

The Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment-Based Training on Sense of Coherence and Regret of Spouse Selection in Women

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

Section:

Family and Couple Therapy

How to cite this article:

Khabazand, S. (2026). The Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment-Based Training on Sense of Coherence and Regret of Spouse Selection in Women. *KMAN Counseling and Psychology Nexus*, 4, 1-9.

<http://doi.org/10.61838/kman.fct.psynexus.5209>



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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment-based training on sense of coherence and regret of spouse selection among women. This study employed an applied, quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest format and a control group. The statistical population included all women aged 25 to 45 years who referred to counseling centers in Sari in 2025. A total of 30 participants were selected using purposive sampling and randomly assigned to an experimental group ($n = 15$) receiving Acceptance and Commitment-based training and a control group ($n = 15$). Data collection instruments included the Revised Sense of Coherence Scale (Flensborg, 2006) and the Regret of Spouse Selection Questionnaire (Schwartz et al., 2002). The intervention consisted of nine structured sessions of Acceptance and Commitment-based training, each lasting two hours. Data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) in SPSS version 26 after confirming statistical assumptions. The results of MANCOVA indicated a significant effect of group membership on sense of coherence ($F = 49.28, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.40$) and regret of spouse selection ($F = 31.57, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.53$) at the posttest stage after controlling for pretest scores. These findings suggest that Acceptance and Commitment-based training significantly increased sense of coherence and significantly decreased regret of spouse selection in the experimental group compared to the control group. Acceptance and Commitment-based training is an effective psychological intervention for enhancing sense of coherence and reducing regret of spouse selection among women, indicating its potential utility in improving psychological well-being and marital-related cognitive-emotional outcomes.

Keywords: Sense of coherence, regret of spouse selection, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, women, quasi-experimental study

1. Introduction

The institution of marriage constitutes one of the most fundamental social and psychological structures influencing individual well-being, interpersonal functioning, and broader societal stability. Within this framework, the process of spouse selection plays a critical role in shaping marital satisfaction, psychological adjustment, and long-term relational outcomes. Contemporary research has increasingly emphasized that the quality of marital relationships is not solely determined by post-marital dynamics, but is deeply rooted in pre-marital decision-making processes, including cognitive evaluations, emotional expectations, and socio-cultural influences surrounding partner selection (Rashvand Sorkhkoole et al., 2024; Saadat et al., 2023). These processes are complex and multidimensional, involving individual beliefs, family influences, cultural norms, and personal experiences that collectively guide individuals toward choosing a life partner.

Recent sociological and psychological investigations highlight that shifts in modern societies, including changes in gender roles, increased individualism, and evolving cultural expectations, have significantly transformed the criteria and processes of spouse selection (Shabani et al., 2022; Simons et al., 2025). These transformations have introduced both opportunities and challenges, as individuals now face a broader range of choices while simultaneously experiencing increased uncertainty and decision-making pressure. Such complexity may lead to post-decisional regret, particularly when expectations are unmet or when individuals perceive that alternative choices may have resulted in more favorable outcomes (Khodabakhsh et al., 2024; Najjar Khodabakhsh et al., 2025). Regret of spouse selection, therefore, emerges as a significant psychological construct that can adversely affect marital satisfaction, emotional well-being, and relationship stability.

Empirical evidence suggests that regret associated with spouse selection is closely linked to various negative psychological outcomes, including marital burnout, emotional disengagement, and decreased relational resilience (Khodabakhsh et al., 2024; Najjar Khodabakhsh et al., 2025). In particular, women appear to be more vulnerable to experiencing such regret due to sociocultural expectations, emotional investment in relationships, and relational interdependence patterns. Studies conducted in diverse cultural contexts indicate that dissatisfaction with partner choice may also contribute to emotional divorce, even in the absence of formal separation, thereby

undermining the psychological and social functioning of individuals (Faizikhah et al., 2021; Feizi Khah et al., 2021). Moreover, the persistence of regret can lead to maladaptive coping strategies, such as rumination, experiential avoidance, and emotional suppression, which further exacerbate psychological distress.

