




The Effectiveness of the Narrative-Based Acceptance and Commitment Counseling Package on Experiential Avoidance, Affective Capital and Desire to Divorce in Women on the Verge of Divorce

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Divorce is the primary factor in the disintegration of the most fundamental social foundation, namely the family, which has detrimental effects on both spouses, especially women. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of a narrative-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) counseling package on experiential avoidance, affective capital, and the inclination towards divorce among women on the verge of divorce in Isfahan.

Methods and Materials: The research method was a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, control group, and a two-month follow-up phase, and the sampling method was voluntary. Accordingly, with coordination with counseling centers affiliated with the judiciary, among the volunteers who were willing to participate in the study and considering the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 30 individuals were randomly selected and then randomly assigned to three groups: experimental and control (each group consisting of 15 individuals). The experimental group received the treatment in eight 75-minute group sessions based on the package developed by the researcher. The control group, however, did not undergo any intervention. The research instruments at the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages included the Golparvar Affective Capital Questionnaire (2016), Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (Bond, 2011), and the Roosevelt et al.'s (1986) Divorce Proneness Scale.

Findings: The results of the repeated measures ANOVA indicated that the narrative-focused ACT counseling package had a significant effect on experiential avoidance, affective capital, and the inclination towards divorce among women on the verge of divorce at the post-test stage ($p < 0.05$), and the effects of the counseling package were sustained at the follow-up stage ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Based on these findings, the narrative-focused ACT counseling package can be used as one of the treatments for improving psychological variables in women on the verge of divorce.

Keywords: Narrative-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy counseling package, experiential avoidance, affective capital, inclination towards divorce, women on the verge of divorce.

1. Introduction

Marriage in today's evolving society is a complex phenomenon. Indeed, a successful marriage and the initiation of a marital relationship can satisfy many psychological and physical needs in a secure environment and significantly affect individuals' mental health and psychological well-being. Humans, by their nature and innate need, require companionship, camaraderie, and confiding in others, and the family is an institution that naturally, deeply, and soothingly responds to this innate human need (Abasi et al., 2019). Therefore, it can be said that the family, as a social, emotional, and personality-forming unit, is formed through the marital bond between a man and a woman and their marriage (Parsakia & Darbani, 2022). Based on this, the need to establish a relationship filled with intimacy and love is one of the most fundamental reasons that drive men and women towards choosing and forming a marital bond with each other (Parsakia et al., 2023; Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). However, one of the harms threatening the family, especially in today's modern society, is the phenomenon of divorce. Edip Ojong defines divorce as the legal dissolution of a marital relationship and the formal separation of a man and his spouse based on established customs (Afshari Kashanian et al., 2019). In recent years, divorce rates in Iran have been increasing, so much so that in the first quarter of 2023, out of approximately 80,000 registered marriages, 38,000 divorces were registered (Ammari et al., 2023; Ghorbani Amir et al., 2023).

The experience of divorce affects individuals' adaptability in all psychological, physical, social, and emotional dimensions, leading to decreased functioning and inefficiency among family members (Dehghani Sheshdeh & Yousefi, 2019). Divorce leads to increased stress and depression, a decline in mental health, reduced quality of life, increased psychological tensions, and decreased immune system efficiency, with more detrimental effects on women than men (Asghari et al., 2015; O'Hara et al., 2019). Research has shown that individuals suffering from depression experience experiential avoidance more than normal individuals (Biglan et al., 2008), and those facing divorce, due to their painful experiences, attempt to reduce their anxiety by avoiding internal experiences (such as negative emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations) (Nazari et al., 2015; Rezaei et al., 2017). The process of avoiding experiences includes severe negative evaluation of sensations, emotions, and unwanted private thoughts. It also

involves a reluctance to experience these private events and deliberate efforts to control or escape from them. Experiential avoidance is an act to reduce or change disturbing thoughts, feelings, or sensations, meaning an attempt to avoid, get rid of, suppress, or flee from unwanted experiences (Ahmady, 2021; Hashemi et al., 2019; Nazari et al., 2015).

