

The Effect of Conflict Resolution Training on Marital Satisfaction in Couples Referring to Counseling Centers in Shiraz, Southern Iran

Farkhondeh Sharif¹, PhD; Sarah Soleimani¹, MSc Candidate; Arash Mani², PhD; Sareh Keshavarzi³, PhD

¹Department of Mental Health and Psychiatric Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran;

²Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran;

³Department of Epidemiology, School of Health and Nutrition, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

Corresponding author:

Farkhondeh Sharif, PhD; Department of Mental Health and Psychiatric Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Zand Avenue, P.O.Box:713451359, Shiraz, Iran

Tel: +98 711 6474255, +98 711 6474250; Email: fsharif@sums.ac.ir

Received: 8 June 2012 Revised: 17 November 2012 Accepted: 15 December 2012

ABSTRACT

Background

Marital conflicts are among the most common problems in today's society. Conflicts are unavoidable since people have different viewpoints, personalities, and goals. Marital conflicts can ultimately lead to divorce. This study aimed to assess the effects of conflict resolution training on marital satisfaction in a sample of Iranian couples.

Methods

This interventional and clinical trial was performed in 2011 in the counseling centers of Shiraz, southern Iran. 56 couples, having the necessary inclusion criteria, were randomly selected using the convenient sampling method. These couples had moderate to severe scores of conflicts (>60) according to the marital conflict questionnaire. The participants were divided into experimental and control groups, using random block allocation. Then the experimental group was randomly subdivided into three groups. The experimental group received 10 sessions of conflict resolution skills training, twice a week, lasting for 1.5 hours. The level of conflict and marital satisfaction was checked before, immediately, and one month after the intervention in the experimental groups, and before and one month after the intervention in the control group. Data were analyzed using SPSS software, version 16.

Results

Both groups were demographically homogenous with no statistically significant difference. The difference in the mean scores of marital conflict and marital satisfaction before, immediately and one month after the intervention was statistically significant in the experimental groups ($P < 0.0001$) but not in the control group.

Conclusion

Conflict resolution training is effective in reducing marital conflicts. Therefore it can be recommended for couples who have marital conflicts.

KEYWORDS: Marriage; Satisfaction; Conflict resolution; Education

Trial Registration Number: IRCT201109112812N2

Please cite this article as: Sharif F, Soleimani S, Mani A, Keshavarzi S. The Effect of Conflict Resolution Training on Marital Satisfaction in Couples Referring to Counseling Centers in Shiraz, Southern Iran. IJCBNM. 2013;1(1): 26-34.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage has always been approved as the most important social customs for satisfying emotional needs. Marriage is a human, complex, delicate, and dynamic relationship with specific characteristics.¹ The family is the first social organization, where one lives in it. It is essentially a center for assistance, reassurance, relief, and healing which should relieve the stress enforced on its members and guide them towards growth and prosperity. Moreover, among different social organizations, the family is the most sacred place for educating the mind and the body.²

Because of their innate social nature, human beings need someone to empathize and live with in peace and prosperity. The family has always manifested love and life, and divorce is a crisis that breaks the bonds of this association.³ In fact, divorce is one the most important and controversial social issues in most societies. Divorce is not an individual problem, because apart from affecting family relationships, it also imposes tremendous damage on societies which eventually create profound and irreversible social tensions and problems.⁴

The National Organization for Civil Registration reported the most recent numbers for the four vital events (birth, death, marriage, and divorce) in 2010, announcing that compared with the previous year, the rate of marriage had increased by 0.1%, while the rate of divorce had a 7.5% growth rate. According to the latest statistics announced by the National Organization for Civil Registration, the rate of divorce has increased in 24 provinces in the country, and in 13 of which this increase is over 10%.⁵

The emotional and psychological effects of divorce are too harmful to be understood from the beginning. Divorce transforms love to hate, trust to distrust, and kindness and support to anger and revenge. Divorce has deep social, psychological, legal, and economical consequences.⁶

Men and women experience many

marital problems in their marriage and close relationship with each other for various reasons such as inadequate understanding of each other, unrealistic expectations from marriage and/or their spouse, and financial, social and moral problems. Some of these problems play a crucial role in marital conflicts and divorce, such as sexual infidelity. Other problems raised by the couples who referred for treatment were lack of feeling love, disputes over power, communicational problems, irrational expectations, and incapability of conflict management.⁷