In parallel, the concept of sense of coherence, originally introduced within the salutogenic model, has gained considerable attention as a key determinant of psychological resilience and well-being. Sense of coherence refers to an individual's capacity to perceive life as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful, thereby enabling effective coping with stressors and challenges (Amin Kazemi et al., 2023). Individuals with a strong sense of coherence are better equipped to regulate emotions, maintain psychological stability, and navigate complex interpersonal situations, including marital conflicts. Conversely, a weak sense of coherence is associated with increased vulnerability to stress, emotional dysregulation, and relational dissatisfaction.

Research indicates that sense of coherence is not a fixed trait but can be enhanced through targeted psychological interventions. Interventions that focus on increasing psychological flexibility, emotional awareness, and value-based living have been shown to strengthen individuals' sense of coherence and improve overall mental health outcomes (Amin Kazemi et al., 2023; Vakili et al., 2024). In the context of marital relationships, enhancing sense of coherence may play a protective role by enabling individuals to reinterpret challenges, engage in adaptive coping strategies, and maintain commitment to relational values despite difficulties.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), as a third-wave behavioral intervention, offers a comprehensive framework for addressing psychological distress by promoting psychological flexibility. ACT emphasizes processes such as acceptance of internal experiences, cognitive defusion, present-moment awareness, self-as-context, values clarification, and committed action. Through these processes, individuals learn to reduce experiential avoidance and align their behaviors with personally meaningful values, even in the presence of distressing thoughts and emotions (Alfoone et al., 2020; Fluja-Contreras & Gómez, 2018). This approach is particularly relevant in the context of marital dissatisfaction and regret, where rigid cognitive patterns and avoidance behaviors often maintain negative emotional states.

A growing body of empirical research supports the effectiveness of ACT-based interventions in improving various psychological and relational outcomes. For instance, ACT has been shown to enhance emotional self-disclosure and marital commitment among women, indicating its potential to strengthen interpersonal connections and relational satisfaction (Akrami, 2022). Additionally, ACT interventions have demonstrated efficacy in reducing cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance, which are key mechanisms underlying psychological distress in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Alfoone et al., 2020). In populations experiencing relational challenges, such as divorced or divorce-seeking women, ACT has been associated with improvements in sense of coherence, responsibility, and self-efficacy, further highlighting its applicability in addressing marital issues (Feizi Khah et al., 2021; Hadian et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the integration of ACT principles into interventions targeting women's psychological functioning has shown promising results in enhancing resilience and reducing emotional distress. Studies comparing ACT with other therapeutic approaches, such as resilience training and reality therapy, suggest that ACT may be particularly effective in fostering adaptive coping strategies and improving psychological coherence (Feizi Khah et al., 2021; Hadian et al., 2023). These findings underscore the potential of ACT as a valuable intervention for addressing complex psychological constructs, including regret and coherence, within the context of marital relationships.

Despite the growing evidence supporting the effectiveness of ACT, there remains a need for further research examining its impact on specific marital-related variables, particularly regret of spouse selection and sense of coherence among women in different cultural contexts. Existing studies have primarily focused on general psychological outcomes or specific clinical populations, with limited attention to the interplay between pre-marital decision regret and post-marital psychological functioning. Additionally, cultural factors play a significant role in shaping marital expectations and experiences, necessitating context-specific investigations to better understand the effectiveness of psychological interventions in diverse populations (Imran, 2022; Saadat et al., 2023).

Moreover, relational dynamics such as attachment patterns, communication styles, and emotional regulation processes are critical determinants of marital satisfaction and may interact with cognitive evaluations of spouse selection (Ahmadi, 2023; Javidan, 2022). Addressing these

interconnected factors through integrative therapeutic approaches can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how psychological interventions influence marital outcomes. In this regard, ACT offers a unique advantage by targeting underlying cognitive and emotional processes while simultaneously promoting value-based behavioral change.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, the present study seeks to address a significant gap in the literature by examining the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment-based training on sense of coherence and regret of spouse selection among women. By focusing on these two interrelated constructs, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how psychological flexibility and value-based interventions can enhance individual well-being and relational satisfaction. The findings of this research may have important implications for the development of targeted interventions aimed at improving marital quality and psychological health among women.

