

# Effectiveness of Brief Strategic Family Therapy on Marital Conflicts and Interpersonal Forgiveness

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of brief strategic family therapy on marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness.

**Methods and Materials:** This quasi-experimental study utilized a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design with a control group. The sample consisted of eight families who sought counseling services at a psychology center in District 1 of Karaj in 2023. Families were randomly assigned to either the experimental group, receiving brief strategic family therapy, or the control group, receiving no intervention. Data were collected using the Forgiveness Questionnaire by Ehteshami Zadeh et al. (2009) and the Marital Conflict Questionnaire by Sanaei (2008). The intervention included eight weekly sessions of 90 minutes each. Descriptive statistics, univariate and multivariate covariance analyses were employed to analyze the data.

**Findings:** Results indicated a significant reduction in marital conflicts and an increase in interpersonal forgiveness in the experimental group compared to the control group. Specifically, the mean score of marital conflicts in the experimental group decreased from 157.3 (SD = 14.7) in the pre-test to 102.2 (SD = 9.8) in the post-test, and further to 101.3 (SD = 9.7) in the follow-up stage. The mean score of interpersonal forgiveness increased from 76.9 (SD = 6.8) in the pre-test to 98.3 (SD = 9.6) in the post-test, and slightly decreased to 96.3 (SD = 8.6) in the follow-up stage. The multivariate covariance analysis confirmed the significant differences between the experimental and control groups ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** Brief strategic family therapy significantly reduces marital conflicts and enhances interpersonal forgiveness among couples.

**Keywords:** *brief strategic family therapy, marital conflicts, interpersonal forgiveness.*

## 1. Introduction

The family system is considered one of the most important social systems; therefore, the need to

establish and maintain connections is regarded as a fundamental and basic human motivation (Allen & Lebow, 2023; Kerr, 2019). In the present era, the family system has

encountered significant problems and challenges, with marital conflicts and the subsequent increase in divorce not only threatening the foundation of families but also posing a serious threat to society and social systems (Mojarrad et al., 2019; Saeedpoor et al., 2020). According to Cohen, conflict arises wherever there is disagreement, difference, or incompatibility between spouses. Marital conflict results from a lack of alignment between spouses in terms of needs and ways of satisfying them, self-centeredness, differences in desires (Markman et al., 2022), behavioral patterns, and irresponsible behaviors towards marital relationships and marriage. Marital conflict arises from reactions to individual differences and sometimes intensifies to the point where feelings of anger, violence, resentment, hatred, jealousy, and verbal and physical misconduct dominate the couple's relationship, manifesting in destructive behaviors (Enayat & Yaghobi, 2012; Li & Liu, 2020). Marital conflict is a predisposing and sustaining factor for many psychiatric disorders, including depression (Enayat & Yaghobi, 2012), anxiety disorders, internalizing disorders, and psychoses (Papp, 2018). Moreover, studies have shown that marital conflicts are directly associated with poor psychological health (Galinsky & Waite, 2014), physical health problems (Robles, 2014), and mortality (Papp, 2018). Thus, the ability to manage and resolve conflicts constructively can foster a strong relationship between couples and help them develop a close and intimate relationship (Markman et al., 2022; Rafezi & Saboori, 2022).

When couples face marital conflicts and cannot successfully overcome crises and challenges, they will experience psychological distress and significant disruption in the normal flow of daily life and in emotional, social, and cognitive aspects (Nasresfahani et al., 2022). Forgiveness is one method of coping with perceived errors, allowing an individual to change negative responses and exhibit positive responses towards forgiving the error (Fincham & May, 2023; Gismero-González et al., 2020). Fincham and May (2021) found that forgiveness is related to satisfaction and improved marital relationships, enhancing constructive communication patterns between couples and ultimately increasing the quality of marital life. Individuals with higher levels of forgiveness also exhibit more positive behaviors in their relationships (Fincham & May, 2023).

