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EFFECTIVENESS OF ENCOURAGEMENT SKILLS TRAINING ON MARITAL CONFLICTS AND THE ANXIETY OF WOMEN REFERRING TO THE COUNSELING CENTERS OF ISFAHAN, IRAN

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ABSTRACT

Background: Considering the importance of reducing marital conflicts and its mental consequences such as depression and anxiety, the aim of the present study was to determine the effectiveness of encouragement skills of marital conflicts and anxiety of women referring to the counseling centers of Isfahan.

Methods: The present study was a semi-experimental controlled study with a pre and post design. Participants were selected using convenient sampling method and 30 women who referred to the counseling center of Farabi hospital of Isfahan were selected as participants. Then, participants were randomly allocated into two groups of intervention (15 participants) and control (15 participants). Participants of the intervention group attended 10 sessions for learning encouragement skills. Data were gathered using Beck's anxiety questionnaire and revised marital conflicts questionnaire (MCQ). Data were analyzed using covariance analysis.

Results: According to the results, the highest scores of marital conflicts (141.1) and anxiety (39.7) in the intervention group were gained at the pre-test stage. Results of covariance analysis showed the significant effect of encouragement skills training on marital conflicts and its aspects and also the level of anxiety among the women in the intervention group ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusions: Based on the results of the present study, by learning encouragement skills, couples could improve their relationship with other through reducing their marital conflicts, increasing their intimacy and having more satisfaction with their lives.

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Introduction

Marriage is the most important and excellent social tradition for achieving emotional and security goals. The event of marriage is entering a new era of life which includes one of the most important parts of every individual's personal social

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life. The manner of beginning and forming relationships would affect their subsequent behaviors and encounters and could positively or negatively affect the couples and their children (1). So, while some marriages could lead to growth and prosperity of the couples, others are associated with marital conflicts; in a way that the ineffective relationship of the couples would cause a deepened interpersonal gap which its affect could be observed in all the aspects of their lives and even the society (2). Considering the fact that every human being requires a fundamental and essential need for having intimate relationships, not using the necessary skills for starting and continuing a desirable married life might lead to lonesome, physical diseases and mental pressures, the feeling of incompetency and job dissatisfaction and family problems (3). Intimacy is an important key characteristic of marital relationships and one of the outstanding properties of a successful marriage. This property indicates the interaction between the spouses and its lack or shortage is the index of chaos in the marital relationship (4). Couple's intimacy is defined as feelings based on love and affection, having a partner and companion for life, meeting emotional-mental needs and increasing joy and pleasure in the couple's life, in a way that it would lead to the stability of the relationship and be positively associated with compatibility and satisfaction with married life (5). Intimacy is an interactive process and contains different elements related to each other. The bases for this process are recognition, perception, acceptance, sympathy with the feelings of another individual and appreciation and acceptance of spouse's point of view (6). Intimacy between spouses would lead to formation of a correct relationship between them; this relationship would allow them to discuss, exchange opinions and solve their problems in an appropriate environment without any conflicts. Therefore, couple who are not able to achieve intimacy would not be able to solve their problems, eventually and are constantly involved in a relationship that would not resolve their needs (7). Bagarozzi (2001) has suggested 8 elements for intimacy including emotional, psychological, rational, sexual, physical, spiritual, aesthetic and social and intimacy, that the severity of intimacy and its aspects might differ between different people (8). The quality of a close intimate relationship has an important role in the emotional and physical health and would affect individual's overall quality of happiness and general satisfaction (9). So, losing intimacy means losing one of the links of marriage; because, as healthy relationships have positive outcomes and consequences in life, dissatisfactory relations would risk the physical and mental health of people (10). Therefore, it seems that by providing necessary and efficient educational opportunities, couples could be help to increase their intimacy, through appropriate communication, accepting their weaknesses and strengths, and having a positive feeling toward themselves and their spouses; one of the educations in this regard is educating encouragement skills (11). Educating encouragement skills would lead to increased courage and higher sense of adequacy and would help the individual to find effective ways for coping with the problems and decreasing the physical and mental tensions. Besides its personal effects, increased bravery, improved relationships and increased interactions are some other effects of this training (12). It must be noted that quantitative studies about the effectiveness of encouragement skills on the eight intimacy needs of couples have been conducted previously, but previous studies have evaluated the effectiveness of encouragement skills on other variables; the results would be reported in the present study. Studies by Alizadeh, Nasirifard and Karami (2010) (13), Abolghasemi, Fallahi, Babaei and Hojjat (2014) (1) and Saffari Nia and Mehman Navazan (2014) (14) have revealed the positive effect of encouragement skills on self-efficacy of teenage girls, spouses of addicts and women heading the household. So the aim of the present study is to the questions "whether educating encouragement skills would be effective on the eight intimacy needs of women who referred to the counseling center of Isfahan?"

