

The Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy on Marital Functioning and Marital Conflicts in Couples with a Tendency toward Emotional Divorce

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) on marital functioning and marital conflicts in couples with a tendency toward emotional divorce. The research employed a quasi-experimental method using a pre-test-post-test design with a control group. The statistical population included couples with a tendency toward emotional divorce who sought counseling services in Tehran during the year 2023. Using a convenience sampling method, 28 couples were selected and randomly assigned to the experimental group (14 couples) and the control group (14 couples). Data were collected using the Marital Functioning Questionnaire and the Marital Conflict Questionnaire. The participants in the experimental group received Acceptance and Commitment Therapy over eight weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes, while the control group received no specific intervention. The findings after the intervention showed that, in the experimental group, the post-test scores for marital functioning and marital conflicts were significantly improved compared to the pre-test scores. Therefore, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has a significant impact on marital functioning and marital conflicts in couples with a tendency toward emotional divorce.

Keywords: *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Marital Functioning, Marital Conflicts, Emotional Divorce.*

1. Introduction

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esearchers and psychologists agree that emotional divorce is one of the social, emotional, and psychological harms that,

when increasing in prevalence, is accompanied by evident signs of disruption in marital relationships, marital and family maladjustment, and, more broadly, changes in social, emotional, psychological, and familial norms (Masruroh et al., 2024; Merino et al., 2024).

Although official statistics indicate a rise in legal divorce rates, these figures do not accurately reflect the extent of dissatisfaction and conflict within marital relationships. This is because, in addition to the legal and formal separation between spouses, there is emotional divorce—a type of emotional and affective dysfunction in marital relationships—which does not lead to actual or legal separation but rather transforms the marriage into a bond devoid of love, companionship, affection, and mutual interaction (Al-Dmour & Halim Arabiyat, 2024; Asayesh et al., 2024). Emotional divorce, and the resulting emotional and affective disengagement, occurs when conflicts and disagreements between spouses escalate, their capacity or willingness to resolve these conflicts diminishes, and they become emotionally indifferent to one another (Abedi et al., 2024).

Marriage is a legally and socially recognized union ideally meant to last a lifetime, involving sexual, economic, and social rights and obligations for both partners (Taghinasab Ardehani, 2018). Overall, family functioning can influence attitudes toward marriage. Family functioning is defined as the interactions and responses among family members and includes variables such as roles and boundaries, cohesion, adaptability, flexibility, resilience, and also the beliefs and values upheld by the family. Childhood family experiences significantly shape the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of children. Furthermore, healthy relationships among family members play a role in increased happiness between couples and in parent-child relationships. As a result, a positive attitude toward marriage is more likely to be transmitted to the next generation (Kim & Jung, 2015).

Conflict is defined as a negative emotional state that arises from the inability to choose at least one of two incompatible or compatible goals. In other words, conflict emerges when an individual cannot make a choice during a period of incompatibility. Marital conflict can be considered normal between couples, as some level of disagreement over various life matters is arguably inevitable (Abedi et al., 2024). Therefore, in marriage, one should assume that the emergence of conflict is part of the marital relationship and shared life. Interpersonal conflict is defined as an interaction in which individuals express opposing desires, perspectives,

and beliefs, and some researchers view this as a normal event in married life (Rafiei Saviri et al., 2022).

At the beginning of a marriage, couples typically feel a sense of lasting commitment toward one another; however, some eventually experience conflict. Marital conflict refers to a consistent and meaningful lack of agreement between spouses, which is reported by at least one partner. "Meaningful" here refers to the impact of such disagreements on marital functioning, and "consistent" points to disputes that do not dissipate over time (Mousavi et al., 2022).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is one of the third-wave behavioral therapies that has recently garnered considerable attention from researchers. ACT was introduced by Steven Hayes and colleagues in the early 1980s and is rooted in a deep philosophical framework known as Functional Contextualism. Theoretically, it is based on Relational Frame Theory (RFT), which explains how human cognition creates suffering and ineffective coping mechanisms, as well as context-based alternatives. ACT employs metaphors, experiential exercises, and logical paradoxes to help individuals detach from verbal content and connect more fully with ongoing present-moment experiences. Its core components include acceptance, cognitive defusion, self-as-context, contact with the present moment, values, and committed action (Hosseini et al., 2022; Mousavi et al., 2022; Yaghoobi et al., 2021).