Various theoretical models have been proposed for explaining and improving marital conflicts among couples, including the forgiveness model, acceptance and commitment approach, and medication therapies (Bridge, 2019). Each of these treatments, in terms of treatment

duration and costs imposed on the affected individual, faces shortcomings. Additionally, the follow-up period in these treatments is not permanent and long-term. One of the evidence-based family therapy approaches is the brief strategic family therapy model (Robles, 2014). This short-term, family-focused model integrates structural and strategic interventions, offering a problem-centered and practical model. Brief strategic family therapy specifically focuses on repetitive patterns of family interactions that fail to meet the needs of the family or its members. Therefore, it is believed that family relationships play a central role in changing behavioral problems and are consequently the primary target for intervention. In brief strategic family therapy, the unit of treatment is the family (Darbani et al., 2020). Numerous studies have examined the efficacy of brief strategic family therapy (Allen & Lebow, 2023; Darbani, 2020; Hadian et al., 2023; Jiménez et al., 2019; Lamson et al., 2022). Given the importance of the family and the harms caused by marital conflicts, there is a need for further research and interventions, such as the brief strategic family therapy model, to reduce its adverse effects. Previous studies on the efficacy of brief strategic family therapy have reported improvements in marital relationships, marital infidelity, physical and mental health, empathy, aggression, positive emotional responses, life satisfaction, stress reduction in relationships, and well-being. However, none of these studies have examined the effectiveness of brief strategic family therapy on various dimensions of marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness in couples. Therefore, the necessity for psychological interventions to empower couples is evident. Having an appropriate treatment program in this area can improve the quality of life for couples (Bayat Asghari, 2015). This study was conducted to fill the existing gap. Therefore, this research was shaped by the question: Does brief strategic family therapy affect marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness?

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is fundamental research, and in terms of research design, it is a quasi-experimental study with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up with a control group. The statistical population consisted of all families who referred to the counseling and psychology center in District 1 of Karaj in 2023 and responded to the researcher's call for participation in the treatment plan. From among the families who referred to the counseling and psychology centers in

District 1 of Karaj in 2023 and were eligible to participate in the research sessions, eight families were selected by convenience sampling and randomly assigned to two groups: experimental and control (each consisting of 4 families). Interventions for brief strategic family therapy and Bowen's intergenerational therapy were implemented separately for each family. The inclusion criteria for the study subjects were: 1) age range 25-45 years, 2) at least one year of cohabitation, 3) no severe mental and personality disorders based on clinical interviews and scores on the Revised Symptom Checklist, 4) completion of the treatment consent form, 5) not seeking divorce, and 6) commitment to attend all sessions and not receiving individual counseling outside the therapy sessions. Exclusion criteria included: 1) having a mental disorder based on clinical interviews and scores on the Revised Symptom Checklist, 2) taking psychiatric medications, 3) participating in individual or group psychotherapy sessions in counseling centers and clinics in Karaj.

Before the treatment sessions begin, the researcher provides explanations about the nature and goals of the sessions to the participants and answers their questions. Families are informed that the goal of the treatment sessions is to help improve their marital relationships and that they are participating in a research process. The control group participants are also assured that therapeutic sessions will be held for them after the experimental group's treatment sessions conclude. Thus, the issue of obtaining informed consent is raised, and all subjects declare their full consent to participate in the research process. After completing the Marital Conflict Questionnaire and Interpersonal Forgiveness Questionnaire by both the experimental and control groups in the pre-test phase, brief strategic family therapy sessions are conducted for the experimental group families, while the control group families receive no intervention and are placed on a waiting list for subsequent treatment periods.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Forgiveness

