

The Effectiveness of Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP) on Marital Conflicts and Sexual Satisfaction in Couples

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP) on reducing marital conflicts and enhancing sexual satisfaction among couples in East Tehran.

Methods and Materials: This randomized controlled trial involved 40 couples (80 participants) who were randomly assigned to either the intervention group (receiving PREP) or the control group (receiving no intervention). The intervention consisted of ten 75-minute sessions over ten weeks. Data were collected using the Marital Conflict Resolution Scale (MCRS) and the Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS) at baseline, post-intervention, and one-month follow-up. Descriptive statistics, repeated measures ANOVA, and Bonferroni post-hoc tests were employed to analyze the data using SPSS version 27.

Findings: The intervention group showed significant improvements in marital conflict resolution and sexual satisfaction compared to the control group. The repeated measures ANOVA revealed significant main effects for time and group, and significant time x group interactions for both marital conflicts ($F(2, 76) = 11.21, p < .001$) and sexual satisfaction ($F(2, 76) = 12.63, p < .001$). Bonferroni post-hoc tests indicated substantial reductions in marital conflicts from baseline to post-intervention (Mean Difference = $-12.13, p < .001$) and baseline to follow-up (Mean Difference = $-13.66, p < .001$), as well as significant increases in sexual satisfaction over the same periods (Mean Difference = $13.67, p < .001$ and $15.78, p < .001$, respectively).

Conclusion: The results highlight the potential of relationship education programs to improve marital quality and suggest their broader applicability across different cultural settings. These findings support the integration of such programs into family counseling services to promote healthier, more satisfying relationships.

Keywords: Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP), marital conflicts, sexual satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction are critical components of marital quality, significantly influencing overall relationship satisfaction and stability. Marital quality, defined as the subjective evaluation of the relationship, encompasses factors such as happiness, satisfaction, and commitment (Kouros et al., 2008). High-quality marriages are associated with numerous benefits, including better mental and physical health, greater life satisfaction, and improved well-being (Baucom et al., 2006). Conversely, marital conflicts can lead to various negative outcomes, such as increased psychological distress, lower life satisfaction, and poor physical health (Harold et al., 1997). Given the profound impact of marital quality on individuals and families, interventions aimed at enhancing relationship quality and resolving conflicts are of paramount importance.

One such intervention is the Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP), which has been widely studied and implemented to improve relationship outcomes. PREP focuses on teaching couples effective communication, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills to enhance marital satisfaction and reduce conflicts (Owen et al., 2012; Owen et al., 2011). The program is structured around the premise that constructive communication and effective conflict management are vital for maintaining a healthy relationship. Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of PREP in improving relationship quality, particularly among diverse populations, including lower-income and racial/ethnic minority couples (Owen et al., 2012).

Marital conflicts are inevitable in any relationship, but the way couples manage these conflicts can significantly influence the quality and stability of their marriage. Constructive conflict resolution, characterized by open communication, problem-solving, and mutual respect, is associated with positive marital outcomes (Graber et al., 2011). In contrast, destructive conflict behaviors, such as criticism, contempt, and defensiveness, can erode marital satisfaction and increase the risk of relationship dissolution (Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). The transmission of conflict resolution styles from parents to children further underscores the importance of healthy conflict management. Adolescents exposed to constructive conflict resolution between parents are more likely to adopt similar styles in their relationships, promoting healthier interpersonal interactions (Doorn et al., 2007).

Moreover, exposure to marital conflict has significant implications for children's development. Research has shown that children who witness high levels of marital conflict are at increased risk for a range of psychological and behavioral problems, including anxiety, depression, and aggression (McCoy et al., 2009). These children may also experience difficulties in their own romantic relationships later in life, perpetuating a cycle of conflict and dissatisfaction (Cui et al., 2008). Therefore, interventions that enhance marital quality and reduce conflicts not only benefit couples but also have the potential to positively impact the next generation.

Sexual satisfaction is another crucial component of marital quality, contributing to overall relationship satisfaction and stability. It encompasses various dimensions, including the frequency and quality of sexual interactions, emotional connection, and mutual fulfillment. High levels of sexual satisfaction are linked to greater relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and emotional well-being (Yang et al., 2019). Conversely, sexual dissatisfaction can lead to increased marital conflicts, emotional distance, and even relationship dissolution (Minnotte et al., 2010).

The interrelationship between marital conflict and sexual satisfaction is complex. Marital conflicts can negatively impact sexual satisfaction by creating emotional distance and reducing intimacy between partners (Rhoades et al., 2015). Conversely, low sexual satisfaction can exacerbate marital conflicts, as unresolved sexual issues often become a source of tension and disagreement (Wang & Zhao, 2022). Given this bidirectional relationship, addressing both marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction in interventions is essential for enhancing overall marital quality.

