






Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy on the Desire for Divorce and Forgiveness in Betrayed Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) on the desire for divorce and forgiveness in betrayed women.

Methods and Materials: The research method was quasi-experimental with a control and experimental group design. The statistical population of this study consisted of betrayed women in Tehran who had visited counseling centers in 2022. Thirty betrayed couples were screened through observation and interviews, and 15 women were placed in the control group and 15 women in the experimental group based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The sample for this study was selected through convenience sampling. The participants in the experimental group received ACT for 8 weeks, with one 60-90 minute session per week, while the control group did not receive any specific intervention. Data were collected using questionnaires on the desire for divorce and forgiveness. Participants completed the questionnaires in both pre-test and post-test situations. Covariance analysis was used for data analysis.

Findings: The findings showed that the mean scores of the variables of desire for divorce and forgiveness in the post-test of the experimental group were significantly different from the pre-test.

Conclusion: Therefore, ACT affects the desire for divorce and forgiveness in betrayed women.

Keywords: *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Desire for Divorce, Forgiveness, Betrayed Women.*

1. Introduction

One of the contemporary causes of family breakdown and dysfunction is infidelity. Infidelity is a violation

of trust and represents a lack of loyalty and moral commitment to one's spouse. It involves crossing the boundaries of the marital relationship by establishing physical or emotional intimacy with someone outside of the

marriage, and it is considered one of the most complex and damaging emotional issues between spouses (Sadeghi et al., 2021).

Marital infidelity, generally defined, is the breach of a dyadic commitment that leads to degrees of emotional and physical intimacy with someone outside of the relationship. Infidelity is defined as a deviation from commitment in emotional or sexual relationships, or both, leading to estrangement without the consent of the other party. Marriage is one of the most significant human institutions, profoundly affecting individuals. A satisfying marriage is a convergence of positive emotions between spouses, and a well-functioning family plays a crucial role in the health, quality of life, and well-being of the entire society (Asvadi et al., 2023; Heidari & Arefi, 2022).

In marital relationships, various factors contribute to spousal intimacy. Forgiveness is one of the most important factors. Forgiveness is a set of motivational changes in the injured individual, where the motivations for revenge and avoidance decrease, and the injured person increases their goodwill motivation towards reconciliation with the offender. Research indicates that forgiveness enhances marital intimacy. One of the emotional needs of couples is intimacy, which is a significant source of happiness (Rahmanishamsh et al., 2022). Forgiveness involves changes in emotions and attitudes towards the wrongdoer, reducing the motivation for revenge or maintaining estrangement, and eliminating negative feelings towards the offender. Theorists believe that forgiveness replaces negative emotions with positive attitudes such as compassion and goodwill. In contrast, hatred stemming from a spouse's wrongdoing likely exacerbates conflicts and hinders successful resolution (Fife et al., 2023; Najari et al., 2023). Forgiving a spouse provides a potential means for reconciliation, despite a painful and worrying event, and thus, forgiveness has significant applications for long-term relationships and short-term interactions (Fincham et al., 2007).

Most people enter marriage with high levels of marital satisfaction at the beginning. However, apart from the gradual decline in satisfaction over time, serious problems can arise in the first weeks and months of marriage that, if unresolved, can threaten marital satisfaction and stability. Divorce is an event recognized as a tool for separating a man and woman and ending their marital relationship, nullifying the rights and obligations that marriage entails. Divorce is among the most tragic social phenomena, and the damages and problems experienced by couples and their families

before and after divorce have long been a subject of attention and investigation (Bolkan & Kaya, 2016). Divorce occurs for various reasons, and no single cause can be identified as the primary reason. Divorce typically happens when the marital bond deteriorates, and there is discord and tension between the spouses. In this state, marital satisfaction reaches its lowest point, paving the way for separation (Rahmanishamsh et al., 2022).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a mindfulness-based behavioral therapy shown to be effective for a wide range of clinical conditions. The goal of ACT is to create a rich and meaningful life while accepting the inevitable suffering that comes with it and preparing to live with it. As individuals begin to prepare for such a life, they encounter various internal obstacles in the form of unwanted and unpleasant experiences. The ultimate goal of ACT is to increase the frequency of value-based living. The primary assumption of ACT is that a significant part of psychological distress is a normal human experience. Experiential avoidance may provide short-term relief but exacerbates problems and distress in the long run, preventing a meaningful, purposeful, and passionate life (Hayes, 2004).

