

Effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) on Emotional Regulation and Quality of Life in Divorced Women

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Poureghbal, N., Barzegar Bafrouei, F., & Naderi, M. (2023). Effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) on Emotional Regulation and Quality of Life in Divorced Women. *Psychology of Woman Journal*, 4(3), 55-61.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.pwj.4.3.7>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Separation and divorce are the most significant factors in the collapse and disintegration of the most fundamental part of society, the family. The current research was conducted with the aim of determining the impact of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on emotional self-regulation and the quality of life of divorced women.

Methods and Materials: The study was a quasi-experimental investigation with a pre-test-post-test design involving two groups. The research population consisted of all divorced women who visited counseling centers in the city of Karaj. Using a convenience sampling method, four centers were selected, and among those who were willing to participate in the study and had low scores in emotional self-regulation and quality of life, 30 individuals were randomly chosen as the sample. Subsequently, these individuals were divided into two groups of 15 and randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group. The experimental group underwent 12 sessions of 90-minute Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, while the control group continued with their usual routine. Both groups were post-tested at the end of the period. The instruments used in this research were the Gross and John (2003) Emotion Regulation Questionnaire and the World Health Organization Quality of Life (WHOQOL) Questionnaire (1989). For data analysis, Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) and SPSS version 22 software were utilized.

Findings: The results indicated that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy had a significant effect on emotional self-regulation ($F=24.22$, $P<0.001$) and quality of life ($F=28.93$, $P<0.001$) of divorced women.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is effective in improving emotional self-regulation and quality of life in divorced women.

Keywords: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Emotional Self-Regulation, Quality of Life, Women, Divorce.

1. Introduction

Separation and divorce are the most significant causes of the collapse and disintegration of the most fundamental unit of society, the family (Laursen et al., 2019), and represent one of the most distressing and stressful life events, necessitating major adjustments for adaptation following the death of a spouse (Lin & Brown, 2020). The occurrence of divorce leads to various problems and damages, which seem to affect women more than men. Compared to divorced men, divorced women experience more severe social conditions at the time of divorce, meaning they face greater rejection, coldness, and blame from those around them. Moreover, in terms of economic, social, psychological, and emotional aspects, the consequences of divorce are more unfavorable for women than men (Law et al., 2019; Lawrence et al., 2019; Mohamadi et al., 2023).

According to the United Nations report (2020), the divorce rate has been significantly increasing not only in developed countries but also in developing ones in recent years. In Iran, based on the latest statistics announced by the National Organization for Civil Registration, the gross marriage rate in 2020 (8.6%) has decreased compared to 2013 (10.5%), and the divorce rate was 5.8% (Aghili & Kashiri, 2022). The rising divorce rates in the country necessitate identifying the problems faced by individuals post-divorce to develop suitable interventions aimed at reducing the negative consequences of divorce.

One of the most common issues women face after divorce and separation is the experience of various negative emotions, which complicates their emotional self-regulation. Emotional self-regulation is a process through which individuals consciously or unconsciously modulate their emotions to appropriately respond to diverse environmental demands (Fillo et al., 2019). It involves generating thoughts and behaviors that inform individuals what emotions they are experiencing, when these emotions arise, and how to express them (Prosen & Jendričko, 2019). Possessing emotional self-regulation skills enables individuals to appropriately express their emotions and reduce the intensity of unpleasant emotions such as sadness (Zafari & Khademi Ashkzari, 2020). Research shows that divorced women differ in emotional self-regulation compared to non-divorced women, experiencing more emotional problems and difficulties in regulating emotions (Nadoshan et al., 2015).

The problems resulting from divorce and its consequences can impact the quality of life of divorced women. Quality of life can be a crucial outcome in health assessments, as emphasized by the World Health Organization's definition of health (Muhammad & Latipun, 2020). Some researchers define quality of life using an objective approach, equating it with visible aspects and standards of living, such as physical health, personal circumstances (wealth, living conditions, etc.), social relationships, occupational actions, or other social and economic factors. In contrast, a subjective approach exists, equating quality of life with happiness or individual satisfaction and emphasizing cognitive factors in evaluating quality of life (Bagheri Sheykhgafshe et al., 2021; Szentiványi & Balázs, 2018). Between these objective and subjective approaches, a holistic approach considers quality of life as a complex, multidimensional concept like life itself, taking into account both objective and subjective components in its evaluation (Izadi & Darayi Mahmoudi, 2018). Generally, quality of life is considered a health index, comprising an individual's perceptions in various aspects of life and functioning in human, work, and social relationships, essential for optimal continuation of life and well-being. It is a multidimensional concept encompassing an individual's physical, psychological, and social health. Various studies confirm the lower quality of life among divorced women (Ilbeigy Ghalenei et al., 2019; Izadi & Darayi Mahmoudi, 2018) and, according to Broersma et al. (2018), the quality of life of women post-divorce drops more than that of men due to social and financial problems (Broersma et al., 2018).

