

Effectiveness of Couple Therapy Based on Reality Therapy Approach on Marital Forgiveness and Empathy in Couples

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of couple therapy based on the reality therapy approach on marital empathy and marital forgiveness among couples.

Methods and Materials: The research method was quasi-experimental with a pretest-posttest control group design including a follow-up phase. The statistical population consisted of all couples who referred to counseling centers in Tehran in 2023. From among the eligible individuals, 30 couples were selected using purposive sampling and were randomly assigned to two groups (15 couples in the experimental group and 15 couples in the control group). Data collection instruments included the Marital Empathy Questionnaire by Joliffe and Farrington (2006) and the Marital Forgiveness Questionnaire by Rye et al. (2001). The intervention group received nine 90-minute in-person group sessions over two months based on the reality therapy approach, while the control group received standard counseling services. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 24 and repeated measures ANOVA, adhering to statistical assumptions.

Findings: The results indicated significant differences in the mean scores of marital empathy and marital forgiveness between the pretest, posttest, and follow-up phases ($P < .01$). These effects remained stable during the follow-up phase, indicating that couple therapy based on the reality therapy approach significantly improved marital empathy and marital forgiveness.

Conclusion: Based on the findings of this study, couple therapy using the reality therapy approach can be considered an effective therapeutic method for enhancing marital forgiveness and empathy among couples.

Keywords: couple therapy based on reality therapy approach, marital empathy, marital forgiveness, couples.

1. Introduction

Marital life is influenced by various psychological, emotional, and behavioral factors (Kazim & Rafique, 2021). In every marital relationship, conflicts and challenges are inevitable; however, the way these challenges are managed has a direct impact on the quality and durability of the relationship (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2022). In many cultures, marital relationships are regarded as the primary source of emotional and social support, and spouses are expected to maintain a unique bond characterized by honesty, affection, intimacy, and mutual support (Bogdan et al., 2022). Nonetheless, some couples experience maladaptive relationships marked by persistent conflict (Wang & Zhao, 2023). In such cases, couple therapy approaches that are both effective and time-efficient are utilized to improve relationship quality (Dong et al., 2022).

One component that significantly affects the quality of marital life is marital forgiveness. Marital forgiveness is a psychological process whereby one spouse accepts the hurt or wrongdoing caused by the partner and forgives it without harboring resentment or negative emotions (Kaleta & Jaśkiewicz, 2024). This concept involves two major dimensions: reducing negative emotions (such as anger, resentment, and revenge) and increasing positive feelings (such as empathy, acceptance, and goodwill) toward the partner. Marital forgiveness does not imply condoning or overlooking inappropriate behavior, but rather letting go of negative feelings to preserve mental health and improve relationship quality (Sari & Cihan, 2024). Research has shown that couples who are more capable of forgiving each other experience fewer conflicts, have higher marital satisfaction, and enjoy more stable relationships (Brudek & Kaleta, 2023).

Another key element related to the quality of marital relationships is marital empathy. Marital empathy refers to the ability to understand, feel, and respond to the emotions, thoughts, and needs of one's spouse (Dong et al., 2022). This concept comprises three primary dimensions: cognitive empathy (understanding the spouse's perspective), emotional empathy (experiencing the partner's feelings), and behavioral empathy (showing supportive and affectionate responses) (Pavlenko & Krasnikova, 2024). Empathy in marital relationships fosters a stronger emotional bond, reduces conflict, and enhances marital satisfaction (Reza et al., 2021). Couples who exhibit high levels of empathy are better able to recognize each other's emotional states and respond effectively, resulting in deeper

and more stable connections (Kaleta & Jaśkiewicz, 2024). The absence of empathy can cause a spouse to feel misunderstood, neglected, and unimportant, thereby negatively impacting the relationship and marital satisfaction. Empathy, alongside other communicative elements—such as the role and value system of the couple—is considered a fundamental part of the structure of marital relationships (Hittner & Haase, 2021).

One intervention approach that can be employed to improve marital relationships is reality therapy (Mahmoodian et al., 2021). According to Glasser, the problems and damages in marital life stem from each partner's attempt to control the other in order to fulfill their own needs and desires (Koleshtajani et al., 2022). The aim of reality therapy is to reduce external control and foster internal control within couples (Badakhshan & Ghaffari, 2021). Glasser's choice theory in reality therapy is an educational approach designed to enhance spousal relationships by helping couples become aware of their reality and personal responsibility, explore both constructive and destructive behaviors, develop empathy and intimacy, and build effective communication and problem-solving skills (Behrang et al., 2022; Bogdan et al., 2022). The findings of Farhadi et al. (2020) demonstrated that reality therapy improves marital intimacy and sexual functioning in newly married couples. Similarly, Moridi et al. (2019) concluded that reality therapy positively influences marital satisfaction, life satisfaction, and communication skills (Moridi et al., 2019).