Despite the importance of this issue and the high rate of divorce in Iran, few studies have been done on conflict resolution training, most of which being done on a small sample of women. Since marital conflicts can cause serious problems in family relationships, increase behavioral problem in children, and have subsequent negative impacts on the society, we aimed to assess the effects of conflict resolution training on marital satisfaction in a sample of Iranian couples.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this interventional randomized clinical trial on couples who referred to counseling centers of Shiraz, southern Iran, during 2011, 56 couples were selected and randomly divided into experimental ($n=25$ couples) and control ($n=31$ couples) groups, using the convenience sampling method and random block allocation. The experimental group was subdivided into three groups.

Data were collected using the marital conflict and marital satisfaction questionnaires and a demographic data form. Data were analyzed using software SPSS, version 16. Repeated measurement, paired and independent *t*-tests were used as appropriate.

Marital Conflict Questionnaire made by Barati and Sanayi (2000). It has 42 questions for assessing marital conflict and evaluates seven aspects of marital conflicts including reduction of cooperation, reduction of sex,

increase of emotional reactions, increase in attracting the children's support, enhancing personal relationship with their families, reduction of personal relationship with their partner's family and his/her friends, separating their financial affairs. Counselors and other clinical experts can use this questionnaire to assess marital conflicts.

The questionnaire was given to 111 people (53 men and 58 women) who had referred to legal consulting centers for their marital conflict, and 108 normal individuals (54 couples) as controls. The provisional norm of this questionnaire was calculated separately for the experimental and control groups based on standard T scores. Individuals whose raw score was 70–140 (standard T score=40-60) had normal marital relationships. Those with raw scores of 115–134 (standard T score=60-70) had higher than normal marital conflicts, and those with raw scores of 235 or higher (standard T score=>70) had severe marital conflicts or highly vulnerable relationships.

Each question has five options and a score of 1-5 is assigned to each option. The maximum total score is 210 and the minimum is 42. Each of the 42 items of this questionnaire corresponds to one of the seven mentioned aspects of marital conflicts. The maximum score for each subscale is equal to the number of questions of that subscale that is multiplied by 5. In this questionnaire, a higher score implies more conflict.⁸

Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire (ENRICH) was made by Olson, Fournier, and Druckman.⁸ This questionnaire has two forms (115 or 125 questions). We used the form with 115 questions. It is used to assess or identify potential problem creating areas or areas of fruitful marital relationship. This questionnaire is also used for couples who need counseling and improvement in their relationship. Moreover, it has been used as a valid tool for assessing marital satisfaction in numerous studies such as Lavi and Olson's on 8385 couples and another study on 6267 couples.⁸

The ENRICH questionnaire has 14 subscales. The first subscale has 5 questions and the other subscales have 10 questions. The subscales consist of idealistic distortion (1-5), marital satisfaction (6-15), personality issues (16-25), communication (26-35), conflict resolution (36-45), financial management (46-55), leisure activities (56-65), sex (66-75), children (76-85), family and friends (86-95), equal roles (96-105), and religion (106-115). The first subscale measures the respondent tendency to answer the questions conventionally.

In the form (115 questions) used in Iran, each question has five options. The options are very high, high, moderate, low, and very low. However, questions 96-105 are rated as always, sometimes, I do not know, very low, and never. A score of 0-4 is assigned to each answer. The maximum score is 460. A higher score indicates a higher level of marital satisfaction.

Cronbach's alpha as reported by Olson, Fournier, and Druckman for subscales of idealistic distortion, marital satisfaction, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sex, children, family and friends, equal roles and religion were 0.9, 0.81, 0.73, 0.68, 0.75, 0.74, 0.76, 0.48, 0.77, 0.72, and 0.71, respectively. In different studies, the Cronbach's alpha for these subscales ranged from 0.68 (for equal roles) to 0.86 (for marital satisfaction) with a mean score of 0.79. The test-retest validity of the questionnaire within 4 weeks ranged from 0.77 (for leisure activities) to 0.92 (for sex and idealistic distortion) with a mean score of 0.86.