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment-based training on sense of coherence and regret of spouse selection in women.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study was applied in terms of purpose and employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest format and a control group. The statistical population consisted of all women who referred to counseling centers in the city of Sari in 2025. The sample included 30 women aged 25 to 45 years who were selected through purposive sampling and randomly assigned to two groups: an experimental group receiving Acceptance and Commitment-based training ($n = 15$) and a control group ($n = 15$). It should be noted that the sample size was determined based on an effect size of 0.25, an alpha level of 0.05, and a statistical power of 0.90, resulting in 15 participants per group. Inclusion criteria for this study included having sufficient physical and cognitive ability to participate in a psychological intervention, possessing at least a high school diploma, being between 25 and 45 years of age, having at least one year of marital life experience, not having received psychological training, not using psychiatric medications (based on medical record review) during the past three months, having no history of psychotherapy, and willingness to participate in the training

sessions. Exclusion criteria included receiving psychological training or using psychiatric medications (based on medical record review) during the past three months, having a history of psychotherapy, unwillingness to complete the intervention or questionnaires, and withdrawal from participation during the study.

2.2. Measures

The Revised Sense of Coherence Scale: The 29-item and 13-item versions of the Sense of Coherence Scale were originally developed by Antonovsky (1996), and the revised version was designed and developed by Flensburg (2006) to assess sense of coherence. This questionnaire consists of 32 items and includes three subscales: comprehensibility (cognitive understanding), manageability, and meaningfulness. It is scored using both three-point and five-point Likert scales to measure sense of coherence. For scoring, items with three response options are scored as follows: the first option receives 1 point, the second option 2 points, and the third option 3 points. For items with five response options, the first two options (very satisfied and satisfied) receive 1 point, the neutral option (sometimes satisfied and sometimes dissatisfied) receives 2 points, and the last two options (dissatisfied and very dissatisfied) receive 3 points. The total score is obtained by summing all item scores, yielding a minimum score of 32 and a maximum score of 96. Higher scores indicate a stronger sense of coherence, whereas lower scores indicate a weak or absent sense of coherence. Flensburg (2006) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 for the revised scale; Saberi-Zadeh (2010) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86; and Babaei (2014) reported a Cronbach's alpha above 0.70. In the present study, the reliability of the scale was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83.

The Regret of Spouse Selection Scale: The Regret of Spouse Selection Scale was developed by Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, Lyubomirsky, et al. (2002) to assess the degree of regret regarding spouse selection. This scale consists of five items. An example item is: "I think I could have found a better partner if I had continued searching and had not yet married." Responses are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (7). The total score ranges from 0 to 30, with higher scores indicating greater regret regarding spouse selection. Schwartz et al. (2002) confirmed the validity and reliability of this instrument, reporting concurrent validity with the Beck Depression Inventory (0.51) and a Cronbach's alpha of

0.67. Mattson et al. (2012) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 for internal consistency. In the study by Ghazi et al. (2019), the concurrent validity of this instrument with the Rajabi Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire (where higher scores indicate greater satisfaction) was -0.78 , and reliability assessed via Cronbach's alpha was 0.85. The reliability of this questionnaire in the present study was reported as 0.79.

