




The effectiveness of Gottman approach intervention on marital burnout, emotional divorce and emotional regulation of conflicted couples

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The current research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the training program based on the marital burnout, emotional divorce and emotional regulation of conflicted couples.

Methods and Materials: The current research is quantitative research in which a quasi-experimental method was used with a pre-test-post-test design with a control group. The statistical population of the research included conflicting couples who, for some reason, have been referred to family court counseling centers in Tehran. Therefore, 40 people (20 couples) were selected by available sampling and randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups (each including ten couples). Then, the experimental group underwent the intervention with Gottman's approach. Quantitative data collection tools included Pines Marital Burnout Measure (CBM), Gottman's Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (2008), and Gross and John's (2012) Emotion Regulation Questionnaire. The data analysis was done through SPSS software and using variance analysis with repeated measurements.

Findings: The calculated F-value for the effect of the groups on marital burnout, emotional divorce and emotional regulation of conflicting couples is significant at the 5% level ($P < 0.05$). Between the experimental group and control after the intervention, there is a significant difference. The intervention of Gottman's approach to marital burnout, emotional divorce, and emotion regulation of conflicting couples has been significantly effective. According to Bonferroni's follow-up test, the effects of Gottman's intervention on marital burnout, emotional divorce, and emotional regulation of conflicting couples are stable in the follow-up phase.

Conclusion: Therefore, the intervention of Gottman's approach is effective in marital burnout, emotional divorce, and emotional regulation of conflicting couples. This effect is also stable in the follow-up phase.

Keywords: emotional divorce, Gottman's approach, marital burnout, emotional regulation, Gottman approach.

1. Introduction

When romantic expectations are not met, the feeling of disappointment is directly attributed to the spouse, leading to the breakdown of love and commitment and the replacement of burnout for love (Fahimi & Taghvaei, 2022). Marital burnout is a painful state of physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion that affects those who expect ideal love and marriage to give meaning to their lives. Burnout occurs when they realize that despite all their efforts, their relationship has not given and will not give meaning to their lives (Mardani et al., 2023; Nazarpour et al., 2019). Based on what has been said, the components of Marital Burnout can be divided into three separate but related dimensions. Pines (1996) identified the components of Marital Burnout in three dimensions: physical fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Pines, 1996). Numerous factors threaten marital relationships over time and lead to the erosion of love and intimacy among spouses, resulting in marital burnout (Falajahi & Mohammadi, 2020; Lucas-Mangas et al., 2022). The anxieties and pressures that enter a couple's life are numerous. On the other hand, some studies have shown that emotional divorce is not strongly related to the duration of the marriage, and what is important are personal components in interpersonal relationships, the difficulty of divorce, and cultural and social conditions, which are currently important about emotional divorce (Goudarzi et al., 2022).

Moreover, couples who have been involved in an emotional relationship and have experienced a breakup seem to be emotionally vulnerable. Emotional regulation refers to how couples effectively cope with emotional burdens and problems (Faustino & Vasco, 2021; Zysberg & Raz, 2019). The two main components of this structure are: 1) the ability to recognize one's emotions and 2) the ability to manage one's emotions. Conflicting couples who lack problem-solving skills and consider themselves to be in a failed relationship are likely to need more awareness of their emotions and their identification (Zysberg & Raz, 2019). Therefore, emotional problems experienced by conflicting couples may include a lack of awareness of their emotional states and an inability to regulate their emotions (Grecucci, Frederickson, & Job, 2017). Theoretically, emotion regulation variables such as emotion acceptance may allow emotionally vulnerable couples to be present in the current time and place. As a result, instead of overreacting and anxious to the situation (e.g., catastrophic thinking), they can gain a more objective understanding of the threat level

(Kazemeini et al., 2022). To some extent, these problems become more severe and sometimes intolerable over time, leading to making decisions such as divorce (Mehraban & Alivandivafa, 2022). In addition, the increase in divorce and marital dissatisfaction on the one hand and the demand of spouses for productivity and improvement of marital relationships on the other hand indicate the need for specialized interventions and training in this area.

