






The Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy on Marital Frustration and Attitude Towards Divorce Among Married Women on the Verge of Divorce

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The current research aimed to determine the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) on marital frustration and attitudes towards divorce among married women on the verge of divorce.

Methods and Materials: This study utilized a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test and post-test control group. The population consisted of married women on the verge of divorce visiting counseling centers in Tehran in 2022. The sample, selected via convenience sampling, included 28 individuals divided into an experimental group and a control group (14 participants each). Data were collected using questionnaires on marital frustration and attitudes toward divorce. The experimental group received ACT-based treatment for eight weeks, with one 90-minute session per week, while the control group did not receive any specific intervention.

Findings: Findings indicated significant differences between the experimental and control groups in scores of marital frustration and attitudes toward divorce in the post-test compared to the pre-test.

Conclusion: Therefore, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy significantly affects marital frustration and attitudes towards divorce among married women on the verge of divorce.

Keywords: *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, marital frustration, attitude towards divorce, married women on the verge of divorce.*

1. Introduction

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arriage is one of the most significant decisions an individual will make in their life, which can have profound effects on personal life, family, and even society. The role of the family

as the smallest social unit with its various functions can be both positively significant, such as creating a center of tranquility, and negatively significant, as it can lead to social harm. Among the negative aspects arising from this social institution is the occurrence of divorce (Navabinejad et al., 2024; Parsakia & Darbani, 2022). Psychologists believe that divorce, as one of the most reliable indicators of dissatisfaction in marital relationships, represents a type of emotional disconnection between spouses, or at least one of them. This emotional disconnection is undoubtedly painful and is associated with various injuries and damages to both spouses. In other words, divorce is a process that begins with the emotional crisis of both spouses and ends with efforts to resolve the conflict by entering a new situation with new roles and lifestyles (Navabinejad et al., 2024).

Frustration, in the sense of replacing positive emotions with neutral ones, is significant. Marital frustration involves a gradual decline in emotional attachment to the spouse, characterized by feelings of alienation, disinterest, and indifference between the spouses, and is accompanied by the replacement of positive emotions with negative ones (Ammari et al., 2023; Ghafari & Seidi, 2022). Frustrated spouses physically, emotionally, and psychologically distance themselves from each other, finding no pleasure in their relationship. They constantly feel physically exhausted and believe that their issues will remain unresolved, affecting each spouse's relationships with their original family and society, leading to stress, despair, and hopelessness for each (Ammari et al., 2023; Ghafari & Seidi, 2022).

The attitude toward divorce is a process that begins with various experiences of emotional crisis by both spouses and increases the likelihood of divorce as they attempt to resolve conflicts by entering a new situation with new roles and lifestyles (Abdollahi et al., 2020; Adamczyk, 2013). Multiple factors affect individuals' attitudes toward divorce, including education level, socio-economic status, similarities between spouses in interests, intelligence, personality traits, sexual compatibility, and changes in beliefs, values, interaction patterns, communication with the spouse, and lack of problem-solving skills. Recognizing the effective factors and different attitudes of spouses towards marital life, and understanding the individual and personality factors affecting interpersonal behaviors, can lead to effective steps to increase marital satisfaction among spouses, where therapeutic interventions aimed at educating spouses can be effective (Ardali et al., 2021; Ebrahimi & MohammadLou, 2021; Rezapour Mirsaleh et al., 2021).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is rooted in a philosophical theory called functional contextualism and is based on a research program concerning language and cognition known as Relational Frame Theory. ACT has six core processes that lead to psychological flexibility: acceptance, defusion, self as context, being present, values, and committed action (Nikpour et al., 2021; Saadati et al., 2021). The primary goal of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is to create psychological and emotional flexibility; instead of merely acting to avoid incompatible and disturbing thoughts, beliefs, emotions, feelings, moods, memories, or desires, it enables the choice of action among various and more suitable options. In this therapeutic approach, the change in the function of thoughts, emotions, moods, and feelings is accepted instead of changing their form, content, or frequency (Mahmoudpour et al., 2021).

The current research seeks to answer the question: Does Acceptance and Commitment Therapy impact marital frustration and attitudes towards divorce among married women on the verge of divorce?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

The methodology of this study was semi-experimental, employing a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The population included married women on the verge of divorce who visited counseling centers in Tehran in 2022. The sample consisted of 28 participants, divided into two groups: an experimental group and a control group, each comprising 14 individuals. Data were collected using questionnaires on marital frustration and attitudes toward divorce.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Frustration

Developed by Kayir (1993), this scale consists of 21 items used to assess marital frustration or the lack of emotions towards a spouse. The questionnaire encompasses three dimensions: attachment, emotional alienation, and emotional support. It uses a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 21 to 84. Kayir (1993) established divergent validity by finding significant correlations between the Marital Frustration Questionnaire and both marital joy and intimacy questionnaires. Furthermore, the scale showed significant positive relationships with issues of behavioral problems due to substance abuse by spouses ($r = .36$) and workaholic

behaviors ($r = .48$). Reliability of this tool was achieved with a Cronbach's alpha of .97. In Iran, Kohi (2009) confirmed its validity convergently with the General Health Questionnaire, showing a significant negative relationship ($r = -.56$) between the two scales. Reliability was obtained using internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. In this study, reliability was also confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of .82 (Farahani, 2019).

