




# Comparison of the Effectiveness of Residential Group Therapy Based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on Meaning in Life and Marital Adjustment in Couples

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The aim of this research was to compare the effectiveness of residential group therapy based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) on meaning in life and marital adjustment in couples.

**Methods and Materials:** This research utilized a quasi-experimental method with a pre-test, post-test, and control group design. The study population consisted of couples who visited family counseling centers and health homes in Birjand city in 2021. From this population, 45 individuals were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned to three groups: control group (15 individuals), ACT group (15 individuals), and CBT group (15 individuals). Intervention sessions for the ACT group were conducted over eight 45-minute sessions within one month (two sessions per week), while CBT sessions were conducted weekly for nine weeks, with each session lasting one and a half hours in a group setting. After the intervention sessions, the Meaning in Life and Marital Adjustment Questionnaires were administered as post-tests, and three months after the end of the intervention as follow-up. The results of the three groups were compared again. In this study, considering the assumptions for parametric tests, and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were employed.

**Findings:** The results indicated no significant difference in the effectiveness of ACT and CBT group therapies in increasing the variables of meaning in life and marital adjustment. Comparison of the mean scores of the experimental groups in the post-test and follow-up stages also showed that the effects of the independent variables persisted during the follow-up stage, and no significant difference was observed between the post-test and follow-up stages.

**Conclusion:** The findings indicated no significant difference between Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in improving meaning in life and marital adjustment among couples. Both therapies demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing psychological flexibility and addressing cognitive distortions, contributing to improved well-being and relational satisfaction.

**Keywords:** *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Meaning in Life, Marital Adjustment.*

## 1. Introduction

The family is an important institution in human society, regarded as the most fundamental and primary social unit, with marriage being the first step in establishing this social institution. Marriage is considered a significant issue in all societies, and having a successful marital life is a primary and ideal goal for most individuals. In other words, the family is recognized as the most important unit in society, and marriage is the most essential human relationship, as it forms the foundation for creating familial relationships and the growth of future generations (Navabi-Nejad et al., 2023). Marriage is the most sacred and complex relationship between two individuals of the opposite sex, encompassing vast and deep dimensions and multiple objectives. It is a sacred and enduring bond between a man and a woman, based on lasting sexual, emotional, and spiritual connections, established through a religious, social, and legal contract that imposes obligations on both parties. Therefore, marriage is a delicate and complex decision that requires careful consideration of all aspects before any action is taken, including examining the factors that might lead couples towards divorce and preventing them (Mohammadi et al., 2021). Marriage is a significant process in human life and has existed in various forms throughout all periods and cultures. The goal of marriage is to fulfill various fundamental human needs such as procreation and child-rearing, achieving the highest levels of friendship and intimacy, providing a safe space for peace and the flourishing of skills, cooperation, helping each other in marital life, division of labor, and attaining human perfection and mental health (Zaheri et al., 2021). A married individual expects a new life full of joy and satisfaction. Thus, the success of a marriage or marital satisfaction is more important than marriage itself (Mardani et al., 2022). Satisfaction with the relationship or marriage has long been the focus of research, with scholars attempting to understand, influence, and predict couples' experiences (Fie et al., 2020). It seems that marital satisfaction is maintained when both parties play an active role in relationship-

maintenance strategies such as positive communication and task-sharing (Korporaal et al., 2023).

On the other hand, a review of studies on marital problems shows that having meaning in life can positively affect reducing marital issues and contribute to an improved quality of life for couples (Hashemizadeh et al., 2021). Meaning in life is a sense of existential integrity that involves answering life's fundamental questions, discovering life's purpose, achieving valuable goals, and thus feeling complete and useful (Deb et al., 2024). Meaning in life can play a role in people's life beliefs and interpersonal relationships, and when marital tension increases, individuals perceive it as a threat to the meaning and quality of their life. However, seeking meaning in life can moderate stress from tense events and play an important role in experiencing positive emotions (Araqiyan et al., 2023). Meaning in life is a variable that, according to the researcher's hypothesis, can predict positive changes in individuals, particularly the emergence of post-traumatic growth. Meaning in life refers to an individual's perception and awareness of the essence of human existence and the more important things that they contemplate. It includes two aspects: the presence of meaning and the search for meaning (Zhang et al., 2021). The presence of meaning in life is experienced when an individual understands themselves and the world and identifies their purpose within it. The search for meaning is understood from two perspectives: first, as a lack or absence of meaning, and second, as a motivational force and a fundamental psychological need to understand one's existence (Travezaño-Cabrera et al., 2022). Numerous research findings have shown that the presence of meaning in life is a crucial element of emotional well-being and is significantly related to various aspects of personality, mental and physical health, coping with stress, adapting to conditions, religion, religious activities, and behavioral disorders (Shadkam et al., 2022).

