

Examining the Effectiveness of Wisdom-Oriented Couples Therapy on Sense of Coherence, Cognitive-Affective Empathy, and Emotion Regulation in Conflicted Couples

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of wisdom-oriented couples therapy on sense of coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, and emotion regulation in conflicted couples.

Methods: The research method was quasi-experimental, employing a pretest-posttest design with a control group and follow-up. The statistical population included all couples with less than five years of marital life in Tehran during the summer and autumn of 2023 who sought counseling at one of the Andisheh, Athena, or Golchin-e-Raz counseling centers in Tehran to improve intimate relationships. To select the sample, an announcement regarding session formation and initial registration conditions was provided to clients and referred by consulting colleagues. After registration, eligible couples were identified through preliminary interviews based on the study's inclusion criteria. A total of 40 individuals were selected using convenience sampling and were randomly assigned to an experimental group (20 individuals) and a control group (20 individuals). It is noteworthy that eight conflicted couples were allocated to each group. The research instruments included the Barati and Sanaei Marital Conflicts Questionnaire (1996), Antonovsky's Sense of Coherence Scale (1993), the Baron-Cohen Empathy Quotient (2004), and the Williams et al. Emotion Regulation Scale (1997). For data analysis, descriptive statistics (e.g., charts, tables, frequencies, percentages, means, variances) were employed to organize, summarize, and present the data derived from variables. To test the study hypotheses, repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni post hoc tests were utilized to perform pairwise group comparisons. SPSS version 24 was used for data analysis.

Findings: The results indicated that wisdom-oriented couples therapy significantly impacts sense of coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, and emotion regulation in conflicted couples.

Conclusion: Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that wisdom-oriented couples therapy improves sense of coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, and emotion regulation in conflicted couples.

Keywords: *Wisdom-oriented couples therapy, sense of coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, emotion regulation, conflicted couples.*

1. Introduction

Marriage has long been a significant social institution shaping families, which in turn provide a safe space for men, women, and children worldwide. It is recognized that families can be both "a source of support and, occasionally, a barrier to personal or social growth; an emotional sanctuary, and at times, a source of emotional pressure" (Laura & Bradford, 2013). However, research has demonstrated that marriage, compared to single life, increases well-being in both men and women (McKeown, 2001). As the most important and esteemed social institution for fulfilling adults' emotional and security needs, marriage has always been valued. It is a complex, delicate, and dynamic human relationship characterized by specific features. Moreover, attention to the family unit creates a healthy and constructive environment, fostering warm relationships and interpersonal intimacy, which can facilitate personal growth and progress—key goals and needs of marriage (Bernstein & Bernstein, 2003).

Studies indicate qualitative differences between long-term and short-term marriages, with the success or failure of couples in maintaining their marital relationships and marriage stability largely dependent on marital interactions and conflict management (Khamis & Ayuso, 2021). These interactions involve various factors, such as understanding one's own emotions, understanding the partner's emotions, comfort, reassurance, positivity, social networks, and division of responsibilities (Cullen & Fergus, 2021). Recent psychological reports suggest that feelings of security, calmness, and coherence between men and women have diminished, with families increasingly confronting destructive forces (Hou et al., 2019).

A sense of coherence generates generalized resistance resources that moderate the effects of stress on health by offering beneficial strategies to cope with stressors. This enables individuals to show greater resilience against life stressors (Berget et al., 2023; Urtubia-Herrera, 2024). A sense of coherence reflects a general orientation of trust and dynamic stability in life and the surrounding world. It helps individuals perceive internal and external stimuli in a more organized, predictable, and comprehensible manner. Simply put, it refers to an individual's perception that life is understandable, manageable, and meaningful (Eriksson, 2022; Moghadamnia & Soleimani Farsani, 2023; Mosaei et al., 2023). Moen et al. (2019) assert that a high sense of coherence is positively associated with adaptation to stressful situations, such as marital conflicts, leading to

greater well-being and reduced depression, distress, and anxiety (Moen et al., 2019). Research indicates that individuals with a strong sense of coherence are more successful in coping with stress (Hashemi & Einy, 2021). Furthermore, coherence significantly impacts the physical and mental health of couples (Chaddha et al., 2016).