The Forgiveness Questionnaire was developed by Ehtesham Zadeh et al. (2009). It consists of 25 items, with 12 items on the first factor (reconciliation and revenge control), six items on the second factor (resentment control), and seven items on the third factor (realistic understanding). Ehtesham Zadeh et al. used a sample of 400 students from Ahvaz universities (237 women and 163 men) for

construction and validation. The scoring of this scale results in an overall score for interpersonal forgiveness and three subscale scores. Items 19 to 25 are scored from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4), and the remaining items are reverse-scored. The maximum score for the entire scale is 100, and the minimum is 25. A high score indicates a strong ability to forgive others' mistakes. The first subscale, Reconciliation and Revenge Control, with 12 items, has a maximum score of 48 and a minimum score of 12, indicating good ability to reconnect with the offender and low desire for revenge. The second subscale, Resentment Control, with six items, has a maximum score of 24 and a minimum of 6, indicating the ability to control resentment and avoid ruminating on being a victim. The third subscale, Realistic Understanding, with seven items, has a maximum score of 28 and a minimum of 7, indicating the ability to understand human characteristics and the conditions under which the error occurred. Content validity was assessed using the content validity ratio and the opinions of five psychology professors with PhDs, with all items scoring above 0.6, indicating good content validity. The reliability of this questionnaire was reported as 0.90 in Ehtesham Zadeh et al.'s (2009) study, showing high validity and reliability (Ehteshamzadeh et al., 2011).

### 2.2.2. Marital Conflict

The Revised Marital Conflict Questionnaire by Sanaei (2008) is a 54-item tool designed to measure marital conflicts. It assesses eight dimensions of marital conflicts: reduced cooperation (5 items), reduced sexual relationship (5 items), increased emotional reactions (8 items), increased support-seeking from children (5 items), increased individual relationships with relatives (6 items), reduced individual relationships with spouse's relatives and friends (6 items), separation of financial matters (7 items), and reduced effective communication (12 items). Each item has five options, scored from 1 to 5. The maximum total score is 270, and the minimum is 54. Higher scores indicate greater conflict, and lower scores indicate better relationships and less conflict. Items are scored as follows: never (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4), always (5). Items 3, 11, 14, 26, 30, 33, 45, 47, and 54 are reverse-scored. Sanaei reported the reliability of this questionnaire with Cronbach's alpha on a sample of 270 people as 0.96. The reliability of the eight subscales is as follows: reduced cooperation, 0.81; reduced sexual relationship, 0.61; increased emotional reactions, 0.70; increased support-seeking from children, 0.33;

increased individual relationships with relatives, 0.86; reduced relationships with spouse's relatives and friends, 0.89; separation of financial matters, 0.71; and reduced effective communication, 0.69. The Marital Conflict Questionnaire has good content validity. In the content analysis stage, after preliminary implementation and calculating the correlation of each item with the total questionnaire and its subscales, no items were deleted due to adequate correlations (Darbani et al., 2020; Enayat & Yaghoobi, 2012).

### 2.3. Intervention

#### 2.3.1. Brief Strategic Family Therapy

The brief strategic family therapy program, an evidence-based family-focused treatment, was extracted from the educational package by Hourigian, Robbins, and Szapocznik (2004) and authored by family therapy specialists. This program is implemented in 8 group sessions of 90 minutes each, held once a week for the second experimental group (Darbani et al., 2020).

##### Session 1: Establishing Rapport and Setting Expectations

In the first session, after establishing rapport, the participants were introduced to each other and discussed their reasons for attending therapy. The therapist outlined the rules and expectations of the sessions. Couples were encouraged to articulate their goals and expectations from the therapy. The intervention model was explained, emphasizing that learning many of the processes, goals, and techniques requires significant changes in their perceptions of the family and its problems. Concepts related to the nature of the family, identified problems, and potential solutions were explained through a conceptual framework. Couples identified their conflicts and were tasked with noting the factors contributing to these conflicts throughout the week to discuss in the next session.

##### Session 2: Creating Awareness through Family Mapping

In this session, awareness was created through family mapping, documenting family life events, and the influence circle. The goal was to discover dysfunctional patterns within the family. Family mapping helped determine how the clients interact with their family members. Each symptom was given context to help the therapist understand the client's relationship dynamics and the nature of their psychological issues. Participants shared historical information about their grandparents, including birth dates and locations, lifestyle, and significant life events. They also discussed their parents' significant events, such as marriage,

current marital status, personal characteristics, and the impact of various individuals on themselves. Participants were assigned the task of creating a sketch of their primary family as homework.

