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The Effectiveness of Imago Therapy on Increasing Interpersonl Trust and Cognitive Flexibility in Young Couples

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Abstract

Abstract

Marriage affects the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral health of young couples. Interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility play a role in family functioning. The purpose of the present study was to determine the effectiveness of imago therapy in increasing interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility in young couples. A quasi-experimental design was used. The statistical population included young couples who referred to Salam Counseling and Psychology Center in Esfahan in 2022. Through purposive sampling method, 16 couples who met the inclusion criteria were selected; they were randomly assigned to the two groups of imago therapy and control (n1=n2=8). Research instruments were Rempel and Holmes's (2007) Interpersonal Relationship Trust questionnaire and Dennis and Vanderwal's (2010) Cognitive Flexibility questionnaire, which were administered to the two groups in three stages. In addition, Muro et al.'s (2016) Imago Therapy program was implemented in the experimental group during ten weekly 60-minute sessions. Data were analyzed using mixed model repeated measures ANOVA. Findings showed that imago therapy could increase interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility in young couples and this effect was sustained in the follow-up phase ($P < 0.001$). Therefore, it could be concluded that imago therapy was effective in increasing interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility in young couples. Accordingly, it is suggested that this treatment package be used for the recovery of interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility of couples.

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Introduction

Trust in a marital relationship is a two-way characteristic which is often referred to by commitment and love (Jan et al., 2010). In families where there is no loyalty, although divorce may not occur, spouses lose their peace and do not consider each other trustworthy (Gingo et al, 2017). Another variable related to family functioning is cognitive flexibility. Cognitive flexibility is an individual's ability to change cognitive cues to adapt to the changing environmental stimuli (Gloster et al., 2017). Cognitive flexibility creates fundamental changes in the reconstruction of individuals' thoughts and improves interpersonal relationships. Individuals with less cognitive flexibility will suffer while they adapt to new situations (Khazaei & Babaei, 2022). It is very important to pay attention to the issues of young couples in order to prevent problems which threaten marital life (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020). One therapeutic method to create a pattern of mutually constructive communication in marital relationships is imago therapy (Nikoogoftar & Sangani, 2019). Imago therapy is a therapeutic method which helps to improve couples' communication, correct developmental fixations, and cure childhood injuries (Knapp, 2022). This method makes couples evolve and creates calmness and intimacy in marital life (Luquet & Muro, 2018). In the imago therapy process, couples examine the root of conflicts instead of solving them on the surface (Matin & Hayati, 2018). Couples can receive more genuine love and affection through changing unconscious marriage to conscious marriage (Muro et al., 2016). Imago therapy reconstructs the imaginary image of couples by presenting a realistic image of love, passion, and relationship (Husseinpoor & Rezakhani, 2019) .

Imago therapy is effective for young couples since it aims to make couples aware of the unconscious aspects of marital relationships, gain a true image of love, and reconstruct the imaginary image of couples. Due to the special position of the family in society, the marriage of young people has become a major concern in Iran. Thus, the current research was conducted to examine the effectiveness of imago therapy in increasing interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility in young couples.

Methodology

The research method was semi-experimental and the pretest-posttest design with one-month follow-up. The statistical population included young couples at Salam Counseling Service Center in Isfahan in 2022. Sixteen couples were selected through purposive sampling method; they were randomly assigned into two experimental and control groups (n1=n2= 8 couples). The inclusion criteria were a score of 63 or lower in the Interpersonal Trust questionnaire, the passage of 5-6 years since the couple's official marriage, informed consent to participate in the study, and willingness to do exercises related to the therapeutic interventions. Moreover, the exclusion criteria included having the experience of remarriage, having severe marital conflicts, having a divorce request, and participating in counseling sessions or psychological workshops. Rempel and Holmes' (1986) Interpersonal Trust Questionnaire (IRS) and Dennis and Vander Wal's (2020) Cognitive Flexibility Questionnaire (CFI) were used to collect data. The imago therapy program of Muro et al (2016) was implemented during ten sessions in the experimental group. Data were analyzed using repeated measurement analysis and Bonferoni's post hoc test using SPSS software (version 23).

Results

Participants in the experimental and control groups were 50% male and 50% female. The highest prevalence of age in the experimental group was 31.25% (in the age range of 20-25 years); in the control group, it was 37.5% (in the age range of 26-30%).