In light of the aforementioned discussions, marital relationships are among the most significant and complex forms of human connection, influenced by individual, interpersonal, and environmental factors. The quality of this relationship can impact the mental and physical well-being of couples. Among these factors, two key elements—marital forgiveness and empathy—play crucial roles in enhancing and sustaining marital relationships. Previous research has indicated that reality therapy can have positive effects on improving marital communication, increasing relationship satisfaction, and reducing conflict. However, there is still insufficient evidence on the specific effects of this approach on marital forgiveness and empathy. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of couple therapy based on the reality therapy approach on marital forgiveness and empathy in couples.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest control group and a follow-up phase. The statistical population included all couples who visited counseling centers in Tehran in 2023. In order to form three groups using convenience sampling (based on inclusion and exclusion criteria), initially, 30 couples visiting counseling centers were selected according to the criteria outlined below. They were then randomly assigned to three groups: 15 couples in Experimental Group 1, 15 couples in Experimental Group 2, and 15 couples in the control group. A minimum sample size of 15 participants per group has been recommended for experimental and quasi-experimental studies (Tabachnick et al., 2013).

To recruit participants, announcements regarding the group sessions and preliminary registration requirements were disseminated among clients and counselors at welfare-affiliated counseling centers. After registration, from among 237 applicants, eligible couples were selected through an initial interview. From the 67 couples who met the study criteria (based on entry conditions and agreement to participate), 30 couples were randomly assigned to two intervention groups and one control group based on their preliminary interviews and eligibility.

The inclusion criteria were: couples aged between 25 and 45 years, with 5 to 15 years of marital life, minimum educational level of a high school diploma for both partners, no remarriage, and currently on the verge of divorce (as indicated by having marital conflict for more than one year, based on self-report). The exclusion criteria included: absence from sessions, failure to complete assignments, occurrence of unpredictable events (e.g., illness, death of a close one), and expressed unwillingness to continue participation. The experimental groups received ten 90-minute training sessions, while the control group remained on a waiting list.

After group assignment and placement of participants into intervention and control groups, the participants were given an explanation of the questionnaires and the purpose of the study. Instructions on how to complete the assessments were also provided. The pretest was administered during the first session at the counseling center of the Iranian MS Society. The intervention group received nine 90-minute face-to-face group sessions over the course of two months. The control group received standard intervention services. The intervention was conducted by the

researcher, a qualified psychologist, under the supervision of academic advisors.

After the completion of the therapeutic sessions, the posttest was administered during the final session for both groups. The follow-up assessment was conducted by the researcher in a single session two months after the end of the training. To adhere to ethical standards, one month after the follow-up, two therapeutic sessions were offered to the control group over the course of one week.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Forgiveness

Marital forgiveness was assessed using the 15-item questionnaire developed by Rye et al. (2001). The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” (5) to “strongly disagree” (1). The total possible score ranges from 15 to 75. Rye et al. (2001) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .87, and the test-retest reliability was .80 (Rye & et al., 2001).

2.2.2. Marital Empathy

Marital empathy was measured using the Basic Empathy Scale developed by Jolliffe and Farrington (2006). This 20-item scale uses a 7-point Likert response format, with 7 reverse-scored items. Total scores range from 20 to 140 (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). A study reported a reliability coefficient of .84 for the marital empathy subscale (Reza et al., 2021).

2.3. Intervention

The couple reality therapy intervention based on Glasser's Choice Theory was conducted over nine structured sessions. In the first session, group members were introduced, group rules were clarified, and participants completed pretests while discussing their needs, expectations, and mutual evaluations. Couples were asked to identify their own and their spouse's positive and negative traits and desired behavioral changes. In the second session, the focus was on exploring excuses for irresponsible behavior and emphasizing present-oriented discussions; members were encouraged to practice positivity and appreciation toward their spouse. The third session examined life direction and current behavioral awareness, emphasizing commitment and differentiation to improve adjustment. The fourth session concentrated on changing thoughts and behaviors rather than emotions and addressed

cognitive distortions and belief restructuring. Role-play exercises were assigned for practicing listening and speaking skills, with recordings shared for therapeutic review. In the fifth session, the "return to family" technique was introduced to help individuals reflect on their upbringing and work toward emotional reconnection, with a focus on fulfilling the needs for love and significance. The sixth session involved behavioral self-evaluation and satisfaction dimensions in marriage, helping couples assess short-term versus long-term gratification and practice relational skills. The seventh session challenged couples on personal responsibility, introduced a four-step conflict resolution model (mutual respect, identifying the real issue, common ground, and joint decision-making), and included role-play to rehearse these methods. The eighth session synthesized learned skills, addressed obstacles, and promoted continued practice of empathy and emotional intimacy, emphasizing self-awareness, role clarity, and the non-blaming approach to mistakes. In the final session, marital conflict and attachment questionnaires were administered as posttests, and couples received appreciation for their engagement and cooperation throughout the intervention.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of marital forgiveness and marital empathy variables in the study groups

