

## The effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on borderline personality disorder

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on borderline personality disorder. The method of the current research was quasi-experimental, and the design used in this research was a pre-test-post-test design with an experimental group and a control group. The first measurement was performed by performing a pre-test before the group therapy sessions, and the second measurement was performed after the completion of the therapy sessions. The present study's statistical population comprised all people with borderline personality disorder who had visited two counseling centers of Hamta and Cheshm Andaz Roshan in district one of Tehran in 2022. In order to form two groups, subjects were selected using the purposeful sampling method and then using the matching method, 15 subjects were assigned to the experimental group of emotion-focused treatment and 15 subjects were assigned to the control group. Leichsenring's borderline personality scale (1999) was used to collect data, and analysis of covariance and SPSS software were used for statistical data analysis. The observed F-value for the desired variable in the adjusted model (adjusting the pre-test effect) is equal to 72.865 and its significance level (sig) is also equal to 0.000, which indicates the existence of a significant difference between the post-test score in the experimental group and the control group. Therefore, the main effect of the group variable is significant. Emotion-focused treatment affects the treatment of borderline personality patients with an effect size of 0.894.

**Keywords:** Emotion-focused therapy, borderline personality disorder, personality disorder, psychotherapy.

### 1 Introduction

Borderline personality disorder is a pervasive pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image and emotions along with marked impulsivity that begins in

early adulthood. The causes of this disorder are different and associated with features such as disturbance in emotional states, anxiety, anger, depression and dangerous behaviors such as self-harm and substance abuse (Dreyße et al., 2020; Garland & Miller, 2020).

This disorder is the most common personality disorder in psychiatric settings, and its main characteristic is emotional instability, which includes dysphoric mood and severe mood swings, as well as frequent and intense response to emotional stimuli, which is a characteristic of this behavioral pattern. This emotional vulnerability causes the patient with borderline personality disorder to be emotionally aroused most of the time, the result of this high arousal is behavioral instability, poor control over emotions, intense physiological arousal, facial expressions, body language and disturbance in interpersonal communication. (Pizarro-Campagna et al., 2020; Richmond, Tull, & Gratz, 2020; Titus & DeShong, 2020).

Problems in emotion processing create other problems related to emotion regulation, such as feelings of emptiness, a high degree of dissociation in different aspects of oneself, and the inability to self-soothe. This lack of emotion regulation is the source of many borderline disorder processes, especially dualization, unstable relationships, and impulsive behaviors and self-harm (Fletcher et al., 2014; Richmond, Tull, & Gratz, 2020).

Borderline personality disorder is associated with difficulties in the ability to regulate emotion (Albein-Urios et al., 2019; Zanarini & Frankenburg, 1994). Researchers tested the relationship between childhood abuse and emotion regulation and found that children with a history of abuse were more likely to have emotion regulation problems than children who had not experienced abuse. Additionally, findings suggest that childhood abuse is associated with high levels of emotional rejection and low levels of understanding (Albein-Urios et al., 2019).

EFT therapy can be successfully used in the treatment of personality disorders. If therapists are careful to tailor chairwork interventions, considerations that increase emotional processing capacity in clients with personality disorders who are vulnerable to emotional arousal and have low reflective capacity (Greenman & Johnson, 2022). Activating interpersonal dynamics and clients' unnecessary arousals in chairwork in EFT can be replaced by increasing the client's capacity to reflect and regulate emotions during chairwork. As a result, EFT can structure and organize the emotional landscape in clients with personality disorder who are emotionally vulnerable, while helping them get the most out of EFT interventions (Johnson, 2012; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on borderline personality disorder.

## 2 Methods and Materials

### 2.1 Study Design and Participants

The method of the current research was quasi-experimental, and the design used in this research was a pre-test-post-test design with an experimental group and a control group. The first measurement was performed by performing a pre-test before the group therapy sessions, and the second measurement was performed after the completion of the therapy sessions. The present study's statistical population comprised all people with borderline personality disorder who had visited two counseling centers of Hamta and Cheshm Andaz Roshan in district one of Tehran in 2022. In order to form two groups, subjects were selected using the purposeful sampling method and then using the matching method, 15 subjects were assigned to the experimental group of emotion-focused treatment and 15 subjects were assigned to the control group.