Among other negative effects of failure in life and increased stressors, especially for women, are behavioral changes that manifest as negative affect (Hayati & Soleymani, 2019). These negative emotions impact marital life in a way that research has shown negative emotions lead to increased marital conflicts and disillusionment, with important consequences of these experiences and negative emotions being increased anxiety and depression along with a decreased level of affective capital due to interference in women's mental health and well-being (Chau et al., 2021).

Affective capital is a state of inner joy and energy that has the capability to guide and influence human behavior in various situations and conditions, thereby providing the capacity for behavioral, functional, and skill enhancement needed for optimal and effective survival. Based on the latest theoretical formulations, the combination of three elements: positive affect, the feeling of energy, and happiness, constitutes affective capital, which is a state of inner joy achieved when an individual experiences positive relationships in social and family life, success, a sense of worth, and goal achievement (Golparvar & Tabatabaie Nejad, 2021). Hence, it is related to a wide range of variables in the health domain such as psychological well-being, mental health, resilience, and perceived stress (Nourian et al., 2021). Studies have shown that divorce is associated with negative behaviors and emotions because reduced self-regulation creates emotional problems in individuals. Therefore, with increased anxiety and decreased affective capital in women on the verge of divorce, their inclination towards separation and divorce likely increases as well (Chau et al., 2021; Dehghani Sheshdeh & Yousefi, 2019; Ebrahimi, 2020; Farahani, 2019; Habibi et al., 2022).

The inclination towards divorce refers to the extent of the couple's desire and interest in separating and breaking off their marital relationship (Ebrahimi, 2020; Jomenia et al., 2021) and includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. The cognitive dimension involves the individual's perceptions and cognitions about divorce, while the emotional dimension covers the individual's emotions and negative feelings towards divorce, and the behavioral dimension is the individual's readiness for practical actions

in the separation process (Baum, 2007; Ebrahimi, 2020; Ghodsi et al., 2018). Given that the phenomenon of divorce is expanding and its psychological effects on couples, especially women, are significant, it is essential to assist divorce consultees in making the right decision and, if their life leads to divorce, to successfully navigate the grieving process after divorce. They need to learn life skills, parenting skills, distress tolerance, negative emotions, and the skill of forgiveness, so they can find peace and tranquility within themselves, free themselves from the dependency of the other party, and prepare themselves for a new life (Baum, 2007; Ghodsi et al., 2018).

Beyond anxiety and affective capital, a reality that must be acknowledged is the increase in anxiety, leading to more experiential avoidance, decreased affective capital, and a greater inclination towards separation in women on the verge of divorce. These issues necessitate therapeutic interventions. Various therapeutic approaches have been employed in this context, including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Aghili & Kashiri, 2022; Araghi et al., 2020; Azizi & Ghasemi, 2017) and Narrative Therapy (Ahmadi et al., 2019; Ghodsi et al., 2018).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is one of the newly developed therapeutic models. Its key therapeutic processes include 1) acceptance, or the willingness to experience pain or other disturbing events without attempting to suppress them, and 2) value-based action or commitment combined with the desire to act as personal meaningful goals. The goal of ACT is not to change the content of thoughts, feelings, or experiences as is the case in the traditional cognitive-behavioral approach, but to teach individuals to fully engage with their internal experiences and events and to move them towards their goals and values (Nikpour et al., 2021; Saadati et al., 2021). ACT can be described as a combination of acceptance strategies and self-awareness to change overt behavior, aiming to improve psychological flexibility (Araghi et al., 2020; Azizi & Ghasemi, 2017). Psychological flexibility is increased through six processes: acceptance, cognitive defusion, self as context, being present, values, and committed action to values. Psychological flexibility means that an individual has the ability to live in the present rather than being caught up in the past or future, to identify their values and goals, and to adopt behaviors that align with their values and goals instead of avoiding thoughts, feelings, memories, or disturbing desires (Iri et al., 2019; Mahmoudpour et al., 2021). Various studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of ACT in different areas (Aghili & Kashiri, 2022; Araghi et

al., 2020; Azizi & Ghasemi, 2017; Ghorbani Amir et al., 2019; Iri et al., 2019; Mahmoudpour et al., 2021; Niazi et al., 2019; Nikpour et al., 2021; Saadati et al., 2021).