##### Session 3: Communication Skills and Message Conveyance

The previous session's homework was reviewed, and communication and message conveyance skills were introduced. Examples of how couples communicate were demonstrated. For instance, one wife mentioned avoiding conversation with her husband when he was upset, instead distracting herself with the TV or her phone. This non-verbal message of neglect led to withdrawal and anger, increasing marital distance. The session highlighted that messages are conveyed through various levels, including body language, tone, volume, and posture. Couples were asked to have close acquaintances observe their interactions and report their observations. The homework for this week was to identify and note their communication patterns for discussion in the next session.

##### Session 4: Identifying Dysfunctional Interaction Patterns

The previous session's homework was reviewed, and couples' interaction patterns were examined. Insight into how their behaviors, based on reciprocal interaction patterns, affected their relationships was provided. Couples learned about "circular causality," understanding that behaviors and reactions form a continuous loop. For example, one partner's conflict might lead to neglect, which causes more conflict, creating a cycle. Couples were tasked with identifying dysfunctional interaction patterns as homework.

##### Session 5: Using "I" Statements and Physical Touch

This session introduced the use of "I" statements and the technique of "touch or contact." Participants were encouraged to use "I" statements when expressing feelings and emotions. The importance of physical touch in creating effective communication and intimacy was explained. As homework, couples were asked to use "I" statements in various situations and incorporate physical touch into their interactions.

##### Session 6: Verbal and Non-verbal Communication Matching

The previous session's homework and the alignment of verbal exchanges with non-verbal behavior were reviewed. Participants were asked to observe each other's verbal and body language interactions and verify their meanings. With the counselor's guidance, couples practiced communicating without words, focusing on non-verbal methods to express

feelings. This non-verbal communication was assigned as homework for further practice.

**Session 7: Active Listening and Role-Playing Dysfunctional Behaviors**

The focus of this session was on enhancing active listening skills and introducing the role-playing technique. Participants practiced reflecting feelings and content and learned about "role-playing" within the family. The goal of role-playing was for each partner to act out dysfunctional behaviors. This technique helped correct and change problematic interaction patterns in the presence of the therapist, aiding in controlling behaviors and words during conflicts. Couples realized they had more control over issues than previously thought.

**Session 8: Reviewing Progress and Post-test**

In the final session, the group counselor reviewed the sessions and the previous session's homework. Participants summarized their experiences throughout the sessions, evaluated their progress toward their goals, and discussed

what they had learned from the group. A post-test was administered at the end of this session to measure outcomes.

**2.4. Data analysis**

Data were analyzed using univariate and multivariate covariance analysis, and the eta coefficient was calculated to determine effect size. The analyses were performed using SPSS version 22.

**3. Findings and Results**

Results of **Table 1** show that in the pre-test stage, the mean score of marital conflicts in the experimental group (brief strategic family therapy) was 157.3, which decreased to 102.2 in the post-test stage and was 101.3 in the follow-up stage. The mean score of interpersonal forgiveness in the experimental group was 76.9 in the pre-test stage, which increased to 98.2 in the post-test stage and was 96.3 in the follow-up stage.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Marital Conflicts and Interpersonal Forgiveness Scores Between Experimental and Control Groups in Pre-test, Post-test, and Follow-up Stages*

Stage	Variable	Exp. Mean	Exp. Standard Deviation	Control Mean	Control Standard Deviation
Pre-test	Marital Conflicts	157.3	14.7	155.1	13.2
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	76.9	6.8	79.3	7.7
Post-test	Marital Conflicts	102.2	9.8	155.1	13.2
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	98.3	9.6	79.3	7.7
Follow-up	Marital Conflicts	101.3	9.7	-	-
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	96.3	8.6	-	-

Results of **Table 2** indicate that considering the pre-test scores for "marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness," the difference between the trained group (brief strategic

family therapy) and the control group in the post-test stage is significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, the research hypothesis is confirmed.