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of the variables' scores

		Interpersonal trust		**Cognitive flexibility**	
Groups	processes	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.
Experimental	Pretest	62.69	12.17	86.55	14.23
	Posttest	96.05	15.24	107.85	17.19
	Follow-up	96.06	15.22	107.27	17.21
Control	Pretest	61.93	14.14	87.43	14.19
	Posttest	61.25	14.28	87.15	14.23
	Follow-up	61.31	14.22	87.17	14.29

According to Table 1, the scores of the experimental and control groups in interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility were almost similar in the pretest phase, but they were different in the posttest and follow-up phases. The results of Mauchly's test of sphericity, Shapiro-Wilk's, and Levene's test of equality of error variances showed that the assumptions of Mauchly's sphericity, data normality, and homogeneity variance were met in the distribution of data.

Table 2. Results of mixed variance analysis through repeated measures analysis

Variables	Sources of changes	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	P	Eta
Interpersonal trust	Intragroup (processes)	1458.45	27,2	729.22	51.83**	<.001	.49
	Intergroup (intervention)	789.39	28, 1	789.39	53.68**	<.001	.55
	Interaction (processes* intervention)	897.73	27, 1	897.73	59.73**	<.001	.57
Cognitive flexibility	Intragroup (processes)	1863.13	27, 2	931.56	57.23**	<.001	.56
	Intergroup (intervention)	898.31	28, 1	898.31	51.39**	<.001	.48
	Interaction (processes* intervention)	1129.94	27, 1	1129.94	59.31**	<.001	.58

As evident in Table 2, the intergroup and intragroup differences in the three phases and the interaction effect of the intervention and measurement phases were significant (P < 0.01). Therefore, imago therapy had an effect in increasing the interpersonal trust of young couples; the interaction effect for increasing interpersonal trust was 57% (P < 0.01). In addition, the results showed that the intergroup and intragroup differences in the three phases and the interaction effect of the intervention and measurement phases were significant (P < 0.01). Therefore, imago therapy had an effect in increasing the cognitive flexibility of young couples; the interaction effect for increasing cognitive flexibility was 58% (P < 0.01).

Table 3. The results of Bonferroni's post hoc test to examine the effect of the intervention on the research variables

Variable	Measurement time	Experimental group		
		Mean differences	Std.	P
Interpersonal trust	Pretest-posttest	-43.36**	4.18	<.001
	Pretest-follow up	-43.37**	4.10	<.001
	Posttest-follow up	-.1	.09	.723
Cognitive flexibility	Pretest-posttest	-153.30**	14.12	<.001
	Pretest-follow up	-153.72**	13.17	<.001
	Posttest-follow up	.13	.98	.418

Table 3 shows that the differences between the means of the groups under imago therapy in the pretest-posttest and pretest-follow-up phases were significant, which indicates the impact of the interventions in increasing interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility and the sustainability of this effect in the follow-up phase.

Conclusion

Imago therapy improves interpersonal trust in young couples. In imago therapy, couples would be aware of the unconscious aspects of their relationships and conflicts. It helps couples understand their partner as a different individual, adjust their expectations, and address the denied and hidden aspects of their personality (Matin & Hayati, 2018). In imago therapy, a secure attachment style is increased in couples through practicing mindfulness, non-judgmental observation, and acceptance of sensations, perceptions, cognitions, and emotions (Husseinpoor & Rezakhani, 2019). Imago therapy improves interpersonal trust. Couples learn to resolve negative interactions and marital conflicts and experience greater trust and intimacy (Muro et al, 2016). Performing imago therapy exercises such as reviewing past romantic memories leads to increased interpersonal trust (Knapp, 2022).

Furthermore, imago therapy increases the cognitive flexibility of young couples. Expressing one's positive and negative emotions helps couples increase their positive emotions. Changing emotions leads to the improvement of the couples' flexibility (Ghasemi Dehnavi et al, 2016). Since imago therapy works on mental images of childhood and mental representation of parents and negative traits, mental and cognitive consistency increases (Luquet & Muro, 2018). Since fixed mental images make one's mind inflexible, changing these images and correcting childhood fixations increases cognitive flexibility (Hendrix & Hunt, 2019). Therefore, imago therapy helps couples achieve more informed and reliable relationships in their marital lives. Being aware of mental images, and changing and modifying mental fixations lead to the improvement of the cognitive flexibility of couples. Considering the effectiveness of this program in young couples, it is suggested that therapists use this program in couple therapy sessions to increase the level of interpersonal trust and cognitive flexibility of couples.

Conflict of interest

This article is taken from a master's thesis in the field of Family Counseling at Islamic Azad University of Tehran, electronic branch. There is no conflict of interest in this article.

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