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The Effectiveness of Religious Forgiveness Therapy on Reducing Marital Conflicts and Extramarital Behaviors in Married Women Seeking Divorce

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy based on religious teachings in reducing marital conflicts and extramarital behaviors (infidelity) in married women seeking divorce. The research employed a quasi-experimental design with a control group. The statistical population included married women seeking divorce who attended family counseling centers in District 1 of Tehran. Sampling was conducted using a convenience sampling method. The sample size consisted of 40 married women seeking divorce, randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Data were collected using the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (Sanaei et al., 2008) and the Attitudes Toward Infidelity Scale (Whatley, 2008). The results demonstrated that forgiveness therapy based on religious teachings significantly reduced marital conflicts and extramarital behaviors in women seeking divorce, with a significant difference observed between the experimental and control groups ($p < .01$). Additionally, the effect size indicated a strong impact of forgiveness therapy based on religious teachings on reducing marital conflicts and extramarital behaviors. In essence, adherence to forgiveness therapy, particularly when integrated with religious teachings, enables individuals to minimize marital conflicts and tendencies toward extramarital behaviors.

Keywords: *Forgiveness therapy based on religious teachings, marital conflict, extramarital behaviors*

1. Introduction

Marriage is a long-term commitment between a man and a woman, requiring both parties to feel satisfied and happy in their marital life (Sumari et al., 2024). However, due to the reciprocal nature of spousal relationships and the unique personalities of each partner, individuals may not, or cannot, perceive issues in the same way as their spouse. This divergence often leads to conflicting views and demands. Naturally, when perspectives differ, or needs are unmet, spouses may feel anger, frustration, and dissatisfaction, resulting in marital conflicts. Given the nature of marital relationships, the occurrence of disagreements and conflicts is a normal phenomenon (Asayesh et al., 2024; Jeong et al., 2024).

The concept of conflict refers to disagreements between spouses, meaning one perceives inconsistencies or incompatibilities between their own goals, expectations, needs, or desires and those of their partner (Yu, 2024). Positive stressful events, such as the birth of a child or obtaining a new job, may also create conflicts within families (Abedi et al., 2024). In Iran, one in every five marriages ends in divorce, reflecting a 20% failure rate. The divorce rate has significantly increased in recent years, while the marriage rate has been declining (Reihanian et al., 2023; Rostaei & Mostafaei, 2023).

Spousal communication patterns play a critical role in family dynamics. Communication patterns are recognized as networks of interactions that frequently occur within families (Abagheri Meyari et al., 2024). Positive communication patterns significantly influence marital satisfaction. Three main types of spousal communication patterns have been identified: mutual avoidance, demand-withdrawal, and constructive mutual communication. In constructive mutual communication, spouses can openly discuss their issues and resolve them without aggressive behaviors (Indumathy & Kanth, 2022). Communication patterns strongly determine marital satisfaction, with 90% of distressed couples identifying poor communication as the primary issue in their relationships (Aqili & Beizai, 2022; Narimani et al., 2021). Improving spousal communication patterns is a common method used in couple therapy to address marital issues. This approach is considered more influential in resolving marital conflicts compared to other factors, such as personality traits or socioeconomic status (Aqili & Beizai, 2022; Fardad et al., 2021).

In some cases, couples fail to achieve the anticipated attachment and tranquility from marriage, leading to marital

burnout (Trudel & Goldfarb, 2010). Another significant issue in marital relationships is extramarital behaviors, which pose a serious threat to marital bonds. Infidelity leads to numerous challenges, including the violation of marital trust and the development of severe conflicts. Despite religious and cultural prohibitions against extramarital sexual activity, such behaviors persist in many societies, including the United States (Fincham & May, 2017).

