

# Effectiveness of Emotion-Focused Therapy on Marital Disaffection and Psychological Distress in Women Traumatized by Their Husbands' Betrayal

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## Abstract

**Background:** Marital dissatisfaction in women can lead to persistent adverse effects and psychological disorders. This study aimed to investigate the effects of Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) for couples on psychological distress and marital disaffection in women traumatized by their husbands' extramarital affairs.

**Methods:** This semi-experimental research was conducted using a pre-test-post-test design with a control group. The study population included all women visiting the Mehravaran Counseling Center in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province, Iran in 2022, who were dealing with their husbands' extramarital affairs. After convenience sampling, 30 individuals were selected and subsequently divided into the experimental and control groups randomly following the pretest. In this process, the experimental group underwent nine weekly 60-minute sessions of EFT for couples, while the control group received no interventions. During the post-test phase, all participants completed research questionnaires. The research tools comprised the Marital Disaffection Scale and Psychological Distress Scale. The data obtained were analyzed using ANCOVA in SPSS version 24.

**Results:** The mean ( $\pm$ SD) of psychological distress and marital disaffection in the control group were  $23.13 \pm 3.64$  and  $33.13 \pm 4.29$  in the pretest and  $23.67 \pm 3.67$  and  $33.53 \pm 4.17$  in the post-test. Meanwhile, the mean ( $\pm$ SD) of psychological distress and marital disaffection were  $23.40 \pm 3.71$  and  $33.80 \pm 4.09$  in the experimental group during the pretest and  $18.53 \pm 3.96$  and  $28.00 \pm 3.11$  in the post-test. The results indicated that EFT for couples alleviated psychological distress ( $P=0.001$ ) and marital disaffection ( $P=0.001$ ) in women traumatized by their husbands' extramarital affairs.

**Conclusion:** Given the effectiveness of EFT in reducing marital disaffection and psychological distress in women traumatized by their husbands' extramarital affairs, it is recommended to provide couples with instruction in emotion-focused strategies to reconstruct and enhance their relationships. Engaging in such an approach can help reinforce positive beliefs and effectively address the psychological challenges experienced by women traumatized by their husbands' extramarital involvements.

**Keywords:** Couples therapy, Psychological distress, Family conflict, Women

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## 1. Introduction

The family is a crucial societal pillar, representing one of the most inherent groups catering to human material, emotional, and spiritual needs (1). Commencing a family and establishing marital relationships, which commence through marriage, bestow upon both men and women a sense of mental well-being and serenity (2). Marriage and its accompanying relationships form the bedrock of support, intimacy, and enjoyment for individuals, fostering collaboration, compassion, unity, affection, and accountability within the family structure (3, 4). The achievement of matrimonial aspirations following the establishment of these marital bonds culminates in contentment and joy for couples; conversely, it can lead to marital discord and resultant

dissatisfaction (5). Acknowledged as a fundamental determinant of mental health within a community, marriage's association with psychological well-being is contingent upon successfully navigating challenges. Prolonged marital discontent can precipitate enduring adverse repercussions and psychological disorders (6). When contrasted with other human associations, matrimony presents the optimal avenue for attaining happiness, social reinforcement, and intimacy, binding individuals in a manner unparalleled by any alternative bond (7). Nonetheless, divorce epitomizes one of the most disheartening societal occurrences and the foremost indication of severe interpersonal conflicts (8, 9).

Over time, numerous factors imperil the conjugal rapport of couples, eroding their affection and

closeness and contributing to relationship fatigue. These dilemmas often amplify progressively, occasionally reaching a point of insufferability (10). The research underscores that a substantial portion of the predicaments experienced by young couples can be traced back to the nature of their relational dynamics (11). Since heartbreak is associated with feelings such as anger, hatred, despair and disappointment, the accumulation of these feelings over time causes reluctance and dissatisfaction with the spouse (12). Extramarital affairs, stemming from breaches in commitment and the erosion of trust within a family, represent a distressing factor jeopardizing family structure, marital stability, and overall health. With particularly adverse implications for women's mental well-being, infidelity threatens marital bonds' sustainability, robustness, and endurance (13, 14). Marital commitment signifies the extent to which couples prioritize and are motivated to safeguard and nurture their marital union (15). Commitment encompasses self-constructed or externally dictated values and beliefs (16). Studies posited that those with a more lenient attitude toward extramarital affairs are statistically more prone to engaging in such actions (13). In essence, attitudes towards extramarital affairs are a crucial predictor of proclivity for such relationships, as these beliefs and values either endorse or proscribe engagement in extramarital entanglements (17).