In Mahdavian's study,⁸ Pearson's correlation coefficient using the test-retest method within a week was 0.937 for men, 0.944 for women, and 0.94 for men and women. The correlation coefficients of this questionnaire for the family satisfaction life satisfaction subscale were 0.41-0.60 and 0.32-0.41, respectively, which shows desirable construct validity. All subscales of this questionnaire differentiate satisfied

and dissatisfied couples, indicating that it has good criterion validity as well.⁸

The researcher initially referred to consulting centers in Shiraz with a letter of introduction and approval from the university. Then, the questionnaires were given to the couples referring to that center, and the couples who had the criteria for inclusion and volunteered to participate in this study were selected. Those who obtained scores of 60 and over (moderate to severe) in the marital conflict questionnaire were chosen for participating in the training sessions. The participants completed the written informed consent form and marital satisfaction questionnaire.

The experimental groups were also randomly subdivided into three groups. For each of three experimental groups, 10 training sessions were held twice a week on Saturdays and Wednesdays (morning and evening), each lasting for 1.5 hours. Couples unable to attend a meeting could participate in the training groups with the same subject. The training method was through questions and answers, lectures, and role playing. In the first session, the participants became familiar with each other and the aim of the training was explained. The subjects of the next session were communication skills, speaking and listening skills, anger, how to deal with anger, the consequences of frequent and intense anger, skills for coping with anger in a partner, assertiveness skills, and conflict resolution skills.

The marital conflict and marital satisfaction questionnaires were filled again by the couples in the final session. They were told to refer again one month after the intervention. One month after the intervention, the questionnaires were completed by the control group as well. At the end, the conflict resolution training booklet was given to the control group.

RESULTS

The independent *t*-test showed that the

mean scores of marital conflict and marital satisfaction between the experimental and control groups did not have any significant difference before the intervention. Both groups were demographically homogenous with no statistically significant difference.

The mean (\pm SD) maternal ages of the women were 34.6 (\pm 5.37) and 33.51 (\pm 4.58) in the experimental and control group, respectively. The corresponding amounts were 39.12 (\pm 5.26) for men and 37.51 (\pm 4.62), respectively. 20% of the women in the experimental groups had primary educational level and 80% had high school diploma or higher, compared with 19.4% and 80.6% in the control group. The corresponding figures for men were 28% and 72% in the experimental groups and 19.4% and 80.6% in the control group, respectively. In comparing the means scores of marital conflict before and after intervention the results while considering the mutual effect of time and group indicated significant reduction in the experimental group and an increase in the control group. Time was a significant factor for change in the experimental and control group. Regardless of time there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups ($P=0.02$). Regarding to the results of repeated measure analysis means scores of marital satisfaction indicated significant improvement in the experimental group and time was a significant factor for change in this aspect. However, in general regardless of time there was no significant difference between both groups ($P=0.126$). The mean scores of both marital conflict and marital satisfaction were statistically significant in various periods of the study, with their decreasing and increasing trend continuing one month after the intervention, respectively (table 1, figures 1 and 2).

By comparing the mean scores of the women's marital conflict and marital satisfaction, based on paired *t*-test results in the experimental and control groups, before and one month after the intervention, we found that the difference in the mean

Table 1: Comparison of changes in marital conflict and marital satisfaction scores in the experimental and control groups before, immediately, and one month after the intervention in women

Scores	Time	Before intervention		Immediately after intervention		One month after intervention		P value		
		Groups	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Time	Group
Marital conflict	Experimental	79,16	14,33	72,68	11,92	71,92	11,45	<0.001 *	0.02*	<0.001 *
	Control	84.29	18.16	84.43	17.26	84.58	16.84			
Marital satisfaction	Experimental	268,56	46,00	281,84	42,98	283,92	42,33	<0.001 *	0.126	<0.001 *
	Control	259.87	48.33	259.19	46.92	258.52	45.73			

