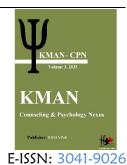


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Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy on Distress Tolerance and Dysfunctional Attitudes in Incompatible Couples

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) on distress tolerance and dysfunctional attitudes in incompatible couples. This research employed a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest structure and a control group. The statistical population consisted of incompatible couples who sought counseling services in Tehran in 2023. Thirty-two participants were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 16) and a control group (n = 16). The experimental group received MBCT over eight weeks in weekly 90-minute sessions, while the control group did not receive any intervention. Data were collected using the Distress Tolerance Scale (Simons & Gaher, 2005) and the Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale (Weissman & Beck, 1978). The normality of data was verified using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to analyze the differences between groups, controlling for pretest scores. Descriptive statistics indicated increased posttest scores in distress tolerance and decreased scores in dysfunctional attitudes among participants in the experimental group. Results of ANCOVA revealed that, after controlling for pretest scores, the difference in distress tolerance between the experimental and control groups was statistically significant (F = 21.12, p = .001, η^2 = .42). Similarly, a significant difference was found in dysfunctional attitudes between the two groups (F = 25.14, p = .001, $\eta^2 = .48$), with the experimental group showing a notable reduction in maladaptive beliefs. The findings suggest that Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy is effective in enhancing distress tolerance and reducing dysfunctional attitudes among incompatible couples. MBCT facilitates cognitive and emotional self-regulation through present-moment awareness and nonjudgmental attention, offering a beneficial intervention for improving marital dynamics.

Keywords: Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Distress Tolerance, Dysfunctional Attitudes, Incompatible Couples, Marital Conflict.

1. Introduction

arriage is considered the most significant event in an individual's life cycle, wherein spouses engage in a reciprocal relationship. This relationship is regarded as the most important interpersonal connection in a person's life (Namvaran Germi et al., 2017). Marital conflicts, as a key indicator of maladjustment in marriage, are associated with a wide range of issues, such as reduced parental compatibility with children, increased likelihood of divorce, and the emergence of depression among spouses. One of the critical tasks in marital life is the ability to establish and maintain stable, adaptive, and satisfying relationships with one's partner. In recent years, there has been a growing focus on marital relationships and efforts to strengthen and enhance marital adjustment. Studies have demonstrated that marital adjustment significantly impacts many aspects of individuals' personal and social lives, particularly the quality of the spousal relationship (Esmaeili et al., 2023; Ragheni & Soltanzadeh, 2023).

Distress tolerance is a psychological trait present in all individuals to varying degrees, yet significant individual differences exist in this capacity. Low levels of distress tolerance can make individuals more vulnerable to numerous psychological harms. In essence, this trait functions similarly to an immune system, helping individuals maintain emotional and behavioral stability in the face of various internal and external psychological stressors. When distress tolerance is low, individuals tend to lose behavioral coherence and emotional regulation under pressure (Keough et al., 2010).

The level of distress tolerance is strongly influenced by environmental support and the individual's ability to engage in help-seeking behaviors (Daughters et al., 2017). Help-seeking behavior functions both as a self-regulatory and coping strategy. In the context of health, it is defined as an adaptive coping process wherein individuals seek external assistance to manage health-related concerns (Aguirre Velasco et al., 2020). Help-seeking theory posits that individuals follow a predictable series of cognitive and behavioral steps to seek help for their deficits, with each step leading to distinct types of solutions (Nguyen et al., 2021).

According to Beck's cognitive theory, dysfunctional attitudes are rigid, perfectionistic standards used to judge oneself and others. These attitudes are considered maladaptive because of their inflexibility, extremity, and resistance to change (Liu et al., 2017). Dysfunctional attitudes are directive schemas or beliefs that individuals

234

hold about themselves, their surroundings, the world, and the future (Abela & Skitch, 2007). These attitudes are reflected in what individuals say and hear and influence their perceptions of the external world. Dysfunctional attitudes contribute to a lack of introspection regarding intrapersonal strengths and weaknesses and key personality traits affecting marital success. They lead to beliefs that marital problems are permanent and that no suitable or constructive solutions exist (Shiri et al., 2016).

One of the interventions addressing these issues is Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy Mindfulness requires the development of three core qualities in attentional focus: nonjudgmental awareness, intentional awareness, and present-moment focus. This presentcentered attention enables the processing of all immediate experiences, including cognitive, physiological, behavioral components. Through mindfulness exercises and techniques, individuals become more aware of their daily functioning, recognize the mind's automatic patterns in past and future thinking, and learn to gain control over their thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations by cultivating moment-to-moment awareness (Deldadeh & Moa'in Islami, 2020). Mindfulness refers to focused attention on the present moment and an awareness of thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and the surrounding environment. According to Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness involves purposeful, presentmoment attention without judgment or labeling of one's experience (Segal et al., 2013).

Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following research question: Does mindfulness-based cognitive therapy affect distress tolerance and dysfunctional attitudes in incompatible couples?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study utilized a quasi-experimental research design with a pretest-posttest format and a control group. The statistical population included incompatible couples who visited counseling centers in Tehran in 2023. From this population, a total of 32 individuals were selected using a convenience sampling method and were randomly assigned to two groups: an experimental group (n = 16) and a control group (n = 16). The instruments used to collect data were the Distress Tolerance Scale and the Dysfunctional Attitudes Questionnaire. Participants in the experimental group received Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for eight consecutive weeks, with one 90-minute session per

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week. The control group did not receive any specific intervention.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Distress Tolerance

Developed by Simons and Gaher (2005), this self-report questionnaire assesses emotional distress tolerance and consists of 15 items across four subscales: Tolerance (the ability to tolerate emotional distress), Absorption (being overwhelmed by negative emotions), Appraisal (subjective evaluation of distress), and Regulation (efforts to alleviate distress). The items are rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were reported as 0.72, 0.82, 0.78, and 0.70, respectively, with a total scale reliability of 0.82. The scale has also demonstrated acceptable levels of criterion and convergent validity (Mohsenabadi et al., 2025; Sohrabnejad et al., 2025).

2.2.2. Dysfunctional Attitudes

This instrument was developed by Weissman and Beck (1978) based on Beck's cognitive theory regarding the content of cognitive structures in depression. The questionnaire consists of four subscales: Achievement-Perfectionism, Need for Approval from Others, Need to Please Others, and Vulnerability-Performance Evaluation. Responses are rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), including intermediate values (2 = very disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = very agree). The total score is obtained by summing responses to 26 items. The minimum possible score is 26 and the maximum is 182. Scores between 26-52 indicate a low level of dysfunctional attitudes, 52-130 reflect a moderate level, and scores above 130 indicate a high level of dysfunctional attitudes (Abbasi et al., 2024).

2.3. Intervention

The intervention protocol in this study was based on Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and was implemented over eight weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. The sessions were designed to help participants develop present-moment awareness, nonjudgmental observation, and acceptance of thoughts and emotions. The program began with psychoeducation on mindfulness principles and the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Subsequent sessions included guided mindfulness practices such as mindful breathing, body scan, mindful eating, and awareness of automatic thoughts. Participants were taught to recognize and decenter from dysfunctional cognitive patterns and to cultivate acceptance and emotional regulation strategies through experiential exercises. Each session included group discussions, skillbuilding activities, and homework assignments aimed at integrating mindfulness into daily life. The protocol emphasized the application of mindfulness to interpersonal dynamics and stress management, with a focus on improving emotional regulation and reducing cognitive distortions contributing to marital distress.

2.3.1. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Initially, descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation were used to summarize participants' scores on the variables of distress tolerance and dysfunctional attitudes in both the experimental and control groups during pretest and posttest phases. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was employed to assess the normality of data distribution, which confirmed that the assumptions of normality were met (p > .05). Given the interval nature of the data and the normal distribution, parametric statistical methods were used. Specifically, univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was applied to compare the posttest scores between groups while controlling for pretest scores. This allowed for determining the effectiveness of the mindfulness-based cognitive therapy intervention on distress tolerance and dysfunctional attitudes among incompatible couples. All analyses were performed at a significance level of p < .05.

3. Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of participants' scores on the variables of distress tolerance and dysfunctional attitudes. As shown, participants in the experimental group demonstrated changes in distress tolerance and dysfunctional attitudes in the posttest compared to the pretest.

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Table 1Descriptive Analysis of Variables

Variables	Group	Pretest Mean	Pretest SD	Posttest Mean	Posttest SD
Overall Distress Tolerance	Experimental	51.37	6.69	67.43	8.47
	Control	50.48	6.87	49.37	6.61
Dysfunctional Attitudes	Experimental	76.35	8.32	50.18	6.31
	Control	78.74	8.18	74.35	8.38

The results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test indicated that the distribution of the study variables was normal (p > .05). Given that the variables followed a normal distribution in both pretest and posttest and the measurement scales were interval-level, a parametric analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed to analyze the data. Consequently, it can be concluded that the variables examined in the sample followed a normal distribution.

