

# Effectiveness of Group Counseling With Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Approach on Couples' Marital Adjustment

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The family is the bedrock of the child's physical and psychosocial well-being and is the factor of realization of the physical, psychological and social balance of human beings. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of group counseling based on acceptance and commitment approach on couple's marital adjustment in Kermanshah city.

**Methods:** This research is a type of experimental research (pre-test-post-test). The statistical population consisted of all couples in Kermanshah City who referred to counseling centers in 2016. Available sampling method was used to select the sample. Then, referring to these centers, 40 people (20 couples) were selected and randomly divided into two groups: experimental and control. To conduct the research, all subjects before and after the acceptance and commitment therapy for the experiment group, answered marital adjustment questionnaires (Spanier, 1976) and questions related to demographic characteristics.

**Findings:** The mean indices and standard deviation in inferiority analysis, analysis of multivariate variance (MANOVA) and analysis of multivariate covariance (MANCOVA) were used to analyze according to the results of single-variable covariance analysis. There was a significant difference between the scores of post-test of marital satisfaction and marital adjustment with pre-test scores. The effect of group on expression of affection is not statistically significant (partial  $\eta^2=0.01$ ,  $P>0.05$ ,  $F(1 \ \& \ 244) = 3.76$ ).

**Conclusion:** The results of this study indicated that acceptance and commitment approach could increase marital adjustment of couples. At the theoretical level, the results of this research can confirm the results of previous research. At the practical level, the findings of this study can be used to develop educational and therapeutic programs.

**Key words:** Acceptance and Commitment Approach, Marital Adjustment, Couples

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## Introduction

The concept of family and the value of this institution are considered as the basis of works for every state and society, and each society, firstly relies on the family to develop its future citizens. That is why the family is one of the first institutions that need to be changed in society; change will not be achieved except through the understanding of the scientific recognition of its functions and its degradation. The family, with a healthy functioning environment, helps to stabilize the community and provides growth and prosperity for their members. The family is the bedrock of the child's physical and psychosocial well-being and is the factor of realization of the physical, psychological and social balance of human beings (1).

The issue of marriage is one of the most important issues of human interest and is the first emotional and legal commitment that people accept in adulthood. In addition, marriage contracting is considered as a turning point in personal growth and development. Marriage requires cooperation, empathy, unity, interest, kindness, patience and responsibility. Marital satisfaction becomes a significant variable in relation to the quality of marriage. What is important in marriage and unity between men and women is marital satisfaction. The most important factor in the mental health of married people is relationship with the spouse. A spouse is the main element of a person's emotional and social life and the lack of marital adjustment affects the ability of couples to establish relationships with satisfaction with their children and other family members. Favorable relationships with satisfaction within the family will help the effective adjustment of people in different situations and on the other hand, marital conflicts provide the basis for mental illness (2, 3).

Conflicts and marital differences, whether leading to divorce or tensions, are experienced as depression, feeling of emptiness and despair and bring down deadly blows on the body of society. It has psychosocial effects for both husband and wife and for their children. For this reason, the recognition and treatment of marital differences has the primary importance for any society with any ideology and paradigm (4). Therefore, it is obvious that the quality of marital relationship as one of the most important and stable relationships that individuals experience throughout their lives, plays a vital role in their mental health and a successful marriage can increase the individuals' psychological well-being (5). Marital adjustment is always considered as one of the essential components of a successful marital relationship.

On the other hand, in the relationship between marriage and family life, the existence of challenges and interpersonal problems is a natural subject, but if the spouses cannot solve these issues effectively, a lot of unresolved issues are left and seriously damage their relationship. Researchers confirm the effective role of forgiveness in individuals' mental health and psychological well-being (6). Honarparvaran (2014), tested the effectiveness of this therapy on forgiveness and marital adjustment, but his