*Significant at the 5% level

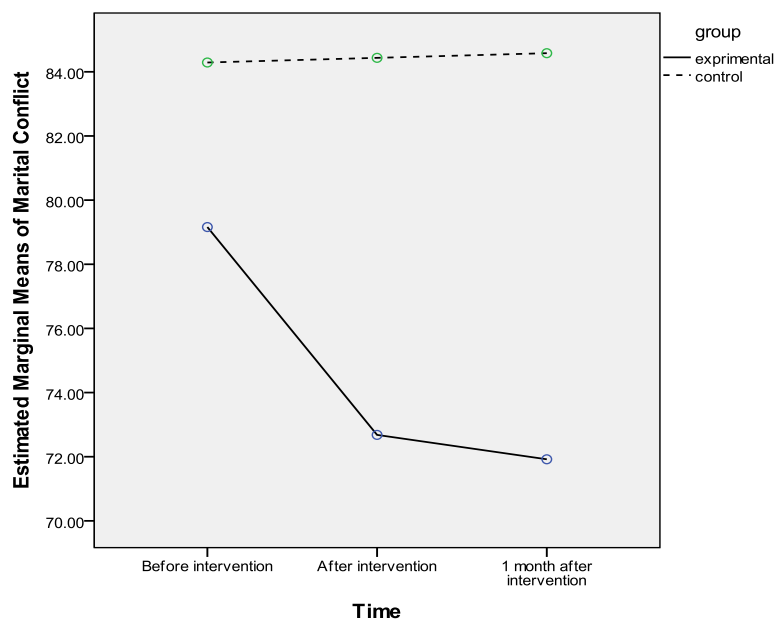


Figure 1: Comparison of changes in marital conflict scores in the experimental group before, immediately and one month after the intervention in the women based on repeated measurement test.

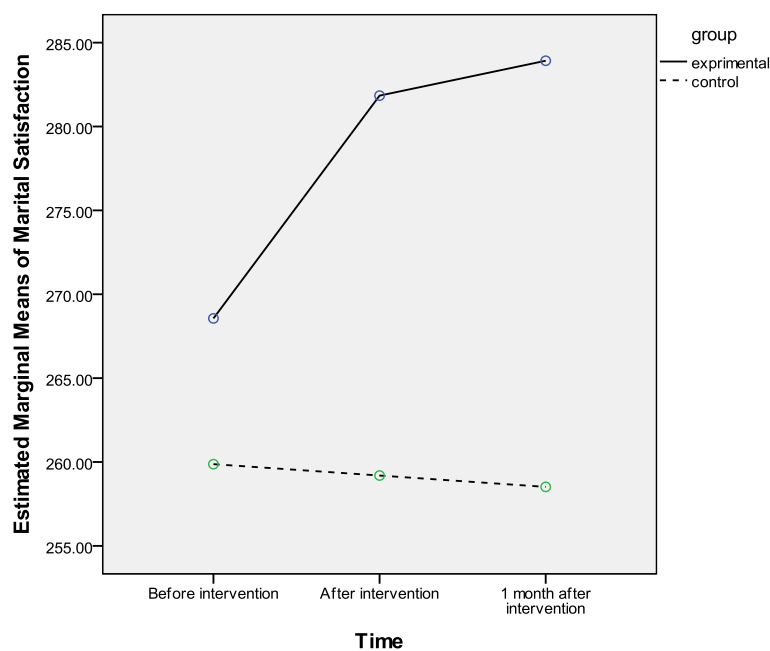


Figure 2: Comparison of changes in marital satisfaction scores in the experimental and control group before, immediately and one month after the intervention in the women based on repeated measurement test.

scores of marital conflict and marital satisfaction were statistically significant in the experimental groups (table 2). Moreover, based on analysis of variance of repeated measurement test results, the difference in the mean scores of marital conflict and marital satisfaction, before, immediately and one month after the intervention in

the men indicated significant change in the experimental group (table 3). Regardless of time there were no statistical differences between experimental and control groups in the mean scores of both marital conflict and marital satisfaction (table 3).