Moreover, marriage is the most important and sacred bond between two individuals and the foundation for establishing a supportive-emotional nucleus, on which the future functioning of the family and the physical and mental

health of its members depends (Rezapour Mirsaleh et al., 2022). In fact, marriage is a relationship based on patience between a man and a woman as two unique individuals. Therefore, the relationship between them plays a key role in various aspects of their lives and influences their way of life, forming the basis of their marital satisfaction (Tehrani Azad & Mojtabayi, 2019). It is worth mentioning that the quality of marital life improves when both parties are committed to fulfilling their spiritual and material rights and obligations towards each other. Fulfilling these obligations helps meet many marital needs (Harahsheh, 2021). Numerous factors can influence the success or failure of marital life (Birditt et al., 2022). One of these factors, which significantly impacts the sustainability of a successful marriage, is marital adjustment (Gopal & Valarmathi, 2020). Marital adjustment does not mean the absence of problems in life, but rather the capacity to adapt to problems and the ability to solve them (Mohammadi et al., 2021). Marital adjustment is an evolutionary process in the relationship between a husband and wife, referring to a state of harmony in various aspects of the couple's lives where conflicts may exist (Montajebian & Rezaei Dehnavi, 2021). In this process, couples gradually understand and accept their roles within the family as time passes (Besharat & Rafiezadeh, 2023). The importance of marital adjustment arises from the fact that it directly affects the stability and success of the relationship (El-Mneizel et al., 2022). Marital adjustment can be defined as one of the factors influencing interactions in marital life. In this regard, Spanier (1976) believed that marital adjustment refers to how couples adapt to each other, with factors influencing the levels of marital adjustment, including marital satisfaction, cohesion, agreement, and affection (Spanier, 1976). Hence, it is predicted that well-adjusted couples are likely to have long-lasting and stable marriages, whereas couples with less adjustment are expected to experience instability in their relationship, which may ultimately lead to separation and divorce. In fact, marital maladjustment is more likely to cause interpersonal conflicts between couples than any other issue. Studies such as those by Asfaw and Alene (2023) and Besharat Qaramaleki et al. (2022) have shown that the absence of marital adjustment is a major warning sign for marital boredom, infidelity, and divorce (Asfaw & Alene, 2023; Besharat Qaramaleki et al., 2022). It is important to note that marital adjustment does not mean the absence of problems in life but rather the capacity to adapt to problems and the ability to solve them (Alizadeh & Azami, 2022). In fact, marital adjustment is an evolutionary process in the

relationship between a husband and wife, referring to a state of harmony in various aspects of the couple's lives where conflicts may exist (Montajebian & Rezaei Dehnavi, 2021). Therefore, marital adjustment refers to the level of closeness with the spouse, shared enjoyable activities, satisfying and intimate sexual relations, and the sharing of values and thoughts without coercion (Safa kermanshahi et al., 2022). Research shows that the tension caused by marital maladjustment does not remain confined to the relationship between the couple but also affects other family relationships, particularly the relationships with children (Adare et al., 2021).

Over the past few decades, treating distressed and conflicting couples has garnered considerable attention from researchers and therapists. While the effectiveness of traditional couple therapy has been established, concerns about its limitations and the maintenance of long-term changes led to the development of a new approach called Integrative Couple Therapy by the founders of traditional couple therapy. However, concerns about the long-term effects of couple therapy still persist (Peterson et al., 2011). This, along with anomalies in the literature of first and second-wave behavior therapy and the need to improve classical cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to explain the explicit effects of human language and cognition, led to the emergence of the third wave of cognitive-behavioral therapy (Tamimi et al., 2023; Vowles et al., 2018). An example of third-wave cognitive-behavioral interventions is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). From the perspective of ACT, distress, conflict, and emotional distance in couples result from each individual's rigid and ineffective control strategies and experiential avoidance in the marital relationship. Negative evaluative thoughts and acting upon them perpetuate the negative cycle in couples' relationships (Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2023; Peterson et al., 2011). ACT helps individuals accept their thoughts and feelings instead of avoiding them, and with awareness and recognition of their core values in life, they can choose behaviors that are more suitable and aligned with their values rather than engaging in actions imposed by disturbing thoughts, feelings, memories, or urges (Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2023). The main processes of ACT aim to teach individuals "how to detach from intrusive thoughts and how to better tolerate unpleasant emotions and feelings." Thus, ACT targets both the cognitive space in which rumination and the like occur and the response to these cognitive experiences (Grau et al., 2023). Additionally, ACT has components that, according to research evidence, lead to

