

## The effect of communication skills training on marital intimacy and marital conflict among young couples: An experimental study

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### Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of communication skills training on improving marital intimacy and reducing marital conflicts among young couples using a cognitive behavioural therapy approach. Data were collected from a sample of 20 couples in Iran who were selected by purposive sampling method. To select them, first, they had to complete at least 2 years of marriage and, second, they should be willing to voluntarily participate in our training course. The selected sample was divided into experiment and control groups using the random assignment method based on a pre-test–post-test plan. The experimental group was trained in communication skills training via 8 weekly based sessions. During this period, no intervention was given to the control group. The hypothesis analyses using the covariance analysis showed that the communication skills training enhanced marital intimacy and reduced marital conflicts in all levels. The findings showed that CBT-based communication skills training can positively affect the family relationship between young couples.

**Keywords:** Communication skills, marital intimacy, marital conflicts, couple, training.

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## 1. Introduction

Marriage is a humanistic, complex, delicate and dynamic relationship with specific characteristics (Etemadi & Jafari, 2009), which is recognised as one of the most important life events (Izaddost, Tizdast & Farhangi, 2014). This phenomenon would create a family which is the primary unit in every society (Olson & Olson, 1999). The family is the first social organisation where the socialisation process starts and also is essentially a centre for assistance, reassurance, relief and education of its members (Hajjabolzadeh, 2002). While some marriages are caused to grow and flourish, many couples can be exchanged disasters against each other (Bagarozzi, 2001).

## 2. The present study and hypotheses

Reviewing and comparing the new and old literature discloses that the cause of many of such failures has been hiding behind the lack of intimacy and existence of conflicts among young couples (e.g., Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). In the Iranian culture, marriage is still viewed as a traditional custom with specific arrangements. The process begins with the request of the boy's family to the girl's family to have a formal meeting together. During the meeting, the families allow to the girl and boy to speak together about themselves, their past, their current condition and their future. After having several meetings, if they realise that they can live together and raise a family well, they give positive feedback to their families and then the process goes to the official stages, i.e., holding a wedding, registering officially and so on (Nejati, 2001). Usually after ending the time-consuming process, families would make sure that the new couple will live together forever. But sometimes their predictions would not be correct and unfortunately fail. On a wider level, more concerns come when the chief manager of Iranian record organisation announces that they have registered 757,197 marriages cases into 2013, which was 4.4% less than 2012, and 158,753 divorces cases, which was 4.6% more than 2012 (Tebyan, 2014). This growing statistics of divorces motivated us to have a deeper look on the root of the problem. Our investigation shows that most of these cases have been suffering from martial conflict and lack of martial intimacy. As the CBT approach (Ellis, 1957) is able to provide opportunity for learning problem-solving methods through practicing, therefore, we decided to apply CBT-based communication skills training as our intervention in order to evaluate the effect of the method on martial conflict and marital intimacy among the young couples by predicting the following hypotheses:

H1: Communication skills training will reduce marital conflict among young couples.

H2: Communication skills training will enhance marital intimacy among young couples.

Figure 1 shows a better view of the relationships between our research variables. As can be seen in the figure, communication training is considered an independent variable and marital conflict and marital intimacy are considered dependent variables.

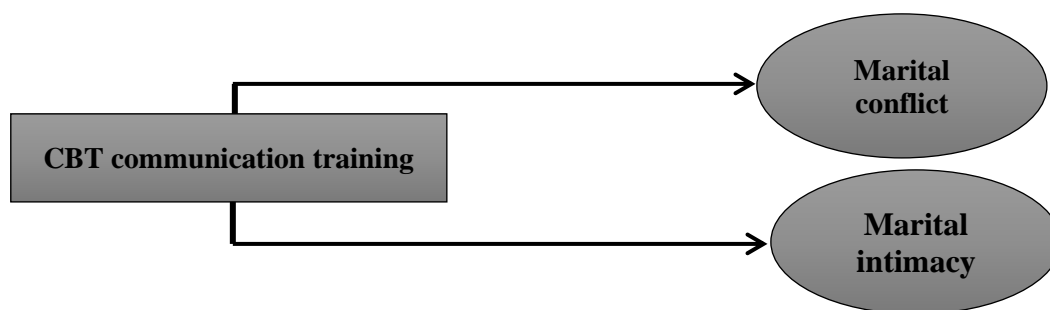


Figure 1. Proposed model of the relationship between research variables

### 3. Methods and materials

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants include 20 young couples ( $N = 40$ ) from the Southwest of Iran who were selected by the purposive sampling method, had completed at least 2 years of marriage and were referred to counselling centres in the city. Subjects were randomly classified into two equal groups (10 couples in the experiment group and 10 couples in the control group). It must be mentioned that the participation of couples in the training sessions was through the mixed sexual shape (husband and wife) within the experiment group, but the couples in the control group was not given any training. The average duration of marriage in the experiment and control groups was, respectively, 5.3 and 5.2 years, and the average age of those in the experiment and control groups was, respectively, 35.6 and 35.1.

