

## Effectiveness of Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy on Emotional Experience Towards Spouse and Family Executive Functioning Among Married Women

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### Article Info

### ABSTRACT

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**Objective:** The present research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy on emotional experience towards the spouse and family executive functioning among married women.

**Materials and Methods:** This study was a quasi-experimental research with control and experimental groups, employing a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design. The population consisted of all married women in Isfahan, among whom forty individuals were conveniently selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria and randomly assigned into two groups, control and experimental (twenty individuals each). The research tools included scales for emotional experience towards the spouse and family executive functioning. While the control group was on a waiting list, the experimental group received eight sessions of Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy. Both groups responded to the research tools in three phases: pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (analysis of covariance).

**Findings:** The results showed that Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy improved the dimensions of emotional experience towards the spouse and family executive functioning.

**Conclusion:** Considering these results, it can be said that this method is suitable for improving family constructs, and counselors can benefit from it.

**Keywords:** Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy, Emotional Experience Towards Spouse, Family Executive Functioning.

### 1 Introduction

Family is the only social system that holds a unique role and position in different societies around the world. Nowadays, the sense of security, tranquility, and intimate relationships between men and women has weakened, and families are increasingly facing destructive forces, posing a significant threat to societal health

(Parsakia & Darbani, 2022). The growing number of referrals to family therapy centers and rising divorce rates indicate a serious crisis in relationship health, which family conflicts and divorce are a manifestation of. Among these, experiencing various emotions towards a spouse can play a significant role in the life changes in marital and family life. Emotional experiences towards a spouse refer to the experiences one of the spouses has in marital,

communicative, or family situations regarding their partner (Mosadegh et al., 2023). Emotion is essentially reactions activated by events that generate feelings, excite the body, and create motivational states (Narimani et al., 2021). Emotions are multidimensional and exist as mental, biological, purposeful, and social phenomena. Essentially, emotion is what regulates elements of feeling, arousal, purpose, and expression in response to an event. When an individual encounters an event, emotion comes into play, and the mind reacts with cognitive processes and the body with physiological processes (Cludius et al., 2020). Emotions can be divided into negative (jealousy, sorrow, anxiety, loneliness, homesickness, anger, despair) and positive categories (interest, love, happiness, hope), affecting marital satisfaction and leading to conflicts, boredom, and betrayal (Tajalli & Sabaghi Renani, 2021). Emotions can also affect executive functioning (Soltanian et al., 2022).

Executive functioning refers to a set of higher mental processing operations that provide a framework for goal-directed behaviors. Simply put, when individuals need to solve a problem (not part of their daily issues), they employ mental capabilities known as executive functioning. These capabilities relate to the frontal parts of the brain and associated extensive neural networks (Aghaziarati et al., 2021). Executive functions have various roles and impact people of all ages and genders, depending on their age, performance ability, and health. Functions like organizing, decision-making, working memory, movement control, sensory and time perception, future forecasting, reconstruction, inner language, and problem-solving are considered among the most critical executive functions aiding in life, learning, and intellectual performances (Doebel, 2020). Family members' executive functioning can shape the foundation of family function, managing three fundamental tasks: innate and natural tasks like providing food and shelter, affection, developmental tasks related to individual growth like infancy, childhood, and family stages like first marriage, first pregnancy, and the birth of the first child, and handling hazardous events like illnesses, accidents, and unemployment (Babakhanipour et al., 2018).

The role of emotional experience in marital life and family executive functioning is so critical to family survival and longevity that improving it has always been of interest in various ways. One approach to family therapy is Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy. This new therapeutic model in family therapy combines systemic, attachment,