Narrative Therapy is also one of the therapeutic methods in the health domain. This therapy, based on narrative reporting of life events by White and Epston (1990) following the narrative theory based on stories, sees narrative as a story about life experiences created by an individual, including events perceived by the narrator as significant life matters. This therapeutic process emphasizes externalizing the problem by the individual, seeing problems as separate from people (Ahmadi et al., 2019; Ghodsi et al., 2018). Each person tends to narrate their life as a story with a beginning and an end. Based on the narrative an individual expresses about themselves, they become aware of their emotions and overall life and gain new experiences. Narrative Therapy sees individuals not as depressed or anorexic but as unique histories. Individuals give meaning to the events that happen to them, and Narrative Therapy helps clients by revising and amending these problematic stories into ones that are more unique and celebrate individual strength and responsibility (Ahmadi et al., 2016; Boostani-Kashani et al., 2021). Studies have shown that narrative-based interventions serve as an effective model in the domain of psychological issues (Ahmadi et al., 2019; Alghamdi et al., 2015; Bahmani & Barzegar, 2018; Basharpour et al., 2019; Ghodsi et al., 2018; Samaelvand et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2019; Zeini et al., 2016). The effectiveness of Narrative Therapy in the domain of family research has been validated in various studies (Ahmadi et al., 2019; Mohammadi et al., 2022; Samaelvand et al., 2022; Sodani et al., 2015; Torkan et al., 2019). In line with employing different therapeutic approaches, studies have shown that combining therapeutic approaches has been effective (Aali et al., 2015; Asano et al., 2015; Haghani et al., 2019; Naderi et al., 2015; Nazari & Ahmadiyan, 2014; Remmerswaal et al., 2021; Rosso et al., 2019; Saadati Anaraki et al., 2021; Salajegheh & Bakhshani, 2014; Soheili et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2022; Waters et al., 2011; Zettle, 2015; Zeynali et al., 2021). Therefore, in the present study, a new counseling package combining ACT and Narrative Therapy based on new therapeutic functions was examined for the first time for its effectiveness on experiential avoidance, affective capital, and the inclination towards divorce among women on the verge of divorce.

Since an individual affected by marital relationships likely has lower acceptance of their past and present and

lacks the ability to regulate and control time, narratives alongside techniques based on commitment and acceptance might help not only to organize time for the individual but also to give meaning to time experiences. The ability for individuals to accept their painful past memories in narrative-focused ACT is provided, and with the commitment to reconstructing a new life story, individuals' patience and perseverance are increased, and a new life based on acceptance and commitment to new narratives is established. Furthermore, with the help of narratives, individuals can be assisted in understanding issues and then helped to solve problems with increased psychological flexibility using the acceptance and commitment approach.

Based on the discussed, marital conflicts and consequently divorce, which create significant psychological harm to both spouses, especially women, require psychological interventions to reduce these damages. Various therapeutic approaches have been employed in this context, but based on the literature, combining therapeutic approaches can be beneficial. Therefore, in the present study, the effectiveness of a new counseling package, a combination of ACT and Narrative Therapy based on new therapeutic functions, was examined for the first time on experiential avoidance, affective capital, and the inclination towards divorce among women on the verge of divorce.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

Research Method, Population, Sample, and Sampling Method: The research method was a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test-post-test and follow-up phase, including a control group. In this study, the statistical population consisted of all women on the verge of divorce visiting counseling centers affiliated with the judiciary system, referred for pre-divorce counseling through court, during the autumn and winter of 2021 in the city of Isfahan. The sampling method was voluntary, where, through coordination with counseling centers, 30 individuals among those willing to participate in the study and meeting the inclusion criteria were randomly selected and then randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups (each group consisting of 15 individuals). The sample size for the present study was determined to be 15 individuals per group, as recommended for experimental research. The experimental group underwent the narrative-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) intervention in eight 75-minute sessions. During this time, the control group did not

receive any therapeutic intervention. Both groups responded to the research questionnaires in the pre-test (before the start of the interventions), post-test (immediately after the end of treatment), and follow-up (two months after the end of treatment) phases.