#### 3.2. Measures

##### 3.2.1. Marital intimacy questionnaire

This questionnaire was designed by Broucke and Ommen (1998, cited by Erfani & Akbari, 1999); it has 56 items and measures 5 components about being intimate in a marriage. The components include problems related to intimacy (14 items), couples' agreement (12 items), being honest (12 items), interest and compassion (8 items) and adherence to the commitments (10 items). In this research, a 5-point Likert scale was used for assessing the respondents' trends, in the range of 5 = 'too high', 4 = 'high', 3 = 'medium', 2 = 'low' and 1 = 'very low'; in addition, it should be noted that scoring in some items was in reverse from 1 to 5. Other related researches have approved the reliability of this test by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. For instance, Erfani and Akbarai (1999), in their research, showed that the values of Cronbach's alpha for each of the subsets of problems related to intimacy, couples' agreement, being honest, interest and affection and adherence to obligations were obtained as 0.86, 0.97, 0.87, 0.80 and 0.87, respectively. In the present study, we applied the same reliability method (Cronbach's alpha). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each of the subsets of problems related to the intimacy, couples' agreement, being honest, interest and affection and, finally, adherence to obligations were obtained as 0.78, 0.92, 80, 0.69 and 0.72, respectively. Moreover, previous research studies have approved the content validity of this test (Erfani & Akbari, 1999).

### 3.2.2. Marital conflicts questionnaire

This questionnaire is a tool with 42 items to assess the conflicts between wife and husband. This test was developed and regulated by Sanaeizaker (1996). It measures seven aspects of marital conflicts including collaboration, sexual relationships, emotional reactions, support of children, personal relationship with relatives, family relationship with the relatives and friends, and separation of financial affairs from each other. These components have a direct association with marital conflict. Five responding options have been considered for each item and proportionately 1–5 points have been assigned to them. In this tool, the higher score means more conflict and lesser score means a better relationship. To calculate the reliability and validity of this questionnaire, Sanaeizaker (1996) ran it on a group of 111 people consisting of 53 males and 58 females, who were referred to judicial authorities and counselling centres to resolve their marital conflicts, and a control group of 110 people, comprising 53 males and 55 females, who were normal couples. The comparison of the mean value between compatible and incompatible groups and between both men and women showed the existence of significant differences between them, which represents the test ability in differentiating conflicting couples from non-conflicting couples.

### 3.3. Intervention structure

Communication skills training sessions were conducted as our main intervention during eight regular sessions. In each session, there were interventions in a structured and systematic framework to teach them how they can enhance intimacy and overcome conflicts. Participants were asked to perform exercises after ending each session and the quantity and quality of these exercises were assessed in the following session. More specifically, Session I comprised expressing the training course goals and introducing the group members. Session II comprised learning and speaking skills to express the feelings of the wife. Session III comprised strengthening the listening skills to each other. Session IV comprised establishing and strengthening support systems for couples. Session V comprised problem-solving skills. Session VI comprised skills of preserving internal control. Session VII comprised skills of creativity and wit. Session VIII comprised skills of paying attention to the spouse through education (Table 1).

**Table 1. Aim and structure of each intervention session**

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Primary aim</b>	<b>Secondary aim</b>
Session I	Expressing the training course goals and introducing the group members	Acceptance of couples Introducing the members of the group to meet Evaluation of the level of intimacy of couples A study of the perceptions of couples of marital intimacy
Session II	Learning and speaking skills to express the feelings of the wife.	The expression of thoughts Self-disclosure of feelings Forming structural problems and issues positively (reframing) Empathetic response to the beliefs, threads and feelings of the spouse Increased flexibility
Session III	Strengthening the skills of listening to each other	Reception To ask open questions To summarise Precaution in judgments To reflect feelings and content
Session IV	Establishing and	Evaluation of the amount of assistance that couples can provide to

	strengthening support systems for couples	each other in difficult conditions. Evaluation of the status of social support system for couples in tough conditions The promotion and strengthening of support systems The establishment of support systems Increasing a sense of support in couples instead of criticism and involvement in dealing with the problem.
Session V	Problem-solving skills	Usage of the correct and appropriate methods of dealing with the issues Steps to problem-solving Self-perception List of the different solutions To test
Session VI	Skills of preserving internal control	Creating a positive attitude in dealing with the issues The belief in solving issues Acceptance of responsibility for the actions and behaviours Attempt to resolve the issue occurred Having self-confidence in dealing with problems Not afraid of problems
Session VII	Skills of creativity and wit	Different and multidimensional attitudes towards the issues Trying to solve problems The variations in all aspects of marital life
Session VIII	Skills of paying attention to the spouse through education	Mutual respect Understanding emotions An overview of past meeting topics and determining the time to run the post-test

