 2018; Garanzini, 2017; Hicks, 2004; Saadati Shamir, 2019; Saemi, 2020). It can be said that since Gottman's approach emphasizes love and respect to counteract the negative aspects of marriage and highlights adding to the positive aspects through showing interest, kindness, affection, attentiveness, appreciation, empathy, acceptance, humor, and sharing in joys, it can significantly enhance these dynamics (Garanzini, 2017; Hicks, 2004). Additionally, this method's training in effective communication skills can aid married women in establishing a constructive relationship conducive to growth and flourishing, reducing the creation or continuation of destructive and negative feelings throughout the marital relationship. Moreover, this educational approach helps married women in conflict resolution and resolving marital issues, avoiding relationships that lead to failure, reducing despair, anger, feelings of worthlessness, depression, and

failure, and increasing empathy and better understanding of each other's needs and desires, thereby encouraging the continuity of the marital relationship and creating and improving a relationship with more effective and positive interactions (Brand, 2012; Saadati Shamir, 2019). Consequently, these factors result in group counseling based on the Gottman theory increasing family cohesion and emotional self-regulation. Family cohesion is defined as the emotional bond between family members and the level of individual autonomy they possess (Winek, 2009). These dimensions are highly emphasized in Gottman's theory. Also, in the sense of family cohesion, emphasis is placed on meaningfulness, selectivity, responsibility orientation, and harmony. As Antonovsky (1987) stated, the sense of coherence is a personality construct with three components: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. In comprehensibility, the sense of coherence refers to the belief that nothing negative or surprising has occurred, and life can proceed well, rationally, and as expected. The manageability component reflects the feeling of having the necessary resources to solve problems and combat stress, and finally, the sense of meaningfulness encompasses how much an individual values life and not only holds this sense cognitively but also emotionally (Kiani, 2018).

#### 5. Limitations & Suggestions

The major limitations included the absence of a follow-up phase due to time constraints and lack of access to participants, and the use of convenience sampling. Another limitation was having only one intervention group, which did not allow for comparing the results of Gottman method couples therapy with another therapeutic method. Therefore, it is recommended that future research use a follow-up phase to examine the continuity of results. It is also suggested that future research compares the results of Gottman method couples therapy with other couples therapy methods such as reality therapy, spirituality therapy, metacognitive therapy, etc. Thus, it can be stated that couples therapy using the Gottman method led to an increase in family cohesion and

emotional self-regulation among couples. Therefore, the results indicate the importance of Gottman method couples therapy in enhancing family cohesion and emotional self-regulation in marital relationships. Consequently, this method is applicable in centers and clinics offering psychological services, thus clinical psychologists and therapists can use Gottman method couples therapy to improve psychological characteristics, particularly improving or enhancing family cohesion and emotional self-regulation among couples.

### 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 equally contributed in this article.

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