Inclusion criteria for the study were age range between 20 to 45 years, having at least a high school diploma, willingness to participate in the study, not suffering from psychiatric disorders, and not undergoing simultaneous parallel treatments. Also, exhibiting psychological symptoms, using psychiatric medications, receiving other concurrent treatments, failing to complete the tasks assigned in sessions, missing more than two therapy sessions, and lack of cooperation or desire to continue participating were considered as exclusion criteria. Ethical considerations of the research included obtaining an ethics code from the ethics committee, acquiring an introduction letter and presenting it to counseling centers, obtaining written consent from participants, maintaining confidentiality and dignity of participants, ensuring privacy and confidentiality of information, and providing research results to participants if desired.

After selecting the sample in the quantitative phase and randomly assigning individuals to groups, participants responded to the research questionnaires in the pre-test phase, after which the experimental group received the narrative-focused ACT therapy package for eight 75-minute sessions. The questionnaires were also administered in both groups in the post-test and follow-up phases.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Divorce Tendency

This questionnaire was first designed by Roosevelt, Johnson, and Morrow (1986). It consists of 28 questions used to assess couples prone and inclined towards divorce, with four dimensions, each having seven questions. The dimensions are inclination for exiting (inclined towards divorce), inclination to compromise, expression of feelings, and fidelity. Each item is scored using a 7-point Likert scale (1=never, 2=very rarely, 3=rarely, 4=sometimes, 5=often, 6=very often, 7=always). Therefore, the scores of this questionnaire are obtained by summing the scores of the items. A higher score indicates a higher level of inclination towards divorce among the participants. Roosevelt, Johnson, and Morrow reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the exiting dimension (inclined towards divorce) (0.91),

expression of feelings (0.76), fidelity (0.63), and compromise (0.86). This questionnaire was standardized in Iran by Davoudi, Etemadi, and Bahrami. Its reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha method for the entire sample as 0.88 (0.89 for women and 0.87 for men), and the Cronbach's alpha for the subscales of inclination for exiting was 0.89, expression of feelings 0.90, fidelity 0.86, and compromise 0.72. The validity of the questionnaire was assessed through content analysis by five psychology and counseling experts. The internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha in this study was 0.803 (Bolt, 2022; Ghodsi et al., 2018).

2.2.2. *Affective Capital*

To measure affective capital, the Golparvar Affective Capital Questionnaire (2016) was used. This 20-question questionnaire comprises three domains: positive affect (10 questions), the feeling of energy (5 questions), and happiness (5 questions). The response format is a 5-point scale ranging from never=1 to always=5. To calculate the scores, the respondent's scores on the entire questionnaire are summed and then the result for the entire questionnaire and at the level of its three subscales is divided by the number of questions. As a result of this process, the score range will fluctuate between 1 to 5, with an increase in scores indicating an increase in the level of affective capital. The face and content validity of this questionnaire was confirmed by Golparvar (2016). Exploratory factor analysis documented the construct validity of this questionnaire, and Cronbach's alpha was reported in the range of 0.8 to 0.96. In the study by Enayati and Golparvar (2018), Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was reported as 0.965 (Aghajanpourian Vahid et al., 2022; Aghayousefi et al., 2017). The internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha in this study was 0.93.

2.2.3. *Psychological Flexibility*

This questionnaire was scored on a 7-point Likert scale by Hayes (2004) and consists of 16 questions. The latest version of this questionnaire has 10 questions, developed by Bond (2011) with the aim of measuring psychological flexibility, particularly in relation to experiential avoidance and the willingness to engage in action despite unwanted thoughts and feelings. The questions are ranked on a 7-point Likert scale (never 1, very seldom 2, seldom 3, sometimes 4, often 5, almost always 6, and always 7). A higher score on this scale indicates lower psychological flexibility and

higher experiential avoidance. Bond et al. (2011) reported a test-retest reliability of 0.81 and an internal consistency coefficient of 0.84. In Iran, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89 and a test-retest reliability of 0.71 were reported (Aghajanpourian Vahid et al., 2022; Aghayousefi et al., 2017). The internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha in this study was 0.93.