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics among our research variables. It also shows the mean and standard deviation of the sum of scores of men and women (couples) in the pre-test and post-test groups in the variables of marital intimacy and marital conflicts and its components in the test and control groups.

**Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of marital intimacy and marital conflicts**

Steps	Variable	Experiment group		Control group	
		Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Pre-test	Marital intimacy	306.3	35.79	293.3	34.89
	The whole marital conflicts	242.5	22.39	243	16.83
	Collaboration	29	2.7	30.4	3.23
	Sexual relationships	31.9	3.69	32.3	2.45
	Emotional reactions	49	6.81	49.7	2.62
	Attracting the support of children versus spouse	29.7	4	30.7	3.71
	Personal and bias relationships with their	30.5	6.39	30.7	5.01

		relatives			
Post- test	Family ties with relatives and spouse's friends	34.8	5.9	33.1	6
	Conflict resulting from financial separation	37.6	4	36.1	5.3
	Marital intimacy	347.7	34.6	297.7	34.55
	The whole marital conflicts	194.8	20.78	242.7	24.17
	Collaboration	22.1	2.76	30	3.36
	Sexual relations	24.7	2.05	30.7	3.33
	Emotional reactions	38.3	5.41	50	5.45
	Attracting the support of children versus spouse	26.4	4.67	30.8	2.69
	Personal and bias relationships with their relatives	24.7	4.57	31.2	5.11
	Family ties with relatives and spouse's friends	26.1	6.08	33.2	7
Conflict resulting from financial separation	32.5	3.02	36.8	5.45	

#### 4.2. Inferential statistics

To check the default of MANCOVA, first, homogeneity of the slope of the pre-tests was calculated with the post-tests. Table 3 shows the homogeneity slope of the marital conflicts and marital intimacy pre-tests with their post-tests.

**Table 3. Homogeneity between the linear combination slope of the marital conflicts and marital intimacy pre-tests with their post-tests**

Resources	Dependent variables	Squares sum	Df	Squares mean	F	Significance level
Marital intimacy group	Marital intimacy	295.26	2	147.63	0.53	0.59
Marital conflicts group	Marital conflicts	866.68	2	433.34	3.08	0.14

Table 4 presents further results showing the homogeneity of pre-tests slope of the marital conflicts components with their post-tests.

**Table 4. Homogeneity between the pre-tests slope of the linear combination of marital conflicts components with their post-tests**

Resources	Dependent variables	Squares sum	Df	Squares mean	F	p value
Components of marital conflicts	Collaboration	4.56	2	2.28	0.51	0.64
	Sexual relationships	4.60	2	2.30	1.50	0.35
	Emotional reactions	20.71	2	10.35	0.72	0.55
	Attracting the support of children versus spouse	0.03	2	0.01	0.05	0.95
	Personal and bias relationships with their relatives	7.01	2	3.50	2.24	0.25
	Family ties with relatives and spouse's friends	26.62	2	13.31	3.43	0.16

Conflict resulting from financial separation	4.93	2	2.46	0.48	0.65
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To check the homogeneity of the two groups' variance in terms of dependent variables, Levine's test results are presented in Table 5. The table displays Levine's values for both marital intimacy and marital conflicts and their components.

**Table 5. Results of Levine's test variances for comparing the groups' pre-test**

Variables	F	DF1	DF2	p value
Marital intimacy	0.01	1	18	0.89
The whole marital conflicts	0.89	1	18	0.35
Collaboration	0.14	1	18	0.71
Sexual relationships	0.22	1	18	0.63
Emotional reactions	1.62	1	18	0.19
Attracting the support of children versus spouse	0.04	1	18	0.83
Personal and bias relationships with their relatives	1.17	1	18	0.29
Family ties with relatives and spouse's friends	0.06	1	18	0.80
Conflict resulting from financial	0.33	1	18	0.57

The findings in Table 5 present the variance homogeneity, the lack of a significant Levine test and the covariance analysis test is correct. This means that the experiment and control groups before applying experimental intervention (in pre-test) in view of the variances are homogeneous. In addition, the results of Kolmogorov–Smirnov are displayed in Table 6 to consider the normality of distribution of marital intimacy and conflicts in experiment and control groups.