### 2.2 Measures and Interventions

#### 2.2.1 Personality Disorder Symptoms

The borderline personality scale was created by Leichsenring (1999) in order to measure borderline personality traits in clinical and non-clinical samples, which is answered in the form of yes/no. Leichsenring (1999) showed that the internal consistency and retest reliability of this test are satisfactory and Cronbach's alpha of the components of this test was in the range of 0.68 to 0.91%. Also, the retest correlation of this test was between 0.73 and 0.89 (Leichsenring, 1999). In the current study, the reliability was calculated using the Cronbach's alpha method of 0.89.

#### 2.2.2 Emotion Focused Therapy

The members of the ACT experimental group received ACT during eight 90-minute sessions based on the treatment program of Hayes et al. (2006) (Hayes et al., 2006).

### 2.3 Data Analysis

In order to statistically analyze the data, analysis of covariance test and SPSS software were used.

## 3 Findings

The descriptive findings of the research are reported in the Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive findings (Mean and Standard Deviation)*

Variable	Stage	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Group	M	SD	M	SD
BPD	EFT	33.8667	3.39888	2.69568	9.5333
	Control	36.1333	4.77892	3.06749	34.8667

According to [Table 1](#), in the post-test, the mean scores of the experimental group decreased. To check the significance

**Table 2**

*Between-group tests (Dependent variable: BPD)*

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig	Effect size
Corrected Model	1439.724 <sup>a</sup>	3	479.908	72.865	.000	.894
Intercept	109.893	1	109.893	16.685	.000	.391
BPD	29.122	1	29.122	4.422	.045	.145
Group	38.598	1	38.595	5.860	.023	.184
Error	171.243	26	6.586			
Total	25187.000	30				
Corrected Total	1610.967	29				

\*R<sup>2</sup> = 0.894, Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.881

As the results of [Table 2](#) show, the observed F-value for the variable in the adjusted model is equal to 72.865 and its significance level (sig) is equal to 0.000, which indicates the existence of a significant difference between the post-test score in the experimental group and the control group. Therefore, the main effect of the group variable is significant. Emotion-focused treatment affects the treatment of borderline personality patients with an effect size of 0.894.

#### 4 Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on borderline personality disorder. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of emotion-focused therapy on borderline personality is significant. In other words, EFT has been effective and has significantly reduced the symptoms of borderline personality disorder. The results is consistent with some previous findings ([Fletcher et al., 2014](#); [Richmond, Tull, & Gratz, 2020](#); [Yaghoobi, Toozandehjani, & Zendedel, 2021](#)).

Borderline personality disorder is associated with difficulties in regulating emotion ([Albein-Urios et al., 2019](#); [Zanarini & Frankenburg, 1994](#)). Problems in emotion

of the changes, the analysis of the covariance test was used. For this purpose, the skewness and elongation of the data were checked first. The results showed that the skewness and kurtosis indices have met their limits for the variables; that is, the normality of the data distribution is approved. Also, the results of Levene's test for both groups showed that the condition of variances is equal ( $p < 0.05$ ). Also, the condition of homogeneity of the regression slope was established for the experimental and control groups ( $p < 0.05$ ).

processing create other problems related to emotion regulation, such as feelings of emptiness, a high degree of dissociation in different aspects of oneself, and the inability to self-soothe. This lack of emotion regulation is the source of many borderline disorder processes, especially dualization, unstable relationships, and impulsive behaviors and self-harm ([Fletcher et al., 2014](#); [Richmond, Tull, & Gratz, 2020](#)).

Also, research shows a close relationship between interpersonal trauma and trauma with borderline processes. Trauma may occur in the form of a history of sexual or physical abuse by caregivers or significant others, and trauma can include creeping traumas such as emotional abuse, deficits in empathic emotional alignment, or lack of emotional alignment. Researchers tested the relationship between childhood abuse and emotion regulation. They found that children with a history of abuse were likelier to have emotion regulation problems than children who had not experienced abuse. Emotion-focused therapy is an effective treatment for clients dealing with severe emotional problems such as complex traumas.

## 5 Limitations and Suggestions

The present study faced some limitations. The present study's most important limitation was the participants' individual differences, which may have affected the subjects' effectiveness of the interventions. Also, the age range of the subjects was limited to 25 to 50 years. According to the results obtained from this research and confirming the effectiveness of EFT on the significant reduction of symptoms of borderline personality disorder, it is suggested to use the emotion-focused therapeutic approach in treating patients with borderline personality disorder. Also, this research should be carried out and investigated in people under 25 due to the importance of this disorder and its critical nature in the teenage years and the beginning of youth. Finally, it is suggested that this research be carried out and investigated in different samples to increase the generalizability of the results to the entire society.

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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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