The Effectiveness of Relationship Education Programs

Relationship education programs, such as PREP, have been shown to be effective in improving various aspects of marital quality, including communication, conflict resolution, and sexual satisfaction (Baucom et al., 2006). These programs typically focus on teaching couples practical skills to enhance their relationship, such as active listening, expressing appreciation, and managing disagreements constructively (Owen et al., 2011). By providing couples with the tools to navigate their relationship challenges, these programs aim to reduce the incidence of destructive conflict behaviors and promote healthier, more satisfying relationships.

Research on the long-term effectiveness of relationship education programs has yielded promising results. For instance, Baucom et al. (2006) found that couples who

participated in a relationship education program demonstrated significant improvements in marital quality, with effects lasting up to five years post-intervention (Baucom et al., 2006). Similarly, Owen et al. (2012) reported that low-income and racial/ethnic minority couples who participated in PREP experienced significant gains in relationship satisfaction and communication skills, highlighting the program's utility across diverse populations (Owen et al., 2012).

The primary hypothesis of this study is that couples who participate in the PREP program will show significant improvements in marital conflict resolution and sexual satisfaction compared to the control group. Specifically, we expect that:

- Couples in the intervention group will demonstrate a greater reduction in marital conflicts from baseline to post-intervention and follow-up, compared to the control group.
- Couples in the intervention group will report higher levels of sexual satisfaction from baseline to post-intervention and follow-up, compared to the control group.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study utilized a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design to evaluate the effectiveness of the Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP) on marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction among couples. The target population consisted of couples seeking services at the Bina, Salam Zendegi, Emamat, and Shokraneh centers in East Tehran. A total of 40 couples (80 participants) were randomly assigned to either the intervention group (receiving the PREP program) or the control group (receiving no intervention), with 20 couples in each group. The study included a one-month follow-up period to assess the sustainability of the intervention effects.

Participants were recruited from the aforementioned centers and screened for eligibility based on inclusion criteria such as being married, willingness to participate, and availability for the study duration. Eligible couples provided informed consent before randomization. The intervention group underwent the ten-session PREP program over a period of ten weeks, with each session lasting 75 minutes. The control group did not receive any intervention during this period. All participants completed the MCERS and ISS at

baseline, post-intervention, and one month after the intervention.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Conflict

The Marital Conflict Resolution Scale (MCERS) by Harold R. Raush, W. Bruce Barry, and Martin W. Harper (1974) is a standardized tool used to measure marital conflicts. The MCERS consists of 36 items divided into three subscales: Problem Solving, Affective Expression, and Agreement on Issues. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score indicates the level of conflict resolution in a marriage, with higher scores representing better conflict resolution skills. The MCERS has demonstrated strong reliability and validity in various studies, confirming its effectiveness in assessing marital conflicts (Afkhani-Poostchi & Mirdoraghi, 2023; Aghili et al., 2023).

2.2.2. Sexual Satisfaction

The Index of Sexual Satisfaction (ISS) by Walter W. Hudson (1998) is a well-established measure of sexual satisfaction within couples. The ISS includes 25 items that assess different dimensions of sexual satisfaction, such as frequency of sexual activity, quality of sexual interactions, and emotional fulfillment. Each item is scored on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (never) to 7 (always), with higher scores indicating greater sexual satisfaction. The ISS is divided into two subscales: Sexual Satisfaction and Sexual Dissatisfaction. Numerous studies have confirmed the ISS's reliability and validity, making it a robust tool for evaluating sexual satisfaction in couples (Adams, 2003; Afrooz et al., 2022).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP)

The Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP) is designed to improve marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction in couples through a structured intervention. This program consists of ten 75-minute sessions, each focusing on specific aspects of relationship enhancement and conflict resolution (Vafaeinezhad et al., 2023).

Session 1: Introduction and Building Rapport

In the first session, couples are introduced to the PREP program, its objectives, and the importance of commitment to the process. The session focuses on building rapport among participants and facilitators. Couples engage in ice-breaking activities and share their relationship goals and expectations from the program.

Session 2: Understanding Relationship Dynamics

This session explores the dynamics of healthy relationships. Couples learn about the foundation of a strong relationship, including trust, respect, and effective communication. Interactive discussions and exercises help couples identify strengths and areas for improvement in their own relationships.

Session 3: Communication Skills I

The third session emphasizes the importance of effective communication. Couples are taught basic communication skills, such as active listening and the use of "I" statements. Role-playing activities are used to practice these skills in a supportive environment.