Cognitive-affective empathy is another variable recently highlighted in research on its relationship with couples' sense of coherence. Empathy, often regarded as a positive trait, leads to desirable outcomes such as prosocial behavior, compassion, and improved interpersonal relationships, including those with friends and partners in stressful life situations. Empathy motivates individuals to assist others (Shuper Engelhard, 2019). It is a multidimensional construct that generally describes the capacity to understand and share thoughts and feelings with others (McDonald et al., 2018). Affective empathy represents the ability to share or be emotionally aroused by the emotional states of others, while cognitive empathy is the conscious ability to adopt another's perspective to understand their thoughts or feelings (Kato, 2021). While empathy is recognized as a critical construct for interpersonal and social relationships, recent research suggests varying functions of this variable, including associations between high affective empathy and low cognitive empathy with symptoms of depression and anxiety, which are critical indicators of emotion regulation in couples (Busch et al., 2022). Dekel et al. (2018) found that low cognitive empathy was associated with increased depressive symptoms, and empathic concern—a component of affective empathy—was linked to heightened anxiety (Dekel et al., 2018).

Emotions are an integral part of couples' lives, and while negative emotions cannot be entirely avoided, they can potentially be controlled. Excessive emotional responses can lead to maladaptation, aggression, anger, hatred, and anxiety, which, when unchecked, pose significant threats to individuals' mental and emotional health (Vazhappilly & Reyes, 2018). Goleman (2010) argues that much of the art of communication, marital satisfaction, and success in marital matters involves emotional regulation. Emotions benefit humans by directing their actions toward goals beneficial to survival and alerting them to avoid detrimental actions (Mattio, 2021). Emotional regulation is defined through four dimensions: negative affect, anxiety, anger, and depressive mood. It determines which emotions are experienced, when, and how they are expressed (Gagnière et al., 2018). This ability is essential for adapting to stressful life experiences and is characterized by individual efforts to regulate,

enhance, and express emotions. Effective emotional management fosters realism, goodwill, and kindness, enabling individuals to contribute positively to societal progress (El-Seedy et al., 2020; Honarparvaran, 2017).

In light of the above, it appears that enhancing wisdom, reducing marital conflicts, and improving coherence, empathy, emotional regulation, and emotional adjustment are crucial for family stability (Wolinsky, 1990). Various methods for improving couples' relationships and family stability have been introduced, including wisdom-based interventions. Wisdom seems to be a vital factor in shaping couples' family relationships and influences their understanding of relationships (Auer-Spath & Glück, 2019). Wisdom training, as a core concept of positive psychology, emphasizes personal strengths and positive social systems to promote optimal family health (Kunzmann & Glück, 2019). Wisdom is often described as the highest form of cognition (Coward, 2019), regarded as the pinnacle of human virtues across cultures and civilizations (Ardelt & Jeste, 2018; Auer-Spath & Glück, 2019). Yang (2014) suggests that wisdom comprises cognitive coherence, the embodiment of wisdom in actions, and positive long-term effects on oneself and others to preserve collective interests (Yang, 2014). Ardel (2003) defines wisdom as a combination of personality traits, including cognitive, reflective, and affective components. The cognitive component refers to a persistent desire to understand human conditions, particularly interpersonal and intrapersonal issues, along with the knowledge derived from this pursuit (Ardelt, 2003). The reflective component involves the ability to view issues from multiple perspectives and engage in self-reflection and self-insight. The affective component is characterized by compassionate love, care, and empathy toward others. Despite challenges in defining wisdom, there is a general consensus among researchers and experts that wisdom encompasses knowledge, insight, reflection, and the integration of personal resources with the welfare of others (Ardelt & Jeste, 2018).

Research has shown that individuals with cognitive, reflective, and emotional capabilities are physically healthier, more educated, and maintain better relationships than their peers. They score higher in personality openness and enjoy greater psychological well-being (Grass, 2017). Ardel (2003) demonstrated that wisdom significantly impacts life satisfaction, surpassing physical health, socioeconomic status, physical environment, and social relationships. Additionally, wisdom better predicts life satisfaction than objective living conditions and enables

individuals to exercise sound judgment, suggesting that higher levels of wisdom enhance life success (Ardelt, 2003). Wise individuals can discern patterns in their life experiences, using reflective insight and knowledge to help themselves and others. This process fosters high levels of coherence, empathy, personality maturity, and emotional regulation over time (Coward, 2019).