increased psychological flexibility (Tamimi et al., 2023). The absence of ACT components in reducing psychological distress, burnout, and stress justifies the need for the present study. On the other hand, evidence-based activities welcome the re-examination of intervention approaches for developmental deficiency areas (Bergman & Keitel, 2023).

Moreover, it seems that other educational programs aimed at increasing marital satisfaction should address the factors influencing it and work towards improving satisfaction in each of these dimensions. Various therapeutic approaches exist for increasing marital satisfaction, including CBT. CBT appears to be effective in this regard, as the cognitive-behavioral approach is based on the assumption that most problems and disorders stem from dysfunctional cognitive patterns that, in turn, activate maladaptive behavioral and emotional responses. Essentially, any behavioral, communicative, or psychological disorder can be explained by a vicious cycle of cognition, emotion, and behavior, which is reinforced and perpetuated (Wilhelm et al., 2019). The main goal of CBT is to address individuals' beliefs and behaviors, which influence their actions (Ciarrochi et al., 2020). Cognitive approaches hold that individuals' beliefs exacerbate illness, cause helplessness, and engage the mind and behavior (Lewin et al., 2021). CBT is an experiential and structured therapy, meaning that its principles and rules are predetermined, and it is expected that therapists who work based on the correct principles of this therapy will achieve relatively similar results (Manber et al., 2019). Although CBT places less emphasis on diagnosing psychological disorders, it is important in CBT to diagnose psychological disorders, as it can influence the type of techniques to be used in treatment (Shakerinasab et al., 2022). Despite the various psychological therapies available, CBT is one of the most applicable treatments for psychological disorders. In this approach, individuals are taught to observe their thoughts from a broader perspective and to develop a decentered relationship with their mental content (Görmezoğlu et al., 2020). In this therapy, the crucial point is how individuals feel free to recognize that most thoughts are merely thoughts and not objects or reality (Hong et al., 2023). The simple act of recognizing thoughts, just as it can free the patient from distorted reality, often leads to greater insight and a sense of control over life (Hoppen et al., 2021).

The necessity of the present study lies in the fact that a marital relationship accompanied by feelings of satisfaction, joy, and happiness has a positive impact on the mental health of the couple. Therefore, it can be said that the quality of the

marital relationship and its various dimensions are crucial factors in the stability of married life. If couples can increase the level of satisfaction and happiness in their marital life, they not only preserve their marital relationship but also protect their family from harm. However, couples' feelings about their marital relationship change over time. Typically, couples experience more joy and generally more positive emotions toward each other at the beginning of their married life. Over time, and with the challenges of marital life, these positive feelings tend to diminish. More importantly, couples may lack the necessary skills to improve the quality of their marital relationship, which can be facilitated through marital counseling and effective interventions. In other words, CBT can be a suitable solution for making couples' relationships more enjoyable and reviving their positive feelings toward each other and their relationship. The aim of this study was to compare the effectiveness of residential group therapy based on ACT and CBT on meaning in life and marital adjustment in couples.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research, in terms of its aim, falls into the category of applied studies, and in terms of its design, it is a quasi-experimental study using a pre-test, post-test, and control group. The study population consisted of couples who visited family counseling centers and health homes in Birjand in 2021. From this population, 45 individuals who visited these centers were selected through convenience sampling and were randomly assigned to three groups: a control group (15 individuals), an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) experimental group (15 individuals), and a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) experimental group (15 individuals). The sample size was 45 individuals, with each group consisting of 15 participants. The inclusion criteria were the absence of marital burnout, the ability to read and write, and no diagnosis of acute psychiatric disorders (based on self-reported psychiatric history). The exclusion criteria included missing more than two sessions and the use of psychiatric medications. Intervention sessions for the experimental groups were conducted by the researcher over 18 consecutive weeks, with each session lasting 2 hours. One experimental group underwent ACT, and the other received CBT. After the intervention sessions, the Meaning in Life and Marital Adjustment Questionnaires were administered as post-tests, and three months after the intervention, they were



administered again as follow-ups to the experimental and control groups. Two months after the post-test, in order to assess the durability of the effects of ACT and CBT, the research questionnaire was distributed to the study participants for follow-up, and the necessary data were collected.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Meaning in Life