Marital disillusionment frequently emerges from unmet marriage objectives within couples. According to Karasu and colleagues (18), negative occurrences within a marriage accumulate to an extent where they foster marital disillusionment. Consequently, marital disillusionment is not solely the result of these events but their cumulative effect. More specifically, disillusionment pertains to the emotional dimensions of marriage: sentiments of love, significance, and mutual interest rather than actual behaviors (19). Disillusionment typically emerges as an intrinsic progression, potentially manifesting in one partner while remaining absent in the other. Even when both partners experience a sense of detachment, the disillusionment may differ markedly. Furthermore, a partner not experiencing disillusionment might inadvertently exacerbate their counterpart's estrangement and anguish by disregarding their emotions (20). Broadly, disillusionment intensifies as negative interactions between spouses escalate, with the

accumulation of disillusionment as an emotional impediment to future positive interactions.

Psychological distress is a constellation of distressing mental, physiological, and behavioral symptoms, such as depression, anxiety reactions, and diminished intelligence (21). Studies revealed that individuals experiencing psychological distress tend to articulate heightened complaints concerning physical symptoms. Indeed, the frequency of physical disorders is a potent predictor of impairment across physical, psychological, and social functioning (22). Moreover, psychological distress exerts strain upon the immediate social circle of a patient, inducing escalated pleas for assistance via social media and precipitating strains within relationships involving partners, children, and friends (23).

Conceived by Greenman and Johnson (24), emotion-focused therapy (EFT), designed for couples, is a concise therapeutic regimen aimed at aiding couples in managing emotional and communicative discrepancies. This approach emphasizes the dynamics between partners as the focal point for therapeutic transformation (25). According to the tenets of EFT for couples, the interplay between partners and their internal emotional encounters bears reciprocal influence (26). EFT for couples seeks to uncover and reevaluate fundamental emotional responses within partner interactions. These responses engender more secure attachment styles, novel relational patterns, heightened empathy for each other's experiences, and the cultivation of innovative interaction paradigms (27). Notably, EFT stands apart from other psychotherapeutic methods due to its propensity for augmenting emotional well-being. The cardinal objective of EFT entails the augmentation and restructuring of emotional responsiveness within the dyad (24). The manifold benefits of EFT encompass fortified emotional bonds and enhanced interpersonal comprehension. The EFT approach, anchored in attachment theory, posits that interpersonal attachment generally functions as a secure refuge, offering solace and serving as a buffer against stress (26).

The psychological repercussions of spousal infidelity exert deleterious effects on women and the familial structure, potentially steering the couple toward the precipice of divorce if

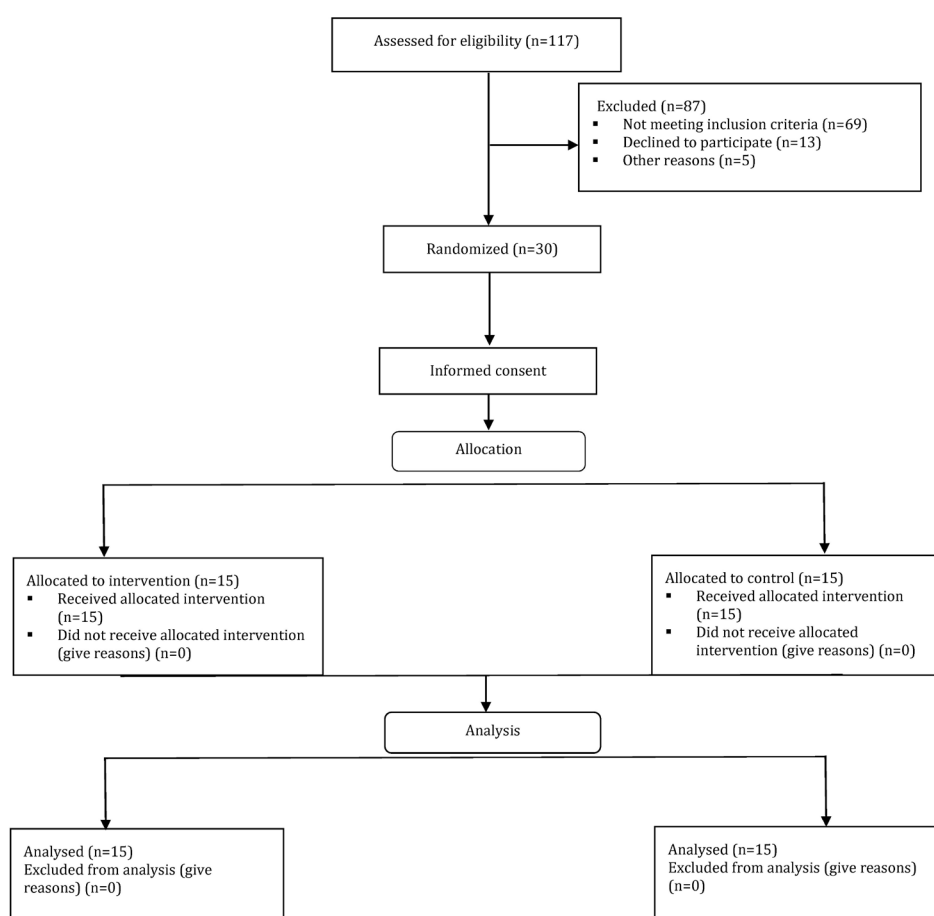
left untreated. By scrutinizing the backdrop of research and the extant discourse regarding the efficacy of EFT for couples in addressing relational and familial challenges, it becomes evident that this modality holds promise for ameliorating women's psychological predicaments. Given the raised issues and recognizing the pivotal role of preserving marital well-being and the function of couple's therapy in ameliorating interactions and abating discord among partners, the present study aspired to assess the efficacy of the EFT approach in alleviating psychological distress and marital disillusionment among women traumatized by their husbands' extramarital affairs.