Also, the mean scores of both marital conflict and marital satisfaction were

Table 2: Comparison of the mean scores of marital conflict and marital satisfaction among the women in the experimental and control groups based on the paired *t*-test results

Variable	Experimental group					Control group				
	Before		One month later			Before		One month later		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	P Value	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	P Value
Marital conflict	79.16	14.32	71.92	11.45	<0.0001*	84.29	18.15	84.58	16.83	0.7
Marital satisfaction	268.56	46	283.92	42.32	<0.0001*	259.87	48.33	258.52	45.73	0.2

*Significant at the 5% level

Table 3: Comparison of changes in the marital conflict and marital satisfaction scores in the experimental groups before, immediately, and one month after intervention in men based on the analysis of variance repeated measurement test

Scores	Time Groups	Before intervention		Immediately after intervention		One month after intervention		P value		
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Time	Group	Time/group
Marital conflict	Experimental	78.84	13.40	73.52	12.90	72.40	12.44	<0.001 *	0.066	<0.001 *
	Control	82.71	17.27	82.45	16.47	82.19	15.89			
Marital satisfaction	Experimental	275.40	39.96	291.12	38.11	291.48	37.08	0.001 *	0.112	<0.001 *
	Control	270.29	39.57	269.61	38.52	268.93	37.84			

*Significant at the 5% level

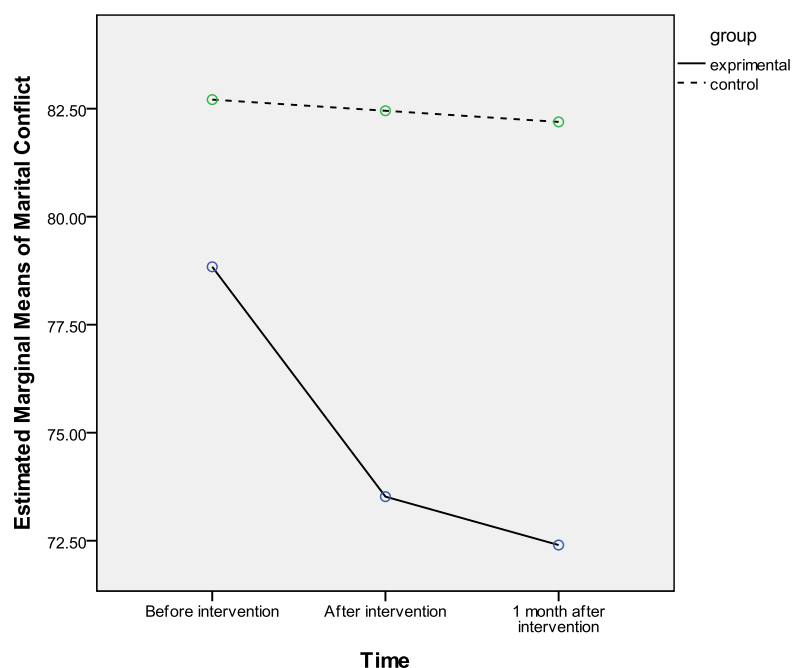


Figure 3: Comparison of changes in marital conflict scores in the experimental and control groups before, immediately and one month after the intervention in the men based on repeated measurement test.

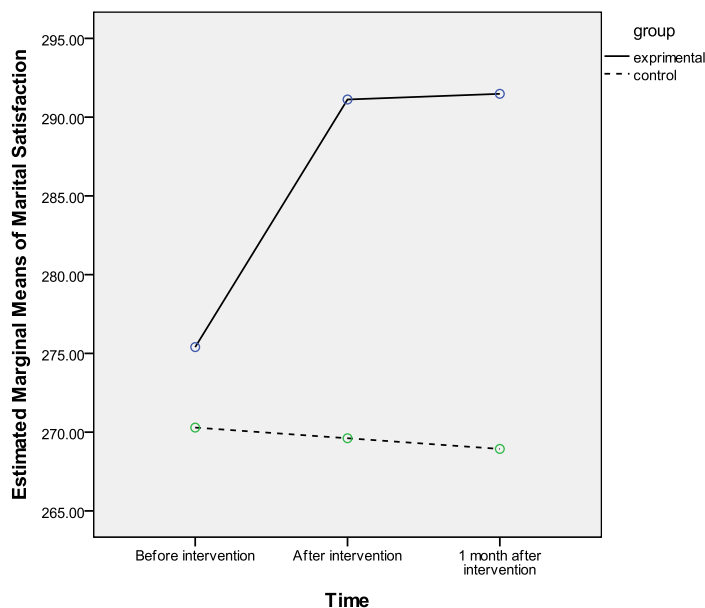


Figure 4: Comparison of changes in marital satisfaction scores in the experimental and control group before, immediately and one month after the intervention in the men based on repeated measurement test.

statistically significant in various periods of the study, with their decreasing and increasing trend continuing one month after the intervention, respectively (figures 3 and 4).