Therefore, various approaches have been proposed to treat family and marital problems, including the Gottman marital enrichment intervention. The Gottman theory includes organized programs and methods called "regular and logical" therapeutic processes, designed to deepen friendship, strengthen conflict management, and create shared meaning and goal-setting in couples' relationships. The Gottman approach is a comprehensive approach that draws on the foundations and principles of various therapeutic beliefs such as systemic theory, existential perspective, and narrative therapy (Gottman et al., 2019; Jalalvand et al., 2023; Veldorale-Griffin, 2023). The Gottman approach also follows a psychoanalytic perspective and supports behavioral approaches where behavior change is sought. In addition, the Gottman approach emphasizes the identification and modification of distorted thinking patterns and ineffective behaviors resulting from them. Therefore, the issues raised and other variables have created a high divorce rate, especially women's request for consensual divorce, which, according to some experts, has increased five times compared to the past, indicating a significant change and gap in the joint life of couples (Saadati Shamir, Saniee, & Zare, 2019). Therefore, based on the above theoretical considerations, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the Gottman approach intervention in reducing marital burnout, emotional divorce, and emotion regulation in conflicted couples seeking divorce.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study is a quantitative and applied research that used a quasi-experimental method with a pre-test-post-test design with a control group. The statistical population of the quasi-experimental group consisted of conflicting couples who had visited family counseling centers in Tehran for various reasons. Therefore, a private counseling center was negotiated for cooperation in the research and an agreement was reached. Then, using purposeful questionnaires, 20 couples who obtained scores above the

cut-off point were selected and, after matching, were randomly assigned to the experimental group (10 couples) and the control group (10 couples). The inclusion criteria were having at least a high school diploma, willingness to participate in the research, and the presence of both couples in the intervention sessions. The exclusion criteria from the research were absence from more than two sessions during the training program, having psychological disorders, taking medical or psychiatric drugs, and participating in other training courses simultaneously.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Couples Burnout Measure (CBM)

This self-assessment questionnaire was designed to measure the degree of burnout in couples. CBM was developed by Pines (1996). The questionnaire consists of 21 questions that cover three main components: physical exhaustion (such as feeling tired, lethargic, and having sleep disturbances), emotional exhaustion (feeling depressed, hopeless, and trapped), and mental exhaustion (such as feeling worthless, frustrated, and angry towards one's spouse). All of these items are answered on a seven-point scale. Completing the CBM takes 15 to 20 minutes (Pines, 1996). The reliability assessment of CBM showed an internal consistency between variables in the range of 0.84 to 0.90. The validity of CBM has been confirmed by negative correlations with positive relational qualities such as positive attitudes towards the relationship, quality of communication, sense of security, self-actualization, sense of purpose, attraction and emotional attachment to the spouse, and the quality of their sexual relationship (Pines & Nunes, 2003).

2.2.2. Emotional Divorce Questionnaire

The Emotional Divorce Questionnaire is designed by John Gottman. This consists of sentences about various aspects of life that a person may agree or disagree with. The scale has 24 questions, and the respondent must answer them with a yes or no. The scoring of the questionnaire is yes or no, with a score of one for yes and zero for no. The more yes answers, the higher the likelihood of emotional divorce. Scores between 0 and 8 indicate a weak likelihood of divorce, scores between 8 and 16 indicate a moderate likelihood, and scores above 16 indicate a strong likelihood

of divorce. To examine the reliability of this scale for measuring emotional divorce, there was a need for a tool that could be used to measure the desired variable. Therefore, the above questionnaire was distributed among 30 people, and the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.91. Additionally, the content and face validity were evaluated and approved by five experienced experts in this field. A 23-item form of the emotional divorce assessment test was created, which had five options on a Likert scale. This test was given to the relevant experts, and they were asked to rate each question on a scale of 1 to 5 based on how much the question assessed emotional divorce. In this way, the face and content validity of the test were measured (Dehghani Sheshdeh & Yousefi, 2019).