## 2. Methods

This semi-experimental research employed a pretest-posttest control group design. The study's target population encompassed all women who sought assistance at the Mehravaran Counseling Center in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province, Iran in 2022 and expressed concerns regarding their husbands' extramarital affairs. This study utilized convenience sampling, and 30 women were invited

to participate. Subsequently, they were allocated randomly into an experimental group (n=15) and a control group (n=15) through the use of a simple randomization technique aided by a table of random numbers (Figure 1). Throughout the random assignment process, each participant was assigned a random number, which was then utilized to sort individuals into two groups based on the evenness or oddness of their assigned numbers. One of the groups was subsequently assigned as the experimental group, while the other was designated as the control group. The determination of the sample size for this study was predicated upon earlier research and aligned with the parameters set forth by the G\*Power software (effect size=1.48,  $1-\beta=0.95$ , and  $\alpha=0.05$ ) (28).

The stipulated inclusion criteria for this study comprised the following: being married, falling within the age range of 18 to 50 years, possessing a minimum of a high school diploma, and having encountered incidents of spousal infidelity within the preceding two years. Conversely, the exclusion criteria were the presence of chronic physical or mental ailments based on self-reported information



**Figure 1:** The figure show the CONSORT flow diagram.

from participants and consistent absenteeism from therapy sessions.

### 2.1. Procedural Details

The commencement of the research was contingent upon obtaining ethical approval with the code of IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1401.087 from the university's ethics committee. Identification and recruitment of women who had experienced emotional distress resulting from their husbands' extramarital affairs occurred through contact with the Ahvaz Mehravaran Counseling Center. After selecting eligible participants, written informed consent was obtained from the participants. The participants were then segregated into intervention and control groups. Prior to the commencement of any interventions, pretests were administered to both groups. After the completion of the therapy sessions, post-tests were conducted. The intervention group underwent nine weekly 60-minute sessions centered on Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) for couples, while the control group received no therapeutic interventions. A breakdown of the session structures within the EFT for couples can be found in Table 1 (29). Following the conclusion of the treatment sessions, post-tests were conducted for the experimental and control groups.

### 2.2. Measurement Metrics of the Study

**2.2.1. Psychological Distress Scale:** The Psychological Distress Scale, conceived by Kessler and colleagues (30), assessed the participants' psychological well-being over the preceding month. This scale encompasses 10 items, each of which the respondent rates on a five-point scale from "never" to "always." Scores on this scale range from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating more pronounced psychological distress. The content

validity index (CVI) and content validity ratio (CVR) for this scale were both reported as 0.98 and 0.99, respectively (31). In a study by Mandizadeh and Homaei (31), Cronbach's alpha coefficient was computed at 0.95.

**2.2.2. Marital Disaffection Scale:** The Marital Disaffection Scale, crafted by Kayser (32), is a 21-item questionnaire which assesses the degree of disaffection or absence of affection for a spouse. Responses are rated on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly true") to 4 ("false"). The cumulative scores on this scale span from 21 to 84. A respondent's total score is computed by summing the scores of all the items. The Marital Disaffection Scale's Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI) were reported as 0.98 and 0.96, respectively (33). Nazari and colleagues (33) calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient to be 0.94 in their study.

