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The Effectiveness of Systemic–behavioral Couple Therapy on Marital Satisfaction, Marital Burnout, and Positive Feelings Toward the Spouse in Married Women with Marital Conflicts Referred to Counseling Centers

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Abstract

Abstract

Persistent marital conflicts are associated with decreased marital satisfaction, increased marital burnout, and decreased positive feelings toward one's spouse. The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of systemic–behavioral couple therapy in improving marital satisfaction, reducing marital burnout, and enhancing positive feelings toward the spouse among women experiencing marital conflicts. The study used a quasi-experimental design with a pretest–posttest control group and a three-month follow-up. Among married women who attended counseling centers in Isfahan in 2025, 64 participants were selected through convenience sampling method; they were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The research instruments included the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (Fournier et al., 1983), the Couple Burnout Measure (Pines, 1996), and the Positive Feelings Questionnaire (O'Leary et al., 1983). The findings indicated that systemic-behavioral couple therapy led to a significant increase in marital satisfaction ($\eta^2 = 0.14$) and positive feelings toward the spouse ($\eta^2 = 0.33$), as well as significant reductions in physical burnout ($\eta^2 = 0.46$), psychological burnout ($\eta^2 = 0.34$), and emotional burnout ($\eta^2 = 0.13$) in the experimental group ($p < 0.01$). The observed effect sizes ranged from moderate to large, indicating the practical significance of the intervention. Overall, the findings suggest that systemic-behavioral couple therapy can be used as an effective approach for improving indicators of marital functioning and reducing various dimensions of marital burnout among women experiencing marital conflicts. Accordingly, it is recommended that this intervention be implemented in family counseling and therapy centers as an evidence-based approach.

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Introduction

The family, as one of the most fundamental social institutions, derives its function largely from the quality of the couple's relationship and their ability to manage conflicts. Although marital conflict is natural to some extent in a marital life, if it persists and is not resolved, it can lead to reduced emotional security, decreased marital satisfaction, increased burnout, and reduced positive feelings toward the spouse (Omoboye et al., 2024; Qavami et al., 2023). Marital satisfaction is a reflection of the individual's cognitive and emotional assessment of the quality of the relationship and the extent to which his or her needs and expectations are met, and its decrease is associated with impaired adjustment and stability of the relationship (Tengku Muda et al., 2021). In contrast, marital burnout indicates gradual physical, psychological, and emotional exhaustion, decreased motivation to participate in the relationship, and increased emotional distance (Nejatian et al., 2021; Jamali et al., 2025). Moreover, positive feelings toward one's spouse, including affection, empathy, attention, and gratitude, can play a role in increasing relationship resilience and moderating the destructive effects of conflicts (Bijani et al., 2023).

Since satisfaction, burnout, and positive emotions are distinct but related constructs, examining them simultaneously provides a more comprehensive picture of marital relationship quality. Systemic-behavioral couple therapy, by integrating systemic principles and behavioral techniques, views marital problems as the product of dysfunctional interaction cycles and seeks to rebuild couple interactions by modifying communication patterns, reinforcing supportive behaviors, teaching problem-solving, and regulating emotions (Baucom et al., 2015; Crowe & Ridley, 2005). Although previous evidence has confirmed the effectiveness of this approach on adjustment, family functioning, intimacy, and some marital outcomes (Goudarzi & Boostanipoor, 2013; Shiri & Goudarzi, 2020; Zamanifar et al., 2022a, 2022b), the simultaneous examination of marital satisfaction, burnout dimensions, and positive emotions toward the spouse, especially in women with marital conflict, has been less studied. Therefore, the present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of systemic-behavioral couple therapy on marital satisfaction, marital burnout, and positive feelings toward the spouse in women with marital conflicts. The main question was whether this intervention could significantly improve these relationship indicators compared to the control group and whether the effects were sustained for three months after the intervention.

Methods

The present study was a quantitative study with an applied purpose and a quasi-experimental design of pretest-posttest with a control group and a three-month follow-up phase. The statistical population included all married women referring to counseling centers in Isfahan in 2025. After screening for marital conflict with the Sanaei-Zaker et al. (2008) questionnaire and considering a cut-off point higher than 115, 64 eligible women were selected using the convenience sampling method. Then, they were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups, each consisting of 32 individuals. Inclusion criteria included being married, referring due to marital problems, obtaining a score higher than the conflict cut-off point, being willing to participate, and having the ability to attend sessions. Furthermore, having a psychiatric disorder, receiving psychological interventions simultaneously, and missing more than two sessions were considered as exclusion criteria. The experimental group received 10 sessions of intervention based on the Crowe and Ridley (2005) systemic-behavioral couple therapy protocol in four groups of eight, and the control group did not receive parallel intervention during this period.

Research instruments included the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (Fournier et al., 1983), the Couple Burnout Measure (Pines, 1996), and the Positive Feelings Questionnaire (O'Leary et al., 1983). Measurements were performed at pretest, posttest, and three-month follow-up phases. Data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 27). After examining the assumptions, multivariate analysis of covariance, univariate analyses, and a paired t-test were performed. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and the research was conducted with the ethics code IR.UI.REC.1404.064.

Results

A descriptive analysis of the data showed that after the intervention, the direction of changes in the experimental group was more favorable than that of the control group in terms of all indicators studied. The mean of marital satisfaction in the experimental group increased from 119.47 at pretest to 126.69 at posttest and 128.91 at the follow-up phase. However, in the control group, it decreased from 122.41 to 118.88 and then to 115.28. Considering the dimension of physical burnout, the mean of the experimental group decreased from 34.50 at pretest to 28.47 at posttest and 28.66 at the follow-up phase, while the changes in the control group were more limited. Psychological

burnout also decreased in the experimental group from 36.47 at pretest to 30.66 at posttest and to 28.91 at the follow-up phase. Considering emotional burnout, the experimental group's mean decreased from 35.53 to 31.41 and then to 28.84, while the control group showed much more limited changes. Furthermore, the mean of positive feelings towards the spouse in the experimental group increased from 22.46 at pretest to 31.53 at posttest and decreased to 0.54 at the follow-up phase, but in the control group it decreased from 47.47 to 41.44 and then to 13.44.