and narrative domains and aims to heal destructive experiences (Dallos, 2001). Gentle narratives create a different soothing experience, potentially altering active internal patterns (Taylor et al., 2015), allowing the recovered individual to embrace relationships filled with love and security. This therapy's framework significantly overlaps with narrative therapies, emphasizing working on individuals' narratives to promote growth and relieve interpersonal issues. This intervention focuses on the emotional content of stories and unspoken experiences and includes four stages: creating a safe space, reviewing attachment narratives within a systemic framework, considering alternative pathways, and maintaining changes, aiding in the management of couples' emotions (Dallos, 2001). Few studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this method on family constructs (Ahmadi et al., 2016; Samaelvand et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, the emotional experience towards a spouse and family executive functioning are two important constructs that can play a significant role in family stability. On the other hand, the increasing divorce rates highlight the necessity of enhancing positive family constructs and reducing negative ones. This research addressed this importance. The results could contribute to introducing family therapy packages to improve the emotional experience towards a spouse and family executive functioning. Thus, this research sought to answer whether Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy significantly affects women's emotional experience towards their spouse and family executive functioning.

## 2 Methods and Materials

### 2.1 Study design and Participant

Considering that the quantitative section aimed to examine the effectiveness of training in Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy on the emotional experience dimensions towards the spouse and family executive functioning, the research design was an experimental and quasi-experimental pre-test, post-test, and follow-up with a control group.

The statistical population consisted of all married women in Isfahan. The sample comprised 40 married women. According to experts, a sample size of 15 individuals per group is sufficient in experimental and quasi-experimental research; however, the sample size was increased to 20 per group to enhance statistical power. Participants were conveniently selected among married

women visiting counseling centers in Isfahan who scored below average on the family executive functioning scale. This was done by visiting municipal cultural centers and conducting recruitment after advertising. Forty women were selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria and were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control groups. The criteria for participation at this stage included being married, scoring below average on the family executive functioning scale, no substance abuse or alcoholism, and not taking psychiatric drugs, which were determined through diagnostic interviews and direct questions to the participants, and not being in the process of separation or divorce. Exit criteria included unwillingness to continue sessions, causing disruption in the sessions (irregular attendance, deviating from the main topic, lack of commitment to tasks), participation in other concurrent counseling programs, and failure to complete assignments.

## 2.2 Measures

### 2.2.1 Family Executive Functioning

The Family Executive Functioning Questionnaire was developed by Javanbakht & Yousefi (2023) and tailored to the family environment. This tool was created to reflect that the executive functioning of family members can manifest as family executive functioning. The questionnaire contains 41 items scored on a five-point Likert scale, and its psychometric properties were examined in this study. The authors confirmed its content and face validity with the help of seven family therapists. They also reported internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha, indicating  $\alpha=0.80$  for the entire scale and its dimensions. Additionally, its construct validity was examined by correlating it with individual executive functioning, showing a significant and positive correlation. Furthermore, an exploratory factor

analysis confirmed eight main factors (Javanbakht & Yousefi, 2023).

### 2.2.2 Emotional Experience Towards Spouse

The Emotional Experience Towards Spouse Scale, developed by Yousefi et al. (2023), consists of 40 items and two factors: positive emotional experience and negative emotional experience. This questionnaire includes dimensions such as anger, jealousy, happiness, hope, sorrow, anxiety, and fear. Each question is answered on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The maximum score on this questionnaire is 205, and the minimum is 41; higher scores indicate a higher emotional experience and lower scores indicate a lesser emotional experience. The negative emotional experience subscale towards a spouse had a positive and significant relationship with neuroticism and triangulation (convergent validity) but a negative relationship with extraversion (divergent validity). Conversely, the positive emotional experience subscale towards a spouse had a positive relationship with extraversion (convergent validity) and a negative and significant relationship with neuroticism and triangulation (divergent validity). Exploratory factor analysis identified two main factors named positive emotional experience towards the spouse and negative emotional experience towards the spouse. Test-retest reliability coefficients after three weeks confirmed the reliability of the questionnaire (Yousefi et al., 2023).

## 2.3 Intervention

### 2.3.1 Narrative Attachment-based Therapy

Table (1) shows the content of the training (Dallos, 2001).