According to Table 2, after adjusting for pretest scores, the difference between the experimental and control groups on the variable of distress tolerance was statistically significant. The posttest mean of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group. Therefore, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) has a significant effect on distress tolerance in incompatible couples.

 Table 2

 Results of Univariate ANCOVA for Comparing Distress Tolerance Between Groups

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.	Effect Size	Power
Adjusted Model	754.75	3	9.75	.001	.59	.62
Intercept	68.32	1	3.23	.190	.07	.42
Pretest	75.68	1	4.64	.170	.06	.38
Group	588.51	1	21.12	.001	.42	.51
Error	512.23	29				
Total	28318.00	32				

Based on Table 3, after controlling for pretest scores, the difference between the experimental and control groups on the variable of dysfunctional attitudes was statistically significant. The posttest mean of the experimental group was

lower than that of the control group. Therefore, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) has a significant effect on reducing dysfunctional attitudes in incompatible couples.

 Table 3

 Results of Univariate ANCOVA for Comparing Dysfunctional Attitudes Between Groups

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.	Effect Size	Power
Adjusted Model	1308.47	3	18.58	.005	.59	.53
Intercept	453.86	1	6.37	.007	.34	.49
Pretest	1012.35	1	11.85	.003	.41	.61
Group	1891.27	1	25.14	.001	.48	.68
Error	2018.65	29				
Total	526712.00	32				

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings revealed that the mean scores of distress tolerance among couples in the experimental group showed a statistically significant increase from pretest to posttest. Therefore, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) has a significant effect on improving distress tolerance in incompatible couples. These results are consistent with the prior findings (Li et al., 2024; Seyed Ali Tabar & Zadhasn, 2023; Shoghi et al., 2023; Yanjuan et al., 2023).

This therapeutic approach helps clients achieve a more positive experience of life by managing negative thoughts and emotions. A key component of this treatment is training

KMAN-CPN
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236

individuals to cope with negative thoughts and stressful events through breathing exercises and mindfulness practices. With this approach, clients learn how to overcome the negative aspects of their lives and instead focus on positive aspects. These mindfulness techniques enhance individuals' control over their mind and body, thereby improving their overall health. Those with high levels of mindfulness possess enhanced insight and awareness regarding their cognitive processes and abilities. Due to the deep connection between mindfulness, emotional regulation, and effective coping strategies, individuals develop greater awareness of themselves, others, emotions, and present circumstances.

Additionally, the findings showed that the mean scores of dysfunctional attitudes among couples in the experimental group significantly decreased from pretest to posttest. Thus, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy is effective in reducing dysfunctional attitudes in incompatible couples. These findings align with previous studies (Barghi Irani & Dehghan Saber, 2021; Kyung et al., 2020; Qarib-Bolook et al., 2022; Sadeghi et al., 2020).

Mindfulness practices, such as focused attention on breathing, eating, seeing, and hearing, emphasize presentmoment awareness. This type of focused and expanded awareness mirrors cognitive tasks like the N-back test, where attention and risk perception are crucial. Therefore, it can be argued that mindfulness-based therapy may enhance performance in cognitive tasks like the N-back, which require accurate and rapid responses based on non-automatic awareness and mental alertness.

In mindfulness, individuals are trained to become aware of their mental state at any given moment and to direct their attention toward various internal processes (Segal et al., 2013). Mindfulness can be defined as nonjudgmental awareness that arises from deliberately paying attention to the present moment (Barghi Irani & Dehghan Saber, 2021). In mindfulness training, individuals learn to attend to all their thoughts and feelings without judgment. In this therapy, it is essential for individuals to become aware of the emergence of thoughts in their mind (Khoshkerdar & Raeisi, 2020).

One of the primary limitations of this study was the small sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of incompatible couples. Additionally, the use of convenience sampling and selfreport questionnaires introduces potential bias, including social desirability and limited external validity. The study was also limited to couples seeking counseling services in

Tehran, which may not represent individuals from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, the absence of a follow-up assessment prevents conclusions about the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of the intervention outcomes.

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of findings across different cultural and demographic groups. It is also recommended that future studies employ randomized controlled trial designs with long-term follow-up assessments to evaluate the sustained impact of MBCT on psychological variables in couples. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide deeper insights into participants' experiences with mindfulness-based interventions. Additionally, comparative studies examining MBCT against other therapeutic approaches could help determine its relative effectiveness in improving couple dynamics and emotional well-being.

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

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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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238



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239