ISSN: 2717-3216 *Volume 13, Issue 1(2026)* https://www.ijfpjournal.ir/

Iranian Journal of Family Psychology

Research Paper

https://doi.org/10.22034/ijfp.2026.2080455.1487

The Effectiveness of Paradoxical Couple Therapy on Mental Health in Couples with Marital Conflicts

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Article Info.

Received: 11 Dec 2025

Revised:18 Mar 2026

Accepted:08 Apr 2026

Published:20 May 2026

Keywords:

Paradoxical Couple Therapy,

PTC,

Paradoxical Therapy,

Paradoxical Intervntion,

Mental Health,

Marital Conflict

Abstract

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The present study examined the effectiveness of paradoxical couple therapy on the mental health of couples experiencing marital conflicts. This research was conducted in response to the rising divorce rate and the detrimental effects of marital conflicts on mental health. The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest and a control group. The statistical population consisted of couples visiting counseling centers in Tehran in 2021; they were selected via convenience sampling method. Among them, 18 couples (i.e., 9 couples in the experimental group and 9 couples in the control group) who obtained high scores on the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (Barati, 1996) were included as the final sample. The research instruments included the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28) and a paradoxical couple therapy protocol. The experimental group received six sessions of paradoxical couple therapy, each lasting 60 minutes and conducted biweekly, while the control group received no intervention. Data were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The findings indicated that paradoxical couple therapy led to a significant improvement in overall mental health and a reduction in somatic symptoms, anxiety, and depression, as well as an improvement in social functioning in the experimental group compared to the control group ($p = 0.001–0.004$). These results suggest that paradoxical couple therapy is an effective intervention to enhance the mental health of couples with marital conflicts. By reframing the experience of conflicts, this approach can contribute to improved psychological well-being. Therefore, it is recommended that paradoxical couple therapy be utilized in counseling and psychotherapy centers by family counselors and couple therapists.

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How to Cite:
Asayesh, M.H., Chitgarzadeh, M.J., Besharat, M.A. (2026). The Effectiveness of Paradoxical Couple Therapy on Mental Health in Couples with Marital Conflicts. *Iranian Journal of Family Psychology. 13*(1), 1-5. https://doi.org/10.22034/ijfp.2026.2080455.1487

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Introduction

According to the Statistical Center of Iran (2020), the ratio of marriage to divorce in the country is 3 to1, and the highest divorce rate exists among couples who have been married for one to five years. Studies have shown that marital tensions and conflicts affect family functioning (McNulty et al., 2016). Marital conflict is a type of ongoing disagreement that damages couples' psychological, social, and emotional processes and reduces their mental health (Downward et al., 2022; Frye-Cox et al., 2021; Sepehrmanesh & Moravveji, 2016). Mental health is the ability to think well, feel well, and function well in everyday life (Gautam et al., 2024) and is a set of characteristics that act as a protective shield against stressful life events (Manwell et al., 2015). Contemporary approaches to mental health emphasize dimensional models rather than the normal/abnormal dichotomy, and the role of cultural and social context in defining normality has been considered (Joiner et al., 2024). In recent years, new therapeutic approaches have been designed to reduce conflict and enhance couples' mental health, including Paradoxical Couple Therapy (PCT). Developed by Besharat, this approach is rooted in systemic and psychoanalytic theories and utilizes two main techniques: "Paradoxical Bilateral Dialogue Scheduling" and "Turn-Based Management Scheduling" (Besharat, 2018). Paradoxical approaches seek to interrupt negative reinforcement cycles and regulate emotions in relational systems by intentionally prescribing problematic behaviors in a scheduled manner (Asayesh, 2026a; Asayesh & Parsakia, 2025a). Numerous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of this method in various psychological disorders, including anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, interpersonal problems, and marital conflicts (Asayesh, 2026b; Besharat, 2019; Chitgarzadeh et al., 2023; Hashemizadeh et al., 2024; Zahmatkesh & Asayesh, 2026). Recent studies have also shown that PTC has a positive effect on increasing mental health and differentiation and disrupts negative reinforcement cycles by transforming the rules of interaction (Asayesh & Parsakia, 2025b; Zahmatkesh & Asayesh, 2025). Given the lack of similar research in the field of couples' mental health, the present study aims to answer whether paradoxical couples therapy is effective on the mental health of couples with marital conflicts.

Method

The present study was a quasi-experimental study with a pretest-posttest design with a control group. The statistical population consisted of couples with marital conflicts who referred to counseling centers in Tehran in the second half of 2021. Purposive sampling was carried out with random assignment. Thus, initially, seven counseling centers were selected, and conflicting couples were screened with a marital conflict questionnaire (score higher than 126) and a clinical interview. Among the 54 eligible individuals (27 couples), 24 couples (48 individuals) were randomly assigned to two experimental (12 couples) and control (12 couples) groups; ultimately, with the loss of three couples from each group, the final sample was reduced to 18 couples (i.e., nine couples in each group). The research instruments included the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979) with a reliability of 0.81 and the Paradoxical Couple Therapy Protocol (Besharat, 2018). The experimental group underwent six 60-minute intervention sessions at biweekly intervals, and the control group received no intervention. Data were analyzed using multivariate and univariate analysis of covariance tests using SPSS software (version 23).