Given the impact of spousal communication patterns, marital burnout, sexual dissatisfaction, conflicts, and extramarital behaviors on married women seeking divorce, and the devastating consequences on relationships, it is essential to implement effective interventions to assist couples facing such challenges. Various theoretical models have been proposed to explain and address these issues. Among them, forgiveness-based therapy has emerged as an effective approach for resolving issues related to marital adjustment and relationship quality. Forgiveness is generally defined as a motivational process that reduces withdrawal, anger, and revenge toward the offender, replacing negative emotions with positive ones. Forgiveness has been recognized as a psychological and interpersonal process that enhances mental health. Over the past two decades, forgiveness has gained considerable attention in family studies and family therapy as a mechanism for increasing intimacy between spouses. Its therapeutic value lies in its capacity to heal conflicts through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes (Davarnia et al., 2018).

Religious teachings and spirituality also play an essential role in forgiveness therapy. The significance of religion, spirituality, and spiritual growth has increasingly captured the attention of psychologists and mental health professionals over the past few decades. The progress of psychology, combined with the dynamic complexity of modern societies, has underscored the importance of spiritual needs alongside material demands. Since the late 19th century, religion has been a key subject of interest in social sciences and, to some extent, psychology. Scholars such as James, Jung, and Fromm have viewed religion as one of the oldest and most universal expressions of the human spirit, recognizing its importance as both a social phenomenon and a deeply personal matter. According to Jung, religion originates from the human unconscious (Davarnia et al., 2018).

A wide range of spiritual and religious interventions have been employed in various studies, demonstrating their efficacy in addressing diverse disorders. Examples include contemplation, prayer, meditation, reading sacred texts,

forgiveness, repentance, worship, and acts of service. The diversity and applicability of psychotherapeutic approaches underscore their utility. In this study, the focus is on religious psychotherapy based on Islamic teachings. Within the religious framework, individuals derive meaning from religion, viewing life through the lens of profound spiritual insights. In culturally relevant contexts, individuals may utilize religious and spiritual motivations to find meaning in pain, hardship, and suffering, enabling them to address psychological disorders.

Given the importance and necessity of addressing these issues, the present study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy based on religious teachings in improving spousal communication patterns, reducing marital burnout and conflicts, alleviating sexual dissatisfaction, and addressing extramarital behaviors in married women seeking divorce in Tehran.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest structure and a control group. The sample consisted of 40 married women seeking divorce, drawn from the statistical population of women who attended family counseling centers in District 1 of Tehran during 2023–2024. Participants were selected through convenience sampling and were randomly assigned into two groups: 20 in the experimental group and 20 in the control group.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: a minimum level of education, at least five years of marital experience, and the absence of medical, psychological, or personality disorders. The exclusion criteria included failure to meet the aforementioned conditions, lack of sufficient literacy to understand and complete homework assignments, and missing more than two sessions.

The study followed a survey-based methodology. After obtaining informed consent, participants completed the questionnaires in group settings without time restrictions. Initially, women dissatisfied with their marital quality were identified through interviews conducted during counseling sessions. Subsequently, pretest questionnaires were administered.

The experimental group received training in psychological teachings based on religious principles, while no interventions were applied to the control group. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and the results. Upon completing the interventions

for the experimental group, the posttest questionnaires were administered to both groups.

Two months after the posttest, follow-up questionnaires were distributed to assess the lasting effects of forgiveness therapy based on religious teachings. The collected data were used for descriptive and inferential analysis.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Conflict

This 54-item questionnaire, developed by Sanaei et al. (2008) based on clinical experiences in Iran, measures eight dimensions of marital conflict: reduced cooperation, reduced sexual relations, increased emotional reactions, increased seeking of support from children, increased personal relationships with relatives, reduced family relationships with spouse's relatives and friends, separating financial matters, and reduced effective communication. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always). The total score ranges from 54 to 270, with higher scores indicating greater conflict and lower scores reflecting better relationships and fewer conflicts. Items 3, 11, 14, 26, 30, 33, 45, 47, and 54 are reverse-scored. The Cronbach's alpha for the overall questionnaire was 0.53 in a sample of 32 participants, while the subscales ranged from 0.30 (reduced cooperation) to 0.73 (increased emotional reactions). Reliability and validity for the questionnaire were confirmed by Farahbakhsh et al. (2005) using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.69 in Isfahan (Farah Bakhsh et al., 2015).