Therefore, this study aims to answer the fundamental question: Does Acceptance and Commitment Therapy affect the desire for divorce and forgiveness in betrayed women?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

The research method was quasi-experimental with a control and experimental group design. The statistical population of this study consisted of betrayed women in Tehran who had visited counseling centers in 2022. Thirty betrayed couples were screened through observation and interviews, and 15 women were placed in the control group and 15 women in the experimental group based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The sample for this study was selected through convenience sampling. The participants in the experimental group received ACT for 8 weeks, with one 60-90 minute session per week, while the control group did not receive any specific intervention. Data were collected using questionnaires on the desire for divorce and forgiveness. Participants completed the questionnaires in both pre-test and post-test situations.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Forgiveness

The original version of this scale was designed by Pollard and Anderson in 1988 to screen and assess forgiveness in families. According to Pollard et al. (1998), this scale aims to measure the level of forgiveness in families and its dimensions. The original form of this scale consists of 40 constructed-response items that evaluate the forgiveness status of a family member and the family system. Respondents rate each item on a 4-point scale: "Almost always," "Often," "Rarely," or "Never," with lower scores indicating a lack of forgiveness and higher scores indicating the presence of forgiveness in the family. Some items are reverse-scored, such as items 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 18, 20, 21, 22, 25, 28, 29, 31, 34, 37, 38, and 40. Items reverse-scored include 3, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24, 26, 27, 30, 32, 33, 35, and 36. Internal consistency coefficients based on Cronbach's alpha were 0.80 for the entire scale and 0.77, 0.66, and 0.57 for its subscales. In 2004, Hari and Seif provided norms for assessing the psychometric properties of the Forgiveness Scale in families as constructed by Pollard et al. In terms of reliability, the scale's reliability coefficient was 0.84, which is highly satisfactory. For validity, item discrimination and factor loading were calculated, yielding a relative reliability of 0.88, indicating good discrimination for the Forgiveness Scale. In this study, the overall reliability of the scale was 0.80 using Cronbach's alpha method (Gholizadeh et al., 2020; Heydari et al., 2022; Zali et al., 2019).

2.2.2. Desire for Divorce

This questionnaire was developed by Arab Alidoosti et al. (2015) to create a short Persian version of the Kansas and ENRICH satisfaction questionnaires. The short ENRICH questionnaire has 10 satisfaction items, and the Kansas questionnaire has three items. Cronbach's alpha and item-total correlation were used to calculate reliability. For construct validity, convergent validity, known groups comparison, and factor validity were used. These researchers reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.74 for the ENRICH questionnaire and 0.98 for the Kansas questionnaire. In this study, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability or repeatability of the questionnaire items. In a preliminary test with 30 questionnaires, this test was conducted. The decision criterion for the alpha coefficient is that values above 0.80 indicate very good item

consistency, above 0.70 indicate good consistency, and values above 0.50 are acceptable (Bahoosh et al., 2022).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

The intervention protocol for this study involved an 8-week Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) program designed to reduce the desire for divorce and enhance forgiveness in betrayed women. Each session lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and focused on different ACT principles and techniques aimed at increasing psychological flexibility, acceptance of difficult emotions, and commitment to value-based actions. The sessions were structured to build upon each other, progressively guiding participants through the process of understanding and applying ACT concepts in their personal and relational contexts (Hadian et al., 2023; Hayes, 2004).

Session 1: Introduction to ACT and Building Rapport

The first session introduced the participants to the basic principles of ACT and the therapy's goals. The therapist established rapport with the participants, providing an overview of the intervention, and discussing the importance of psychological flexibility. Participants were introduced to the concept of mindfulness and engaged in a brief mindfulness exercise to familiarize themselves with being present in the moment. Homework was assigned to practice mindfulness techniques daily.

Session 2: Understanding Acceptance and Defusion

The second session focused on the concept of acceptance, emphasizing the importance of accepting thoughts and feelings without trying to change them. Participants were taught cognitive defusion techniques to help them distance themselves from unhelpful thoughts. Exercises included observing thoughts as external events and practicing letting go of the struggle with these thoughts. Homework involved practicing defusion exercises and maintaining a thought journal.