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, developed by Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006), is designed to assess the presence of meaning in life and the search for it. Its validity, reliability, and factor structure have been examined in various studies with different samples. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire consists of two subscales that evaluate the presence of meaning and the search for meaning. According to Steger et al. (2006), the reliability of this scale is 0.86 for the overall life evaluation, 0.87 for the presence of meaning subscale, and 0.70 for the search for meaning subscale. In an Iranian study, the test-retest reliability of the presence of meaning subscale was found to be 0.84, and for the search for meaning subscale, it was 0.74, with a two-week interval (Eshtad, 2009). Cronbach's alpha for the search for meaning subscale was 0.75 and for the presence of meaning subscale, it was 0.78, indicating good internal consistency.

### 2.2.2. Marital Adjustment

The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (1959) is a short self-report questionnaire designed to measure the quality of marital functioning. It is one of the most commonly used tools in this area. This test contains 15 items that indicate the respondent's agreement with their spouse on various activities that play a fundamental role in marital adjustment. The internal consistency estimate using the Spearman-Brown formula was very good, with a split-half reliability coefficient of 0.90. There is no information available regarding the test-retest reliability of this instrument. The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test demonstrates high validity for both compatible and incompatible couples. The scores of this test are highly correlated with the Locke-Wallace Marital Predictive Test, indicating high concurrent validity. This test is also a valid predictor of future marital adjustment (Azarosh et al., 2023).

## 2.3. Interventions

### 2.3.1. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a therapeutic approach that emphasizes psychological flexibility by helping individuals accept their thoughts and feelings instead of avoiding them and commit to actions aligned with their core values. The intervention is structured around eight sessions designed to foster mindfulness, clarify values, and encourage committed action, aiming to enhance psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Peterson et al., 2011).

#### Session 1: Introduction and Treatment Agenda

The first session focuses on creating a therapeutic alliance and allowing clients to familiarize themselves with the therapy goals. Participants introduce themselves, and the therapist outlines the objectives of ACT. This session also includes a "focus exercise" to promote mindfulness, helping clients increase awareness of the present moment. The session lasts for 45 minutes.

#### Session 2: Behavior Change and Mindfulness

This session introduces the concept of "creative hopelessness," where clients explore how past solutions to their problems may have been ineffective. Through metaphors and discussions, clients are encouraged to become aware of their ineffective control strategies. The session concludes with mindfulness exercises to enhance present-moment awareness. The session lasts for 45 minutes.

#### Session 3: Values Exploration

Clients are guided through exercises on accepting their current situation and identifying their core values. The focus is on understanding what is meaningful in their lives and how these values can guide their actions. A homework assignment is given to reflect on personal values. The session lasts for 45 minutes.

#### Session 4: Clarifying Values and Setting Goals

In this session, clients work on clarifying their values and identifying the obstacles preventing them from living a value-driven life. Mindfulness exercises, such as "body scan," are introduced to help clients focus on their internal experiences. Clients complete a form outlining their valued directions. The session lasts for 45 minutes.

#### Session 5: Cognitive Defusion

This session emphasizes the concept of cognitive defusion, where clients learn to separate themselves from their thoughts, particularly negative evaluative ones. Clients review their homework and engage in mindfulness exercises designed to reduce the influence of language on their

emotional well-being. A new homework assignment is given. The session lasts for 45 minutes.

#### Session 6: Committed Action

The focus of this session is on translating values into committed action. Clients review their progress, discuss barriers to change, and engage in mindfulness exercises that promote self-observation. Homework is assigned to encourage clients to take committed steps toward their values. The session lasts for 45 minutes.

#### Session 7: Satisfaction and Commitment

In this session, the therapist explores primary and secondary suffering and the obstacles that prevent clients from finding satisfaction in their lives. The group participates in mindfulness exercises during a walking activity. Homework is provided to reinforce the concepts learned. The session lasts for 45 minutes.

#### Session 8: Conclusion and Final Review

The final session reviews the values and skills learned during therapy, with a focus on relapse prevention and preparing for future challenges. Clients discuss strategies for maintaining progress and are given a "lifetime homework" assignment to continually engage with their values. The session concludes with a farewell. The session lasts for 45 minutes.