Findings

Demographic data showed that the mean age of women in the experimental group was 35.4 years and that of men was 39 years; in the control group, it was 35.2 years for women and 39.4 years for men. The mean duration of marriage in the experimental group was seven years, and in the control group was 7.93 years. Descriptive data showed that in the pretest phase, the mean total mental health score in the experimental group was 51.35 (SD = 4.95) and that in the control group was 51.66 (SD = 4.17), indicating initial homogeneity of the two groups. In the posttest phase, the mean score in the experimental group decreased to 40.25 (SD = 3.94), while it remained 52 (SD = 5.27) in the control group. A similar trend was observed in the subscale; in the experimental group, the mean of physical symptoms decreased from 12.05 to 9.60, anxiety symptoms from 13.20 to 9.90, social functioning from 13.35 to 10.55, and depressive symptoms from 12.75 to 10.20, but the control group did not show significant changes. Before the inferential analysis, statistical assumptions were examined. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests showed that the distribution of the dependent variable scores in both groups was normal (significant values for all variables were greater than 0.05). Levene's test confirmed the equality of variances for the total mental health score and all subscales. Moreover, the results of the group

interaction and the pretest for the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes showed that the interaction effect was insignificant for all variables, indicating that this assumption was met. The results of multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) using the three statistics of Pillai, Wilks' lambda, and Hotling showed that there was a significant difference between the two experimental and control groups in at least one of the mental health components (Pillai's t = 0.558, Wilks' lambda = 0.332, Hotling's t = 2.011; F value = 583.14, and significance level P < 0.001). In order to examine it more precisely, univariate analysis of covariance was performed, the results of which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1:*Results of univariate analysis of covariance to investigate the effect of paradoxical couple therapy on the dimensions of couples' mental health*

Source of change	Variable	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	Sig.	Effect size	Power
Group	Physical symptoms	37.55	1	37.55	9.66	.004	.23	.89
	Anxiety symptoms	125.52	1	125.52	25	.001	.44	1
	Social functioning	62.67	1	62.67	13.68	.001	.30	.95
	Depression symptoms	101.89	1	101.89	22.41	.001	.41	1
Error	Physical symptoms	124.30	33	3.88				
	Anxiety symptoms	160.65	33	5.02				
	Social functioning	146.52	33	4.58				
	Depression symptoms	145.50	33	4.58				

As is evident in Table 1, paradoxical couples therapy had a significant effect on reducing physical symptoms (P = 0.004, effect size = 0.23), reducing anxiety symptoms (P = 0.001, effect size = 0.44), improving social functioning (P = 0.001, effect size = 0.30), and reducing depressive symptoms (P = 0.001, effect size = 0.41) in couples with marital conflicts. Moreover, the statistical power for all variables was above 0.89, and As can be seen in Table 1, paradoxical couples therapy was able to have a significant effect on reducing physical symptoms (P=0.004, effect size=0.23), reducing anxiety symptoms (P=0.001, effect size=0.44), improving social functioning (P=0.001, effect size=0.30), and reducing depressive symptoms (P=0.001, effect size=0.41) in couples with marital conflicts. Moreover, the statistical power for all variables was above 0.89, and it was 1.00, it was 1.00 for anxiety and depression.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of paradoxical couple therapy on the mental health of couples with marital conflicts. The findings showed that the intervention had a significant and positive effect on the overall improvement of mental health and all its components (i.e., physical symptoms, anxiety, social functioning, and depression). These results are consistent with the findings of previous studies, including Joudari and Anasseri (2024), Hashemizadeh et al. (2024), Chitgarzadeh et al. (2023), Merzaye et al. (2019), and Besharat (2020). In explaining these findings, it can be stated that the paradoxical intervention works by changing the meaning of the symptom of illness (Asayesh, 2026b; Asayesh & Parsakia, 2025a; Besharat, 2018). In this vein, by structured prescription of conflicts, they transform them from threatening and uncontrollable phenomena into intentional and manageable behaviors (Watzlawick et al., 1974; Weeks & L'Abate, 1982). The paradoxical two-way dialogue scheduling technique with ritualization of conflicts and the turn-taking management technique with the creation of dominant and subordinate roles in turns provide the basis for mutual understanding and the possibility of observing events from the mental lens of the spouse (Asayesh & Parsakia, 2025a; Besharat, 2018). It leads to a reduction in communication and emotional problems and ultimately improved social functioning and a reduction in neurotic symptoms.

Despite the promising results, the present study included limitations such as the lack of complete control of intervening variables, the lack of implementation of the follow-up phase, an insufficient sample size for multivariate analysis of covariance, 25% sample dropout, and analysis at the individual level instead of the couple. Accordingly, future researchers are advised to replicate this study with a larger sample size, a longitudinal design,

a follow-up phase, and analysis of pairs. It is also suggested that educational administrators and counseling centers utilize this effective treatment method to improve mental health and reduce couples' conflicts.

Acknowledgements
The researchers would like to thank all participants for taking part in the study.

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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