Group	Variable	Pretest (M ± SD)	Posttest (M ± SD)	Follow-up (M ± SD)
Control	Marital Forgiveness	43.27 ± 9.22	41.47 ± 8.35	39.93 ± 8.19
	Marital Empathy	51.40 ± 7.31	50.80 ± 7.36	48.60 ± 7.74
Reality Therapy-Based Couple Therapy	Marital Forgiveness	41.87 ± 10.79	54.00 ± 11.22	51.40 ± 10.22
	Marital Empathy	50.53 ± 8.22	83.87 ± 10.47	80.20 ± 9.77

Prior to conducting repeated measures ANOVA between groups, the normality assumption was tested using the Shapiro–Wilk test. This assumption evaluates whether the difference between the observed distribution in the sample and a normal distribution in the population is zero. Results indicated that all variables in pretest, posttest, and follow-up followed a normal distribution.

Additionally, Mauchly's test of sphericity was used to evaluate the assumption of equal variances of the differences

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 24, applying repeated measures ANOVA with between-group comparisons, while ensuring that statistical assumptions were met.

3. Findings and Results

The results of the demographic data analysis showed that in the experimental group, 12 participants (30%) were between the ages of 25 and 35, and 18 participants (70%) were between 36 and 45. In the control group, 14 participants (46.67%) were between 25 and 35 years old, while 16 participants (53.33%) were between 36 and 45 years old.

Table 1 presents the descriptive findings of the study variables. According to the results, the mean scores for marital forgiveness and marital empathy in the reality therapy-based couple therapy group improved in the posttest and follow-up stages compared to the pretest stage, while no such trend was observed in the control group.

(covariance homogeneity). If the significance level in Mauchly's test is greater than .05, the sphericity assumption is met; otherwise, the Greenhouse–Geisser correction is applied. In this study, Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was violated for the study variables ($p < .05$). Therefore, the results of the repeated measures ANOVA using the Greenhouse–Geisser correction are reported in table below.

Table 2

Repeated measures ANOVA results with Greenhouse–Geisser correction for comparing groups across pretest, posttest, and follow-up stages

Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value	Effect Size
Marital Forgiveness	Time	873.70	1.02	854.79	7.00	.01	.14
	Time * Group	959.63	2.04	469.43	3.84	.03	.16
	Groups	1395.57	2.00	697.79	5.10	.01	.20
Marital Empathy	Time	3278.42	1.14	2877.14	132.84	.001	.76
	Time * Group	1909.67	2.28	837.97	38.69	.001	.65
	Groups	4113.88	2.00	2056.94	63.58	.001	.75

As shown, there were statistically significant differences across the three stages (pretest, posttest, follow-up) for both marital forgiveness ($p < .01$) and marital empathy ($p < .01$). Additionally, the differences between the two groups (experimental and control) were also significant for both variables ($p < .05$). The results indicate that approximately 36% and 58% of individual differences in marital forgiveness and marital empathy, respectively, are attributable to group differences. Furthermore, the interaction effects between time and group membership

were significant for both variables ($p < .05$), indicating that the observed changes across the three measurement points were meaningfully different between the groups. Therefore, it can be concluded that couple therapy based on the reality therapy approach was effective in improving marital forgiveness and empathy.

Given the above findings, pairwise comparisons of mean scores at the three stages (pretest, posttest, follow-up) using the Bonferroni test are reported in the table below.

Table 3

Bonferroni pairwise comparisons of mean differences between the reality therapy and control groups at three measurement stages for marital forgiveness and empathy

Group	Dependent Variable	Comparison	Mean Difference	Standard Error	p-value
Control	Marital Forgiveness	Pretest–Posttest	1.80	1.51	.92
		Pretest–Follow-up	3.34	1.83	.95
		Posttest–Follow-up	1.54	1.49	.99
	Marital Empathy	Pretest–Posttest	0.60	0.54	.99
		Pretest–Follow-up	2.80	0.87	.76
		Posttest–Follow-up	2.20	0.73	.89
Reality Therapy-Based Couple Therapy	Marital Forgiveness	Pretest–Posttest	12.13	2.08	.001
		Pretest–Follow-up	9.53	2.09	.001
		Posttest–Follow-up	2.60	1.57	.13
	Marital Empathy	Pretest–Posttest	-17.40	1.97	.001
		Pretest–Follow-up	-15.80	1.93	.001
		Posttest–Follow-up	1.60	1.39	.62