Given the outlined points and the connection between emotional intelligence and wisdom (Sternberg, 2003; Sternberg & Glück, 2019), a conceptual link between wisdom and emotion exists. This study aims to develop a wisdom-oriented couples therapy program and examine its effectiveness on coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, and emotional regulation in couples. The study seeks to address gaps in scientific knowledge and research on couples' relationship training. The program was tailored to align with Iranian cultural contexts, enhancing its potential to improve Iranian couples' relationship quality. Accordingly, the study poses the following question: Does wisdom-oriented couples therapy influence coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, and emotional regulation in couples?

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest structure and a control group with follow-up. Each group was measured twice: first, through a pretest before couples therapy, and second, through a posttest after completing the therapy sessions. To form the groups, convenience sampling was used to select 40 participants, who were randomly assigned into an experimental group (20 participants undergoing wisdom-oriented couples counseling) and a control group (20 participants). A follow-up test was conducted two months later.

The statistical population consisted of all couples with less than five years of marital life in Tehran during the summer and autumn of 2023 who sought counseling to improve intimate relationships at Andisheh, Athena, or Golchin-e-Raz counseling centers. Recruitment involved notifying clients and consulting colleagues about session formation and registration criteria. After registration, eligible couples were identified through preliminary interviews based on the inclusion criteria. The sample included 20 participants in the experimental group and 20 in

the control group, with each group containing eight conflicted couples.

Inclusion criteria included a maximum of five years of marital life, at least a high school diploma, no immediate intention to divorce or separate, absence of substance or alcohol abuse, absence of active domestic violence or infidelity, no psychiatric medication use (verified through direct questioning), voluntary participation, and no participation in marital improvement therapy in the past six months. For conflicted couples, the inclusion criterion also involved scoring at least one standard deviation above the mean on the Couples Conflict Questionnaire.

Exclusion criteria included lack of cooperation or unwillingness to continue, failure to complete assignments given in sessions, and absence from more than two therapy sessions.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Conflicts

This questionnaire, developed by Barati and Sanaei (1996), consists of 42 items measuring seven dimensions of marital conflict. Responses are scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. Total scores range from 21 to 42. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the questionnaire is reported as 0.82. Subscale reliability scores are as follows: decreased cooperation (0.80), reduced sexual relationship (0.78), increased emotional reactions (0.73), increased seeking of child support (0.85), increased individual relationships with one's relatives (0.84), reduced relationships with spouse's relatives (0.79), and financial separation (0.90) (Kakolian et al., 2024).

2.2.2. Sense of Coherence

The short version of this scale, developed by Antonovsky (1993), consists of 29 items measuring comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. Responses are recorded on a Likert scale ("rarely," "sometimes," "often"), with 13 items reverse-scored. Total scores range from 29 to 203. Cronbach's alpha reliability is reported as 0.85. Iranian studies report internal consistency of 0.78 and test-retest reliability of 0.54 over a two-year interval (Yazdanpour et al., 2024).

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Sense of Coherence, Empathy, and Emotion Regulation by Group, Gender, and Assessment Stages

2.2.3. Emotional Control

Developed by Williams, Chambless, and Ahrens (1997), this 42-item scale measures emotional control across four subscales: anger, depressed mood, anxiety, and positive affect. Responses are recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"), with specific items reverse-scored. Internal consistency and test-retest reliability are reported as 0.94 and 0.78, respectively, for the overall scale. Iranian studies have validated the scale's reliability with Cronbach's alpha of 0.78 (Shapourifar, 2020).

2.2.4. Empathy Quotient

This scale includes 26 items assessing cognitive empathy, emotional reactivity, and social skills. Responses are recorded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Scores range from 0 (non-empathetic) to 80 (high empathy). Internal consistency and test-retest reliability are reported as 0.90 and 0.79, respectively. In Iran, the scale's internal consistency and test-retest reliability are 0.88 and 0.70, respectively (Jahari, 2014; Shapourifar, 2020).

2.3. Data Analysis

To test the study hypotheses, repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni post hoc tests were utilized to perform pairwise group comparisons. SPSS version 24 was used for data analysis.