Given the increasing divorce rates in the country and the psychological and social problems it causes, it is imperative to study and address these issues more closely, to identify and implement suitable interventions for solving these problems in a comprehensive program aimed at reducing the difficulties faced by individuals post-divorce. One of the interventions that can be effective in this context is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). This treatment emphasizes the importance of thought processes as much as environmental effects, aiming to change and correct irrational beliefs, dysfunctional beliefs, cognitive distortions, the feeling of control over life, facilitate constructive self-talk, and strengthen coping skills (Ghorbani Amir et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2018).

The effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on emotional self-regulation has been confirmed in various clinical groups and the general population (Ghorbani-Amir

et al., 2019; Ghorbani Amir et al., 2023; Khatibi et al., 2023; Shoostari et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018), and in the research by Ghorbani Amir et al. (2023), its effectiveness on emotional self-regulation in divorced women was also validated (Ghorbani Amir et al., 2023). Similarly, research by Azizi et al. (2020) and Azizi & Ghasemi (2017) confirmed the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on the quality of life of divorced women (Azizi & Ghasemi, 2017). Considering the importance of family mental health and improving the quality of life in society on one hand, and the growing trend of divorce and its detrimental effects on the quality of life and mental health of these families and subsequently society on the other, it is necessary to identify effective interventions in this area and employ them in intervention programs aimed at assisting these individuals. In this vein, the current research was conducted with the goal of determining the impact of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on emotional self-regulation and the quality of life of divorced women.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The research method was a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test-post-test control group setup. The study population consisted of all divorced women visiting counseling centers in the city of Karaj. By convenience sampling, four centers were selected, and those who were willing to participate in the study (200 individuals) completed questionnaires on emotional self-regulation and quality of life. From these women, those who scored low on emotional self-regulation and quality of life (64 individuals) were randomly selected, and 30 were chosen as the statistical sample. These were then divided into two groups of 15 each, randomly assigned as either the experimental group or the control group. The experimental group underwent Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for 12 sessions of 90 minutes each, while the control group followed their usual routine. Both groups were post-tested at the end of the period.

Ethical considerations in this research were such that participation was completely voluntary. Before the start of the project, participants were informed about the project details and regulations. The views and beliefs of individuals were respected. Members of both the experimental and control groups were allowed to withdraw from the research at any stage. Moreover, members of the control group could receive the same intervention as the experimental group in similar therapy sessions after the completion of the project if

they wished. All documents, questionnaires, and confidential records were exclusively accessible to the researchers. Informed consent was obtained from all volunteers.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Emotion Regulation

This questionnaire, developed by Gross and John (2003), consists of ten items and measures two subscales: emotional suppression and cognitive reappraisal. Participants rate each item on a seven-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The scale scores range from 10 to 70. Across four different administrations, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the emotional suppression factor was .73, .68, .75, and .76, respectively. The test-retest reliability of this scale was .69 over three months. Internal consistency for the cognitive reappraisal subscale was .72 for men and .79 for women, and for the emotional suppression subscale, it was .67 for men and .69 for women (Gross & John, 2003; Narimani et al., 2011).

2.2.2. Quality of Life

This questionnaire was developed by the World Health Organization in collaboration with 15 international centers in 1989. The original version has 100 questions, but the short version contains 26 questions, measuring overall quality of life and general health in the first two questions, and the remaining 24 questions assess four main dimensions: physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and environmental health. It is scored on a 1-5 Likert scale, with reverse scoring applied to questions 3, 4, and 26. A higher total scale score indicates a better quality of life, with a cut-off score of 40 indicating desirable quality of life. External reliability of the questionnaire: The internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, yielding .87 for physical health, .55 for social relationships, .74 for psychological health, and .74 for environmental health, indicating satisfactory reliability. This test was standardized and validated in Iran by Nejat et al. (2008) (Nedjat et al., 2008).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy sessions were conducted over twelve 90-minute weekly sessions for two and a half

months for the experimental group, based on the Beck protocol (2006) (Ghorbani Amir et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2018).

2.4. Data analysis

In the descriptive analysis of data, statistical indices for each research variable were calculated. In the inferential statistics section, Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) and SPSS version 22 software were utilized.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables by Test Type and Groups

Variable	Stage	Experimental Group	Control Group
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean
Emotional Self-Regulation	Pre-test	37.29	4.36
	Post-test	44.81	7.48
Quality of Life	Pre-test	30.26	5.01
	Post-test	43.11	7.20

According to the data in Table 1, the mean scores of emotional self-regulation and quality of life in the experimental and control groups in the post-test phase

3. Findings and Results

The mean (standard deviation) age of participants was 38.5 (8.7) for the experimental group and 36.9 (7.7) for the control group. The minimum and maximum ages in the experimental group were 26 and 43 years, respectively, and in the control group, 27 and 42 years.

showed a significant difference in at least one of the variables of emotional self-regulation and quality of life.