Session 3: Exploring Personal Values

In the third session, participants explored their personal values and how these values could guide their actions. The therapist facilitated discussions on identifying what truly matters to each participant and how betrayal has impacted these values. Activities included values clarification exercises and creating a values-based action plan. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their values and set small, achievable goals aligned with these values for the upcoming week.

Session 4: Committed Action and Goal Setting

The fourth session focused on committed action, encouraging participants to take actionable steps towards their values despite emotional difficulties. The therapist helped participants develop specific, value-driven goals and strategies to achieve them. Techniques for overcoming obstacles and maintaining commitment were discussed. Homework included working on the set goals and reflecting on any challenges encountered.

Session 5: Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

In the fifth session, mindfulness practices were deepened, and self-compassion was introduced as a critical component of healing from betrayal. Participants engaged in guided mindfulness and self-compassion exercises to cultivate a kinder and more accepting attitude towards themselves. Discussions included the impact of self-criticism and the benefits of self-compassion. Homework involved daily mindfulness and self-compassion practices.

Session 6: Enhancing Forgiveness

The sixth session was dedicated to the concept of forgiveness, exploring its meaning and significance in the participants' lives. The therapist guided participants through exercises to facilitate the process of forgiveness, addressing common misconceptions and barriers. Participants were encouraged to reflect on past hurts and consider steps towards forgiveness, either towards themselves or others. Homework included forgiveness exercises and journaling reflections on their experiences.

Session 7: Building Resilience and Relational Skills

In the seventh session, the focus shifted to building resilience and enhancing relational skills. Participants learned techniques for effective communication, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation within their relationships. Role-playing and group discussions were used to practice these skills in a supportive environment. Homework involved applying these skills in real-life interactions and noting the outcomes.

Session 8: Review and Future Planning

The final session reviewed the key concepts and progress made throughout the intervention. Participants reflected on

their experiences, discussed their achievements and challenges, and refined their values-based action plans for the future. The therapist provided additional resources and strategies for maintaining progress post-intervention. The session concluded with a group discussion on the journey of healing and the importance of ongoing commitment to their values and goals.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to assess the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) on the desire for divorce and forgiveness among betrayed women, controlling for pre-test scores. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for both the experimental and control groups at pre-test and post-test stages. Prior to conducting ANCOVA, assumption checks were performed to ensure the validity of the analysis, including tests for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test, homogeneity of variances using Levene's test, and linearity through scatterplot inspection. No significant outliers were identified. The ANCOVA was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups in the post-test scores of desire for divorce and forgiveness, with pre-test scores as covariates. The effect sizes were calculated to quantify the magnitude of the differences observed. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 26, with a significance level set at $p < .05$.

3. Findings and Results

As seen in [Table 1](#), the means and standard deviations of pre-test and post-test scores for the desire for divorce and forgiveness variables in the experimental and control groups show an increase in forgiveness and a decrease in the desire for divorce from the pre-test to the post-test stage in the experimental group.

Table 1

Statistical Indicators of Research Variables in Pre-Test and Post-Test Stages

Variable	Pre-Test M (SD)	Post-Test M (SD)
Desire for Divorce (Exp)	33.42 (4.38)	23.45 (3.78)
Desire for Divorce (Ctrl)	35.31 (4.58)	32.14 (4.42)
Forgiveness (Exp)	51.29 (6.63)	67.83 (8.75)
Forgiveness (Ctrl)	53.56 (6.48)	52.24 (6.65)

Before conducting the main analyses, all necessary assumptions were checked and met to ensure the validity of the results. Normality of the distribution for the dependent variables was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated that the data were normally distributed for both the pre-test and post-test scores of the desire for divorce ($W = 0.98$, $p = 0.34$) and forgiveness ($W = 0.97$, $p = 0.28$). Homogeneity of variances was tested using Levene's test, confirming equal variances across groups for both dependent variables (desire for divorce: $F(1, 28) = 1.12$, $p = 0.29$; forgiveness: $F(1, 28) = 1.45$, $p = 0.24$). Furthermore, the assumption of linearity was checked through scatterplot

analysis, showing a linear relationship between pre-test and post-test scores. No significant outliers were detected in the data, as assessed by examination of boxplots and standardized residuals ($|z| < 3.29$). These checks confirm that the assumptions for ANCOVA were satisfactorily met, allowing for reliable interpretation of the study's findings.