By comparing the mean scores of the men’s marital conflict and marital satisfaction, based on paired *t*-test results in the experimental and control groups, before and one month after the intervention, we found that the difference in the mean scores of marital conflict and marital satisfaction were statistically significant in the experimental groups (table 4).

DISCUSSION

We found that our intervention was effective in decreasing marital conflicts and increasing marital satisfaction among the studied couples.

These results are consistent with those of other studies showing that improvement in the couples’ knowledge and skills on marital conflicts plays an essential role in prevention programs.⁹⁻¹⁶

Epstein and Baucom studied the cognitive behavioral approach on marital conflicts. They support the continuity and correlation of behavioral approaches with cognitive strategies. These common strategies are avoiding conflicts, ending them, and examining their consequences. From this point of view, the creation of conflicts by spouses can be based on their understanding of the relationship and also their behavior.¹⁷

Hosseinian and colleagues studied the effects of conflict resolution training on marital conflicts in women. These skills were taught in 15 two-hour sessions. It was concluded that conflict resolution training can reduce marital conflicts.¹⁸

Table 4: Comparison of the mean scores of marital conflict and marital satisfaction among the men in the experimental and control groups based on the paired *t*-test results

Variable	Experimental group					Control group				
	Before		One month later			Before		One month later		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	P Value	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	P Value
Marital conflict	78.84	13.40	72.40	12.43	<0.0001*	82.70	17.27	82.19	15.89	0.4
Marital satisfaction	275.4	39.96	291.48	37.08	<0.0003*	270.29	39.57	268.94	37.84	0.3

*Significant at the 5% level

In Turkey, a study was on the effects of communication training on improving conflict resolution skills on 40 couples who had the worst scores in the marital conflict questionnaire showed that after participation in the program, scores in the experimental group were better than those of the control group. In a follow-up study performed 3 and 6 months later, the results were still the same.¹⁹

Furthermore, the pre- and post-tests and follow-up assessments after 1 month showed that these changes were long-lasting in the experimental group. Cummings and Wood also found that participation in brief 4-session prevention programs for improving marital conflicts decreased marital conflicts and subsequently increased marital satisfaction when they performed 6 month and one year follow-ups.²⁰ These results are consistent with those of our study that showed conflict resolution training improved marital conflict resolution and marital satisfaction.

Another study investigated the effects of problem solving and communication training on familial conflicts. The researchers found that participation in these meetings improved the conflict resolution skills among the studied couples.²¹ Moreover, Sardogan and Karahan studied the effects of training human relation skills on a group of couples in the form of ten interventional sessions. The results showed improvement in the couple's marital adjustment.²²

Our results are consistent with those of most other studies that confirm the effectiveness of training courses and their long lasting benefits. These training courses should be held before and in the initial stages of marriage to prevent emerging conflicts. Also, preventive programs on marital distress and conflict resolution may be more effective and economical compared with programs for the remediation of marital distress.

One of the limitations of our study was that our follow-up period was short. We suggest that further studies be performed to assess the relationship between the couples' improvement in knowledge and behavior

and children's adjustment. It would also be beneficial to study the relationship between the participants' personal characteristics and the effectiveness of interventional programs. For example, although the knowledge of the participants might increase during the intervention, they might still have low self-esteem about their ability to cope with their different viewpoints on various matters and the way to handle familial conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Conflict resolution training is effective in reducing marital conflicts as well as increasing marital satisfaction. Therefore, this method can be recommended for couples who have marital conflicts. The application of related interventional programs before and in the initial years of marriage might help reduce marital conflicts. However, further studies with larger sample sizes and a longer duration of follow-up are needed to further confirm these results.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The present article was extracted from the thesis written by Sara Solymani and was supported by Shiraz University of Medical Sciences grant No. 5646 The authors thank the patients for their active contribution and participation in this research.