Methods

The present study was a semi-experimental controlled study with a pre-post design. Study population for this study included all the women who referred to the counseling centers of Isfahan in 2016. To select a sample representing the study population, Farabi hospital of Isfahan was selected through convenient sampling and then 30 women who referred to this center were selected randomly and based on their inclusion criteria, were divided into two groups of intervention (15 participants) and control (15 participants). The inclusion criteria were being married for at least 1 and at most 15 years, having a least educational degree of diploma, not being addicted to narcotics for one or both of the spouses, which was evaluated by interviewing them, and having informed consent for participation in the study. The exclusion criteria were unwillingness to continue the study and missing more than 2 sessions of the 10 educational sessions. Data gathering tool for this study was Bagarozzi's marital intimacy needs questionnaire (2001). This questionnaire was developed by Bagarozzi in 2001 which has 41 items and evaluates the severity of intimacy needs in 8 elements of emotional, psychological, rational, sexual, physical, spiritual aesthetic and social-recreational intimacy. The subject would indicate their agreement to the items of the questionnaire with a number within the range of 1 to 10. Each element would gain a separate score and by summing up the scores of the elements, the total score of intimacy would be achieved. Questions 1 to 5 evaluate emotional intimacy, 6 to 10 psychological intimacy, 11 to 15 rational intimacy, 16 to 20 sexual intimacy, 21 to 25 physical intimacy, 26 to 31 spiritual intimacy, 32 to 36 aesthetic intimacy and 37 to 41 social-recreational intimacy. Validity and reliability of this questionnaire were evaluated by Etemadi (2005); the total reliability of the questionnaire was 0.94 and its concurrent validity was 0.58 (4). After completing the questionnaire by both groups, participants of the intervention group attended 10 90-minute educational sessions about encouragement skills based on the Schwenker's theory (1991). After all the educational sessions ended, questionnaires were again completed by both of the intervention and the control groups. Eventually gathered

information were analyzed using SPSS software for evaluating the most important descriptive and inferential statistical indexes.

Sessions	Therapeutic content of each encouragement session
First	Introducing the members to each other and making primary relationships, reviewing the rules of the group, structure and the goals of the sessions, presenting a relaxation exercise, introducing the philosophical and psychological concept of encouragement, presenting an exercise to the members for expressing five encouragement behaviors in relation with others
Second	Presenting a relaxation exercise, receiving feedback from the last session, educating purposive behaviors using individual psychology concepts, evaluating the required conditions for relaxation, presenting an exercise to perform at home
Third	Presenting a relaxation exercise, receiving feedback from the last session, educating encouragement exercise, providing an exercise about the educated subjects, presenting a homework in this field for performing ta home
Fourth	Presenting a relaxation exercise, receiving feedback from the last session, causing encouragement by thinking about others in a kindly manner, presenting the empty chair exercise and talking in an encouraging manner, performing the empty chair exercise imaginary and really at home
Fifth	Presenting a relaxation exercise, receiving feedback from the last session, evaluating the negative effect of talking behind someone's back both from the religious view and psychological and ethical view and its negative effect on people' relationship, using the relaxation exercise and the educated skills at this session during the daily living
Sixth	Presenting a relaxation exercise, receiving feedback from the last session, focusing on creating and improving positive and constructive relationships, recognizing the positive characteristics and abilities of the members by themselves, presenting the exercise of standing on mirror for performing at home, relaxation exercise and its performance in daily living
Seventh	Presenting a relaxation exercise, receiving feedback from the last session, participants' learning from a positive inner conversation about themselves, each member's expression of their abilities and goals in from of the other members, repeating personal expressions, abilities and goals twice or three times a day out load as an exercise at home
Eighth	Presenting a relaxation exercise, receiving feedback from the last session, requesting each member's expression of their share in troublesome situations of their life, presenting an exercise for determining individual's share in problems and their solutions in their life for performing at home
Ninth	Presenting a relaxation exercise, receiving feedback from the last session, members' expressions of their personal thoughts about the sense of belonging to and loving others, using the educated exercises by the members for improving their relationships with those they have a problem with and exercising this matter at home
Tenth	Presenting a relaxation exercise, receiving feedback from the last session, performing the empty chair exercise in a way that members would imagine themselves on that chair, completing the questionnaires for this study by the members and ending the session with relaxation exercise