2.2.3. Emotion Regulation Questionnaire

This questionnaire was developed by Gross and John in 2003. The scale consists of 10 items with two subscales of reappraisal (first 6 items) and suppression (last 4 items). Responses are rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Scores are calculated by summing the responses to each of the 10 items. If, for example, you have 10 questionnaires, you should multiply the scores below by 10. The minimum possible score is 10 and the maximum is 70. Scores between 10 and 27 indicate low emotion regulation, scores between 27 and 40 indicate moderate emotion regulation and scores above 40 indicate high emotion regulation. In the study by Gross and John, the internal consistency for reappraisal was 0.79 and for suppression was 0.73 (Gross & John, 2012). In this study, the reliability of the scale was reported to be in the range of 0.60 to 0.81 based on internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha.

2.3. Interventions

2.3.1. Gottman Couple Therapy

The experimental group received an 8-session, 90-minute intervention based on the Gottman approach, while the control group did not. After the intervention, members of both groups completed the questionnaires in the post-test phase, and after a one-month follow-up period, members of both groups were tested again. The summary of the content of the Gottman intervention sessions is presented in the Table 1 (Jalalvand et al., 2023; Veldorale-Griffin, 2023).

Table 1

Gottman Couple Therapy Sessions

| Session | Content |
|---------|---|
| 1 | Familiarizing couples and defining the goals and logic of sessions, establishing a good relationship, familiarizing with the overall plan of sessions, expressing expectations of clients and their commitment to attending sessions, and emphasizing the importance of completing tasks. |
| 2 | Principle One - Helping couples examine their love map, improve and strengthen it to help enhance understanding and better cope with life situations. Task: Practicing the love map exercise to help enhance understanding and better cope with life situations. |
| 3 | Principle Two - Strengthening the sense of attachment and admiration, the concepts of attachment and admiration, signs of attachment, and how to create attachment in a relationship. Task: A seven-week training course on admiration and attachment was assigned in this regard. |
| 4 | Principle Three - Instead of turning away from each other, take steps towards each other; the love and emotions of couples, how to create them, and maintaining marital relationships from coldness and monotony. Task: What should you do when your spouse shows no interest in you? |
| 5 | Principle Four - Let your spouse have an influence on you; how to deal with a power-hungry spouse. Task: Surrendering to win and playing the survival game on Gottman Island. |
| 6 | Principle Five - Solving unsolvable problems. Task: Find an example of your own conflicts without discussing it. |
| 7 | Continuing to work on conflict resolution in the area of removing obstacles and problems, and Principle Six - Overcoming impasse in marital relationships, identifying the causes of impasse. Task: Conduct these exercises in a natural environment and prepare a report. |
| 8 | Principle Seven - Achieving a shared concept, creating a new culture in the family. Task: Implementing rules at home, final discussions on sessions, and post-assessment implementation. |

2.4. *Data analysis*

In order to analyze the data in the quantitative section, the data were examined in two stages: descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (analysis of variance of repeated measures). The calculations were performed using SPSS software version 22.

3. Findings and Results

The table below presents data on the mean and standard deviation of participants' scores in the variables of marital burnout, emotional divorce, and emotion regulation for the experimental and control groups in the study sample.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics (M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation)

| Variable | Group | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Follow-up | |
|--------------------|---------|----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|
| | | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| Burnout | Exp. | 98.52 | 5.16 | 89.80 | 5.42 | 89.10 | 5.62 |
| | Control | 96.34 | 5.18 | 97.17 | 5.11 | 96.19 | 5.24 |
| Emotional divorce | Exp. | 21.02 | 1.89 | 17.13 | 2.26 | 17.52 | 2.15 |
| | Control | 21.14 | 1.93 | 21.25 | 1.99 | 20.95 | 2.19 |
| Emotion regulation | Exp. | 27.72 | 3.33 | 33.61 | 3.40 | 33.02 | 3.47 |
| | Control | 27.65 | 3.91 | 26.98 | 3.67 | 27.19 | 3.95 |

As shown in the Table 2, participants in the study had high scores in marital burnout and emotional divorce and low scores in emotion regulation in the pre-test and before implementing the Gottman intervention approach. According to the table, the mean scores of marital burnout and emotional divorce decreased, and the score of emotion regulation increased in the post-test. This finding suggests that the implementation of the Gottman intervention sessions has led to changes in the dependent variables of the study.