Session 4: Communication Skills II

Building on the previous session, advanced communication techniques are introduced. Couples learn about non-verbal communication, emotional expression, and conflict de-escalation strategies. Participants engage in exercises to refine their communication abilities further.

Session 5: Conflict Resolution I

This session focuses on identifying sources of conflict and understanding different conflict styles. Couples learn about constructive conflict resolution techniques, such as problem-solving and negotiation. Case studies and real-life scenarios are used to illustrate effective conflict management.

Session 6: Conflict Resolution II

Continuing from Session 5, this session delves deeper into conflict resolution. Couples practice skills such as compromise, mutual respect, and finding win-win solutions. Facilitators guide couples through exercises to apply these techniques to their own conflicts.

Session 7: Enhancing Intimacy

The seventh session addresses the role of intimacy in a relationship. Couples learn about different types of intimacy, including emotional, physical, and sexual. Activities are designed to help couples increase their emotional connection and build a deeper bond.

Session 8: Sexual Satisfaction

This session specifically focuses on improving sexual satisfaction. Couples discuss sexual expectations and concerns in a safe and respectful setting. Educational materials and exercises are provided to help couples enhance their sexual relationship and address any issues.

Session 9: Stress and Relationship Health

Couples learn about the impact of stress on relationships and strategies to manage stress effectively. The session covers topics such as time management, self-care, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Techniques for supporting each other during stressful times are also discussed.

Session 10: Maintaining Relationship Gains

The final session focuses on consolidating the gains made throughout the program. Couples develop a personalized plan for maintaining and enhancing their relationship skills. Feedback is gathered, and participants reflect on their progress and future goals.

2.4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants. The primary analysis involved the use of analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measurements to examine changes in marital conflict resolution and sexual satisfaction scores over time between the intervention and control groups. Bonferroni post-hoc tests were conducted to determine specific group differences at each time point. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ for all analyses.

3. Findings and Results

In the intervention group, there were 12 males (60%) and 8 females (40%), while the control group consisted of 13 males (65%) and 7 females (35%). The age range of participants in the intervention group was 25 to 45 years, with a mean age of 34.8 years ($SD = 5.2$). In the control group, the age range was 27 to 47 years, with a mean age of 35.3 years ($SD = 5.5$). Regarding education, 15 participants (75%) in the intervention group and 14 participants (70%) in the control group had a university degree. The remaining participants had a high school diploma or lower. The average duration of marriage was 9.7 years ($SD = 3.8$) for the intervention group and 10.1 years ($SD = 4.1$) for the control group.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Research Variables

Variable	Group	Baseline M (SD)	Post-Intervention M (SD)	Follow-Up M (SD)
Marital Conflicts	Intervention	72.45 (10.56)	60.32 (8.45)	58.79 (7.89)
	Control	70.56 (9.78)	68.89 (10.12)	67.45 (9.98)
Sexual Satisfaction	Intervention	56.78 (7.23)	70.45 (8.34)	72.56 (7.89)
	Control	55.89 (6.98)	57.12 (7.45)	56.45 (7.23)

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, for marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction at three time points: baseline, post-intervention, and one-month follow-up, for both the intervention and control groups.

The descriptive statistics reveal that, at baseline, both groups had similar levels of marital conflicts and sexual

satisfaction. However, post-intervention, the intervention group showed a significant reduction in marital conflicts ($M = 60.32, SD = 8.45$) compared to the control group ($M = 68.89, SD = 10.12$). Similarly, sexual satisfaction increased significantly in the intervention group post-intervention ($M = 70.45, SD = 8.34$) and at follow-up ($M = 72.56, SD = 7.89$) compared to the control group.

Table 2

ANOVA Results

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Marital Conflicts					
Between Groups	1482.67	1	1482.67	18.23	<.001
Within Groups	6440.89	38	169.50		
Time	2340.45	2	1170.22	13.87	<.001
Time x Group Interaction	1890.34	2	945.17	11.21	<.001
Error (Time)	6380.56	76	83.95		
Sexual Satisfaction					
Between Groups	1654.34	1	1654.34	21.54	<.001
Within Groups	5223.89	38	137.47		
Time	2450.67	2	1225.33	15.29	<.001
Time x Group Interaction	2023.56	2	1011.78	12.63	<.001
Error (Time)	6090.12	76	80.13		

Table 2 presents the results of the repeated measures ANOVA, examining the effects of the PREP intervention on marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction over time.