Conflict of interest: None declared

REFERENCES

- 1 Etemadi O, Navabinejad S, Ahmadi A, et al. The effects of couple therapy with Image therapy to increase intimacy in couples referring to counseling centers in Isfahan. *Journal of New Research and Consulting*. 2006;5:9-22. [In Persian]
- 2 Hajiabozladeh N. The effects of communication skills training with

- method of cognitive-behavioral on marital adjustment in couples of Karaj. [dissertation]. Mount Pleasant (MI): Azahra University of Tehran; 2002.
- 3 Norouzzian Sh. Teaching family with structured approach in improvement of marital satisfaction. [dissertation]. Mount Pleasant (MI): Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Science in Tehran; 2007.
 - 4 Rahmani N. Assessment of psychological, social and economical reasons of divorce in family courts in Tehran. Thesis submitted to the Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Science in Tehran in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in mental health nursing: Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Science; 2007.
 - 5 Sharifi M, Karasouli S, Beshlideh K. The effectiveness of group attribution-retraining in reducing couple burnout and divorce probability in divorce-seeking couples. *Journal of Family Counseling and Psychotherapy*. 2011;1:212-25
 - 6 Akhavan Tafti M. Divorce outcomes in the transition from stage. *Journal of Women's Studies*. 2003;125-52. [In Persian]
 - 7 Zargar F, Neshatdoost H. Divorce incidence factors in Falavarjan Township. *Journal of Family Research*. 2008;3:737-49.
 - 8 Sanaei B, Alaghband S, Abbasi H. Scales for assessing family and marriage. Tehran: Besat Publishments. 2000. p.19-28.
 - 9 Floyd FJ, Markman HJ. An economical observational measure of couple's communication skills. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. 1984;52:97-103.
 - 10 Linkh DJ, Sonnek SM. An application of cognitive-behavioral anger management training in a military occupational setting: Efficacy and demographic factors. *Mil Med*. 2003;168:475-8.
 - 11 Shiri Z. Conflict resolution Skills for Couples. Tehran: Behzisti Institute; 2008. p. 7-9.
 - 12 Epstein N, Baucom DH, Rankin LA. Treatment of marital conflict: A cognitive behavioral approach. *Journal of Clinical Psychology Review*. 1993;13:45-57.
 - 13 Halford WK, Markman HJ, Kling GH. Best practice in relationship education. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. 2003;29:385-406.
 - 14 Lange A, Barends E. Self control in distressed couples: A pilot study. *Journal of Family Therapy*. 1998;20:367-82.
 - 15 Bernstein P, Bernstein M. Marital therapy with behavioral-communication perspective. Translated by Poorabedinaeini H, Manshaei GH. Tehran: Rsohd; 2001. p. 264. [In Persian]
 - 16 Simpson R. Building intimate relationship: clinical application of the PAIRS program. 2002. p. 213-26.
 - 17 Epstein N, Baucom DH, Rankin LA. Treatment of marital conflict: A cognitive behavioral approach. *Journal of Clinical Psychology Review*. 1993;13:45-57.
 - 18 Hosseinian S, Shafieyan A. The effects of conflict resolution training on reduction of conflict in women's. *Journal of New Thoughts on Education*. 2005;1:7-22. [In Persian]
 - 19 Karahan TF. The effects of a couple communication program on the conflict resolution skills and active conflict tendencies of Turkish couples. *J Sex Marital Ther*. 2009;35:220-9.
 - 20 Cummings EM, Faircloth WB, Mitchel PM. Evaluating a Brief Prevention program for Improving Marital Conflict in Community Families. *Journal of Family Psychology*. 2008;22:193-202.
 - 21 Foster SL, Prinz R JO, Leary KD. Impact of Problem Solving Communication Training and Generalization Procedures on Family Conflict. *Journal of Child Behavior Therapy*. 1983;5:1-23
 - 22 Sardogan ME, Karahan TF. The effects of human relation skills training program for married couples on the level of marital adjustment of married couples. *Journal of Faculty of Educational Science*. 2005;38:89-102.