subjects were women injured by their husband's betrayal and his approach was considered kind of therapeutic than preventive. However, in the present study, consideration should be given to a sample of married men and women who do not have special marital problems. However, the research done by Saeedeh et al, (2017) Honarparvaran (2014) showed that acceptance and commitment therapy is effective on both forgiveness and marital adjustment of these women. He believes this acceptance and commitment therapy, instead of focusing on conflicts and solving them, adopts a positive approach and takes into account the couples' personal values and their priorities in the life and attempts to discover more effective ways of life by emphasizing the experiences of couples' living (7, 8). Baruch, Kanker & Busch (2012) compared two methods of system couple therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy on marital disturbance of couples aged 20-30 years old. In this study, 30 couples were randomly selected and placed into two experiment and one control groups (9). In acceptance and commitment approach, mental concentration and cognitive rupture (which leads to psychological flexibility) are used. The results of this study showed that the acceptance and commitment approach has improved all communication variables over the couple therapy. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of group counseling based on acceptance and commitment approach on couple marital Adaptation in Kermanshah City.

## Participants and Research Design

The statistical population consisted of all couples in Kermanshah City who referred to counseling centers in 2016. According to the nature of the community, the available sampling method was used to select the sample. 40 people (20 couples) were selected and randomly assigned into two experiment and control groups (each containing 20). Couples should have at least a bachelor's degree and be prepared to continue the sessions. The couples who volunteered to participate in the study were asked to complete the research questionnaires.

## Tools

**Marital Adaptation Scale (DAS):** This scale is a 32-items tool for assessing marital quality in both husband and wife' viewpoints or two people living together. This tool is made for various purposes and can be used to measure overall satisfaction in a sincere relationship by obtaining total scores. Factor analysis shows that this scale measures four aspects of relationship: husband and wife satisfaction, husband and wife correlation, husband and wife agreement and expression of affection. Scoring the questions is from 0 to 151. Higher scores indicate a better relationship (10). The reliability of the whole scale with Cronbach's alpha 0.96 has significant internal consistency. The inner consistency of the subscales is good to excellent: dual satisfaction = 0.94, dual correlation = 0.81, dual agreement = 0.90 and expression of affection = 0.73. Its validity has been tested with content validity logical methods. The husband and wife compatibility scale with the power to identify married and

divorced couples in each question has shown its validity and correlates with Locke-Wallace's Marital Satisfaction Scale. This scale has a concurrent validity

## Description of Sessions Based On Acceptance and Commitment

**Table : The content of sessions based on acceptance and commitment (11)**

Session	Strategy	Interventions
<b>Session 1: Assessment and orientation of treatment</b>	Getting Details About Couples Introducing ACT	Introducing exercises focus
<b>Session 2: Individual assessments</b>	Individual interview, assessment of marital forgiveness adaption	Paired designing sessions, integration of individual and paired assessment
<b>Session 3: Assessing ineffective relationships Costs</b>	Investigating the costs of couples' conflict and avoidance, the development of creative disappointment	Using the Chinese finger trap metaphor and practice fighting and scramble with a spouse
<b>Session 4: Focusing on Sensation and Acceptance</b>	Introducing the focus of attention and acceptance	Exercising the acceptance of thoughts and feelings
<b>Session 5: Cognitive Co-operation</b>	Describing and explaining the negative relationship of thoughts for couples	Bus Driver Exercise, Thoughts on Practicing Papers
<b>Session 6: View the thoughts</b>	Developing an observer's perspective and comparing own reactions and in relationship with the spouse	Thoughts on practice sheets, practice of accepting relationship reactions
<b>Session 7: Choosing the Value's directions</b>	Helping customers to clarify and identify the values of relationship and life	Practicing What's in Life? Do I want a relationship now?
<b>Session 8: Identify the barriers to the value of life through acceptance and observation</b>	Review the worksheet of values, discuss about obstacles of life values and help clients to move with them rather than overcome them	Worksheet of committed action, review of bus driver training
<b>Session 9: Creating flexible patterns of behavior in relationships</b>	Introduction of desire	Worksheet of committed action
<b>Session 10: Self as a context in this relationship</b>	The nature of choice and the ability to respond, the experience of having couples in themselves as the context of the relationship	Commitment Action Worksheet, Metaphor of Chessboard
<b>Session 11: Acceptance and committed action</b>	Review emotional desire in a committed context of action	Committed action Worksheet
<b>Session 12: Work in order to End</b>	Reviewing the values of the relationship and preparation for the committed action at the future and the end of the treatment	CD of exercises the focus of the senses to practice at home