ACT operates on the premise that the central problem most clients face is experiential avoidance—an attempt to escape or avoid thoughts, emotions, sensations, and other private events. In ACT, the effort to control private experiences is viewed not as a solution but as a source of further problems. Therefore, the main goal of ACT is to foster psychological flexibility (Jafarimanesh et al., 2021).

Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following research question: Does Acceptance and Commitment Therapy influence marital functioning and marital conflicts in couples with a tendency toward emotional divorce?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The method employed in this study was quasi-experimental with a pretest-posttest design including a control group. The statistical population consisted of couples with a tendency toward emotional divorce who visited counseling centers in Tehran in the year 2023. Using a

convenience sampling method, 28 couples were selected and randomly assigned to either the experimental group (14 couples) or the control group (14 couples). Data were collected using the Marital Functioning Questionnaire and the Marital Conflict Questionnaire. The participants in the experimental group received Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in one 90-minute session per week for a total of 8 weeks. The control group did not receive any specific intervention.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Marital Functioning

The Marital Functioning Questionnaire was developed in 2008 by Rafahi and colleagues to assess various dimensions of marital functioning. This instrument consists of 66 items derived from a review of domestic and international theoretical and empirical literature related to marital functioning. The questionnaire encompasses 11 components: communication, emotional expression, problem-solving and decision-making, role flexibility, parenting styles, financial and economic management, relationships with family and friends, values, physical and psychological care, and overall functioning.

2.2.2. Marital Conflict

This instrument, consisting of 42 items, was developed by Sanaei (2000) based on clinical experience to measure marital conflict. It evaluates seven dimensions of marital conflict: reduced cooperation, reduced sexual relationship, increased emotional reactivity, increased seeking of support from children, increased individual relationships with one's own relatives, reduced familial relationships with the spouse's relatives and friends, and financial separation. This questionnaire has demonstrated strong content validity. The reliability of the instrument, measured using Cronbach's alpha on a sample of 30 individuals, was 0.94 for the total scale. The alpha coefficients for the seven subscales were as follows: reduced cooperation (0.70), reduced sexual relationship (0.72), increased emotional reactivity (0.73), increased seeking support from children (0.81), increased personal relationships with one's own relatives (0.75), reduced familial relationships with the spouse's relatives and friends (0.69), and financial separation (0.68). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. Higher scores indicate greater conflict, while lower scores suggest a better marital relationship.

2.3. Intervention

The intervention protocol for this study was based on the standard structure of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and was conducted over the course of eight weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. In the initial session, participants were introduced to the therapeutic framework, including the rationale for ACT, the concept of experiential avoidance, and the importance of value-driven living. The second and third sessions focused on enhancing present-moment awareness and mindfulness skills, helping couples to observe their thoughts and emotions without judgment. In the fourth session, cognitive defusion techniques were introduced, enabling participants to create distance from unhelpful or distressing thoughts that contributed to marital tension. The fifth session emphasized self-as-context, guiding individuals to recognize a stable sense of self distinct from their experiences. During the sixth session, the therapist facilitated exercises for identifying core personal values in relational domains, such as intimacy, communication, and cooperation. The seventh session was dedicated to committed action, wherein couples set behavioral goals aligned with their shared values and practiced effective communication strategies. In the final session, the progress was reviewed, and relapse prevention strategies were discussed, focusing on maintaining psychological flexibility and value-based behavior over time. Throughout the intervention, experiential exercises, metaphors, and role-plays were used to deepen learning, and couples were given homework assignments to reinforce therapeutic gains between sessions.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using SPSS-27 software. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize the participants' scores on marital functioning and marital conflicts across pretest and posttest stages for both experimental and control groups. To examine the effectiveness of the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy intervention, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed. This statistical method allowed for controlling the influence of pretest scores while assessing the differences in posttest scores between the experimental and control groups. Significance levels, F-values, eta-squared (effect size), and statistical power were reported to determine the strength and reliability of the treatment effects.

3. Findings and Results

As shown in Table 1, the means and standard deviations of the study variables for the experimental and control

groups are reported separately for the pretest and posttest phases. As indicated, for instance, the variable of marital functioning demonstrates an increase in the mean score of the experimental group from the pretest to the posttest stage.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable	Group	N	Pretest Mean	Pretest SD	Posttest Mean	Posttest SD
Marital Functioning	Experimental	14	112.78	12.78	131.87	15.68
	Control	14	116.54	13.35	115.55	13.98
Marital Conflicts	Experimental	14	48.68	5.12	33.32	4.45
	Control	14	49.78	5.65	48.37	5.32

Table 2 demonstrates a significant difference between the posttest mean scores of marital functioning after adjusting for the effect of the pretest. Therefore, the posttest mean score for marital functioning in the experimental group is

significantly higher compared to the pretest group, indicating that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has a significant effect on improving marital functioning in couples with a tendency toward emotional divorce.