2.3. *Intervention*

2.3.1. *Narrative-Focused ACT*

To develop and prepare the narrative-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) package, based on the approach by Brown and Clarke (2006), the first phase involved semi-structured interviews with women on the verge of divorce to explore the content of the therapy package. In the second phase, the main factors mentioned in the inclination towards divorce were extracted from the interviews. In the next phase, after identifying the network of themes involved in the inclination towards divorce, therapeutic techniques and strategies of ACT and narrative therapy were extracted from scientific texts, including books, articles, dissertations, and theses. In the fourth phase, after determining the therapeutic techniques and strategies in the third phase, based on the frequency and breadth of each of the categories and factors related to the inclination towards divorce among women and the appropriateness of the therapeutic techniques with each of the categories, the initial narrative-focused ACT therapy package was developed. In the fifth phase, the content of the initial therapy package was converted inversely into a network of therapeutic techniques, and finally, after evaluation by seven experts, the final narrative-focused ACT therapy package was prepared. The overall agreement among experts on the developed package was 0.846.

Session 1: Understanding Divorce Influencers and Cognitive Flexibility

The first session is dedicated to introducing women to the factors influencing divorce. It emphasizes the importance of cognitive flexibility in preventing divorce. Participants are taught how to rename their life narratives in a way that externalizes problems. This approach shifts the focus from internal blame to recognizing external factors, setting the foundation for a change in perspective that is critical for navigating marital challenges effectively.

Session 2: Changing Life Narratives for a Richer, Fuller, and More Meaningful Life

In the second session, the focus shifts to how life narratives can be changed to support a richer, fuller, and more meaningful existence through the acceptance of external problems with mindfulness. Participants learn about living in the present moment and monitoring self-talk to address issues related to their spouse. This session aims to enhance participants' awareness of their internal dialogue and its impact on their relationships and overall well-being.

Session 3: Understanding Defusion Techniques and Life's Problems in a Larger Socio-Cultural Context

This session introduces defusion techniques to detach from unhelpful thoughts and considers life's challenges within a larger socio-cultural context that might hinder narrative change. The aim is to foster narratives where the individual experiences fewer relational problems by recognizing and mitigating the influence of broader cultural and social constraints on personal narratives and marital relationships.

Session 4: Techniques for Cognitive Defusion and Deconstructing Life Narratives

The fourth session teaches techniques for cognitive defusion and deconstructing life narratives to improve interpersonal communications. By learning to separate themselves from their thoughts and the stories they tell about their lives, participants can begin to form better interpersonal connections and navigate marital conflicts more effectively.

Session 5: Acceptance Techniques and Redefining Life Structures for Problem Management

Participants are taught acceptance techniques and ways to redefine the structures of their lives to manage problems more effectively. This session focuses on building resilience and flexibility, empowering participants to accept their circumstances and work towards constructive change within their lives and marriages.

Session 6: The Role of Differences in Marital Conflicts and Value-based Life Re-definition

The sixth session explores the role of differences in marital conflicts and teaches techniques for identifying

values and redefining life structures based on these values. This approach helps participants to align their actions and decisions with what they truly value in life, fostering a more harmonious marital relationship.

Session 7: Techniques for Self-observation and Rewriting a New Life Story for Sexual Relationship Management

This session introduces techniques for self-observation and rewriting a new narrative of life to manage sexual relationships. By fostering a deeper understanding of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, participants learn to craft a new story that reflects their desired changes in their sexual and overall relationship dynamics.

Session 8: Committed Action Techniques and Rewriting a New Life Story for Sexual Relationship and Life Management

The final session focuses on committed action techniques and rewriting a new life story for managing both sexual relationships and life in general. Participants are encouraged to take concrete steps towards the goals and values identified earlier in the therapy, applying their new skills to create a fulfilling and satisfying marital relationship and life trajectory. This session aims to consolidate the learnings from the entire program and equip participants with the tools they need to continue their growth and development beyond the therapy.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data from this study were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (correlation and multiple regression) using SPSS version 23 software.