The results show that the difference between the pretest and both the posttest and follow-up stages was statistically significant ($p < .01$) in the reality therapy-based couple therapy group. However, in the control group, no significant differences were observed between pretest, posttest, and follow-up scores ($p > .05$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of couple therapy based on the reality therapy approach on marital empathy and forgiveness. The results indicated that after controlling for pretest effects, there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in posttest scores of marital empathy, and this effect persisted during the follow-up phase. Therefore, couple therapy using the reality therapy approach was effective in enhancing marital empathy among couples. These findings are consistent with the results of Goudarzi et al. (2020), who found that group therapy based on reality therapy improved general family functioning (Goudarzi & et al., 2020). Empowerment programs provide couples with the skills necessary to confront marital challenges and prepare them to

deal effectively with relational issues. These programs teach a variety of skills to prevent and mitigate marital problems and improve overall family functioning.

Reality therapy is one of the therapeutic approaches that can be effective in enhancing family functioning. Glasser’s Choice Theory (1998), as utilized in reality therapy, is among the most well-known models in couple therapy. According to this theory, all human behaviors are chosen and consist of four components: doing, thinking, feeling, and physiology. Individuals can directly control their actions and thoughts and indirectly influence their emotions and physiology. Choice Theory primarily focuses on the components of doing and thinking. It posits five basic human needs that are internal, universal, dynamic, and interrelated: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Koleshtajani et al., 2022). Most marital failures stem from differences in the intensity of these basic needs. If couples recognize the impact of these needs and apply the principles of Choice Theory from the outset of their marital lives, they will make significant progress in enhancing their relationships (Farhadi et al., 2020). The main goal of Choice Theory is to teach couples to understand their own and their

partner's basic needs, to avoid using controlling behaviors, and to make appropriate and responsible choices (Moridi et al., 2019).

The reality therapy approach, grounded in Choice Theory, emphasizes fulfilling basic needs, respecting others' rights, behavioral responsibility, making value-based judgments, and the use of common sense. According to this approach, humans can achieve a healthy identity through love, goal setting, planning, and the acceptance of reality (Hittner & Haase, 2021). Many familial problems arise from a lack of knowledge and skills. As such, reality therapy plays an educational role and can be effective in preventing and resolving family issues (Moridi et al., 2019). Multiple studies have shown that reality therapy improves couples' marital knowledge and skills, helping them develop realistic expectations and apply them in practice (Goudarzi & et al., 2020).

Moreover, the findings showed that couple therapy based on the reality therapy approach had a significant impact on components of marital empathy. This outcome can be attributed to the reduction of external control and the promotion of internal control, which are core tenets of Choice Theory. As individuals stop trying to control their partners, they reduce the tendency to blame and criticize, which, in turn, increases life satisfaction. On the other hand, self-control significantly decreases blaming behaviors and improves life satisfaction (Koleshtajani et al., 2022). Thus, these factors contribute to the success of reality therapy based on Choice Theory in improving marital empathy and intimacy while reducing conflict. Glasser's Choice Theory places strong emphasis on love and closeness in marital relationships and helps couples reconnect with a fulfilling life. It also teaches people to avoid the "seven deadly habits" and instead adopt the "seven caring habits" (Farhadi et al., 2020).

Choice Theory emphasizes taking responsibility for fulfilling one's own and one's partner's basic needs and letting go of external control. Therefore, it is likely that couples did not fully attend to these needs prior to the intervention. Meeting each other's needs in a marital relationship is a key factor in enhancing empathy between spouses (Moridi et al., 2019). Thus, it can be argued that participation in marriage enrichment sessions based on Choice Theory can draw couples' attention to these essential elements, prompting them to incorporate these considerations into their behavior. Another important point is that marital empathy takes time to develop and requires a mutual understanding of each other's needs, as emphasized

in Choice Theory. Overall, Choice Theory explains how individuals make decisions to identify and balance their needs. Strengthening communication skills increases positive self-esteem and reduces negativity, which in turn promotes psychological intimacy between couples.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

One limitation of the current study is that the findings are restricted to the sample population, which included only couples referred to counseling centers in Tehran. Additionally, the use of self-report questionnaires for data collection may have introduced response biases. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing these results to other populations. Future research should consider using alternative data collection methods, such as interviews.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that family and marriage counselors apply reality therapy techniques to help clients achieve rational behavior, realistic expectations, empathy, and forgiveness more efficiently. The results of this research can be utilized in counseling centers, psychological services, marriage and family counseling centers, and welfare organizations to improve empathy and reduce irrational beliefs.

Authors' Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's master's thesis at the Ashtian Branch of Islamic Azad University, Ashtian, Iran. 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. The ethical code IR.IAU.QOM.REC.1403.054 was obtained for conducting this research.

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