## Findings

Among 20 couples participating in the present study, 10 couples in the acceptance and commitment group and 10 couples in the control group were evaluated before and after education using the research tools. The mean age of the subjects was 36.7 with a standard deviation of 6.3; the age range was from 26 to 53 years old categorized by groups. 3 (7.5%) had diploma degree, 20 (50%) had bachelor degree and 17 (42.5%) had master degree. In Tables 1, 2 and 3, details of each age and education and duration of marriage variables are presented in the two groups.

One of the other hypotheses of the covariance analysis test is the normal distribution of data. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to test this hypothesis. The results of this test to observe the hypothesis of normalization of data distribution indicate that all marital adjustment subscales follow the normalization hypothesis ( $p > 0.05$ ).

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was performed to study the correlation between dependent variables. Since this test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 263.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); this indicates an adequate correlation between the dependent variables for the continuation of the analysis. (Table 2)

Another pre-hypothesis for covariance analysis is studying the homogeneity regression. Considering that none of the marital adjustment scales is not significant in the homogeneity of regression ( $P > 0.05$ ), it can be concluded that the hypothesis of regression coordination is established. (Table 3)

The evaluation of the data attributes showed that the statistical hypothesis of equivalence of variance-covariance matrices for quality of life components (Box's M = 84.81,  $P < 0.001$ ) is not established. Therefore, Pillai's index was used for the purpose of evaluating the significance of multivariate effects. Pillai's index showed that the effect of the group on the linear combination of dependent variables was significant (Partial  $\eta^2 = 0.92$ ,  $P < 0.0001$ ,  $F = 83.07$ ). In other words, there is a significant difference between two experiment and control groups in at least one of the marital adjustment components. (Table 4)

Single-variable ANOVA statistics was individually run for each dependent variable to determine the meaningful source of multi-variable effects. Tables 4-9 show that the group significantly affects marital satisfaction (Partial  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ,  $F = (1&38) = 1$ ), couple agreement (Partial  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ,  $F = (1&38) = 8.70$ ), couple correlation (Partial  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ,  $F = (1&38) = 10.00$ ) and couple adjustment (Partial  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ,  $F = (1&38) = 3.76$ ). The effect of group on expression of affection is not statistically significant (Partial  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ ,  $P < 0.005$ ,  $F = (1&244) = 3.76$ ). (Table 5)

**Table 1: Description of research variables**

Group	Research variables	Pre-test of mean (standard deviation)	Post-test of mean (standard deviation)
Acceptance and commitment	Marital Satisfaction	12.65 (4.17)	32.20 (4.96)
	Couple agreement	16.01 (3.14)	32.00 (4.11)
	Couple Correlation	6.60 (2.30)	16.10 (2.40)
	Expression of affection	4.75 (1.86)	4.80 (1.80)
	Total Marital Adjustment Score	43.60 (10.87)	53.12 (11.36)
Control	Marital Satisfaction	10.65 (1.98)	10.75 (1.25)
	Couple agreement	11.65 (1.81)	11.75 (1.33)
	Couple Correlation	5.20(0.52)	5.75 (1.06)
	Expression of affection	4.50 (0.60)	4.60 (0.60)
	Total Marital Adjustment Score	34.25 (7.47)	35.68 (8.30)

**Table 2: Study of marital adjustment subscale using variances homogeneity test (Lone)**

Subscales	Lone statistics	fd1	df2	Sig.
Marital Satisfaction	0.41	1	38	0.52
Couple agreement	0.45	1	38	0.50
Couple Correlation	2.11	1	38	0.16
Expression of affection	1.75	1	38	0.19
Total Marital Adjustment Score	0.14	1	38	0.70