**Table 6. Results of distribution normality of variable scores in both experiment and control groups**

Groups	Variables	Kolmogorov–Smirnov test		
			p value	N
Experiment and control	Marital intimacy	0.58	0.88	10
	The whole marital conflicts	0.57	0.89	10
	Collaboration	0.59	0.87	10
	Sexual relationships	0.60	0.86	10
	Emotional reactions	0.76	0.60	10
	Attracting the support of children versus spouse	0.59	0.86	10
	Personal and bias relationships with their relatives	0.42	0.99	10
	Family ties with relatives and spouse's friends	0.63	0.81	10
	Conflict resulting from financial	0.79	0.55	10

As shown in Table 6, Kolmogorov–Smirnov's test shows significance between experiment and control groups. Thus, normal distribution of variable scores is verified. To compare the effect of communication skills training between experimental and control groups on the basis of post-test scores, we firstly controlled the pre-test effect, and secondly MANCOVA was performed. The MANCOVA results are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7. Results of MANCOVA on post-test scores of marital intimacy and marital conflicts in test and control groups**

Test	Value	F	Error	DF	p value
Pillai's trace	0.83	36.80	2	15	0.001
Wilks' Lambda	0.16	36.80	2	15	0.001
Hotelling Trace	4.91	36.80	2	15	0.001
Roy's Largest Root	4.91	36.80	2	15	0.001

As can be seen in Table 7, the significance levels of all tests allow usability of MANCOVA. This would indicate that a significant difference exists between experiment and control groups at least in terms of one of the dependent variables. Table 8 shows the results of ANCOVA on the scores of marital intimacy and marital conflicts in experiment and control groups.

**Table 8. ANCOVA results on the post-test scores of marital intimacy and marital conflicts**

Variable	Squares sum	Df	Squares mean	F	p value
Marital intimacy	7,126.18	1	7,126.18	30.12	0.001
Marital conflicts	11,143.43	1	11,143.43	69.13	0.001

As can be seen in Table 8, a significant difference exists between the averages of the intimacy marital and marital conflicts in the two tests and control groups ( $p > 0.001$ ). So, hypotheses 1 and 2 are validated.

## 5. Conclusion and limitations

In this research, we examined the effectiveness of CBT-based communication skills training based on cognitive behavioural therapy on reducing marital conflicts and enhancing marital intimacy of couples. The results revealed that communication skills training reduced marital conflicts and enhanced marital intimacy. The results of the first hypothesis have a close correlation with the results of the research conducted by Gottman, Coan and Career (1998), Olia, Fatehizadeh and Bahrami (2006) and Etemadi (2005). As it was observed, a significant difference was observed between the couples in the test and the control groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that communication skills training increased the intimacy of couples. Communication skill training to couples allows them to exchange better messages between themselves; thus, their understanding of each other gets better. Repetition and practice of these skills lead to this that the couple will save these behaviours and the correct skills in the behavioural repertoire and they refer to them in times of trouble. Also, a significant difference was observed between couples in the experiment and control groups in terms of marital conflicts and its components. Therefore, the second hypothesis is approved. The findings of this study are consistent with the results of the research by Berns, Jacobson and Gottman (1999), Hansson and LundBland (2006) and Schilling, Baucom, Burnett, Allen and Ragland (2003).

In explaining these results, we apply the cognitive behavioural therapy approach (Ellis, 1957) to state this training provides opportunity for the couples to do real practices under supervision of a professional trainer in order to learn more about problem-solving methods. The origins of the communication defect are emotional distress, false documents, history of previous enhancement and



so on. However, appropriate training in the field of communication skills can help in developing appropriate communication behaviours in couples and improving marital relationship (Faghirpoor, 2004). The emphasis of this CBT approach is on behavioural, communication and problem-solving aspects. CBT strengthens exchanges, causes behavioural modification and prevents the formation of improper interactions and relationship conflict. Moreover, the widespread use of this approach of communication skills training improves couples' relationship. Usage of the productive skills for solving problems and using emotions, feelings and control of negative emotions and their mutual influence on each other play an important role in reducing conflicts and its dimensions and the emotional reactions (Jahnson et al., 2005). One of the most important communication skills trained in this regard is learning how to deal with solving the problem where the individual learns to control his or her emotional reactions.

The limitations of statistical society and sample size of the research make it partly difficult to generalize the results. Also, due to time limitation of the research, long-term follow-ups of educational outcomes were impossible.

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