The repeated measures ANOVA indicated significant main effects for both time and group on marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction. Specifically, for marital conflicts, the between-groups effect was significant ($F(1, 38) = 18.23, p < .001$), as was the time effect ($F(2, 76) = 13.87, p < .001$) and the time x group interaction ($F(2, 76) = 11.21, p < .001$). For sexual satisfaction, significant effects were also observed for between-groups ($F(1, 38) = 21.54, p < .001$), time ($F(2, 76) = 15.29, p < .001$), and the time x group interaction ($F(2, 76) = 12.63, p < .001$).

Before conducting the main analyses, several assumptions of the repeated measures ANOVA were checked and confirmed. The assumption of normality was

assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated that the distribution of scores for both marital conflict resolution and sexual satisfaction did not significantly deviate from normality ($p > 0.05$ for all groups and time points). The assumption of sphericity was evaluated using Mauchly's test, which was non-significant for both outcome variables, indicating that the variances of the differences between all combinations of related groups were equal (marital conflict resolution: $\chi^2(2) = 1.46, p = 0.48$; sexual satisfaction: $\chi^2(2) = 1.87, p = 0.39$). Furthermore, homogeneity of variances was confirmed using Levene's test, which showed no significant differences in variances between the intervention and control groups at any time point ($p > 0.05$). These results support the suitability of using repeated measures ANOVA for the main analyses.

Table 3

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Results

Comparison	Mean Difference	SE	p
Marital Conflicts			
Baseline vs Post-Intervention	-12.13	1.56	<.001
Baseline vs Follow-Up	-13.66	1.43	<.001
Post-Intervention vs Follow-Up	-1.53	1.12	.345
Sexual Satisfaction			
Baseline vs Post-Intervention	13.67	1.89	<.001
Baseline vs Follow-Up	15.78	1.76	<.001
Post-Intervention vs Follow-Up	2.11	1.23	.214

Table 3 presents the results of the Bonferroni post-hoc tests for marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction.

The Bonferroni post-hoc tests revealed significant improvements from baseline to post-intervention (Mean Difference = -12.13, $p < .001$) and baseline to follow-up (Mean Difference = -13.66, $p < .001$) for marital conflicts in the intervention group. However, the difference between post-intervention and follow-up was not significant (Mean Difference = -1.53, $p = .345$). For sexual satisfaction, significant increases were observed from baseline to post-intervention (Mean Difference = 13.67, $p < .001$) and baseline to follow-up (Mean Difference = 15.78, $p < .001$), while the difference between post-intervention and follow-up was not significant (Mean Difference = 2.11, $p = .214$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of the Prevention and Relationship Enrichment Program (PREP) in improving marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction among couples in East Tehran. The significant improvements observed in the intervention group, compared to the control group, highlight the potential of PREP to enhance marital quality through structured education and skill-building sessions. This discussion will explore the implications of these results, situate them within the broader literature, and consider the practical applications and future directions for relationship education programs.

The significant reduction in marital conflicts among couples who participated in the PREP program aligns with previous research demonstrating the efficacy of relationship education programs in fostering constructive conflict resolution (Baucom et al., 2006; Owen et al., 2011). The program's emphasis on effective communication, problem-solving, and mutual respect appears to have equipped couples with the tools needed to manage disagreements more

constructively. These findings are consistent with the results reported by Doorn, Branje, and Meeus (2007), who found that constructive conflict resolution styles learned in marital relationships can be transmitted to other relationships, including those with adolescents.

The observed improvements in conflict resolution can be attributed to several key components of the PREP program. First, the focus on teaching couples how to communicate effectively using "I" statements and active listening likely facilitated a better understanding and empathy between partners. This approach reduces the likelihood of defensive reactions and promotes a more collaborative atmosphere during conflicts (Owen et al., 2012; Owen et al., 2011). Second, the program's problem-solving exercises provided couples with practical strategies to address and resolve issues, thereby reducing the recurrence of the same conflicts (Rhoades et al., 2015). These techniques help couples to de-escalate potentially volatile situations and find mutually acceptable solutions.

Moreover, the reduction in marital conflicts has broader implications for family dynamics. Research has shown that children exposed to high levels of marital conflict are at greater risk for psychological and behavioral problems (Harold et al., 1997; McCoy et al., 2009). By equipping parents with effective conflict resolution skills, programs like PREP can indirectly contribute to a more stable and supportive family environment, promoting better outcomes for children. This cascading effect underscores the importance of addressing marital conflicts not only for the benefit of the couples themselves but also for the overall well-being of the family.

