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# The Effect of Self-Differentiation Intervention on Emotional Blackmail and Emotional Harassment of Couples with Emotional Cutoff Syndrome

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**Abstract**

Marital and emotional difficulties, including emotional cutoff syndrome, are among the fundamental challenges in marital relationships that can negatively impact marital stability and quality of life. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the effect of self-differentiation-based intervention on emotional blackmail and emotional harassment in couples exhibiting emotional cutoff syndrome. This quasi-experimental study employed a pretest-posttest design with a control group. The statistical population consisted of married couples with emotional cutoff syndrome who visited the Mehr Aeen Psychology Center in Malayer, Iran, in 2023. A convenience sample of 40 participants was selected and randomly assigned to either the experimental (n=20) or control group (n=20). The instruments included the Self-Differentiation Scale (DSI-R), the Emotional Blackmail Scale (EHS), the Emotional Harassment Scale (EBS), and a self-differentiation intervention protocol. The experimental group underwent 10 sessions (90 minutes each) of self-differentiation therapy, while the control group received no intervention. Post-test assessments were conducted for both groups, and the data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). The MANCOVA results indicated a significant difference ($p<0.01$) in post-intervention scores of emotional blackmail, emotional harassment, and their subscales between the experimental and control groups. Specifically, self-differentiation therapy significantly reduced emotional blackmail and emotional harassment ($p<0.01$). The findings support the efficacy of self-differentiation intervention in improving marital relationships and emotional dynamics. Thus, this approach can be implemented as an effective strategy in family counseling centers and couple education programs.

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## Introduction

Emotional cutoff, defined as psychological distancing and reduced emotional exchange between couples, not only weakens family dynamics but also has widespread negative impacts on individuals' mental health and even their social functioning (Masjedi et al., 2022). Emotional blackmail is another fundamental challenge in contemporary marital relationships. Emotional blackmail is defined as a controlling behavior in interpersonal relationships where one spouse uses threats, negative emotions, or emotional deprivation to pressure the other into meeting their demands (Anusree et al., 2021). Moreover, the concept of emotional harassment can also damage marital relationships (Alipanah et al., 2021). Therefore, in the context of emotional cutoff, emotional harassment often functions as a maladaptive mechanism to maintain control or fill the void resulting from a lack of intimacy (Sharifi et al., 2024).

Recent research indicates that when psychological boundaries blur and emotions become entangled, relationships become a fertile ground for the growth of destructive patterns (Rodríguez-González et al., 2023); however, through targeted intervention, couples can be taught how to maintain their psychological independence while preserving their emotional bond. One psychological concept that can help this issue is self-differentiation, a construct introduced by Bowen (1993) in Family Systems Theory, which refers to an individual's ability to maintain a balance between emotional connectedness with others and psychological autonomy. Given that emotional cutoff is one of the problems facing modern families and has become a serious issue in Iran (Arbabzadeh et al., 2022), identifying factors and effective approaches to improve these relationships and designing efficient psychological interventions is of great importance. Self-differentiation, as a psychological construct, has significant potential in explaining and moderating marital problems since it attends to both individuality and healthy connection. Therefore, by taking into account both family psychology theories and practical interventions, this study sought to investigate the effect of a self-differentiation-based intervention on emotional blackmail and emotional harassment in couples with emotional cutoff.

## Method

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of an intervention using a quasi-experimental method with a pretest-posttest and control group design. The statistical population consisted of couples with emotional cutoff referred to a psychology center in Malayer. From among them, 40 individuals were selected using available sampling method based on specific inclusion criteria (e.g., having at least three years of marriage and a high score on Emotional Cutoff scale). They were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups (20 individuals in each group). After obtaining informed consent and administering the pretest, the experimental group underwent a self-differentiation-based intervention consisting of ten 90-minute sessions, while the control group received no intervention. At the end, a posttest was administered to both groups. Research data were collected using standardized questionnaires, including the Emotional Cutoff subscale of the Differentiation of Self Inventory (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), the Emotional Blackmail Scale (Karnani, 2018), and the Emotional Harassment Scale (Brahimi, 2008). The data were statistically analyzed using SPSS-26 software

## Findings

The results of data analysis showed that the self-differentiation-based intervention had a significant effect on reducing emotional blackmail and emotional harassment in couples with emotional cutoff. After controlling for the pretest effects, analysis of covariance showed a significant decrease in the posttest scores of the experimental group compared to the control group. The intervention accounted for 25% of the variance in reducing emotional blackmail and 59% of the variance in reducing overall emotional harassment.

Furthermore, the intervention had a significant effect on all components of emotional harassment, including verbal-critical harassment, social restriction, domination, and neglect-withdrawal, accounting for 46%, 27%, 32%, and 24% of the variance in reducing these components, respectively. These findings indicate the effectiveness of this intervention in improving marital relationships.

## Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate the effect of a self-differentiation-based intervention on reducing emotional blackmail and emotional harassment in couples with emotional cutoff. The findings showed that the intervention significantly reduced both variables, with its effect on reducing emotional harassment (accounting for 59% of the variance) being considerably stronger than that on reducing emotional blackmail (accounting for 25% of the variance). This difference is likely due to the more deep-rooted and complex nature of emotional harassment. Overall, the results

are consistent with most previous studies and confirm the effectiveness of this intervention in breaking the vicious cycle of harmful behaviors by strengthening emotional autonomy, self-regulation, and establishing healthy communication boundaries.

To summarize, this intervention is recommended as an effective protocol to be used in family counseling centers. Limitations of the study included the limited number of participants who were from one city and the lack of a follow-up phase to assess the consistency of the effects. It is suggested that future research employ longitudinal designs, investigate the role of mediating variables such as attachment style, and replicate the study in different cultures to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this intervention.

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**Conflict of interest**
According to the authors, there is no conflict of interest in this article.

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