Results

According to the results, the most frequent among the samples were 30 to 35 year sold women (26.7%) and the lowest frequent were 45 to 50 years old (10%) women. Also most of the participants had a bachelor's degree (33.3%) and the lowest frequency belonged to women with master's degree or higher (16.7%). Regarding the economic status, results showed that the highest frequency among the samples belonged to women with moderate economic status (36.7%) and the lowest frequency belonged to women with poor economic status (16.7%).

According to the results of table 1 regarding the mean and standard deviation of the intimacy elements at the pre and post stages of the study in the intervention and the control group, the highest mean score of the intimacy elements in the intervention group occurred at the post-test stage.

To evaluate the research hypothesis, covariance analysis (MANCOVA) method was used. Based on the value of the Wilk's lambda coefficient and considering the significant post-test scores with a value of 0.001 ($p < 0.05$), it was revealed that educating encouragement skills has been effective on intimacy elements. For further investigation of these differences, single-variable covariance analysis was performed on the data in the context of MANCOVA.

Achieved results from group membership in table 3 have shown that the ratio of the Fs of single-variable covariance analysis in the scores of emotional intimacy ($F = 84.4, p = 0.000$), psychological intimacy ($F = 20.8, p = 0.000$), rational intimacy ($F = 10.2, p = 0.004$) and aesthetic intimacy ($F = 7.9, p = 0.01$) were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Therefore educating

encouragement skills has been effective on these elements. But based on the results, this education had no significant effect on the sexual, physical, spiritual and social-recreational intimacy elements.

Table 1. The mean and standard deviation of intimacy elements in the intervention and the control groups

		Pre-test								Post-test							
		Emotional intimacy	Psychological	Rational intimacy	Sexual intimacy	Physical intimacy	Spiritual intimacy	Aesthetic	Social-recreational	Emotional intimacy	Psychological	Rational intimacy	Sexual intimacy	Physical intimacy	Spiritual intimacy	Aesthetic intimacy	Social-recreational
Intervention group	Mean	32.8	35.06	37	38.1	36.3	44.3	37	37.1	41.4	38.6	40.7	41.2	41.5	46.1	38.6	39
	SD	6.9	9.7	10.4	7.2	10.8	13.1	9.3	9.5	6.6	10.6	8.9	8.6	8.5	12.5	9.02	5.9
Control group	Mean	35.2	34.7	35.1	35.2	36.7	38.5	36	38.6	33.3	29.6	35.7	36.4	37.3	37.6	35.2	39.1
	SD	10.4	9.9	10.6	14.1	12.6	16.7	11	8.7	11.3	15.1	10.9	13.9	13.4	16.8	10.5	10.9

Table 2. MANCOVA covariance analysis for evaluating the effectiveness of encouragement training on the elements of intimacy

Test	Value	F	Degree of freedom	Error of degree of freedom	Significant level	Impact rate (ETA coefficient)
Pilay effect	0.83	8.06	8	13	0.001	0.83
Wilk's lambda	0.16	8.06	8	13	0.001	0.83
Hetling effect	4.96	8.06	8	13	0.001	0.83
The largest square root	4.96	8.06	8	13	0.001	0.83

Table 3. Results of single-variable covariance analysis on the elements of intimacy

