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Comparing the Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Solution-Focused (Brief) Therapy on Internal Coherence and Self-Control in Women with Marital Conflict

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Abstract

In families with healthy relationships, a dynamic and flourishing environment is provided for all family members and promotes individual growth and community well-being. Various factors, including a lack of internal coherence and low self-control among spouses, can increase marital conflict. The aim of the present study was to compare the effects of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Solution-Focused Therapy (SFT) on the self-control and internal coherence of women with marital conflict. The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, one-month follow-up, and a control group. The study population included all women with marital conflict who were referred to the Ravan Plus Counseling Center in Mashhad in 2022. A total of 45 women were selected using purposive and voluntary sampling and randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group (15 participants in each group). The measurement instruments included the Sense of Coherence Questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1993), the Self-Control Scale (SCS; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), and the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ-R; Sanaei, 2008). The two experimental groups received Solution-Focused Group Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for two months, with each session lasting 90 minutes, whereas the control group received no intervention during the study period. The participants completed the questionnaires at three time points: pre-test, post-test, and one-month follow-up. Repeated-measures analysis of variance was used to analyze the data. The results showed that both Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Solution-Focused Therapy significantly improved self-control and internal coherence compared with the control group ($P < 0.001$). The findings also showed that there was no significant difference between the effectiveness of the two therapeutic approaches in improving self-control and internal coherence ($P > 0.05$). Based on the findings, Solution-Focused Group Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy can be considered effective approaches for improving internal coherence and self-control among women with marital conflict.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The family is the primary institution of society, and the relationships among its members, especially between spouses, are of great importance. A healthy marital relationship leads to greater satisfaction, fewer conflicts, and a higher quality of married life. Various factors, including a lack of internal coherence, may affect the relationship between spouses and cause considerable harm to the family. A strong sense of coherence helps individuals manage marital conflicts and improves marital relationships. Another factor that may affect couples' relationships is self-control. Evidence suggests that higher levels of self-control are associated with constructive interpersonal behaviors that improve relationship quality and reduce conflict. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is one therapeutic approach that has been evaluated in more than 900 randomized trials. In Iran, however, relatively few studies have examined the effectiveness of ACT on sense of coherence and self-control. Solution-Focused Therapy (SFT) is another psychological approach that emphasizes individuals' strengths and abilities to develop effective solutions. Likewise, only a limited number of studies have investigated the effectiveness of Solution-Focused Therapy on sense of coherence and self-control. Furthermore, no previous study has compared the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Solution-Focused Therapy on self-control and internal coherence among women with marital conflict. Considering the negative consequences of marital conflict for couples and their children, it is important to investigate interventions that specifically target these problems. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effects of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Solution-Focused Therapy on the self-control and internal coherence of women with marital conflict.

Method

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, one-month follow-up, and a control group. The study population consisted of women with marital conflict who were referred to the Ravan Plus Counseling Center in Mashhad in 2023. Among them, 45 women were selected using purposive and voluntary sampling and were then randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group (15 participants per group). Data were collected using the Sense of Coherence Questionnaire (SCQ), the Self-Control Scale (SCS; Tangney et al.), and the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ). After the participants were informed about the study objectives and procedures, the first experimental group received Solution-Focused Therapy, the second experimental group received Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and the control group received no intervention during the study period. Each group session was held once a week for 90 minutes over a period of two months. The questionnaires were completed at three time points: pre-test, post-test, and one-month follow-up. Repeated-measures analysis of variance was used to analyze the data.

Results

The findings showed that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Solution-Focused Therapy were significantly more effective than the control group in improving self-control and internal coherence ($P < 0.001$). The results also indicated that there was no significant

difference between the two experimental groups in terms of self-control and internal coherence ($P > 0.05$).

Discussion

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy techniques, such as acceptance, cognitive defusion, and mindfulness, enabled the participants to understand and observe others without judgment. Individuals experiencing high levels of marital conflict often use avoidance strategies, such as emotional distancing, depression, or extramarital relationships, in an attempt to change their current circumstances. However, these strategies are generally maladaptive, worsen the individual's situation, and may further damage the marital relationship, potentially accelerating the process of divorce. The Acceptance and Commitment Therapy approach helps individuals recognize that avoiding or attempting to control unpleasant experiences often increases psychological distress and reduces the likelihood of effective coping. Acceptance techniques encourage individuals to experience the present moment openly, accept their current circumstances without judgment, and act in accordance with their personal values. Solution-Focused Therapy emphasizes individuals' strengths and abilities to generate effective solutions rather than focusing on problems. Its primary characteristic is its emphasis on solutions instead of problem analysis. This approach proposes that even when clients feel discouraged and believe their problems cannot be solved, meaningful change can occur by identifying existing resources, emphasizing strengths, and focusing on achievable solutions. In conclusion, both Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Solution-Focused Therapy were effective in improving the internal coherence and self-control of women with marital conflict. Future studies are recommended to include both spouses in order to examine the effectiveness of these interventions among men as well. To increase the generalizability of the findings, further research should also be conducted in different populations, such as divorced women.

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Ethical Approval: This study is taken from the doctoral dissertation of the first author and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Mashhad branch, Islamic Azad University (Approval No. IR.IAU.MSHD.REC.1402.023). All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional and national research committee.