2.3. Intervention

The intervention protocol consisted of a structured Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) training program delivered across nine sessions, each lasting approximately two hours, based on the framework proposed by Hayes et al. (1991). The initial session focused on establishing therapeutic alliance, introducing participants, explaining confidentiality principles, and providing psychoeducation regarding the target problems and the rationale and mechanisms of ACT. The second session emphasized clarification of personal values, exploration of participants' expectations, and fostering "creative hopelessness" through experiential exercises and group discussions. In the third session, maladaptive control strategies were identified, and core processes such as acceptance and experiential avoidance were introduced, alongside techniques for cognitive defusion. The fourth session deepened understanding of cognitive fusion and self-as-conceptualized, applying defusion techniques to reduce attachment to distressing thoughts and emotions. The fifth session targeted the development of self-as-context through mindfulness exercises, enhancing participants' ability to observe internal experiences nonjudgmentally. The sixth session focused on present-moment awareness ("here and now") using mindfulness-based practices to increase psychological flexibility. The seventh session addressed values identification and operationalization, helping participants distinguish between values and goals, identify barriers, and formulate value-consistent goals and action plans. The eighth and ninth sessions concentrated on committed action, including developing behavioral patterns aligned with personal values, enhancing commitment to goal-directed behavior, addressing relapse prevention, and utilizing therapeutic metaphors (e.g., passengers on the bus, climbing a mountain) to reinforce persistence. Throughout the program, homework assignments, group discussions, and experiential exercises were employed to consolidate

learning, and the intervention concluded with a posttest assessment and closure.

2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) in SPSS version 26.

3. Findings and Results

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 indicate that at the pretest stage, the mean scores of sense of coherence were relatively similar between the experimental group (M = 64.47, SD = 9.65) and the control group (M =

64.06, SD = 10.62). However, at the posttest stage, the experimental group showed a substantial increase in sense of coherence (M = 78.18, SD = 12.18), whereas the control group exhibited only a slight increase (M = 65.60, SD = 9.43). Regarding regret of spouse selection, the pretest mean scores were comparable between the experimental group (M = 15.45, SD = 3.13) and the control group (M = 16.06, SD = 3.56). At posttest, the experimental group demonstrated a noticeable decrease in regret (M = 12.46, SD = 4.15), while the control group remained nearly unchanged (M = 16.03, SD = 3.45). These findings suggest a potential effect of Acceptance and Commitment-based training on increasing sense of coherence and reducing regret of spouse selection.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Sense of Coherence and Regret of Spouse Selection by Experimental and Control Groups

Variables	Phase	Acceptance and Commitment-Based Training (M)	SD	Control Group (M)	SD
Sense of Coherence	Pretest	64.47	9.65	64.06	10.62
	Posttest	78.18	12.18	65.60	9.43
Regret of Spouse Selection	Pretest	15.45	3.13	16.06	3.56
	Posttest	12.46	4.15	16.03	3.45

Prior to conducting the main analysis, the assumptions underlying ANCOVA were examined. The results of the Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that the distribution of scores for sense of coherence and regret of spouse selection at both pretest and posttest stages did not significantly deviate from normality ($p > 0.05$), confirming the assumption of normality. Levene’s test results demonstrated that the homogeneity of variances assumption was met for both sense of coherence ($F = 0.48, p = 0.65$) and regret of spouse selection ($F = 0.53, p = 0.69$). Additionally, the assumption

of homogeneity of regression slopes was supported, as the interaction between group and pretest scores was not statistically significant for sense of coherence ($F = 7.43, p = 0.45$) and regret of spouse selection ($F = 4.25, p = 0.24$). Finally, the results of Box’s M test indicated that the assumption of equality of covariance matrices was satisfied for both variables (sense of coherence: $F = 3.23, p = 0.16$; regret of spouse selection: $F = 2.98, p = 0.21$). Overall, these findings confirm that the necessary statistical assumptions for performing ANCOVA were adequately met.

Table 2

Results of One-Way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) on Posttest Scores of Sense of Coherence and Regret of Spouse Selection with Pretest

Control

Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2	Power
Sense of Coherence	Pretest	69.50	1	69.50	65.87	0.0001	0.70	1.00
	Group	52.00	1	52.00	49.28	0.0001	0.40	1.00
	Error	28.49	27	1.05				
Regret of Spouse Selection	Pretest	123.81	1	123.81	268.52	0.0001	0.90	1.00
	Group	14.56	1	14.56	31.57	0.0001	0.53	1.00
	Error	12.45	27	0.46				

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that after controlling for pretest scores, there was a statistically significant effect of group membership on both sense of coherence and regret of spouse selection at the posttest stage.