### 2.3. Statistical Analyses

To compare demographic variables between the two participant groups, independent t-tests and chi-squared tests were employed. Additionally, paired t-tests were utilized to compare means. Levene's test assessed the homogeneity of variance for psychological distress and marital disaffection. Furthermore, the pretest and post-test data from both the intervention and control groups were subjected to descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (ANCOVA).

## 3. Results

The study participants comprised women who had experienced trauma due to their husbands' betrayal, with an average age of  $33.74 \pm 7.15$  years (as shown in Table 2).

**Table 1:** The general structures of the sessions in the emotion-focused therapy (EFT) for couples (29)

| Session | Topic   |
|---------|---|
| 1       | Introducing the participants to each other and establishing communications between them; introducing the training course; raising the main questions    |
| 2       | Explaining the topics of conflicts; identifying the negative interaction cycle that keeps couples in distress and prevents establishment of a safe bond |
| 3       | Accessing the unidentified emotions that form the foundations of interactive situations   |
| 4       | Reframing the problem based on fundamental emotions and attachment needs  |
| 5       | Increasing identification of those needs and self-aspects that have been denied   |
| 6       | Increasing acceptance of the experiences of one's spouse and finding new ways of interaction  |
| 7       | Facilitating the expression of needs and demands and connecting emotionally with the spouse   |
| 8       | Facilitating the development of new solutions to old problems and issues  |
| 9       | Integrating the new situations that the spouses have acquired towards each other  |



**Table 2:** Demographic variables of the women

| Groups             | Mean±SD<br>age (years) | Duration of<br>cohabitation (years) | Education             |                   | Employment status |            |
|--------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------|
|                    |                        |                                     | High school education | College education | Housewife         | Employed   |
| Experimental group | 34.46±4.22             | 6.71±1.18                           | 3 (20.0%)             | 12 (80.0%)        | 5 (33.3%)         | 10 (66.7%) |
| Control group      | 33.71±4.48             | 6.55±1.37                           | 6 (40.0%)             | 9 (60.0%)         | 6 (40.0%)         | 9 (60.0%)  |
| P                  | 0.641                  | 0.734                               | 0.239                 |                   | 0.709             |            |

**Table 3:** Mean ( $\pm$ standard deviation) of the psychological distress and marital disaffection in the experimental and control groups

| Variables              | Phases    | Experimental group | Control group | P (between-group) |
|------------------------|-----------|--------------------|---------------|-------------------|
|                        |           | Mean±SD            | Mean±SD       |                   |
| Psychological distress | Pre-test  | 23.40±3.71         | 23.13±3.64    | 0.842             |
|                        | Post-test | 18.53±3.96         | 23.67±3.67    | 0.001             |
| P (within-group)       |           | 0.001              | 0.689         | -                 |
| Marital disaffection   | Pre-test  | 33.80±4.09         | 33.13±4.29    | 0.665             |
|                        | Post-test | 28.00±3.11         | 33.53±4.17    | 0.001             |
| P (within-group)       |           | 0.001              | 0.798         | -                 |

Table 3 presents the mean ( $\pm$ standard deviation) scores for pretest and post-test psychological distress and marital disaffection in the experimental and control groups. According to the results, the mean ( $\pm$ standard deviation) pretest scores for psychological distress were 23.4±3.71 and 23.13±3.64 in the experimental and control groups, respectively. Conversely, the corresponding post-test scores for the two groups were 18.53±3.96 and 23.67±3.67. Moreover, the mean ( $\pm$ standard deviation) pretest scores for marital disaffection were 33.8±4.09 and 33.13±4.29 in the experimental and control groups, respectively. However, the corresponding post-test scores were 28.0±3.11 and 33.53±4.1 for the two groups, respectively.

Levene's test statistic for psychological distress variables ( $F=0.32$ ,  $P=0.571$ ) and marital disaffection ( $F=0.25$ ,  $P=0.612$ ) indicated homogeneity of variances. The results demonstrated that there were no significant interactions between the auxiliary variables (pretests) and the dependent variables (post-tests) among the different groups (i.e., the experimental group and the control group). Therefore, the hypothesis of homogeneity of regression was confirmed.

According to the findings of the analysis of covariance, the Emotional Focused Therapy (EFT) for couples led to an improvement in psychological distress within the experimental group when compared to the control group ( $F=52.87$ ,  $P=0.001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.67$ ). Furthermore, this intervention mitigated marital disaffection among women who had experienced trauma due to their husbands' extramarital affairs in the experimental group, as

opposed to the control group ( $F=150.73$ ,  $P=0.001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.85$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

The findings indicated that Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) for couples significantly improved psychological distress among women traumatized by their husbands' extramarital affairs. Furthermore, according to the research outcomes, EFT for couples significantly alleviated marital disaffection in women traumatized by their husbands' infidelity. In alignment with the present study's findings, Najafi and colleagues (25) reported that EFT for couples yielded positive effects on marital adjustment among infertile couples dealing with marital conflicts. Similarly, Shareh and colleagues (27) observed that EFT effectively enhanced self-compassion and sexual function in women with premenstrual dysphoric disorder.