### 2.3.2. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) focuses on identifying and challenging dysfunctional thought patterns and behaviors to improve emotional regulation and develop personal coping strategies. This intervention includes nine sessions aimed at restructuring cognitive distortions and enhancing coping mechanisms for better mental health and relationship outcomes (Manber et al., 2019; Shakerinasab et al., 2022).

#### Session 1: Introduction and Orientation

The first session introduces the participants to CBT. Clients share why they joined the group, and basic information on CBT, including the goals and principles of confidentiality, is discussed. Rules for group sessions are outlined, and participants complete a pre-test. Homework is assigned to familiarize participants with the concept of cognitive restructuring. The session lasts for 90 minutes.

#### Session 2: Thoughts, Emotions, and Behavior

This session focuses on the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The therapist explains the differences between these concepts and discusses common cognitive distortions. Worksheets on cognitive

restructuring are distributed for clients to practice identifying their own thoughts and behaviors. The session lasts for 90 minutes.

#### Session 3: Cognitive Restructuring

The therapist reviews the previous session's homework and introduces the four steps of cognitive restructuring: identifying thoughts, evaluating thoughts, changing thoughts, and determining the effects of modified thoughts. Clients receive additional worksheets to practice these steps. The session lasts for 90 minutes.

#### Session 4: Triggers and Behavior Chains

In this session, clients examine the cause-and-effect chains between triggers, responses, and consequences. Strategies for breaking harmful behavioral chains are discussed. Clients practice identifying these chains in their own lives and are assigned related homework. The session lasts for 90 minutes.

#### Session 5: Assertiveness

This session defines assertiveness and contrasts it with passive and aggressive behaviors. Clients are encouraged to think of situations where they struggle with assertiveness and are provided with self-talk strategies to improve their assertiveness. The difference between passive, aggressive, and assertive behaviors is highlighted. The session lasts for 90 minutes.

#### Session 6: Impulsivity, Self-Control, and Mood Elevation

Clients learn about impulse control and strategies for managing impulsive behaviors. Techniques for improving mood and increasing pleasant events in daily life are discussed. The therapist provides worksheets on pleasurable activities to help clients enhance their mood. The session lasts for 90 minutes.

#### Session 7: Stress Management and Problem Solving

This session focuses on understanding stress, its triggers, and methods for managing it. Problem-solving strategies are taught to help clients cope with stressful situations more effectively. Clients also practice progressive muscle relaxation techniques. The session lasts for 90 minutes.

#### Session 8: Self-Esteem

In this session, clients learn about self-esteem and how negative self-assessments contribute to low self-esteem. Strategies for improving self-esteem are discussed, and clients receive a worksheet to work on their self-image. The session lasts for 90 minutes.

#### Session 9: Final Session

The final session reviews the skills learned throughout the intervention. The importance of continued practice is emphasized, and the group assesses their progress and

acquired skills. Participants complete a post-test to measure their development. The session lasts for 90 minutes.

#### 2.4. Data analysis

In this study, given the assumptions of parametric tests, and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were used via SPSS-24.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables by Group and Time Stage*

Stage	Variable	Group	Mean (SD)
Pre-test	Meaning in Life	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	40.73 (6.45)
		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	38.87 (8.58)
		Control	40.67 (9.03)
	Marital Adjustment	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	38.93 (6.95)
		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	39.93 (6.45)
		Control	38.4 (5.73)
Post-test	Meaning in Life	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	47.93 (9.27)
		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	47.67 (6.53)
		Control	39.47 (7.29)
	Marital Adjustment	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	50.53 (11.89)
		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	52.07 (6.87)
		Control	41 (8.2)
Follow-up	Meaning in Life	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	44.13 (12.37)
		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	45.8 (7.51)
		Control	40.67 (7.82)
	Marital Adjustment	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy	50.27 (5.98)
		Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	48.27 (7.75)
		Control	38.93 (6.02)

To test the research hypothesis, one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used. The participants' scores in the two therapy groups at the pre-test stage were considered

### 3. Findings and Results

As shown in Table 1, in the pre-test stage, the mean scores of the experimental and control groups across all three variables, meaning in life and marital adjustment, are almost identical. However, in the post-test stage, the mean scores for the experimental groups on the mentioned variables have increased. In the control group, only slight changes were observed between the pre-test and post-test stages.