3. Findings and Results

The frequency and percentage of the number of children in the sample individuals, as well as the mean and standard deviation of age and marriage history, are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

Descriptive Findings of Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Variable	Levels	Groups Frequency (%)	Statistics	Significance
Number of Children Frequency (%)	Without children	Experimental: 7 (46.7%) Control: 4 (26.7%)	$\chi^2 = 1.41$	p = .499
	One child	Experimental: 5 (33.3%) Control: 6 (40%)		
	Two children	Experimental: 3 (20%) Control: 5 (33.3%)		
Age Mean (SD)	-	Experimental: 33.67 (4.18) Control: 36.1 (4.26)	t = -1.51	p = .141
Marriage History Mean (SD)	-	Experimental: 11.53 (6.28) Control: 10.67 (3.59)	t = 0.463	p = .647

Independent t-test results showed that there is no significant difference in the mean age and marriage history of the sample individuals between the experimental and control groups ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, chi-square test results

indicated that there is no significant difference in the frequency of children between the two groups ($p < 0.05$).

The descriptive findings (mean and standard deviation) related to the research variables are presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Descriptive Findings of Research Variables in Groups at Three Time Points

Variable	Time	Group	Mean	SD
Experiential Avoidance	Pre-test	Narrative-focused ACT	44.6	6.85
		Control	42.6	7.58
	Post-test	Narrative-focused ACT	35.2	5.34
		Control	43.13	7.46
	Follow-up	Narrative-focused ACT	36.87	5.64
		Control	44.13	7.64
Affective Capital	Pre-test	Narrative-focused ACT	43.1	6.86
		Control	39.07	9.04
	Post-test	Narrative-focused ACT	62.12	5.98
		Control	38	9.62
	Follow-up	Narrative-focused ACT	63.13	7.08
		Control	36.8	9.75
Inclination Towards Divorce	Pre-test	Narrative-focused ACT	113.6	12.59
		Control	110.6	12.96
	Post-test	Narrative-focused ACT	102.47	12.14
		Control	116.93	13.45
	Follow-up	Narrative-focused ACT	100.13	10.7
		Control	117.47	13.66

The use of parametric repeated measures tests requires adherence to several initial assumptions including the normality of scores, homogeneity of variances, and equality of covariance matrices, which can be used in these tests if the group sizes are less than 40 and the assumptions are met and confirmed.

The use of parametric repeated measures tests requires adherence to several initial assumptions including the normality of scores, homogeneity of variances, and equality of covariance matrices. The Shapiro-Wilk test for checking the normality of score distribution in groups, the Levene test for checking the homogeneity of variances, and the Mauchly test for checking the sphericity of the variance-covariance matrix were used. The purpose of checking the normality assumption is to verify that the distribution of scores is consistent with the population. This assumption indicates that the observed difference between the score distribution of the sample group and the normal distribution in the

population is zero. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used for this purpose. The results of applying this assumption regarding the scores of research variables showed that the null hypothesis regarding the normality of the score distribution in the research variables remains at all three stages of pre-test, post-test, and follow-up in both groups (all significance levels are greater than 0.05). The Levene's assumption based on the equality of variances in groups in the research variables at all three stages of pre-test, post-test, and follow-up has been confirmed (the level of significance is greater than 0.05). However, the assumption of sphericity of covariances using the Mauchly test in the variable of experiential avoidance has been rejected ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, in examining the research hypotheses in the variable, the Greenhouse-Geisser test is used, and in other variables, tests with the assumption of sphericity are used. The results of the repeated measures analysis of variance are presented in [Table 3](#).