**Table 1**

#### *Narrative Attachment-based Therapy*

Sessions	Descriptions
1	Implementation of pre-test; Establishing therapeutic relationships; Providing informational brochures; Therapeutic inquiry
2	Interpreting individuals' perceptions of events and expressing viewpoints; Identifying stories filled with problems; Assisting individuals in externalizing the problem
3	Examining attachment narratives through family genograms; Exploring familial communication patterns; Introducing calming examples
4	Discussing the predominant attachment style of the family; Identifying avoidant/preoccupied and dismissive/avoidant patterns; Recognizing key emotional moments (attachment injuries)
5	Examining various self-protection methods; Emotional processing; Framing narratives about emotions and attachment
6	Expressing attachment narratives; Correcting and repeating stories
7	Creating and expanding narratives; Focusing on alternative narratives and secure attachment; Encouraging emotional integration
8	Encouraging integration; Responding to the sessions; Summarizing feedback; Providing final suggestions; Implementation of post-test

## 2.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (analysis of covariance).

## 3 Findings and Results

To test the research hypothesis, a multivariate analysis of covariance was utilized. Descriptive statistics of the

sample showed that the highest frequency of age among participants was between 25 to 30 years, and the lowest was above 50 years. The highest educational level was Bachelor's degree, while the lowest was among those with a diploma, below diploma, or associate degrees. The majority of participants had been married for less than 10 years, with the fewest being married for more than 20 years. The most common number of children was two, and the fewest had four or more children. The table shows the means and standard deviations of the research variables.

**Table 2**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Tendency Toward Infidelity Variable in Research Groups at Three Time Stages*

Variable	Group	Time	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Negative Emotional Experience Towards Spouse	Experimental	Pre-test	84.80	9.48
		Post-test	75.15	9.65
	Control	Pre-test	85.00	9.65
		Post-test	85.50	9.03
Positive Emotional Experience Towards Spouse	Experimental	Pre-test	23.75	5.70
		Post-test	75.15	9.65
	Control	Pre-test	23.35	5.22
		Post-test	22.39	5.66
Family Executive Functioning	Experimental	Pre-test	97.70	13.41
		Post-test	106.61	12.63
	Control	Pre-test	96.40	11.22
		Post-test	102.00	12.43

The results in Table 2 indicate that there are significant differences in family executive functioning and emotional experience dimensions towards the spouse between the experimental and control groups. To examine the significance of these differences, a multivariate analysis of covariance was used. To check for the normal distribution of scores for family executive functioning and emotional experience dimensions towards the spouse, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used. For the assumption of equality of

variances, Levene's test was used, and to check for equality of covariances of the dependent variables, Box's test was used. The results indicated that the distribution of scores for the dependent variables was normal ( $p < 0.05$ ), and there was no significant difference in the variances ( $p < 0.05$ ). Furthermore, Box's M test results showed no significant difference in the covariances of the research variables between the two groups.

**Table 3**

*Data of Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (Repeated Measures) for Tendency Toward Infidelity*

Source	Variable	SS	df	MS	F	p	Eta <sup>2</sup>	Power
Pre-test	Positive Emotional Experience Towards Spouse	718.5	1	718.75	332.11	0.001	0.905	1
	Negative Emotional Experience Towards Spouse	4415.66	1	1544.66	164.37	0.001	0.824	1
	Family Executive Functioning	5847.055	1	5847.05	397.53	0.001	1.000	1
Group	Positive Emotional Experience Towards Spouse	919.160	1	919.160	424.71	0.001	0.924	1
	Negative Emotional Experience Towards Spouse	1085.70	1	1085.70	40.41	0.001	0.536	1
	Family Executive Functioning	1783.36	1	1783.36	121.25	0.001	0.776	1
Error	Positive Emotional Experience Towards Spouse	75.74	35	2.16				
	Negative Emotional Experience Towards Spouse	940.21	35	26.86				
	Family Executive Functioning	514.78	35	14.70				

As observed in the table, the difference in means between the two groups in family executive functioning and emotional experience dimensions towards the spouse is significant. Also, the eta-squared coefficient indicates that Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy explains 92.4% of the variance in positive emotional experience towards the spouse, 53.6% of the variance in negative emotional experience towards the spouse, and 77.6% of the variance in family executive functioning. The statistical power for negative emotional experience, positive emotional experience towards the spouse, and family executive functioning is 1.000, indicating an appropriate sample size.

