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Comparing the Effectiveness of the Marriage Moments Program and the Couple Communication Program in Marital Intimacy

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Abstract

Abstract

Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) programs have primarily focused on training communication and conflict management skills over the past few decades. However, there is limited empirical evidence of the sustained effectiveness of skill-based approaches in improving the quality of marital relationships. Recent research suggests that the effectiveness of communication skills is largely dependent on the virtues of the spouses and that training in skills alone, without regard to virtues, does not lead to desirable and sustainable behavioral changes. This study compared the effectiveness of the virtue-based "Marriage Moments" program and the skill-based "Couple Communication" program on marital intimacy. Using a quasi-experimental design with pretest, posttest, and three-month follow-up and a control group, the research sampled 60 couples (120 individuals) visiting marriage and family counseling centers in Sabzevar during the second quarter of 2024. The participants were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned to two experimental groups (each comprising 20 couples) and a waiting-list control group (also comprising 20 couples). The Marriage Moments program was delivered in five 2-hour weekly sessions, while Couple Communication involved ten 90-minute weekly sessions. Couples filled out the Intimacy scale (IS) at pretest, posttest, and follow-up. Data were analyzed using ANCOVA. Results indicated that both programs improved marital intimacy. However, at both posttest and the three-month follow-up, the Marriage Moments program was significantly more effective than Couple Communication in enhancing intimacy. The findings highlighted the value of short-term virtue-based interventions. The Marriage Moments program promised to be an effective method for applying marital virtues in conflict situations, thereby improving intimacy. It facilitated openness to the spouse's perspective and created reflective opportunities for couples to cultivate altruistic virtues in their current and future relationships.

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Introduction

Marital intimacy, as a multidimensional construct consisting of emotional, physical, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions, plays a central role in the quality of couples' relationships (Yabiku & Gager, 2019). Recent developments in research on this concept have highlighted its inherent complexity and fundamental impact on marital stability and couples' well-being (Schoenfeld et al., 2017). Growing evidence suggests that this construct is dynamic and can be strengthened through targeted interventions (Christensen et al., 2010).

Marriage and relationship education (MRE) has emerged as a strategy to improve marital outcomes and reduce divorce in recent decades (Fallahchai et al., 2017). This approach involves activities or programs that teach individuals and couples the skills and principles necessary to build strong and lasting relationships (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). Over the past few decades, the field of MRE has focused primarily on teaching skills to improve the quality of marital relationships. These programs often stem from social learning theory and behavioral models (Koerner & Jacobson, 1994).

The Couple Communication Program (CCP), developed by Miller (1971), is one of the most popular standardized programs for training couples. In this program, communication skills are taught to couples through a combination of methods, including short lectures, guided exercises, and small group assignments between sessions (Wampler & Sprenkle, 1980).

Fowers (2001) stated that the effectiveness of communication skills in MRE programs may depend to a large extent on virtues. In fact, he noted that skills alone are not sufficient to create positive change. Sustainable behavior change is driven by changing attitudes and developing both the secretary's competencies and virtues (Schramm et al., 2017).

The Marital Moments (MM) program is conceptually based on Fowers' (2000) Marital Virtues Model. It presents five core concepts: the myth of marital happiness and the four cardinal virtues of friendship, generosity, justice, and loyalty.

Although the CCP program has been effective in Iranian studies such as Sharifian et al. (2011) and Momeni and Zabet (2014), there is limited evidence of the long-term sustainability of the effects of skill-based approaches. On the other hand, the findings of Khojasteh Mehr et al. (2025) that the virtue-based approach of GOHR is superior to PREP suggest the need for further investigation of these approaches.

Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the distinct effects of the Marital Moments (MM) program based on marital virtues and the Couple Communication Program (CCP) based on communication skills on marital intimacy at post-test and three-month follow-up.

Method

The research method, considering its objectives and nature, was a quasi-experimental research type and was implemented with a pretest, posttest, and follow-up design with a control group. The statistical population of the study included couples who were recruited voluntarily by visiting marriage and family counseling centers in Sabzevar in the first three months of 2024. Sixty couples (i.e., 120 participants) were registered in the study. Couples were randomly assigned to one of three research groups. The first experimental group (20 couples) received the MM program intervention; the second experimental group (20 couples) received the CCP program intervention; the control group (20 couples) were placed on a waiting list and after administering the posttest and follow-up phase, they were offered to participate in one of the two programs.

Findings

In this study, 20 couples with a mean age of 35.00 and a standard deviation of 4.15 participated in the MM group, 20 couples with a mean age of 34.70 and a standard deviation of 4.35 in the CCP group, and 20 couples with a mean age of 34.85 and a standard deviation of 4.20 in the control group. The results of the analysis of demographic variables and marital intimacy pretest scores indicated initial homogeneity of the groups. This made it possible to analyze covariance to compare the groups.