2.2.2. Attitudes Toward Extramarital Behaviors

Developed by Whatley (2008) to measure attitudes toward extramarital behaviors, this 12-item questionnaire was validated in Iran by Abdollahzadeh (2010). Items are scored on a Likert scale, with questions such as "Extramarital behaviors are one of the reasons for divorce in marital relationships" assessing attitudes. Cronbach's alpha for this scale exceeded 0.70, indicating strong reliability (Amadi & Amadi, 2014).

2.3. Interventions

2.3.1. Religious Forgiveness Therapy

This intervention consists of ten structured sessions aimed at enhancing marital satisfaction and reducing conflicts through a forgiveness therapy model rooted in

religious teachings. The sessions address various aspects of marital life, emphasizing the role of values, spirituality, and religious principles in improving communication, fostering forgiveness, and reinforcing marital bonds. Below is a session-by-session breakdown of the protocol.

Session 1: Understanding Islamic Values

This session begins with group introductions and the establishment of group rules. Participants are introduced to the concepts of marital conflict and satisfaction. The facilitator explains the concept of values and their role in shaping beliefs and behaviors, emphasizing the role of religion in forming individual values. Participants are introduced to the concept of Islamic value systems and their significance. The session concludes with a group discussion and a homework assignment to identify personal value systems.

Session 2: Marriage as an Islamic Value

Participants provide feedback on the homework from the previous session. The session focuses on discussing marriage as a divinely ordained value in Islam, exploring its importance and objectives as outlined in Islamic teachings. The facilitator reviews Islamic texts, including hadiths, that highlight the role of marriage in preserving values. The session ends with a group discussion and a homework assignment to identify sacred marital values and their consequences.

Session 3: Religious Value Systems in Marital Relationships

Participants report on the previous session's homework, and feedback is provided. The discussion revolves around treating marital relationships as a religious value and recognizing God's presence in spousal interactions. The session explores the religious importance of honesty, kindness, and respect in marriage, referencing Quranic verses and hadiths. Participants are assigned homework to identify religious values associated with spousal relationships.

Session 4: Forgiveness as a Religious Value

Participants present homework from the previous session and receive feedback. The session emphasizes the value of forgiveness and condemns anger and vengeance in religious teachings. The role of forgiveness in mitigating and resolving marital conflicts is discussed, alongside religious texts that advocate for suppressing anger and embracing forgiveness. Participants are tasked with practicing religious forgiveness in marital conflicts.

Session 5: Loyalty and Boundaries in Relationships

Participants provide homework feedback, and the discussion focuses on religious values in interactions with non-mahrams and their impact on marital relationships. The role of modesty and chastity in maintaining marital security is explored. The session discusses the religious importance of loyalty and the sinfulness of infidelity. Participants are assigned to identify and practice religious principles in interactions with non-mahrams.

Session 6: Religious Values in Family Interactions and Parenting

Feedback from the previous session is discussed. The session emphasizes the importance of religious upbringing for children and examines religiously recommended values in family interactions. Topics include maintaining family boundaries, parental coordination in religious education, and the importance of emphasizing religious values when children marry. The session concludes with homework to apply religious principles in family interactions.

Session 7: Valuing Marital Duties as Worship

Participants report on the previous session's homework. The session highlights the role of religious families in societal well-being and the significance of maintaining and nurturing religious families as a form of jihad and worship. Participants explore the value of fulfilling marital duties as a means of worshiping God. Hadiths are reviewed, and participants are assigned to reflect on marital duties as a pathway to spiritual closeness.

Session 8: Valuing Connections with Parents and Relatives

Homework feedback is discussed, followed by a session on maintaining familial ties and respecting parents as essential religious values. The role of these relationships in fostering marital satisfaction and intimacy is explored. Quranic verses and hadiths on maintaining ties and showing respect are reviewed. Participants are tasked with applying religious values in interactions with parents and relatives.

Session 9: Religious Value Systems and Marital Outcomes

Participants present their homework, and feedback is provided. The session examines the relationship between adherence to religious value systems and the sanctity of marriage. The connection between religious values and commitment to various aspects of marital life is emphasized. Participants are assigned homework to identify marital outcomes influenced by religious values.