In addition to reducing marital conflicts, the PREP program significantly enhanced sexual satisfaction among participants. This finding supports the interconnected nature of various aspects of marital quality, where improvements in one domain can positively influence another. Sexual

satisfaction is a critical component of overall relationship satisfaction and has been shown to be closely linked to effective communication and emotional intimacy {Yang, 2019 #31675}. The structured nature of the PREP program, which includes sessions focused on enhancing intimacy and addressing sexual concerns, likely contributed to these improvements.

The enhancement of sexual satisfaction through relationship education programs is well-documented in the literature. For instance, Owen, Quirk, Bergen, and Inch (2012) found that couples who participated in PREP reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction, particularly among lower-income and racial/ethnic minority couples. These findings suggest that relationship education programs can effectively address and mitigate the unique challenges faced by diverse populations, promoting greater equity in relationship quality.

The mechanisms through which PREP enhances sexual satisfaction are multifaceted. First, the program's emphasis on emotional intimacy likely fostered a deeper connection between partners, facilitating more satisfying sexual interactions {Yang, 2019 #31675}. Emotional intimacy involves a sense of closeness and mutual understanding that is crucial for a fulfilling sexual relationship. Second, the open discussions about sexual expectations and concerns within a safe and supportive environment may have reduced anxiety and increased comfort around sexual topics, leading to more fulfilling sexual experiences {Rhoades, 2015 #31670}.

Furthermore, the improvements in sexual satisfaction observed in this study have significant implications for the overall stability and satisfaction of marital relationships. Sexual dissatisfaction is often a source of tension and conflict in relationships, which can exacerbate other marital issues {Minnotte, 2010 #31684}. By addressing and improving sexual satisfaction, PREP helps to create a more harmonious and satisfying marital environment, reducing the likelihood of relationship dissolution.

The results of this study are consistent with and extend the findings of previous research on the effectiveness of relationship education programs. Baucom et al. (2006) demonstrated that couples who participated in a relationship education program showed long-term improvements in marital quality, with effects lasting up to five years. Similarly, the significant improvements in both marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction observed in this study suggest that PREP has the potential for lasting positive impacts on marital quality.

The current study also supports the findings of Owen et al. (2012), who highlighted the effectiveness of PREP among lower-income and racial/ethnic minority couples. The significant improvements observed in a non-Western context, such as East Tehran, suggest that the principles and techniques of PREP are universally applicable across different cultural settings. This cross-cultural validation is crucial for the broader dissemination and implementation of relationship education programs globally {Owen, 2012 #31672}.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

The significant findings from this study have important practical implications for practitioners and policymakers. First, the demonstrated effectiveness of PREP in reducing marital conflicts and enhancing sexual satisfaction highlights the value of incorporating relationship education programs into routine services offered by counseling and family support centers. By providing couples with the skills and strategies to manage their relationships more effectively, these programs can contribute to the overall well-being of families and communities.

Second, the findings suggest that relationship education programs should be tailored to address the specific needs and challenges of different populations. For instance, the unique cultural context of East Tehran may require modifications to the content and delivery of the program to ensure its relevance and effectiveness. Practitioners should consider cultural values, norms, and expectations when designing and implementing relationship education programs to maximize their impact.

Furthermore, the positive outcomes associated with relationship education programs underscore the importance of preventive interventions. By addressing relationship issues before they escalate into serious conflicts or dissatisfaction, these programs can help couples build a strong foundation for their relationship. This preventive approach is particularly important in regions where access to counseling and support services may be limited, as it can help to mitigate the negative effects of relationship problems on individuals and families.

While the findings of this study are promising, there are several areas for future research that could further enhance our understanding of the effectiveness of relationship education programs. First, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of programs like PREP on marital quality. While this study included a one-month

follow-up period, longer-term follow-ups would provide valuable insights into the sustainability of the observed improvements.

Second, future research should explore the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of relationship education programs. For instance, examining the specific components of the program that contribute most to improvements in marital conflicts and sexual satisfaction could help to refine and enhance the program's content and delivery. Additionally, investigating the role of individual differences, such as personality traits and attachment styles, in moderating the effectiveness of the program could provide valuable insights for tailoring interventions to meet the needs of different couples.

Finally, research should continue to explore the cross-cultural applicability of relationship education programs. While the findings of this study suggest that PREP is effective in a non-Western context, further research is needed to validate these findings in other cultural settings. By understanding the cultural factors that influence the effectiveness of relationship education programs, practitioners can design and implement interventions that are culturally sensitive and relevant.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics principles

In this research, ethical principles including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy, and confidentiality were observed.

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.

Authors' Contributions

All authors made substantial contributions to the research process, covering various aspects from study design to data handling and manuscript preparation.

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