Since there was only one dependent variable in the research design, a separate univariate analysis of covariance was used to compare the effectiveness of the two interventions on marital intimacy, taking into account the role of pretest scores.

The results of the analysis of covariance for the posttest phase, after controlling for the pretest effect, showed a statistically significant difference between the groups ($p < 0.001$, $F = 29.85$, $\eta^2 = 0.340$). In addition, the results of the analysis of covariance for the follow-up data, after controlling for the pretest effect, indicated a significant difference between the groups ($p < 0.001$, $F = 32.10$, $\eta^2 = 0.356$). Details of the analyses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Results of the analyses of covariance for the comparison of groups at the posttest and follow-up phases*

Phases	Change source	Sum of the squares	df	Mean of the squares	F	P	η_p^2
Posttest	Pretest	2485.75	1	2485.75	42.15	<.001	.267
	Group	3518.90	2	1759.45	29.85	<.001	.340
	Error	6839.80	116	58.96			
	Total	12844.45	119				
Follow-up	Pretest	2402.30	1	2402.30			
	Group	3750.60	2	1875.30	44.87	<.001	.279
	Error	6775.15	116	58.41	32.10	<.001	.356
	Total	12928.05	119				

Following the significant results of ANCOVA, the Bonferroni test was used for pairwise comparisons between the groups. The results of these comparisons are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Results of pairwise comparisons with the Bonferroni test for adjusted posttest and follow-up means*

Phase	Group comparison	Mean differences	Standard error	P
Posttest	MM – CCP	5.95	.99	< .001
	MM - Control	14.12	1.01	< .001
	CCP – Control	8.17	1.02	< .001
Follow-up	MM - CCP	7.75	.98	< .001
	MM - Control	15.68	1	< .001
	CCP - Control	7.93	1.01	< .001

As can be seen in Table 2, at the posttest, the MM group had a significantly higher mean of marital intimacy scores than the CCP and control groups ($p < 0.001$). The CCP group also performed significantly better than the control group ($p < 0.001$). This superiority was maintained at the three-month follow-up, with the MM group significantly outperforming the CCP and control groups at the follow-up phase ($p < 0.001$). The CCP group also outperformed the control group at the follow-up phase ($p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The present study aimed to compare the effectiveness of the virtue-based MM program and the skill-based CCP program in marital intimacy. The findings, obtained after carefully controlling for the pretest effect, showed that both intervention programs resulted in significant improvements in marital intimacy compared to the control group at both posttest and three-month follow-up. This result is consistent with the findings of previous studies on the effectiveness of the CCP program (e.g., Brock & Joanning, 1983; Halford & Moore, 2002; Momeni & Zabet, 2014; Sharifian et al., 2011; Yalcin & Karaban, 2007) and virtue-based programs such as MM (e.g., Goddard et al., 2016; Khojasteh Mehr et al., 2025; Sells et al., 2021) in marital outcomes.

Importantly, the MM program significantly outperformed the CCP program at both posttest and follow-up phases. This finding confirms the main research hypothesis that virtue-based approaches are more effective and supports theoretical perspectives (Fowers, 2001) and empirical perspectives (Goddard et al.,

2016; Hawkins et al., 2007) that emphasize the central role of secretary capabilities and virtues in shaping relationship outcomes.

In explaining the effectiveness of the CCP program, it can be stated that this program improves intimacy between couples by teaching structured communication skills (e.g., active listening, using structured I statements, and conflict management skills) because these skills prevent the emergence of destructive behavioral patterns (e.g., criticism and defensiveness) in the relationship which, according to Gottman and Gottman (1999) research, are a major barrier to intimacy. It also improves intimacy by identifying and expressing the emotional needs of spouses, which strengthens the feeling of being seen and understood.

In explaining the effectiveness of the MM program, it can also be stated that this program demonstrates its effectiveness through three key pathways by replacing the myth of spontaneous happiness in marital life with relationship-oriented virtues. The first pathway is cognitive change. Exercises such as listing strengths (generosity) and the ritual of faithful listening (fidelity) reduce negative mental biases and focus selective attention on the positive behaviors of the spouse. The second pathway is strengthening bonding behaviors. Emphasis on sharing responsibilities (fairness) and sharing goals (friendship) replaces bargaining in the relationship with practical cooperation. The third pathway is conflict insuring couples' resilience by anticipating conflict-causing areas (e.g., division of labor) based on the Gottman and Gottman (1999) proactive model.

However, the present finding of the superiority of MM indicated that training in behavioral skills alone may not be sufficient to create lasting changes. According to Fowers (2001), the effectiveness of skills depends largely on individual virtues (i.e., intrinsic motivation) and the fundamental attitudes towards their application.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this research.

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