as the covariate, and their post-test scores were considered as the dependent variable. The results are reported in Table 2:

**Table 2**

*One-Way ANCOVA Results for Comparing the Effectiveness of Two Therapeutic Methods in the Post-Test Stage*

Variables	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Significance Level
Meaning in Life	Group	0.37	1	0.37	0.01	0.94
	Error	1799.46	27	66.65		
	Total	1800.8	29			
Marital Adjustment	Group	16.01	1	16.01	0.16	0.69
	Error	2634.85	27	97.59		
	Total	2658.3	29			

Based on the results of the ANCOVA test, there is no significant difference in the scores of participants between the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) groups in the post-test for the variables of meaning in life and marital adjustment.

### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results indicated no significant difference between the two therapeutic methods, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT),

in the post-test for the variable of meaning in life. The findings of this study align with the prior research (Ghojavand & Bang, 2016; Ghomian & Shairi, 2014; Salehi & NajafiSoulari, 2016). The focus of the residential ACT therapy is on increasing acceptance of life's realities and, as a result, utilizing problem-focused coping strategies when faced with life's challenges. This occurs through the mechanism of willingness to accept distressing thoughts, feelings, memories, bodily sensations, and negative urges. Clients realize that these distressing symptoms are not obstacles to a meaningful and fulfilling life but rather parts of such a life. Active and effective confrontation with thoughts and feelings, avoiding avoidance, changing one's self-narrative from that of a victim, re-examining life values and goals, and committing to more socially-oriented goals are key factors in the effectiveness of this therapy.

In ACT, fundamental processes are taught to help participants relinquish cognitive inhibition, defuse from intrusive thoughts, replace the conceptualized self with an observing self, accept internal events instead of trying to control them, and clarify and act according to their values. By using value clarification techniques, it becomes clear to participants that what overwhelms a person is not necessarily suffering or its undesirable nature (as seen in the specific circumstances of these couples), but the loss of meaning in life, which is truly devastating. Meaning is not found solely in pleasure, joy, and happiness; it can also be found in suffering and death. Therefore, having meaning in life requires careful processing, evaluation, and restructuring of values, goals, and standards within the individual.

Hayes (2005) demonstrated that ACT, rather than focusing on eliminating harmful factors, helps clients accept their emotions and cognitions, freeing them from problematic verbal rules and helping them stop struggling with these issues (Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2023). Ghomian and Shiri (2014), in their study on the effectiveness of ACT, showed that meaning-making strategies and acceptance of life's sufferings alongside joys, as well as the acceptance of life's harmful aspects, lead to increased meaning in life for adolescents (Ghomian & Shairi, 2014). The process-based mechanism of ACT enhances the acceptance of psychological experiences and commitment to meaningful, flexible actions, irrespective of the content of psychological experiences. Thus, flexible interpretation of life events leads to a transcendent understanding of life concepts and helps overcome feelings of frustration and isolation. Furthermore, by fostering realistic, effective, and logical thinking and reducing psychological avoidance, ACT

indirectly increases awareness of life's reality by focusing on the present moment, helping individuals understand life's true meaning. Participants learn to release themselves from distress caused by avoiding unpleasant inner experiences. In other words, the primary mechanism of ACT's effectiveness lies in improving functioning through increased psychological flexibility, allowing individuals to somewhat overcome the distress and thoughts arising from life in pseudo-family environments and prepare themselves for a future grounded in a deep understanding of life's meaning.

Regarding the effect of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) on meaning in life for couples, it can be explained that in CBT, positive and logical thoughts replace negative and irrational thoughts and cognitive distortions. Through the proper challenge of these dysfunctional thoughts and their replacement with positive ones, individuals' thinking and perception are improved, which in turn enhances meaning in life. In CBT, cognitive restructuring strategies such as reevaluating experiences and supporting cognitive reasoning, considering the best and worst outcomes of situations, downward arrow analysis, identifying situation-based communication patterns, and using Socratic questioning and guided discovery are used as therapeutic interventions.

Moreover, the results indicated no significant difference between ACT and CBT in the post-test for the variable of marital adjustment. In explaining the possible confirmation of this hypothesis, it can be stated that adjustment increases self-confidence, assertiveness, and self-esteem, helping individuals achieve their goals and leading to satisfaction with life and improved mental health in couples. Conversely, depression, anxiety, sadness, and loneliness in couples lead to decreased adjustment, as they become excessively focused on their thoughts and engage in avoidance behaviors to change the form or frequency of incorrect thoughts. ACT helps individuals experience their inner experiences as mere thoughts and, instead of responding to them, focus on life values and what is important to them.