Table 2

Results of Multivariate Analysis of Covariance for Comparing Mean Variables of the Research

Test Name	Value	F	Degrees of Freedom	Error Degrees of Freedom	Significance Level	Effect Size
Pillai's Trace	0.825	59.992	2	25	0.001	0.825
Wilks' Lambda	0.172	59.992	2	25	0.001	0.825
Hotelling's Trace	14.830	59.992	2	25	0.001	0.825
Roy's Largest Root	14.830	59.992	2	25	0.001	0.825

For a more detailed examination, the results of the Analysis of Covariance in the difference between the two groups, experimental and control, for each of the variables

of emotional self-regulation and quality of life, are presented in Table 2.

Table 3

Analysis of Covariance Results for Research Variables

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Significance Level	Effect Size
Emotional Self-Regulation	176.574	1	176.574	29.247	0.001	0.75
Error	57.931	26	2.228			
Quality of Life	150.283	1	150.283	28.933	0.001	0.52
Error	135.048	26	5.194			

As the covariance results in Table 3 indicate, there is a significant difference between the adjusted means of the two groups in the levels of emotional self-regulation and quality of life. The eta squared value shows that approximately 75.1% of the variance in the emotional self-regulation variable and 52.6% of the variance in quality of life are

attributable to the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The current research aimed to determine the impact of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) on emotional self-

regulation and the quality of life of divorced women. The results indicated that CBT is effective in improving emotional self-regulation and the quality of life in divorced women. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Shooshtari et al. (2016), and Ghorbani Amir et al. (2022) regarding the effectiveness of this therapy on the emotional self-regulation of divorced women (Ghorbani Amir et al., 2023; Shooshtari et al., 2016). Additionally, the positive effect of CBT on the quality of life of divorced women aligns with the studies by Azizi & Ghasemi (2017) (Azizi & Ghasemi, 2017).

The results can be explained by the descriptive-action model in post-traumatic growth (Mousavi et al., 2020). According to this model, when an individual can control their negative thoughts following traumatic events, the foundation for post-trauma growth is established. CBT aims to place the individual within their biological, social, and cultural context. The techniques used in this therapy, such as stopping negative thoughts, using stress inoculation techniques, and positive self-talk, help increase the ability of divorced women to manage their emotions. As Del-Palacio-Gonzalez et al. (2017) suggest, cognitive processing significantly influences post-trauma growth, which is why CBT focuses on correcting negative thoughts of divorced women over several sessions and teaches various techniques like thought stopping, identifying the relationship between thoughts and feelings, and keeping a daily thought record to reduce rumination and encourage a more realistic assessment of their situation (Del Palacio-González et al., 2017).

CBT empowers divorced women in mental aspects, assisting in the reconstruction of individual and social cognitions. It helps them recognize their cognitive distortions and accurately assess the aspects of social integration and personal life. This intervention enables women to become aware of their thoughts, emotions, and reactions in different situations and respond more appropriately to emotional and environmental actions. CBT influences divorced women's attitudes towards negative societal perceptions and encourages a more realistic confrontation with events. By recognizing cognitive distortions, individuals' attitudes become more realistic, leading to more positive evaluations of others, the environment, and interactions. This clearer self-assessment, free from biased cognitive distortions, aids in better emotion management and emotional regulation (Ghorbani Amir et al., 2023; Khatibi et al., 2023; Shooshtari et al., 2016). CBT creates insight and increases awareness, employing a broad

spectrum of cognitive and behavioral techniques to enhance awareness among participants. The practical and interactive space of this therapeutic group provides an excellent opportunity for members to become more aware of their emotions, which in turn can reduce emotional regulation issues and lead to better emotional regulation.

Considering the emphasis of the quality of life theory on life satisfaction and the mental experience of health, quality of life is somewhat related to the quality of consciousness, i.e., the positivity of one's internal experience (such as thoughts and feelings). In the quality of life theory, emotions and judgments related to satisfaction have an adaptive aspect and provide constant feedback for individual goals (Eddolls et al., 2018). On the other hand, the World Health Organization defines quality of life as an individual's perceptions of their life situation within the cultural and value systems related to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns. CBT, focusing on existing realities and not rejecting or denying various issues and problems, reduces cognitive exaggeration and thus considers problems as they are, not as negatively interpreted under different conditions. If people clearly observe their flaws instead of ignoring them, they are liberated from absolute despair and gently encouraged to make constructive changes (Wang et al., 2018), potentially enhancing their quality of life.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Research limitations include participants' fatigue during testing and the lack of a suitable location for group therapy, considered an intervening variable in the study. Given the limited research on emotional processing, it is suggested that this study be extended to the capabilities of divorced women to prevent problems in this group. Based on the results, it is recommended that treatment centers consider CBT for empowering divorced women. It is suggested that CBT be used in intervention programs aimed at empowering divorced women and improving their quality of life.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

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.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally to this article.

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