Given the significant levels of the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p > 0.05$), the normality assumption is established. Therefore, considering the high probability of normal distribution (more than 95%), parametric tests can be used. The Levene's

test was used to test the assumption of equality of variances between the two groups in the population. The results showed no significant difference in the variance of the two groups in any variable ($p < 0.05$). Finally, considering the non-significance of the interaction between group and pre-test in the variables of marital burnout, emotional divorce, and emotion regulation in the sample of the study ($p < 0.05$), the assumption of homogeneity of interaction effects was observed, and repeated measures analysis of variance can be used to test the research hypotheses. Therefore, to compare the effect of the Gottman intervention approach on the variables of marital burnout, emotional divorce, and emotion regulation in the study sample, repeated measures analysis

of variance was used. In this analysis, post-test scores were entered as dependent variables, group variables (with three levels) as independent variables, and pre-test scores as

constant variables in the repeated measures analysis of the variance equation.

Table 3

Analysis of variance with repeated measurements

| Variable | Source | SS | df | MS | F | Sig. | Effect size |
|--------------------|----------|------------|----|------------|----------|-------|-------------|
| Burnout | Constant | 629583.382 | 1 | 629583.382 | 2921.395 | 000.0 | 0.996 |
| | Group | 702.293 | 1 | 323.932 | 16.144 | 001.0 | 0.602 |
| | Error | 1982.039 | 39 | 42.422 | | | |
| Emotional divorce | Constant | 136932.952 | 1 | 136932.952 | 1640.832 | 000.0 | 0.992 |
| | Group | 529.319 | 1 | 291.298 | 14.312 | 0.001 | 0.562 |
| | Error | 1632.023 | 39 | 30.942 | | | |
| Emotion regulation | Constant | 214921.921 | 1 | 214921.921 | 1962.293 | 000.0 | 0.990 |
| | Group | 623.291 | 1 | 279.723 | 10.932 | 0.002 | 0.371 |
| | Error | 292.1460 | 39 | 153.52 | | | |

As shown in Table 3, according to the calculated F-value for the effect of groups on the variables of marital burnout (F = 14.16), emotional divorce (F = 31.14), and emotion regulation (F = 93.10), at a significance level of 5%, it can be said that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups after the intervention and

the intervention has had a significant effect on the research variables. Thus, the main hypothesis of the study is confirmed, and the Gottman intervention approach is effective in reducing marital burnout, emotional divorce, and improving emotion regulation in conflicting couples.

Table 4

Results of Bonferroni's post-hoc test

| Variable | Post-test – Follow-up | | Pre-test – Follow-up | | Pre-test – Post-test | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------|----------------------|------|----------------------|------|
| | Mean diff. | Sig. | Mean diff. | Sig. | Mean diff. | Sig. |
| Burnout | 0.70 | 0.81 | 9.42 | 0.00 | 72.8 | 0.00 |
| Emotional divorce | 0.39 | 0.93 | 3.50 | 0.00 | 3.89 | 0.00 |
| Emotion regulation | 0.59 | 0.90 | 5.89 | 0.00 | 5.30 | 0.00 |

The data in Table 4 indicate that based on the Bonferroni follow-up test, the effects of the Gottman intervention on the dependent variables of the study have a suitable stability in the follow-up stage.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the Gottman approach intervention on marital burnout, emotional divorce, and emotion regulation in conflicted couples. The statistical analysis results confirmed the research hypotheses, which were consistent with previous findings (Jalalvand et al., 2023). Gottman approach emphasizes coping with negative aspects of marriage, and positive aspects such as showing affection, kindness and love, paying attention, appreciation, empathy, sympathy, acceptance, generosity, and sharing in happiness are added. Additionally, this educational method can help married

women establish a good relationship for growth and flourishing by teaching effective communication skills and reducing negative and destructive emotions during the marriage. Furthermore, it helps women in conflict resolution and problem-solving, avoiding relationships that lead to failure, reducing hopelessness, anger, feelings of worthlessness, depression, and failure, and increasing empathy and better understanding of each other's needs and desires, and increasing the desire to continue the marital relationship, leading to the creation and improvement of a relationship that is both effective and positive (Veldorale-Griffin, 2023). As a result, these factors lead to the Gottman approach intervention, increasing emotion regulation and reducing marital burnout and emotional divorce. The results of quantitative data analysis showed that the first sub-hypothesis of the research, which stated that the Gottman approach intervention is effective in reducing marital burnout in conflicted couples, was confirmed. In explaining