#### 4 Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the effectiveness of Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy in improving emotional experience dimensions towards the spouse and family executive functioning among married women. The results showed significant differences in both family executive functioning and emotional experience dimensions towards the spouse between the two groups, indicating the method's effectiveness in improving both variables.

The findings are consistent with other studies demonstrating the effectiveness of this method on various variables, (Ahmadi et al., 2016; Rezapour Mirsaleh et al., 2014; Samaeelvand et al., 2023). Explaining the effectiveness of this method on family executive functioning, it can be said that family executive functioning consists of a set of problem-solving operations related to the frontal part of the brain and the brain's organizational and supervisory power of family members, playing a crucial role in the family's survival and stability. This includes organizing family affairs, family planning, family discipline, restraint, emotional control, and pursuing family matters (Javanbakht & Yousefi, 2023). Thus, Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy appears to have mechanisms that have improved this variable. One of the most important therapeutic axes of this method seems to be the creation of psychological security arising from correcting attachment styles within a secure narrative of life (Taylor et al., 2015), which has reduced relational preoccupations and thereby improved problem-solving energies, role acceptance, and commitment among women in the training group, leading to improved executive functioning and organization in their families. Indeed, this result implies that correcting features related to attachment styles within a systemic framework in

this method has reduced relational rumination and overall improved cognitive power and gray matter function. In line with this, research showed that rumination is associated with insecure attachment styles (Ramezani et al., 2023).

On the other hand, as women play a significant role in improving family situations, their progress in solving life problems has contributed to family tranquility, reducing stress and anxiety in the family, and thereby enhancing the executive functioning of family members. This finding is also supported by the previous research (Rezapour Mirsaleh et al., 2014). These results, overall, imply that improving psychological security from correcting attachment within a family's secure narrative has been effective in enhancing the overall executive functioning of family members. Additionally, these results suggest that the sense of security from Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy has improved women's perception of family functioning.

Explaining the effectiveness of this method on positive and negative emotional experience dimensions towards the spouse, it's understood that emotional experiences towards the spouse fall into negative and positive dimensions, meaning an individual can experience more positive emotions like affection, interest, love, and hope, or negative emotions like hatred, anxiety, worry, and jealousy towards their spouse (Yousefi et al., 2023). Thus, the trainings seem to have provided insights and techniques that helped improve positive emotional experiences towards the spouse and reduce negative emotional experiences. These mechanisms involved awareness of the role of attachment styles and their types in creating optimal relationships with others or relational turmoil. Participants realized how anxious and avoidant attachment styles cause preoccupations with relationships, leading to misperceptions of interactions and preventing them from confronting current relational situations with incorrect past patterns. It also caused trust, which fosters intimacy, to weaken among them, leading to superficial and short-term relationships. Moreover, they learned how to reconstruct themselves by revisiting narratives based on insecure attachment styles, thereby experiencing better relational conditions. It seems these women learned that many of their relational problems stem from their own reinforcement of insecure attachment styles, not their spouses. Thus, instead of blaming their spouses, they corrected their narratives based on insecure attachment styles, leading to a greater sense of security in their



relationships with their spouses and consequently experiencing more positive emotions towards them.

## 5 Limitations and Suggestions

The research had limitations, including its cross-sectional nature and the limitation of results to short-term variable assessment, convenience sampling, participants belonging to Isfahan, and cautious generalization of findings to other cities. It is suggested to investigate the sustainability of these teachings and the duration of learners' use of these strategies through longitudinal research and also examine the impact of these teachings on family functioning. Given the results of the training, it can be said that Narrative Attachment-Based Therapy can create skills and awareness in married women that lead to improvements in family constructs. Therefore, family counselors are advised to utilize it for improving family constructs.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethics Considerations

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

## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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