**Table 3: The studying the normalization of data distribution using Kolmogrov-Smirnov test**

Kolmogrov-Smirnov test			
Subscales	Statistics	df	Sig.
Marital Satisfaction	0.12	40	0.20
Couple agreement	0.17	40	0.05
Couple Correlation	0.12	40	0.20
Expression of affection	0.17	40	0.06
Total Marital Adjustment Score	0.14	40	0.19

**Table 4: Studying the Pre-hypothesis of Regression Homogeneity**

subscale	Sum of squares	df	F	Sig.
Marital Satisfaction	6.92	1	0.21	0.64
Couple agreement	31.03	1	1.68	0.20
Couple Correlation	13.24	1	0.44	0.51
Expression of affection	7.18	1	0.20	0.65
Total Marital Adjustment Score	12.83	1	0.40	0.53

**Table 5: Variance analysis test of marital adjustment scores in experimenter and control groups**

Variable	SS	df	MS	F	P
Marital Satisfaction	160.98	1	160.98	10.86	0.00
Couple agreement	87.84	1	87.84	8.70	0.00
Couple Correlation	40.65	1	40.65	10.00	0.00
Expression of affection	83.12	1	83.12	3.76	0.05
Total Marital Adjustment Score	91.93	1	91.93	11.56	0.00

## Conclusion

The research indicated that acceptance and commitment intervention significantly has increased marital adjustment of couples in the experiment group compared with the control group. These results were in line with the findings of the research done by Honarparvaran (2014), Baruch, Kanker & Busch (2012)(7, 9).

In explaining the results of this research we can say that according to the acceptance and commitment therapy, development and conflict and emotional distance in couples is due to the combination of useless controls of each one and empirical avoidance strategies in the relationship between husband and wife. Acceptance and commitment therapy seeks to undermine these processes and thus reduce the unnecessary suffering of couples, which is caused by empirical avoidance of each one. The main purpose of this kind of couple therapy is to help each husband and wife to be aware of their cognitive processes and their emotional reactions, either alone or in a two-person relationship; realize the values that keep them intact, and commit in practices that are consistent with these goals, even in the presence of unwanted thoughts and feelings. Couples usually avoid situations related with injury, rejection or conflict. Acceptance and commitment therapy teaches couples to get close to the unwanted intrinsic thoughts and feelings

and physical states associated with these dynamics and patterns of communication. It is clearly shown that when one of the couples emotionally feels harmed or weakened, he/she goes into emotional distance. However the emotional distance protects individuals and reduces emotional distress in the future, the conscious acceptance of such thoughts is practiced in ways that target couples' emotional communication and intimacy. As couples begin to use these skills and strategies, they become able to approach previous avoidance situations. Approaching the thoughts and feelings associated with previous avoidance and practice in line with the value of bilateral relationships provides an opportunity for couples to provide a stronger relationship (12). According to Hoffman Hofmann & Asmundson (2008), ACT encourages couples to connect and engage with true values of their lives. From the perspective of ACT, avoidance of experiences creates a harmful process that engages in the development and expansion of marital and family conflicts(13). Greco and Eifert (2004) also write about the effectiveness of focusing exercises; they believe these exercises help a person directly contact with stressful events, especially at the treatment sessions and experience the unpleasant thoughts and emotions instead of controlling or struggling with them(14). The person not only has the full experience of thoughts and emotions, but also allows the spouse to have such an experience(15).

In explaining the results, the acceptance and commitment therapy allows couples to focus on changing relationships with their inner experiences, minimizing empirical avoidance and increasing flexibility and increasing action in valuable ways. Changing relationships with internal experiences involves expanding and clarifying inner consciousness. In addition, it emphasizes the strengthening of an experienced non-judgmental relationship. Correction and strengthening self-compassion (a concept that is opposed by judgment and critique) is an important aspect of this therapy; so that reaction, fear and unjustified judgments are reduced immediately. Ultimately, the purpose of this therapy is to experience the thoughts, feelings and senses as naturally occurring (16, 17). In general, interventions based on this approach have helped couples to resolve conflicts with their spouse, initiating a new and positive relationship trying to reduce their marital problems and ultimately increase their marital adjustment.

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