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The Effectiveness of Couple Therapy based on Schema Therapy on Rejection Sensitivity and Tendency to marital infidelity of Married Women

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Abstract

Abstract

The objective of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of couple therapy based on schema therapy in the rejection sensitivity and tendency to marital infidelity in married women in Isfahan. In terms of purpose, the present study was practical, and in terms of method, it was quasi-experimental with a pretest-posttest and follow-up design with a control group. The statistical population included all women with marital conflicts who had been referred to the counseling centers in the 5th and 6th districts of Isfahan in 2023. Using the convenient sampling method, 30 women were selected and were randomly assigned to the experimental (n = 15) and control (n = 15) groups. The research instruments included the Rejection Sensitivity questionnaire and the Marital Infidelity Tendency scale. The experimental group received 14 90-minute sessions of couple therapy intervention based on schema therapy. Analysis of variance with repeated measurements was used to analyze the data. The results of the analysis of variance with repeated measures showed that couples therapy based on schema therapy had a significant effect on rejection sensitivity and marital infidelity in married women (P<0.001), and this effect was sustained in the one-month follow-up phase (P<0.001). The results showed that couples therapy based on schema therapy had a significant effect on rejection sensitivity and tendency to marital infidelity in married women (P < 0.001), and this effect was sustained in the one-month follow-up phase (P < 0.001). Based on the results of the present study, it could be concluded that couple therapy based on schema therapy is an efficient treatment to reduce rejection sensitivity and the tendency to marital infidelity.

Introduction

A large number of studies have pointed out rejection sensitivity as a communication schema in marital life problems, which indicates a person's tendency to expect, perceive, and overreact to rejection by others (Galliher & Bentley, 2010). Moreover, another common problem in families that leads couples to divorce is marital infidelity (Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2021), which is a shocking issue for couples and families and a common phenomenon for marriage and family therapists. Involvement in extramarital relationships has a considerable prevalence in clinical and normal contexts, which leads to confusion among the perpetrators and their spouses (Nogales, 2020). Therefore, one of the current concerns of family counselors is maintaining the family and its success. Different theories of couples therapy and family therapy try to explain the relationship between spouses and the factors leading to marital stability; they try to intervene based on their theoretical foundations and propose solutions to reduce problems and increase the quality of spouses' relationships (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). One of the effective therapeutic approaches in this field is the schema therapy theory, which addresses the deepest level of cognition and targets early incompatible schemas (Mandler, 2014). Ojaghloo et al. (2022) investigated the effectiveness of this approach in feeling lonely and emotional ataxia of conflicted couples, Ismaeilzadeh and Akbari (2021) studied the effectiveness of this approach in sexual self-efficacy, marital satisfaction, and primary incompatible schemas in couples with marital conflicts, and Mirabi et al. (2021) examined the effectiveness of this approach in marital intimacy. Considering the existence of psychological, communicative, and emotional injuries in couples with marital conflict (e.g., sensitivity to rejection and marital betrayal), the importance of using appropriate treatment and intervention methods (e.g., Couple therapy based on schema therapy) which focuses on the client's basic needs and emotions, the effort to understand the transformational root of incompatible schemas, and lack of research in this area, the following hypotheses o are raised for the present research study.

1. Couples therapy based on schema therapy is effective in the rejection sensitivity of married women in Isfahan.
2. Couple therapy based on schema therapy is effective in the marital infidelity of married women in Isfahan.

Methodology

The research method was quasi-experimental with a pretest-posttest design and follow-up with a control group. The statistical population included all women with marital conflict who had been referred to the counseling centers of the 5th and 6th regions of Isfahan in 2022. An available sampling method was used to select the sample, and 30 women were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups. The experimental group received schema-based couple therapy in 14 training sessions, and the control group did not receive any intervention. After the completion of the sessions, the posttest phase and to ensure the stability of the results, a follow-up was implemented one month later. The measurement instruments included the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ) and the Attitudes toward Infidelity Scale (ATIS). Variance analysis with repeated measurements was used to analyze the data. All analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 26).

Results

The demographic information of the participants showed that 26.7% of the experimental group members were in the age range of 20-25 years, 46.7% were in the age range of 26-30 years, and 26.7% were in the age range of 31-40 years. Furthermore, 20% of the control group members were in the age range of 20-25 years, 53.3% were in the age range of 26-30 years, and 26.7% were in the age range of 31-40 years. The descriptive indices of the research variables showed that the mean scores of sensitivity to rejection and marital infidelity in the experimental group decreased in the posttest and follow-up phases compared to the pretest; this effect was sustained in the follow-up phase. Before conducting the variance analysis with repeated measurements, the normality of the sensitivity to rejection and marital infidelity data was examined through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($P> 0.05$). In addition, the homogeneity of variances was confirmed through Leven's test ($P> 0.05$). After making sure that the assumptions of variance analysis were established, the analysis was carried out with repeated measurements (see Table 1).