Table 3

Results of Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Research Variables

Variable	Effect	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance	Effect Size	Statistical Power
Experiential Avoidance	Between Subjects	Group	322.02	1	322.02	25.95	< .001	.480	.998
	Within Subjects	Time Effect	310.422	1.18	263.04	21.07	< .001	.429	.995
		Time × Group Effect	462.467	1.18	391.88	31.39	< .001	.529	1.000
Affective Capital	Between Subjects	Group	7362.178	1	7362.178	42.65	< .001	.604	1.000
	Within Subjects	Time Effect	1602.067	2	801.033	50.07	< .001	.641	1.000
		Time × Group Effect	2274.689	2	1137.344	71.09	< .001	.717	1.000
Inclination Towards Divorce	Between Subjects	Group	2073.6	1	2073.6	4.83	.03	.147	.710
	Within Subjects	Time Effect	174.6	2	87.3	5.82	.005	.172	.854
		Time × Group Effect	1816.867	2	908.433	60.62	.01	.684	1.000

The results in Table 3 show that in the analysis between subjects, the mean scores of the variables of experiential avoidance ($F=25.29, p<0.001$), affective capital ($F=42.65, p<0.001$), and inclination towards divorce ($F=4.83, p<0.05$) in the experimental group (narrative-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy package) and control group differ significantly. Based on the results, the main effect of time in within-subject analyses is also significant, indicating that there is a significant difference overall between the mean scores of all three variables of experiential avoidance

($F=21.07, p<0.001$), affective capital ($F=50.07, p<0.001$), and inclination towards divorce ($F=5.82, p<0.01$) at the stages of the study. The results have shown that the interaction effect of time and group membership is also significant in all three variables ($p<0.001$), indicating that changes in the stages of pre-test, post-test, and follow-up in each of the groups have been significant. The level of difference in stages in groups for the variable of experiential avoidance is 52.9%, for affective capital is 71.7%, and for the inclination towards divorce is 68.4%.

Table 4

Follow-Up Test Results for Comparing the Two Groups Across Research Variables at Three Stages

Variable	Stage	Mean Difference	Significance	Effect Size
Experiential Avoidance	Pre-test	2	.455	.020
	Post-test	-7.93	< .001	.311
	Follow-up	-7.27	.003	.271
Affective Capital	Pre-test	4.03	.201	.058
	Post-test	24.12	< .001	.706
	Follow-up	26.33	< .001	.719
Inclination Towards Divorce	Pre-test	3	.526	.015
	Post-test	-14.47	.004	.254
	Follow-up	-17.33	< .001	.380

The results in Table 4 show that the difference between the experimental and control groups at the pre-test stages is not significant ($p>0.05$) but the difference at the post-test stages and also follow-up in all three variables of experiential avoidance, affective capital, and inclination towards divorce between the control group and the experimental group or the narrative-focused Acceptance and

Commitment Therapy package is significant ($p<0.01$), indicating that the impact of the narrative-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy package on reducing experiential avoidance, increasing affective capital, and also reducing the inclination towards divorce in the post-test is respectively 31.1%, 70.6%, and 25.4%. Also, the impact of the narrative-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

package on reducing experiential avoidance in follow-up is 27.1%, on increasing affective capital 71.9%, and on reducing the inclination towards divorce in this phase is 38%.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of the present research was to investigate the impact of a narrative-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) counseling package on experiential avoidance, psychological assets, and the inclination towards divorce among women on the verge of divorce. The results indicated that the narrative-focused ACT counseling package effectively reduced experiential avoidance and the inclination towards divorce and increased affective capital in women on the verge of divorce at the post-test stage, with the therapeutic effects remaining at the follow-up stage.

Given that the present study is the first to combine the approaches of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy with narrative therapy, there has been no directly comparable research. However, its effectiveness can be aligned with studies on divorce (Ghorbani Amir et al., 2019; Iri et al., 2019; Mahmoudpour et al., 2021). Divorce is a phenomenon that causes severe anxiety and depression for those involved (Clark & Bentano, 2006). Therefore, psychological interventions can be effective in this context. In narrative therapy, focusing individuals on changing inefficient beliefs, externalizing and disempowering the problem, and creating an external view of the problem from different angles, thus transforming and redefining the narrative of one's life story, helps individuals find a new perspective on realities. In other words, through therapeutic dialogue, narrative therapy facilitates individuals' awareness of their abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and problems, enhancing their personal agency and self-recognition. Consequently, by increasing individuals' agency, their internal locus of control, positive self-concept, and sense of worth are enhanced, leading to assertiveness (Namni & Shahabi, 2021). Thus, by strengthening a positive self-concept and sense of worth through expressing life narratives, individuals, with the help of the ACT approach, find the possibility to change.