ACT, through increased mindfulness, helps individuals fully engage with present situations without judgment. One reason negative emotions negatively affect mental health is feelings of guilt, blame, and frustration. The combination of ACT's mechanisms, such as acceptance, increased awareness, desensitization, being present in the moment, non-judgmental observation, confrontation, and release, with traditional CBT techniques, can reduce psychological symptoms and increase marital adjustment in couples (Forman & Herbert, 1991). In ACT, behavioral commitment



exercises, along with defusion and acceptance techniques, discussions about values and goals, and the necessity of value clarification, all contribute to increased individual and social adjustment in couples. The emphasis on individuals' willingness to experience inner emotions was intended to help them see distressing thoughts as mere thoughts and become aware of the inefficacy of their current approach. Instead of responding to distressing thoughts, they could focus on what matters in life and align their actions with their values.

In addition, through ACT, couples learned to experience unpleasant internal events simply in the present moment and separate themselves from unpleasant reactions, memories, and thoughts. They were taught how to let go of cognitive inhibition, defuse from distressing thoughts, and strengthen their observing self instead of a conceptualized self, accept inner events instead of trying to control them, and clarify and act on their values. Moreover, they learned to accept rather than distance themselves from their emotions, while also paying more attention to their thoughts through mindfulness and linking them to goal-oriented activities. In summary, ACT seeks to teach individuals to experience their thoughts and feelings rather than attempting to suppress them, encouraging them to work toward their goals and values while fully experiencing their thoughts and emotions.

Furthermore, as cognitive-behavioral training can be effective in improving marital adjustment, it can be noted that during the CBT training sessions, multiple factors were taught to enhance marital adjustment, such as proper conflict resolution, appropriate communication between couples, expressing both positive and negative emotions correctly, avoiding self-centeredness, fostering empathy and cooperation between partners, decision-making, responsibility, not dwelling on past negative experiences, and increasing self-awareness in couples. CBT leads to increased positive affect and reduced negative affect in couples. Awareness of how negative emotions impact mental health and the benefits of a happy life motivates individuals to reduce negative emotions and increase positive ones. This awareness also increases individuals' willingness to complete homework and practice the techniques learned during therapy sessions, which can lead to improved marital adjustment and reduced marital conflict.

In CBT, positive and logical thoughts replace negative and irrational thoughts and cognitive distortions. With the proper training in challenging these dysfunctional thoughts and replacing them with positive ones, individuals' thinking and perception improve, which also supports the findings of

this study. In CBT, cognitive intervention strategies such as cognitive restructuring (e.g., weighing the pros and cons of a cognition), considering the best and worst outcomes of a situation, evaluating experiences and cognitive reasoning, analyzing downward arrow techniques, identifying situation-based communication patterns, and using Socratic questioning and guided discovery are therapeutic goals. By applying CBT techniques, individuals can re-evaluate the logic of their thoughts and modify them. This can help improve relationships, increase marital adjustment, and reduce conflict. Additionally, by changing dysfunctional thought patterns, it is possible to create and enhance feelings of satisfaction and adjustment and reduce conflicts.

## 5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to couples in a specific geographical location, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Second, the use of self-reported measures for assessing meaning in life and marital adjustment may introduce bias, as participants could have responded in socially desirable ways. Lastly, the study did not consider long-term follow-ups beyond the three-month post-intervention period, limiting insights into the lasting effects of the therapies.

Future research could address these limitations by using a larger and more diverse sample, including participants from different cultural backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of the results. Incorporating objective measures, such as behavioral observations or partner-reported assessments, may provide more accurate data on the impact of therapy. Longitudinal studies with extended follow-up periods are also recommended to assess the sustainability of the therapeutic effects over time, particularly in relation to long-term marital adjustment and well-being.

Therapists and practitioners can use both ACT and CBT to improve marital adjustment and meaning in life among couples, tailoring interventions based on the specific needs of their clients. Incorporating mindfulness and cognitive restructuring techniques into marital counseling programs could help couples manage negative thoughts and emotional challenges more effectively. Additionally, integrating these therapeutic approaches into broader mental health and relationship education programs may enhance psychological flexibility and relational satisfaction on a larger scale.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

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

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed in this article.

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