Table 1. Results of analysis of variance with repeated measures regarding the effect of the independent variable on sensitivity to rejection and marital infidelity in the three measurement phases

Variable		Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	P	Eta	Power
Rejection sensitivity	Within group	Agent	9907.	1	9907.35	535.18	.001	.95	1
		Interactive effect	9702.81	1	9702.81	524.13	.001	.94	1
		Error	518.33	28	18.51				
	Between group	Group	26866.94	1	26866.94	523.94	.001	.49	1
		Error	1435.77	28	51.27				
Marital infidelity	Within group	Agent	1926.66	1	1926.66	8.79	.001	.74	1
		Interactive effect	1269.6	1	1269.6	53.23	.001	.65	1
		Error	667.73	28	23.84				
	Between group	Group	2371.6	1	2371.6	59.7	.001	.68	1
		Error	1112.13	28	39.71				

The results of the analysis of variance with repeated measurements (see Table 1) showed that the factor of time or evaluation phase had significant effects on rejection sensitivity and marital infidelity. In other words, the scores of rejection sensitivity and marital infidelity in different phases of the test (pretest, posttest, and follow-up) in the experimental group were significantly lower than the control group ($P < 0.001$). On the other hand, these results indicated that the effect of interaction effect of the type of treatment and the time factor on the scores of sensitivity to rejection and tendency to marital infidelity were significant, and explained 94% and 65% of the difference in the scores of rejection sensitivity and tendency to marital infidelity, respectively. In addition, Bonferroni's post hoc test was used to determine the difference in the sensitivity score to rejection and marital infidelity in the pretest, posttest, and follow-up phases and to examine the sustainability of the effect of the independent variable, the results of which are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Bonferroni test results in three phases (pretest, posttest, and follow-up)

Variable	Phases	Mean differences	Std. error	P
Rejection sensitivity	Pretest-posttest	25.33*	1.03	.001
	Pretest-follow up	25.7*	1.11	.001
	Posttest-follow up	.36	.22	.33
Marital infidelity	Pretest-posttest	11.56*	1.18	.001
	Pretest-follow up	11.33*	1.26	.001
	Posttest-follow up	-.23	.15	.45

According to Table 2, the difference in the mean scores of sensitivity to rejection and tendency to marital infidelity in the pretest and posttest was significant ($p < 0.001$). However, this difference in the posttest-follow-up phase was not statistically significant ($p > 0.001$), which indicated the sustainability of changes in these variables until the follow-up phase.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of couple therapy based on schema therapy on rejection sensitivity and the tendency to marital infidelity in married women. The results showed that couple therapy based on schema therapy was effective in reducing rejection sensitivity in married women. This finding is indirectly aligned with the results of Ismaeilzadeh and Akbari's (2021) research study regarding the effectiveness of schema therapy in reducing early incompatible schemas. This finding can be explained by referring to the fact that during the treatment process and by identifying the transformational roots of each schema, the participants realized that the reason for their current behavior was their prior thoughts and attitudes. Moreover, it could be changed through training and special solutions (i.e., experiential, cognitive, and behavioral strategies). Thus, being

aware of the role of schemas, a person revises his beliefs and cognitive structures and accordingly modifies his behaviors and communication patterns. The reduction of the effect of early incompatible schemas in couples results in fast and effective communication, mutual trust between couples, more responsibility, and respect for family rules. In general, by considering the areas covered in schema therapy, the effect of this approach on reducing sensitivity to rejection can be justified. Women whose schemas are in the field of rejection-cutting often cannot establish secure and satisfactory attachments with their spouses and believe that their needs for security, affection, love, and belonging have not been fulfilled. Thus, establishing a proper therapeutic relationship in sessions based on the principles of schema therapy including empathic dreaming could have a significant effect on the improvement of this schema (Young et al., 2006).

In the explanation of the second finding, it can be stated that participating in different forms of schema therapy helps married people manage their relationships emotionally and cognitively; instead of using incompatible strategies, they would use acceptance, behavioral activation, and more meaningful supportive relationships. Thus, their possible marital problems such as the tendency to infidelity would be reduced. Some suggestions for further study include comparing other standard couple therapy programs with the protocol used in the present study, conducting the research simultaneously with the presence of men in training sessions, and comparing the sensitivity to rejection and tendency to marital infidelity in couples.

Conflict of interest

No conflicts of interest are declared by the authors.

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