Source	Dependent variable	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean of squares	F	Significant level	Impact rate
Group	Emotional intimacy	463.8	1	463.8	84.4	0.000	0.80
	Psychological intimacy	331.7	1	331.7	20.8	0.000	0.51
	Rational intimacy	138.2	1	138.2	10.2	0.004	0.33
	Sexual intimacy	68.5	1	68.5	3.1	0.09	0.13
	Physical intimacy	63	1	63	3.4	0.07	0.14
	Spiritual intimacy	55.4	1	55.4	3.04	0.09	0.13
	Aesthetic intimacy	146.8	1	146.8	7.9	0.01	0.28
	Social-recreational intimacy	46.9	1	46.9	1.8	0.1	0.08

Discussion

The present study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of encouragement skills education on the intimacy needs of women who referred to counseling centers. According to the results, educating encouragement skills has been effective on the elements of emotional intimacy, psychological intimacy, rational intimacy and aesthetic intimacy ($p < 0.05$). But these trainings were not effective on the elements of sexual intimacy, physical intimacy, spiritual intimacy and social-recreational intimacy. Results of the present study were in line with the results of Etemadi et al (2014) (4), Florian et al (2013) (15), Waring and Chelune (2011) (16), Jakaboski and Mine (2011) (17) and Cutler (2009) (18).

To explain the achieved results it could be said that intimacy is an interactive process in which individuals would try to get close to each other and discover the similarities and differences in their emotions, thoughts and behaviors. The bases for this process are recognition, perception, acceptance, sympathy with other's emotions and appreciating or accepting the unique view of another person toward the world (19). Etemadi et al (2014) believed that intimacy is an essential realistic need of human beings and what strengthen the marital relationship is couple's close emotional relationship and their intimacy. Intimate relationships would satisfy individual's emotional needs and is also a source of defense against many individual damages at different situations (14). In the present study women who participated in the sessions, after learning the skills of expressing the feelings and conversation with the husband, were able to present themselves in their relationship more desirably and express their problems to their partners and husbands more effectively; consequently, they experienced high levels of intimacy. Therefore, the more sympathetic spouses would be with each other, they would be attracted more to each other and their intimacy would be increased; and vice versa, the greater the distance and the deeper the gap between them and the more they would be differentiated, their intimacy would be decreased more. Women who participated in the sessions of the present study, by expressing their deepest emotions, dreams, desires, concerns and pleasures to their husbands, increased the intimacy of their relationships; more importantly, intimacy requires awareness of one's self and others and also addressing individual's inner secrets. So women, by becoming aware of themselves and their needs and also having a more accurate recognition of their husbands were able to experience high levels of intimacy in their married life. As it was mentioned before, problems in couple's intimacy are rooted in their failure to establish a proper relationship. Conducting encouragement sessions would increase spouse's communicational intimacy which is followed by emotional intimacy; because emotional intimacy means expressing all the positive and negative feelings to the spouse. Psychological intimacy which means spouses' ability in significantly and deeply revelation of important personal topics about their inner self or their real self (20), would be increased after encouragement sessions; in a way that, at these sessions, women learnt to share the most private part of themselves with their husbands safely, without the fear of being fooled, ashamed, judged or humiliated. Rational intimacy include sharing the thoughts and important beliefs with the spouse and encouragement sessions, by improving conscious conversation skills, would provide the necessary ground for development of rational intimacy.

Based on the achieved results in the present study it could be concluded that elements of intimacy form a totality that could be summarized as a model for intimate relationship and this model for intimate relationship or the essence of joy in life, which people are searching for it, is not a secret matter; but is a series of characteristics that could be achieved by exercising, self-awareness, better understanding of each other, effort and consideration, along with a little bit of love. It seems that to achieve the effectiveness of training this skill on sexual, physical, spiritual and social-recreational elements of intimacy, more sessions should be conducted. Also, another limitation of the present study was not considering a follow-up period which limited the evaluation of continuity of the educations' results. So, for further studies, it is recommended that by minimizing the limitations of the present study, other psychological interventions should be used for increasing the intimacy and decreasing the marital conflicts among women.

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