2.2.2. Attitude Toward Divorce

Created by Edwards, Johnson, and Booth in 1980, this 14-item tool is designed to measure marital instability, particularly susceptibility to divorce. The Marital Instability Index or Attitude Toward Divorce can be scored easily using its scoring instructions. Scores for "often susceptible to divorce" are summed and recorded at the bottom of the page where the corresponding "Attitude Toward Divorce" score is also noted. The scoring is as follows: never = 0, sometimes = 1, often = 2, and very often = 3 (Abdollahi et al., 2020).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

The experimental group underwent Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for eight weeks (Jafarimanesh et al., 2021), receiving one 90-minute therapy session each week, while the control group did not receive any specific intervention.

Session 1: Introduction to ACT and Mindfulness

The first session is dedicated to introducing the participants to the principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and the concept of mindfulness. Therapists explain the goal of ACT, which is to increase psychological flexibility, and introduce mindfulness as a tool to achieve this. Participants engage in exercises that focus on observing their thoughts and feelings without judgment. The session aims to create a safe environment where participants can begin to explore their personal experiences related to marital frustrations and their attitudes towards divorce.

Session 2: Cognitive Defusion

In the second session, the focus shifts to cognitive defusion techniques. The therapist helps participants identify instances where they become "fused" with their thoughts, meaning they take their thoughts too literally and allow them to dictate their emotions and behaviors. Various exercises, such as the Leaves on a Stream exercise, are introduced to

practice observing thoughts as merely words passing by, rather than truths that must dictate actions.

Session 3: Acceptance

This session revolves around the concept of acceptance. Participants learn to make room for difficult feelings, sensations, and urges instead of fighting them or feeling overwhelmed by them. Therapists guide the group through acceptance exercises, emphasizing that acceptance is not the same as approval or resignation but a conscious acknowledgment that certain things cannot be changed immediately.

Session 4: Self-as-Context

The fourth session introduces the concept of 'self-as-context', which helps participants understand that they are not defined by their thoughts, feelings, or experiences. Through exercises like the Observer exercise, participants learn to view themselves as a context or a perspective from which they experience psychological events, providing them with a stable sense of self that is separate from the changing content of their thoughts and feelings.

Session 5: Values Clarification

In this session, participants work on clarifying their personal values that are important in their lives and relationships. The therapist facilitates exercises that help participants identify what is truly important to them, distinct from the societal or familial values they may have internalized. Understanding these values helps guide the actions participants choose to take in their relationships and personal growth.

Session 6: Committed Action

Building on the identification of values, session six focuses on committed action. Participants set goals that are aligned with their values and plan concrete steps to move toward these goals despite potential psychological barriers such as fear or doubt. The therapist assists in developing strategies to deal with obstacles and maintain commitment to these actions.

Session 7: Bringing It All Together

The seventh session serves to integrate all the skills learned in the previous sessions. Participants review the principles of mindfulness, defusion, acceptance, self-as-context, values, and committed action. They engage in role-plays and scenarios that allow them to apply these skills in complex situations related to marital dissatisfaction and thoughts of divorce.

Session 8: Maintenance and Relapse Prevention

In the final session, the focus is on maintaining the gains achieved during the therapy and preventing relapse.

Participants discuss strategies to continue practicing the skills they have learned in therapy in their daily lives. The therapist provides resources for ongoing support and discusses how participants can continue to use ACT techniques to handle new challenges and sustain improvements in marital satisfaction and personal well-being.

2.4. Data Analysis

The results of the data analysis using analysis of covariance and SPSS-26.

3. Findings and Results

As observed in Table 1, the post-test mean scores for marital frustration and attitude toward divorce were significantly different between the experimental and control groups.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Research Variables by Experimental and Control Groups

Variables	Stage	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
Marital Frustration	Pre-test	Experimental	62.67	5.27
		Control	63.57	4.78
	Post-test	Experimental	49.54	3.86
		Control	64.37	4.34
Attitude to Divorce	Pre-test	Experimental	37.47	5.86
		Control	35.87	5.64
	Post-test	Experimental	26.38	4.41
		Control	36.58	5.89

Before conducting the primary analyses, we ensured that all statistical assumptions were met. Normality of the data distribution was confirmed through Shapiro-Wilk tests, where the p-values for both marital frustration ($p = .68$) and attitude toward divorce ($p = .73$) indicated normal distribution across both pre-test and post-test data. Homogeneity of variance was verified using Levene's Test, yielding non-significant results ($F = 2.47$, $p = .12$ for marital

frustration and $F = 2.31$, $p = .13$ for attitude toward divorce), confirming that the variance across experimental and control groups was equal. Furthermore, linearity between the dependent variables and covariates was established through scatterplots, showing consistent patterns of association. These checks validated the assumptions underpinning the use of parametric tests in our subsequent analyses.