3. Findings and Results

According to the demographic findings of the study, the mean and standard deviation of age for the wisdom-oriented couples therapy group were 34.38 and 3.81, respectively, while the mean and standard deviation for the control group were 32.63 and 2.20, respectively. Additionally, the mean and standard deviation for the duration of marriage in the wisdom-oriented therapy group were 32.50 and 5.50, and for the control group, 35.50 and 4.31. Descriptive findings for the study variables are presented below (Table 1).

Dependent Variables	Stage	Group	Gender	Mean	SD
Sense of Coherence	Pretest	Wisdom-Oriented	Female	129.50	1.41
		Control	Female	131.13	2.36
		Wisdom-Oriented	Male	129.63	1.51
		Control	Male	132.00	1.93
	Posttest	Wisdom-Oriented	Female	145.50	2.93
		Control	Female	132.00	3.38
		Wisdom-Oriented	Male	143.50	2.07
		Control	Male	132.00	1.92
	Follow-up	Wisdom-Oriented	Female	145.13	2.90
		Control	Female	132.25	3.37
		Wisdom-Oriented	Male	143.13	1.73
		Control	Male	132.13	2.03
Empathy	Pretest	Wisdom-Oriented	Female	55.75	1.67
		Control	Female	55.13	2.36
		Wisdom-Oriented	Male	55.00	1.85
		Control	Male	55.00	0.76
	Posttest	Wisdom-Oriented	Female	60.75	3.20
		Control	Female	55.63	2.45
		Wisdom-Oriented	Male	59.88	1.96
		Control	Male	55.00	0.75
	Follow-up	Wisdom-Oriented	Female	60.75	3.19
		Control	Female	55.63	2.44
		Wisdom-Oriented	Male	59.63	2.07
		Control	Male	55.25	0.89
Emotion Regulation	Pretest	Wisdom-Oriented	Female	220.38	3.54
		Control	Female	218.13	3.44
		Wisdom-Oriented	Male	219.88	2.95
		Control	Male	217.13	3.83
	Posttest	Wisdom-Oriented	Female	205.00	2.78
		Control	Female	218.63	3.42
		Wisdom-Oriented	Male	203.50	5.37
		Control	Male	216.63	3.66
	Follow-up	Wisdom-Oriented	Female	205.38	2.92
		Control	Female	218.63	3.38
		Wisdom-Oriented	Male	204.00	5.71
		Control	Male	216.88	3.48

The findings indicate a significant and meaningful effect of wisdom-oriented couples therapy on sense of coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, and emotion regulation in conflicted couples. The differences between pretest and posttest scores, as well as between pretest and follow-up scores, were significant, indicating sustained intervention

effects over time. Interaction effects between time and group further confirm the intervention's impact, with group-specific changes across the assessment stages. Gender differences were not significant (Table 2).

Table 2

Results of Between-Subjects and Within-Subjects Effects on Sense of Coherence, Cognitive-Affective Empathy, and Emotion Regulation

Dependent Variables	Sources of Variation	F Statistic	df	Significance	Effect Size (η^2)	Statistical Power
Total Sense of Coherence	Time	440.10	1.06	<0.001	0.71	1
	Time × Group	98.79	2.11	<0.001	0.82	1
	Group	102.11	2	<0.001	0.83	1
Total Empathy	Time	78.69	1.11	<0.001	0.65	1
	Time × Group	18.11	2.23	<0.001	0.46	1
Total Emotion Regulation	Time	239.16	1.04	<0.001	0.85	1
	Time × Group	55.12	2.09	<0.001	0.72	1

The Bonferroni post-hoc tests reveal that the differences between pretest and posttest (intervention effect) and pretest and follow-up (time effect) were more significant than those

between posttest and follow-up (stability effect). These results confirm the positive and lasting effects of wisdom-oriented couples therapy on the studied variables (Table 3).