The assumptions required for performing multivariate analysis of covariance were examined. The Energy test confirmed the multivariate normality of the data (E = 1.04, p = 0.83). Moreover, Box's M test showed that the assumption of homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices was met (Box's M = 21.66, F = 1.32, p = 0.18). The Bartlett test also confirmed the significant and sufficient correlation between the dependent variables ($\chi^2 = 125.48$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, the interaction of pretest and group was not significant for any of the dependent variables; therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was also met.

After examining the assumptions, the results of multivariate analysis of covariance showed that the overall effect of group, after controlling for pretest scores, was significant. Based on the Wilks Lambda statistic, $\Lambda = 0.733$ and $F(5, 53) = 20.82$, $p < .001$ were obtained, indicating that the linear combination of dependent variables had a significant difference in the experimental and control groups. The results of univariate analyses also showed that systemic-behavioral couple therapy significantly increased marital satisfaction ($F = 8.99$, $p = 0.004$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$). Moreover, the intervention was associated with a significant reduction in physical burnout ($F = 49.43$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.46$), psychological burnout ($F = 28.74$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.34$), and emotional burnout ($F = 8.68$, $p = 0.005$, $\eta^2 = 0.13$). The effect of the intervention on positive feelings toward the spouse was also significant and practically significant ($F = 27.79$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.33$). The range of effect sizes obtained was from 0.13 to 0.46, indicating the practical importance of the intervention in improving various dimensions of marital functioning. A summary of the results of the univariate analyses, including the F statistic, significance level, and effect size for each of the dependent variables, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Results of univariate analysis of covariance*

Variable	Source	df	MS	F	P	$^2\eta$
Marital satisfaction	Pretest	1	63.81	.65	.42	.01
	Group	1	883.3	8.99	.0004	.14
	Error	57	98.25	-	-	-
Physical burnout	Pretest	1	5.17	.46	.5	.01
	Group	1	554.85	49.43	<.001	.46
	Error	57	11.22	-	-	-
Psychological burnout	Pretest	1	.4	.02	.88	٠
	Group	1	488.81	28.74	<.001	.34
	Error	57	17	-	-	-
Emotional burnout	Pretest	1	19.56	1.69	.2	.03
	Group	1	100.26	8.68	.005	.13
	Error	57	11.55	-	-	-
Positive feelings towards spouse	Pretest	1	59.59	1.31	.26	.02
	Group	1	1260.99	27.79	<.001	.33
	Error	57	45.38	-	-	-

To assess the persistence of the intervention effect, posttest and follow-up scores in the experimental group were compared using a paired t-test. The differences between the two phases in terms of marital satisfaction ($t = -0.993$, $p = 0.329$), physical burnout ($t = -0.310$, $p = 0.759$), psychological burnout ($t = 1.895$, $p = 0.067$), and positive feelings toward the spouse ($t = -0.555$, $p = 0.583$) were not significant; therefore, the changes in these variables remained stable over the three months. However, the difference between posttest and follow-up was significant in terms of emotional burnout ($t = 3.191$, $p = 0.003$). Given the decrease in the mean emotional burnout from 31.41 at posttest to 28.84 at follow-up, this difference indicated a continued improvement in this construct during the follow-up period, rather than a return or weakening of the intervention effect. In sum, the findings showed that systemic-behavioral couple therapy was effective in improving positive relationship indicators and reducing dimensions of marital burnout. In addition, most of the effects were maintained till three months after the intervention.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of systemic-behavioral couples therapy on marital satisfaction, marital burnout, and positive feelings toward the spouse in women with marital conflicts. The results showed that this intervention increased marital satisfaction and positive feelings and reduced physical, psychological, and emotional dimensions of burnout. Moreover, most of the changes achieved were stable up to three months after the intervention. These findings are consistent with studies that have highlighted the role of modifying communication patterns, increasing constructive interaction, enhancing positive emotions, and reducing dysfunctional cycles in improving relationship quality (Omoboye et al., 2024; Shiri & Goudarzi, 2020; Zamanifar et al., 2022a, 2022b).

From an explanatory perspective, systemic-behavioral couple therapy can transform the relationship experience from a draining state to a more adaptive pattern by identifying repetitive cycles of criticism, defense, avoidance, and withdrawal and replacing them with clear communication, active listening, appropriate expression of emotion, mutual support, and problem-solving. Reduced physical and psychological burnout may reflect a reduction in the chronic burden of conflict and an increased sense of control and security in the interaction, while increased positive feelings toward the spouse may act as a mechanism for consolidating therapeutic changes. However, generalization of the results should be done with caution due to the limited sample size of women referring to counseling centers in Isfahan and the short follow-up period. Furthermore, implementing the intervention with the participation of one spouse highlights the need to test the results in studies with the simultaneous presence of both spouses. It is suggested that future studies use six-month and one-year follow-up phases, a more diverse sample, active comparison groups, and comparisons with other couples therapy approaches, and examine the mediating role of variables such as emotion regulation, communication patterns, attachment styles, and self-differentiation. From a practical perspective, the present findings support the use of this intervention in counseling and family service centers to improve the marital functioning of women with marital conflicts .

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Conflict of interest

According to the authors, this study had no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used at any stage of the preparation, writing, editing, analysis, or translation of this manuscript.

Ethical Approval

The authors declare that All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional and national research committee.

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