Specifically, for sense of coherence, the group effect was significant ($F = 49.28, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.40$), indicating that Acceptance and Commitment-based training significantly increased participants’ sense of coherence compared to the

control group. Similarly, for regret of spouse selection, the group effect was also significant ($F = 31.57, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.53$), suggesting that the intervention significantly reduced regret levels. The large effect sizes ($\eta^2 = 0.40$ and 0.53) and high statistical power (1.00) further confirm the robustness of these findings.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment-based training on sense of coherence and regret of spouse selection among women, and the findings demonstrated that this intervention significantly increased sense of coherence while simultaneously reducing regret of spouse selection in the experimental group compared to the control group. These results indicate that ACT-based training can effectively enhance adaptive psychological functioning and reduce maladaptive cognitive-emotional responses related to marital decision-making. The observed increase in sense of coherence suggests that participants developed a stronger capacity to perceive their life experiences as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful, while the reduction in regret reflects a shift in cognitive appraisal and emotional processing regarding past marital choices.

The improvement in sense of coherence observed in this study is consistent with previous research indicating that ACT interventions enhance psychological flexibility and adaptive coping processes. Sense of coherence is closely associated with individuals' ability to interpret life events in a structured and meaningful way, and interventions that target acceptance, mindfulness, and value-based action are particularly effective in strengthening this construct (Amin Kazemi et al., 2023; Vakili et al., 2024). The ACT framework facilitates a shift from rigid cognitive patterns toward more flexible and adaptive interpretations of internal and external experiences, enabling individuals to better manage stress and uncertainty. In the context of marital life, this enhanced coherence may allow individuals to reinterpret relational challenges in a more constructive manner, thereby reducing emotional distress and increasing resilience.

Furthermore, the findings align with studies demonstrating that ACT-based interventions improve psychological functioning in women experiencing relational and emotional difficulties. For example, research has shown that ACT can significantly increase responsibility, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation among women facing marital challenges, suggesting that the intervention promotes

adaptive behavioral and cognitive patterns (Hadian et al., 2023). Similarly, studies comparing ACT with other therapeutic approaches, such as resilience training, have found that ACT is particularly effective in enhancing sense of coherence and reducing emotional disturbances in women experiencing relational dissatisfaction (Faizikhah et al., 2021; Feizi Khah et al., 2021). These findings support the notion that ACT's emphasis on acceptance and value-based action contributes to improved psychological integration and coherence.

The reduction in regret of spouse selection observed in the present study can be understood through the core mechanisms of ACT, particularly cognitive defusion and acceptance. Regret is often maintained by persistent rumination, counterfactual thinking, and rigid attachment to alternative possibilities. ACT interventions help individuals disengage from such maladaptive cognitive processes by promoting a nonjudgmental awareness of thoughts and emotions, thereby reducing their impact on behavior and emotional well-being (Alfoone et al., 2020; Fluja-Contreras & Gómez, 2018). By learning to accept past decisions and focus on present-moment experiences, participants may have developed a more balanced and compassionate perspective toward their marital choices, leading to a decrease in regret.

This interpretation is further supported by studies highlighting the role of cognitive and emotional processes in shaping regret related to spouse selection. Research indicates that individuals who experience higher levels of regret often engage in maladaptive cognitive patterns, such as overgeneralization and negative comparison, which can exacerbate dissatisfaction and emotional distress (Khodabakhsh et al., 2024; Najjar Khodabakhsh et al., 2025). By targeting these cognitive processes, ACT can effectively reduce the intensity and persistence of regret. Additionally, the emphasis on values clarification in ACT may help individuals realign their perceptions of their marital relationships with their core values, thereby fostering acceptance and reducing dissatisfaction.