The results of [Table 2](#) show that the F ratio for the covariance analysis of the experimental and control groups in the desire for divorce variable indicates a significant difference between the two groups. Therefore, ACT affects the desire for divorce in betrayed women.

Table 2

Results of Covariance Analysis of Groups in Dependent Variables with Pre-Test Control on Post-Test Scores

Variables	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Effect Size
Desire for Divorce	2652.32	1	2652.32	13.42	.005	.45

The results of [Table 3](#) show that the F ratio for the covariance analysis of the experimental and control groups in the forgiveness variable indicates a significant difference

between the two groups. Therefore, ACT affects forgiveness in betrayed women.

Table 3

Results of Covariance Analysis of Groups in Dependent Variables with Pre-Test Control on Post-Test Scores

Variables	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Effect Size
Forgiveness	2147.75	1	2147.75	13.69	.004	.32

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings showed that the mean scores of the desire for divorce variable in the post-test of the experimental group were significantly different from the pre-test. Therefore, ACT affects the desire for divorce in betrayed women. These results align with the prior findings ([Amir et al., 2019](#); [Ghorbani Amir et al., 2019](#); [Iri et al., 2019](#); [Mahmoudpour et al., 2021](#); [Panahifar et al., 2022](#)).

In summary, ACT aims to teach individuals to experience their thoughts and feelings rather than attempting to stop them. Individuals are encouraged to work towards their goals and values while experiencing their thoughts and feelings. ACT enables individuals to manage difficult and critical situations more effectively. During ACT sessions, individuals classify their values, strengthening commitment and the desire to maintain the marital relationship. Commitment increases trust between spouses and motivates individuals to remain in the marital relationship and uphold their vows ([Iri et al., 2019](#)). Commitment, in its broadest

sense, represents a sea of goodness and positive attributes that can be described in the context of life together. Commitment is unconditional; it is not dependent on the partner's level of commitment. A committed person remains loving, loyal, and dedicated, regardless of circumstances ([Amir et al., 2019](#)).

The findings also showed that the mean scores of the forgiveness variable in the post-test of the experimental group were significantly different from the pre-test. Therefore, ACT affects forgiveness in betrayed women. These results align with the prior findings ([Ghasedi et al., 2019](#); [Gholizadeh et al., 2020](#); [Hadian et al., 2023](#); [Honarparvaran, 2014](#); [Karimzadeh, 2018](#); [Najari et al., 2023](#); [Saadatmand et al., 2017](#)).

Marriage is one of the most important decisions in an individual's life, and marital satisfaction is a key determinant of life quality. ACT provides individuals with the ability to change their relationship with internal experiences, reduce experiential avoidance, increase flexibility, and act in value-based directions. Changing the relationship with internal

experiences involves expanding and clarifying internal awareness. ACT interventions help couples uncover factors leading to infidelity, gaining a deeper understanding of why infidelity occurred, increasing empathy and positive emotions, and reducing anger and hostile feelings. Consequently, marital disaffection is impacted, leading to increased marital satisfaction and efforts to resolve inevitable marital conflicts, thus ensuring the psychological health of future generations (Hadian et al., 2023).

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations that should be noted. The sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 30 couples, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the participants were selected through convenience sampling from a single city, which may not represent the broader population of betrayed women. The self-report nature of the questionnaires could also introduce bias, as participants might not accurately report their feelings or behaviors. Furthermore, the study did not include long-term follow-up assessments to determine the enduring effects of ACT on desire for divorce and forgiveness.

Future research should aim to include larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the results. Longitudinal studies with follow-up assessments are recommended to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of ACT on marital outcomes. It would also be beneficial to compare the effects of ACT with other therapeutic interventions to determine relative efficacy. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods could provide deeper insights into the personal experiences of betrayed women undergoing ACT, thereby enriching the understanding of how this therapy impacts their relationships and emotional well-being.

The findings of this study have important implications for clinical practice and therapeutic interventions for couples dealing with infidelity. Practitioners should consider incorporating ACT into their treatment plans for betrayed

women, as it has been shown to reduce the desire for divorce and increase forgiveness. Training therapists in ACT techniques can enhance their ability to support clients in managing the emotional aftermath of infidelity. Moreover, integrating ACT into broader couple's therapy programs could promote resilience and improve relationship quality, thereby contributing to overall mental health and well-being in affected couples.

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.

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