**Table 2**

*Results of Multivariate Covariance Analysis (MANCOVA)*

Source of Variation	Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance (P)	Eta Squared
Marital Conflicts	Marital Conflicts	47.131	1	47.131	32.172	.000	.745
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	2.844	1	2.844	.812	.387	.069
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	.931	1	.931	.266	.616	.024
Interpersonal Forgiveness	Marital Conflicts	.020	1	.020	.014	.909	.001
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	3.274	1	3.274	.935	.354	.078
Group	Marital Conflicts	8364.155	1	8364.155	5709.000	.000	.998
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	1470.188	1	1470.188	419.826	.000	.974
Error	Marital Conflicts	16.115	11	1.465			
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	38.521	11	3.502			
Total	Marital Conflicts	264711.000	16				
	Interpersonal Forgiveness	125779.000	16				

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to determine the effectiveness of brief strategic family therapy (BSFT) on marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness. The results showed that brief strategic family therapy affects marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness. The comparative findings on the hypothesis that brief strategic family therapy impacts marital conflicts and interpersonal forgiveness are consistent with the results of previous studies by both domestic and international researchers (Allen & Lebow, 2023; Darbani, 2020; Hadian et al., 2023; Jiménez et al., 2019; Lamson et al., 2022).

Specifically, the significant decrease in marital conflict scores from the pre-test to the follow-up stage suggests that BSFT not only offers immediate benefits but also provides sustained improvements over time. This finding is particularly noteworthy as it addresses one of the common criticisms of short-term therapeutic interventions: the durability of their effects. The follow-up data demonstrate that couples who participated in BSFT continued to experience reduced conflict levels even after the completion of the therapy sessions. The increase in interpersonal forgiveness observed in this study is consistent with literature that highlights the role of forgiveness in improving relational satisfaction and reducing interpersonal tensions (Allen & Lebow, 2023; Jiménez et al., 2019). Forgiveness, as a coping mechanism, allows individuals to reframe their perceptions of harm and facilitates emotional healing, which is essential in the context of intimate relationships. The incorporation of forgiveness-focused strategies within BSFT likely contributed to the positive outcomes observed in this study, as couples were able to develop more adaptive responses to past grievances. One of the key strengths of this study is its use of a quasi-experimental design with a control group, which adds rigor to the findings. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this design, particularly the use of convenience sampling and the relatively small sample size. While the results are promising, they may not be generalizable to all populations, particularly those from different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds. Future research should aim to replicate these findings in larger, more diverse samples and explore the cross-cultural applicability of BSFT.

#### 5. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study faced limitations. It was limited to all families who referred to the counseling and psychology center in District 1 of Karaj in 2023. Caution should be exercised when generalizing these results to other families and cities. The cross-sectional nature of the study prevented follow-up of the samples. The results obtained are limited to the specific questionnaires used, and using other similar tools may yield different results. One major limitation is the convenience sample of volunteers. It is recommended that psychologists, psychotherapists, and specialists in the field of psychology use brief strategic family therapy to treat various patients, as its effectiveness in reducing marital conflicts and improving interpersonal forgiveness has been confirmed in various studies. Given the content and concepts of the therapeutic method used in this study and other research, this therapeutic method has the potential to treat and improve various individuals. Therefore, it is suggested that these two therapeutic methods be used more widely. It is also recommended that the concepts of this therapeutic method be introduced to couples planning to marry to strengthen and solidify their relationships. Based on the effectiveness of the variables, it is recommended that this research be conducted among other social groups and various patients. The effectiveness of this therapeutic method should be evaluated concerning gender and age.

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#### Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

#### Ethical Considerations

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

#### Transparency of Data

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

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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