This phenomenon can be elucidated by understanding that the transformative process of EFT for couples manifests through expressing underlying emotions and unmet needs. Therapists in this approach perceive emotional avoidance or detachment as disruptors of relationships while valuing the joyous sensation of connection as a catalyst for increased flexibility and enhanced distress tolerance. In situations of emotional detachment (also known as emotional cutoff), partners are inclined to withdraw emotionally or exit relationships during stressful scenarios. This behavior often stems from desiring to avoid or disregard emotionally distressing situations (25).

Within the framework of EFT, emotional skills, encompassing the capacity to recognize and communicate emotions and empathize with others, contribute to heightened intimacy, feelings of security, and excellent receptiveness to constructive criticisms. These skills foster a sense of tranquility within conflicting couples, allowing them to rekindle their marital bond and sustain their relationship (24). EFT for couples guides couples through the process of re-establishing their connection, enabling them to reduce distress through emotional intervention. This phenomenon, in turn, facilitates the development of deeper intimacy, affection, and strong interpersonal ties.

EFT participants tend to hold more optimistic outlooks on their future relationship well-being than couples undergoing alternative therapy. EFT does not primarily focus on honing conversational skills, as it operates under the premise that these skills will only be available once underlying emotional conflicts are addressed (27). Emotional conflicts overshadow people's communication abilities.

This observation finds its rationale in that the foundation of EFT for couples is rooted in adult love, attachment styles, and relational distress. This approach underscores the importance of nurturing compatible attachment styles through mutual attention, support, and safeguarding each partner's needs. In practice, couples often express less threatening emotions rather than expressing solid emotions that expose vulnerability (25). Consequently, distressed couples become entangled in rigid patterns and recurring interactive cycles perpetuated by them. Their inability to tolerate the emotions they experience contributes to their distress and compounds the intractability of their problems (9). EFT fundamentally posits that emotion constitutes a vital aspect of an individual's character and a pivotal determinant of self-regulation. Emotions function primarily as a mechanism for processing information adaptively and compatibly, shaping behavior and contributing to psychological well-being (27).

Many factors influence marital dynamics, some of which may propel couples toward discord, contention, emotional detachment, dissatisfaction, fatigue, and dissolution. EFT stands out as one of the few therapeutic models that effectively amalgamate patient-centered therapy, Gestalt therapy, and cognitive principles (24).

#### 4.1. Limitation

Implementing the intervention program for the experimental group posed challenges due to the considerable employment commitments of many women. The intervention program had a brief duration, and limitations in accessing participants precluded the possibility of a follow-up period. Many women declined participation in the research, citing the sensitive nature of the issue, making it challenging for the researcher to garner their cooperation. The research sample comprised women seeking counseling at Ahvaz (Iran) counseling centers, specifically those who voiced concerns about their husbands' extramarital affairs. Consequently, generalizing the results to different populations or culturally distinct cities may prove unfeasible, given the variations in demographics and cultural contexts.

#### 5. Conclusion

Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) for couples has demonstrated its efficacy in ameliorating psychological distress and attenuating marital disaffection among women who have experienced trauma due to their husbands' extramarital affairs. The findings of this study underscore the significance of addressing psychological distress as a pivotal element in enhancing marital satisfaction. The amelioration of marital disaffection encompasses alleviating negative emotions and augmentation of positive sentiments within couples, thereby playing a pivotal role in reducing conflicts.

Given the compelling outcomes achieved through the utilization of EFT for couples in alleviating both marital disaffection and psychological distress, it is strongly recommended that couples be guided in adopting emotion-focused strategies. These strategies can aid in reconstructing and fortifying their relationships, fostering positive beliefs, and ameliorating the psychological challenges faced by women traumatized by their husbands' extramarital involvements.

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### Authors' Contribution

Sakineh Ameri: Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data for the work; reviewing the work critically for important intellectual content. Fatemeh Sadat Marashian: Substantial contributions to the conception of the work, drafting the work and reviewing it critically for important intellectual content. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, such that the questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

### Ethical Approval

The ethical approval was obtained from Islamic Azad University-Ahvaz Branch with the code of IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1401.087. Also, written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

**Conflict of interest:** None declared.

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