Session 10: Conclusion and Group Closure

Feedback on the final homework is discussed. The session reviews all topics covered throughout the

intervention, highlighting the impact of Islamic value systems on marital life compared to the diminishing role of religious values in Western societies and its consequences for marital stability. Remaining participant questions are addressed. The group concludes with a review of the group's closure rules.

2.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, median, range, frequency, and percentage, were calculated. For inferential analysis, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used to assess the normality of the data distribution. Hypotheses were tested using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). All analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 26).

3. Findings and Results

This study included 40 participants. The mean and standard deviation of age for the forgiveness therapy group were 38.2 ± 7.12 , and for the control group were 39.8 ± 6.35 . The descriptive findings of the study variables are presented below, and inferential statistics were used to examine and test the hypotheses. The results of the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for hypothesis testing are reported in the inferential statistics section.

The means and standard deviations of marital burnout, sexual dissatisfaction, marital conflicts, and extramarital behaviors across the pretest, posttest, and follow-up stages for both groups are provided in Table 1.

For the forgiveness therapy group, the mean scores for marital burnout were 113.25 at pretest, 79 at posttest, and 78.15 at follow-up. In the control group, the mean scores were 113.9 at pretest, 114.45 at posttest, and 114.35 at follow-up.

The mean scores for sexual dissatisfaction in the imagery-based therapy group were 60.8 at pretest, 110.8 at posttest, and 111.45 at follow-up. For the forgiveness therapy group, the mean scores were 60.1 at pretest, 60.75 at posttest, and 60.05 at follow-up. In the control group, the mean scores were 61.55 at pretest, 61.2 at posttest, and 61.85 at follow-up.

The mean scores for marital conflicts in the forgiveness therapy group were 165.15 at pretest, 79.75 at posttest, and 79.6 at follow-up. For the control group, the mean scores were 164.35 at pretest, 164.15 at posttest, and 164.75 at follow-up.

The mean scores for extramarital behaviors in the forgiveness therapy group were 50.1 at pretest, 23.95 at posttest, and 23.8 at follow-up. In the control group, the mean scores were 51.15 at pretest, 52.05 at posttest, and 51.8 at follow-up.

Table 1

Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) of Study Variables Across Pretest, Posttest, and Follow-Up Stages in Both Groups

Variable	Time	Experimental Group (Forgiveness Therapy)	Control Group
Marital Conflicts	Pretest	165.15 (10.71)	164.35 (8.30)
	Posttest	79.75 (23.60)	164.15 (12.04)
	Follow-Up	79.6 (23.10)	164.75 (13.07)
Extramarital Behaviors	Pretest	50.1 (3.87)	51.15 (2.94)
	Posttest	23.95 (3.32)	52.05 (4.70)
	Follow-Up	23.8 (2.90)	51.8 (4.56)

As seen in Table 1, the experimental group's scores (forgiveness therapy) demonstrated changes in marital

conflicts and extramarital behaviors during the posttest and follow-up stages.

Table 2

Repeated Measures MANOVA for Intragroup and Intergroup Effects on All Variables

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	Partial η^2
Within-Subjects	Time	0.517	1.799	0.287	0.018	0.975
Interaction	9.817	1.799	5.456	0.34	0.69	0.009
Error	1098.333	68.374	16.064			
Group	45.633	1	45.633	0.57	0.455	0.015
Error	3040.867	38	80.023			

The results of repeated measures MANOVA are presented in Table 2. To ensure which variable is

significantly affected by the intervention, post-hoc test is presented in the following:

Table 3

Pairwise Comparisons for Study Variables Across Pretest, Posttest, and Follow-Up Stages

Variable	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error (SE)	p-value	95% CI Lower Bound	95% CI Upper Bound
Marital Conflicts	Pretest	Posttest	42.800*	3.302	.001	34.531	51.069
		Follow-Up	42.575*	3.369	.001	34.138	51.012
	Posttest	Follow-Up	-0.225	0.650	.998	-1.852	1.402
Extramarital Behaviors	Pretest	Posttest	12.625*	0.757	.001	10.730	14.520
		Follow-Up	12.825*	0.866	.001	10.657	14.993
	Posttest	Follow-Up	0.200	0.466	.998	-0.968	1.368