Table 2

ANCOVA Results for Marital Functioning

Subscale	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared
Posttest	Pretest	56.286	1	56.286	18.42	0.038	0.06
	Group	245.745	1	245.745	145.75	0.000	0.58

Table 3 shows a significant difference between the posttest mean scores of marital conflict after controlling for the pretest effect. Therefore, the posttest mean score for marital conflicts in the experimental group is significantly

reduced compared to the pretest group, suggesting that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy effectively reduces marital conflicts in couples with a tendency toward emotional divorce.

Table 3

ANCOVA Results for Marital Conflicts

Subscale	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared
Posttest	Pretest	68.748	1	68.748	16.68	0.035	0.07
	Group	153.685	1	153.685	125.35	0.000	0.62

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The post-intervention findings revealed that in the experimental group, marital functioning significantly improved in the posttest compared to the pretest. Therefore, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has a significant impact on enhancing marital functioning in couples with a tendency toward emotional divorce.

In the ACT approach, it is believed that the lack of acceptance of certain conditions exacerbates relationship difficulties between spouses. Conditions such as unpleasant emotions, feelings, and thoughts related to problems must

ultimately be accepted, as there is often no alternative. In ACT interventions, individuals reconnect with their core values and begin to act in accordance with them. Over time, these values become more stabilized, and behavior aligns more closely with them. ACT is grounded in the principle that attempts to avoid or control distressing internal experiences are either ineffective or counterproductive, often intensifying psychological distress. Clients are taught that full acceptance of these experiences is more adaptive. Additionally, ACT emphasizes present-moment awareness, guiding individuals to become mindful of their psychological state, physical sensations, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in the present (Jafarimanesh et al., 2021).

Clients are then trained to cognitively defuse from these mental experiences, allowing them to act independently of distressing thoughts. This is followed by a focus on reducing over-identification with the autobiographical self, or the narrative identity the individual has constructed in their mind (Moghim et al., 2022; Mousavi et al., 2022; Rafiei Saviri et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the findings showed that marital conflicts in the experimental group significantly decreased in the posttest compared to the pretest. Hence, ACT also significantly reduces marital conflicts in couples with a tendency toward emotional divorce.

This hypothesis can be explained by recognizing that marriage is one of the most important life decisions, and marital satisfaction is a key determinant of quality of life. A successful marriage is grounded in three essential elements: commitment, attraction, and mutual understanding. ACT equips individuals with more effective strategies to manage difficult and crisis situations (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2019; Amani et al., 2018; Rabiei et al., 2023). During ACT sessions, individuals clarify and categorize their personal values. In explaining the mechanism by which ACT reduces marital conflict, it can be argued that ACT lowers psychological stress in couples, thereby increasing adaptability and promoting the use of constructive conflict resolution strategies. ACT asserts that change occurs when individuals are able to relate to their inner experiences through increased cognitive defusion. Ultimately, this defusion reduces negative thoughts and reactions, enhancing psychological acceptance. This acceptance, in turn, weakens the link between negative thoughts and maladaptive behavior. Increased psychological defusion and awareness of thoughts and actions enable individuals to recognize the patterns between their reactions and make conscious decisions not to follow their previous avoidant and conflict-prone behaviors (Rabiei et al., 2023; Rafiei Saviri et al., 2022).

One of the main limitations of this study is the relatively small sample size, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the use of convenience sampling and the focus on couples from counseling centers in Tehran may introduce selection bias, as participants might differ from the general population of couples experiencing emotional divorce. The reliance on self-report questionnaires could also lead to response bias due to social desirability or misinterpretation of items. Furthermore, the short-term follow-up period does not allow for assessment of the long-term effectiveness of Acceptance

and Commitment Therapy on marital functioning and conflict resolution.

Future research should consider using larger and more diverse samples to enhance the external validity of the findings. Longitudinal studies are recommended to evaluate the long-term impact of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy on marital dynamics and emotional resilience. It would also be beneficial to include qualitative assessments, such as in-depth interviews, to gain richer insights into the participants' lived experiences and therapeutic processes. Moreover, comparing ACT with other therapeutic approaches, such as Emotionally Focused Therapy or Cognitive-Behavioral Couple Therapy, could help identify the most effective methods for addressing emotional divorce and marital conflict.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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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