The key therapeutic processes in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy are 1) acceptance, or the willingness to experience pain or other disturbing events without attempting to suppress them, and 2) value-based action or commitment, combined with the intention to act as meaningful personal goals. The goal of the ACT approach is

not to change the content of thoughts, feelings, or experiences as in the traditional cognitive-behavioral approach but to teach individuals to fully engage with their internal experiences and events and to move them towards their goals and values {Azizi, 2017 #4107; Biglan, 2008 #12909}. The aim of ACT is to create psychological flexibility, defined as the ability to change or persist in behaviors that are functional in achieving goals. High psychological flexibility can enable these women to focus on the present moment and help them act according to their values when faced with stressful events. Therefore, the goal of ACT counseling is not to reduce anxiety but to increase psychological and behavioral flexibility in areas where experiential avoidance is predominant and prevents individuals from living a fundamental life {Nourian, 2021 #16024; Saadati, 2021 #2623}. In this therapy, individuals learn to connect with the present and serve their values and goals and the narratives they have constructed for themselves. When women on the verge of divorce are introduced to thought and emotion control strategies, the nature of thoughts and mental stories, disconnection and acceptance techniques for unpleasant thoughts and emotions, familiarization with different life values, and encouraged to be committed in this aspect and are educated in this area, despite unpleasant feelings and experiences in marital life, pain and suffering are considered a value, thereby reducing experiential avoidance and increasing their affective capital, and also their inclination towards divorce decreases.

Furthermore, time plays a crucial role in situations where individuals experience marital dissatisfaction because the past brings back painful memories, the present is filled with pain, and the future is ambiguous and unimaginable for the individual. Therefore, the individual has low acceptance of the past and present and lacks the ability to regulate and control time. However, narratives not only organize time but also give meaning to past experiences. Thus, accepting past painful memories in narrative-focused ACT therapy enables change, and by committing to reconstructing a new life story, experiential avoidance in women is reduced.

Another important technique in narrative therapy is externalization. In this technique, clients are asked to view the problem as something outside of themselves, not a part of who they are. Therefore, by participating in therapy sessions and revising narratives about spouses perceived as changeable and blameless, individuals reinterpret conflict situations in their marital relationships differently, reducing

blame and catastrophizing of spouses' behaviors, thereby reducing their inclination towards divorce.

Furthermore, narrative therapy helps individuals give completeness and specific meaning to their incomplete experiences. For this purpose, in therapy sessions, members were asked to narrate their stories in a new language and create new meanings for problematic thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Thus, asking questions of members and based on their answers, posing further questions led to the separation of the problem from the person affected by it, resulting in the formation of new emotions. Indeed, managing and controlling emotions increases women's affective capital.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

Every research has limitations, and the present study is no exception. This research was conducted only on women visiting counseling centers affiliated with the judiciary system, referred for pre-divorce counseling through court during the autumn and winter 2021, and caution should be exercised in generalizing the data and results of this study. It is suggested that this research be conducted on other samples in other cities and on women with different cultural backgrounds and the results be compared. For future research proposals, it is suggested that subsequent researchers, while examining the effectiveness of each of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and narrative therapy separately, also compare their effectiveness with the combined treatment presented in this study.

In terms of applying the results of this research, given that marital conflicts and divorce are increasing and this phenomenon significantly affects the quality of life of all individuals, especially women, effective roles can be played by informing and educating individuals, families, and especially women through mass media about reducing marital conflicts and increasing emotional assets and reducing experiential avoidance. Additionally, counselors in counseling centers can reduce the negative effects of divorce and the inclination towards separation in women by conducting educational workshops and using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and narrative-focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

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. All participants declared their verbal consent to participate in the research, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their information. Also, the present article is derived from a doctoral dissertation with the ethics code IR.IAU.KHUISF.REC.1400.306.

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