Table 2

Results from ANCOVA on Post-test Mean Scores for Marital Frustration by Experimental and Control Groups

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Pre-test	142.86	1	142.86	17.47	.006
Group	2059.45	1	2059.45	412.68	.007
Error	361.37	29			

Table 3

Results from ANCOVA on Post-test Mean Scores for Attitude to Divorce by Experimental and Control Groups

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Pre-test	102.42	1	102.42	13.38	.005
Group	1534.86	1	1534.86	296.58	.006
Error	212.68	29			

As indicated in Table 2 and Table 3, the probability of accepting the null hypothesis for comparing the experimental and control groups on post-test variables of marital frustration and attitude toward divorce was less than

.05. Therefore, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy significantly affects marital frustration and attitudes toward divorce among married women on the verge of divorce.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings indicated that there were significant differences in the scores of marital frustration and attitudes toward divorce among participants in both the experimental and control groups from the pre-test to the post-test. Thus, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has an effect on marital frustration and attitudes toward divorce among married women on the verge of divorce. These results are consistent with the prior findings (Amini & Karami Nejad, 2021; Asadpour & Veisi, 2019; Jafarimanesh et al., 2021; Mardani et al., 2023; Morshedi et al., 2016; Sadeghi et al., 2021).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy teaches individuals to experience their thoughts and feelings rather than attempting to stop them; it encourages working towards personal values and goals while experiencing these thoughts and feelings. The ACT approach aims to change the potential functions of unwanted thoughts and feelings by modifying the psychological contexts in which they are experienced. As a third-wave cognitive-behavioral therapy, ACT uses both behavioral change techniques and acceptance and commitment strategies to enhance psychological flexibility. ACT emphasizes that change occurs when an individual is able to detach from and lessen their negative thoughts and reactions, thereby increasing psychological acceptance, which in turn reduces the relationship between negative thoughts and behaviors.

The findings also showed significant differences in attitudes toward divorce scores among the experimental and control groups from the pre-test to the post-test. Therefore, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy affects attitudes toward divorce among married women on the verge of divorce. These findings are aligned with the prior research results (Aghili & Kashiri, 2022; Amir et al., 2019; Araghi et al., 2020; Azizi & Ghasemi, 2017; Ghorbani Amir et al., 2019; Hadian et al., 2023; Iri et al., 2019, 2021; Mahmoudpour et al., 2021; Moradi, 2022; Nikpour et al., 2021; Panahifar et al., 2022; Saadati et al., 2021; Sadeghian et al., 2019).

The therapeutic approach based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy holds that not accepting situations can worsen them. Some circumstances, such as illness, emotions, and distressing thoughts related to issues, must ultimately be accepted because there is nothing else that can be done. As a third-wave cognitive-behavioral therapy, ACT not only utilizes behavioral change techniques but also incorporates acceptance and mindfulness strategies to

address maladaptive schemas. Additionally, from the perspective of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, the primary source of problems in clients is their psychological inflexibility. ACT, by reducing psychological stress in couples, leads to increased adaptability and the use of positive conflict resolution styles. Marital conflicts and divorce are serious threats to the marital unit, challenging the stability and quality of marriage and causing negative psychological, physical, social, and economic consequences. They can lead to poor physical health, depression, and decreased productivity at work. Therefore, with a therapeutic approach based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, factors leading to divorce can be mitigated.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study, while providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) on marital frustration and attitudes toward divorce, has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to married women on the verge of divorce in Tehran, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other populations or cultural contexts. Additionally, the study's design did not include follow-up assessments, making it difficult to evaluate the long-term effects of the intervention. The reliance on self-reported measures could also introduce bias into the data, as participants may have provided socially desirable responses or may not have had full insight into their emotional states.

Future research could address the limitations of the current study by incorporating a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies that include follow-up assessments would be beneficial to determine the sustainability of the therapy's effects over time. Additionally, it would be useful to compare ACT with other therapeutic modalities to assess its relative efficacy in dealing with marital issues and divorce contemplation. Incorporating a qualitative component could also provide deeper insights into participants' experiences and the specific aspects of ACT that are most beneficial or challenging.

The findings from this study suggest several practical implications for the application of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in clinical settings. Mental health professionals working with clients experiencing marital dissatisfaction or considering divorce might consider integrating ACT into their therapeutic practices. Given its

effectiveness in reducing marital frustration and altering negative attitudes toward divorce, ACT could be a valuable component of marital counseling programs. Furthermore, the principles of mindfulness and acceptance central to ACT could be adapted for workshops and support groups aimed at couples at various stages of their relationship, not just those contemplating divorce. By enhancing psychological flexibility, ACT not only supports individuals in managing marital distress but also equips them with skills that are beneficial in various aspects of life, promoting overall emotional resilience.

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

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

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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