this finding, it can be said that couples learn to renegotiate their commitments and responsibilities, establish effective communication with each other, discuss the causes of disagreement and the importance of expressing their views on the best way to manage disagreement and decide to implement the idea they have proposed after participating in Gottman approach intervention sessions (Navarra & Gottman, 2019; Saadati Shamir, Saniee, & Zare, 2019). This allows couples to show significantly more positive emotions, better communication, and more appropriate problem-solving behaviors. These positive emotions and constructive conflict resolution methods, in turn, reduce marital burnout in couples.

The results of quantitative data analysis showed that the second sub-hypothesis of the study, which states that the Gottman intervention approach is effective in reducing emotional divorce in conflicting couples, was confirmed. In explaining this finding, it can be said that the key to a successful relationship is the overall level of positive emotions and the ability to reduce negative emotions during conflict resolution. When disruptive behaviors decrease and positive and pleasant behaviors increase, satisfaction with the relationship increases (Basharpoor, Farivar, & Ebadi, 2021; Gottman et al., 2019). Gottman's theory is based on the belief that therapeutic interventions should increase positive emotions and help couples discover strategies to reduce negative emotions during conflict. Given that part of the couple therapy sessions using the Gottman method was dedicated to teaching conflict resolution skills, it can be said that teaching these skills and transferring them to couples outside of therapy sessions can help achieve agreement. Naturally, achieving agreement in marital interactions reduces negative emotions (Veldorale-Griffin, 2023) and consequently reduces emotional divorce.

The results of quantitative data analysis also showed that the third sub-hypothesis of the study, which states that the Gottman intervention approach is effective in emotion regulation of conflicting couples, was confirmed. Emotion regulation can facilitate individuals' performance. It is assumed that increasing executive brain functions leads to an improvement in the overall problem-solving style, and problem-solving leads to an improvement in positive mood in individuals, ultimately leading to an increase in individuals' performance. When individuals face emotional situations, they need the best cognitive functions for emotion regulation and try to control their emotions (Saadati Shamir, Saniee, & Zare, 2019). In explaining this finding, it can be said that by using the Gottman intervention approach, since

the goals and processes of this method are to reduce negative emotions during conflict, increase positive emotions during conflict, create positive emotions at times other than conflict, and balance emotions and inconsistent emotions (Navarra & Gottman, 2019), therapy sessions on emotion regulation of couples have an impact. The Gottman approach emphasizes reducing negative behaviors and considers marital conflicts as a result of inappropriate behaviors such as neglect, humiliation, reproach, avoidance, and silence. Incompatible couples retaliate against negative behaviors, leading to increased conflict and a defective cycle of generating negative emotions (Saadati Shamir, Saniee, & Zare, 2019). Therapy sessions create acceptance empathy, reduce destructive behaviors, and increase emotional awareness, allowing couples more peace in their conflicts and better manage their emotions.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

One of the limitations of the study includes the fact that the follow-up stage was only conducted once, with a relatively short interval of one month. Regarding the long-term sustainability of intervention methods, there is a need for further follow-up with longer intervals, and caution should be exercised in generalizing the follow-up results. Participants' attitudes towards the tests used, their level of cooperation with the researcher, and their honesty and interest in adhering to and fully implementing the intervention materials with the Gottman approach are factors that are almost beyond the researcher's control and can affect the study's results.

It is suggested that due to the importance of the research topic, a similar study be conducted for other communities, taking into account various variables and adding mediating variables for comparison with the present study. Given the importance of divorce counseling and couples therapy, it is recommended that research be conducted to apply Gottman intervention techniques in other approaches to develop an integrated and cohesive protocol. Additionally, couples therapy centers can use the Gottman couples therapy approach used in this study to enhance the skills and marital knowledge of conflicting couples.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics principles

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

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