As shown in Table 3, significant differences were observed in marital conflicts and extramarital behaviors between the pretest and both posttest and follow-up stages. However, no significant difference was found between the posttest and follow-up stages.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy based on religious teachings in improving spousal communication patterns, marital burnout, marital conflicts, sexual dissatisfaction, and extramarital behaviors (infidelity) among married women seeking divorce in Tehran. The findings revealed a significant difference between the experimental group (forgiveness therapy) and the control group in communication patterns. These results align with prior findings (Abbasi et al., 2013; Farah Bakhsh et al., 2015; Novin & Bahrami, 2016).

There is no doubt that success in family relationships and marital satisfaction largely depends on spouses acquiring knowledge and skills related to marital roles. Marital relationship education can prepare couples to adapt to expected roles and reduce conflicts. Proponents of developmental and structural theories argue that increased marital conflicts arise because young couples lack the skills to modify behavioral patterns and rules derived from prior relationships, particularly their families of origin, to form a new marital unit. For instance, Novin and Bahrami (2016) found that educational interventions could enhance marital satisfaction (Novin & Bahrami, 2016).

The effectiveness of forgiveness therapy rooted in religious teachings can be attributed to its impact on marital

dynamics. Specific communication patterns within families can perpetuate problematic cognitions and behaviors. Couples with communication issues often exhibit deficiencies in skills such as problem-solving, stress management, and emotional expression, which exacerbate relational difficulties. Forgiveness therapy helps couples understand unconscious processes, heal childhood wounds, and separate marital relationships from past influences. This approach fosters healthy and constructive interaction, enhances understanding, creates a safe space for expressing negative emotions, and reduces psychological and emotional distance between spouses (Muro et al., 2016).

Research indicates that religion and religious beliefs directly influence marital commitment and satisfaction (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). Since religion and family emphasize similar values, researchers predict a close relationship between the two. This perspective suggests that religious-psychological teachings can strengthen marital bonds and increase marital satisfaction. Larson and Goltz (1989) found that religious values are major predictors of marital commitment and satisfaction. They concluded that religious values make it harder to leave a marriage due to the religious opposition to divorce and the support for maintaining the marital bond (Larson & Goltz, 1989).

Farah Bakhsh (2015) concluded that religious teachings rooted in Islamic ontology are an effective means of enhancing marital satisfaction (Farah Bakhsh et al., 2015). Abbasi et al. (2013) found that teaching marital skills improved marital life and satisfaction, enhancing the quality of life for married women (Abbasi et al., 2013). Similarly, Manjezi et al. (2011) explored the impact of Islamic communication and religious attitudes on improving marital

satisfaction, finding these factors effective in post-test and follow-up stages (Manjezi et al., 2012).

The findings of this study confirm the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy based on religious teachings in improving marital agreement and resolving conflicts. This approach equips spouses with skills to address unconscious processes, heal wounds from the past, and establish healthy, empathetic relationships. Additionally, exercises emphasizing attentive and nurturing behaviors, such as anger management, shared enjoyable activities, and recognizing positive and negative traits in oneself and one's spouse, can enhance intimacy and positive emotional interactions. Consequently, forgiveness therapy can reduce divorce rates among women seeking divorce by improving communication patterns.

One limitation of this study was the absence of husbands in the educational sessions. To address this, the researcher prepared educational booklets for participants to share with their husbands. Another limitation was the use of convenience sampling, which may restrict the generalizability of findings. Including husbands in future interventions could enhance outcomes. Designing a model of healthy marital relationships tailored to the needs of men may also prove effective in fostering healthier interactions among couples.

The results of this study can be utilized in educational programs, healthcare policies, family wellness initiatives, and counseling services in both public and private sectors.

Overall, the findings demonstrate the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy based on religious teachings in improving communication patterns (marital burnout, conflicts, sexual dissatisfaction, and extramarital behaviors). This intervention alone improved constructive mutual communication and reduced mutual avoidance in couples. Significant differences between the experimental and control groups highlight the utility of this approach in reducing divorce rates among women seeking divorce.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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