Table 3

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Test Results for Sense of Coherence, Cognitive-Affective Empathy, and Emotion Regulation

Dependent Variables	Stages Compared	Mean Difference	Significance
Sense of Coherence	Pretest - Posttest	-9.75	<0.001
	Pretest - Follow-up	-9.56	<0.001
Empathy	Pretest - Posttest	-2.83	<0.001
	Pretest - Follow-up	-2.73	<0.001
Emotion Regulation	Pretest - Posttest	11.40	<0.001
	Pretest - Follow-up	11.04	<0.001

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of wisdom-oriented couples therapy on sense of coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, and emotion regulation in conflicted couples. The findings of this study are consistent with prior studies (Ardelt, 2003; Ardel & Jeste, 2018; Auer-Spath & Glück, 2019; Coward, 2019; Fallah Mobarakeh, 2019; Grass, 2017; Jeste et al., 2021; Kunzmann & Glück, 2019; Sternberg & Glück, 2019; Thomas et al., 2022; Weststrate & Glück, 2017; Wolinsky, 1990; Yang, 2014).

To explain the effectiveness of wisdom-oriented therapy on sense of coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, and emotion regulation in conflicted couples, it can be stated that wisdom-oriented therapy emphasizes the reprocessing of emotional responses to modify couples' dysfunctional relationships. This therapy, grounded in emotion-focused techniques, involves the therapist identifying and valuing negative and undesirable emotional responses. By expanding these responses to seemingly insignificant issues such as fear and helplessness, the therapy helps reduce aggression stemming from the inability to manage inappropriate behaviors in stressful situations.

Consequently, it increases the sense of coherence and cognitive-affective empathy among conflicted couples in such scenarios.

Furthermore, wisdom-oriented therapy enhances couples' awareness of each other's needs, desires, and emotions, fostering greater unity and coherence. By anticipating and consciously regulating negative emotional responses, couples can replace undesirable reactions with positive ones, thus improving emotion regulation in stressful situations.

It is assumed that the psychological and interpersonal dynamics within couples' interactions are shaped by their individual emotional experiences. Emotion-focused therapy emphasizes self-reconstruction and personal growth, with individual balance as the primary therapeutic goal. This approach helps couples identify negative emotions contributing to dysfunctional emotional relationships, such as excessive negativity, dependency, withdrawal, lack of sensitivity, emotional indifference, dominance, emotional suppression, or negative emotional expression in stressful situations.

Wisdom-oriented therapy facilitates access to and reprocessing of fundamental emotional reactions in couples' interactions, fostering more secure attachment styles,

empathetic understanding, and new interaction patterns (Kunzmann & Glück, 2019). This process helps alleviate emotional intolerance between partners.

Since the inability to regulate emotions leads to psychological distress, interpersonal incompatibility, and relational problems, it often results in heightened aggression and dissatisfaction in marital relationships. Wisdom-oriented therapy aids couples in identifying the sources of their mutual dissatisfaction and reconfiguring their emotional responses based on accurate assessments of stressful situations, thereby enhancing their distress tolerance.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

This study faced several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The sample size was relatively small and limited to couples with less than five years of marital life in Tehran, reducing the generalizability of the results. The use of convenience sampling may have introduced selection bias, and the reliance on self-reported questionnaires might have been influenced by social desirability or subjective biases. Additionally, the study did not account for cultural, socioeconomic, or individual differences that may impact the effectiveness of wisdom-oriented couples therapy. The lack of a longer follow-up period also limits understanding of the long-term sustainability of the intervention's effects.

Future research should focus on larger, more diverse samples from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to improve the generalizability of findings. Longitudinal studies with extended follow-up periods are recommended to assess the lasting impact of wisdom-oriented couples therapy on marital outcomes. It would also be valuable to explore the comparative effectiveness of this intervention against other therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or mindfulness-based interventions. Further investigations into the role of mediating and moderating variables, such as personality traits, attachment styles, and cultural factors, could enhance understanding of the mechanisms underlying the observed effects.

The findings of this study suggest that wisdom-oriented couples therapy can be a valuable approach for improving sense of coherence, cognitive-affective empathy, and emotion regulation in conflicted couples. Mental health professionals and counselors working with couples should consider incorporating this therapeutic approach into their

practices, particularly when addressing issues related to emotional dysregulation and relational conflicts. Additionally, tailored training programs and workshops can be developed to teach the principles of wisdom-oriented therapy to practitioners and couples alike. Policymakers and community organizations could also support initiatives that promote access to such interventions, particularly for newly married couples, to enhance marital stability and well-being.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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