The findings of the present study also resonate with broader literature on spouse selection and marital satisfaction, which emphasizes the complex interplay between individual expectations, cultural norms, and relational dynamics. Studies have shown that attitudes toward spouse selection and cultural expectations significantly influence marital outcomes, and discrepancies between expectations and reality can lead to dissatisfaction and regret (Rashvand Sorkhkoule et al., 2024; Saadat et al.,

2023). In this context, ACT-based interventions may serve as a valuable tool for helping individuals navigate these complexities by promoting psychological flexibility and reducing rigid adherence to unrealistic expectations.

Moreover, the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping marital experiences highlights the importance of context-specific interventions. Research conducted in different cultural settings indicates that spouse selection is influenced by a combination of traditional values and modern preferences, which can create internal conflicts and decision-making challenges (Imran, 2022; Shabani et al., 2022). These conflicts may contribute to post-decisional regret, particularly when individuals perceive a mismatch between their choices and societal expectations. ACT, with its focus on personal values and acceptance, may help individuals reconcile these conflicts and develop a more coherent and meaningful perspective on their relationships.

Another important aspect of the findings is the potential impact of ACT on relational dynamics and emotional functioning. Marital relationships are influenced by various psychological factors, including attachment styles, communication patterns, and emotional regulation processes. Studies have demonstrated that effective communication and emotional awareness are critical for maintaining marital satisfaction and reducing conflict (Ahmadi, 2023; Javidan, 2022). ACT interventions, by enhancing mindfulness and emotional acceptance, may improve these relational processes, thereby contributing to better marital outcomes and reduced regret.

Additionally, the findings can be interpreted within the broader framework of contemporary partner selection research, which emphasizes the increasing complexity of mate preferences and decision-making processes in modern societies. As individuals are exposed to a wider range of options and higher expectations, the potential for regret and dissatisfaction may increase (Simons et al., 2025). ACT-based training may help individuals cope with this complexity by fostering acceptance of uncertainty and promoting value-based decision-making, thereby reducing the likelihood of regret.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study provide strong empirical support for the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment-based training in improving psychological coherence and reducing regret related to spouse selection among women. By targeting core psychological processes

such as acceptance, cognitive defusion, and values clarification, ACT offers a comprehensive approach to addressing both cognitive and emotional aspects of marital dissatisfaction. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature supporting the use of third-wave behavioral therapies in enhancing psychological well-being and relational functioning.

One of the limitations of the present study is the relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the use of a specific demographic group, namely women aged 25 to 45 years who referred to counseling centers in a single city, may restrict the applicability of the results to other populations with different socio-cultural characteristics. Another limitation is the reliance on self-report measures, which may be subject to response biases and may not fully capture the complexity of psychological constructs such as sense of coherence and regret. Furthermore, the study did not include a follow-up assessment, making it difficult to determine the long-term sustainability of the observed effects.

Future research should consider employing larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings and explore the effectiveness of ACT-based interventions across different cultural and demographic contexts. Longitudinal designs with follow-up assessments are recommended to evaluate the stability of intervention effects over time. Additionally, future studies could investigate the mediating and moderating mechanisms underlying the relationship between ACT and marital outcomes, such as psychological flexibility, emotional regulation, and value alignment. Comparing ACT with other therapeutic approaches in randomized controlled trials may also provide deeper insights into its relative effectiveness.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study highlight the potential of Acceptance and Commitment-based training as an effective intervention for improving psychological well-being and marital satisfaction among women. Mental health professionals and counselors can incorporate ACT principles into their therapeutic practices to help individuals cope with regret, enhance sense of coherence, and strengthen relational functioning. Developing culturally sensitive ACT-based programs tailored to the specific needs of women in different contexts may further enhance the effectiveness of such interventions. Additionally, integrating ACT into premarital counseling programs could help individuals make more informed and value-consistent decisions, thereby reducing the likelihood of future regret.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed 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.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

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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