

Comparing the Effect of Cognitive Behavioral Couple Therapy and Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy on Communication Patterns in Couples with Extramarital Relationships

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Abstract

Introduction: The aim of this study was to compare the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Couple Therapy (CBCT) and Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT) on the communication patterns of couples with extramarital relationships.

Method: This semi-experimental study was conducted on all couples referred to counseling centers in Mashhad, 2020. For this purpose, 39 couples were selected by convenience method and were randomly divided into two experimental groups and one control group. The experimental groups were subjected to treatment protocol intervention and the control group was not subjected to any intervention. The Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ) of Christensen and Sullaway (1984) was used for collecting data. Data were analyzed through one way ANCOVA and SPSS software.

Results: There was a significant difference between the scores of mutually constructive communication pattern, avoidance and expectation/withdrawal in the groups of CBCT and IBCT with control group ($P < 0.05$). The results showed that CBCT is more effective on the mutually constructive pattern; while the IBCT group had a higher effect on the avoidance and expectation/withdrawal pattern ($P = 0.001$).

Conclusion: According to the findings of the present study, as infidelity in a couple's relationship is a multi-causal and combined issue, using these two approaches is suggested to be used in order to investigate infidelity more comprehensively.

Keywords: Behavior Therapy, Couples Therapy, Communication, Extramarital Relations, Family

Introduction

Family stability is important in social societies because the existence of stable families plays an important role in social order and prosperity [1]. Marital satisfaction is one of the main reasons for family survival [2]. Extramarital relationships are one of the main reasons for marital dissatisfaction and divorce around the world. A significant percentage of couples face infidelity during their married life [3]. In general, about 23% of men and 19% of women report sexual infidelity in their current committed relationship [4]. However, there is no accurate information on the statistics of extramarital relationships in Iran, while according to the opinion of family experts, in most cases of couples, infidelity of the spouse has been mentioned as one of the factors of divorce [5]. The appearance of infidelity in a marital relationship can damage the relationships between families and even create occupational and social problems for them [6].

Most couples mention insufficient emotional and psychological connection as the main factors of their betrayal. In order to investigate how marital relationship emerges, it is necessary to examine the way of communication between couples [6]. Communication patterns shows type of communication between couples. Christensen and Salawi [7] have

introduced three categories of communication patterns including mutual constructive, mutual avoidance, and expectation/withdrawal [8]. There is a positive and significant relationship between the mutual constructive pattern and marital commitment, and there is a significant and negative relationship between the expectation/withdrawal pattern and marital commitment [9]. Considering that extramarital relationships can have harmful and long-term effects for couples, it has been recommended that these people benefit from psychotherapy to solve their problems [10].

Among psychotherapy approaches, traditional behavioral therapies known well, and the most research evidence of couple therapy belongs to this approach. CBCT is actually derived from traditional behavioral couple therapy, but it is theoretically and technically distinct from it [11]. CBCT is a three-step treatment that focuses on teaching emotion management skills and encouraging good decision making [12]. In this therapy, couples are taught to learn how they feel and be able to express it. They realize that their destructive behaviors are both the result of behavioral patterns and the result of their thoughts and beliefs [13]. Evidence has revealed the efficacy of CBCT on marital relationship. Askari [14] and Durães et al., [15] have reported positive efficacy of this therapy on different marital related variables as well as communication patterns. Also, evidence has shown the effectiveness of CBCT on communication skills and beliefs [16].

Although behavioral couple therapy has a long history, but over time, the need for integrative approaches led to the creation of a treatment called integrative behavioral couple therapy (IBCT). This therapy considers relationship distress to be caused by the combination of four factors, which are differences, emotional sensitivities, external stressors, and interaction patterns [17]. The interventions used in IBCT are divided into three categories of strategies of acceptance, tolerance, and change [18]. The focus of IBCT is on the emotional impact of betrayal and understanding its origin, and emphasizes with functional analysis of this crisis on the conflict cycles of betrayal [12]. Heidari et al. have shown the effectiveness of IBCT on emotional divorce [19]. Moreover, Barraca in a systematic review showed the efficacy of IBCT on marital relationships [20].

Although no study has been found that has investigated the effectiveness of CBCT and IBCT on the communication patterns of couples with extramarital relationships, the effectiveness of this psychotherapy on inter-couple relationships has been positively evaluated. Despite the development of several protocols in the field of couple therapy, today, specialists tend to use integrative approaches and believe that a pure approach does not have the necessary efficiency because it does not comprehensively and deeply analyze the couple's problems. The approach of IBCT is newer than CBCT and the studies that have been conducted with this treatment method are more limited. Especially regarding the difference in effectiveness of IBCT with other treatment methods, there are few reliable data. Given the prevalence of infidelity and technological methods, which continue to

provide more ways to blur sexual and emotional boundaries, and the heavy costs that infidelity imposes on the family and its members and society, couple therapists face many couples which are trying to get rid of the trauma of betrayal. Accordingly, due to the multi-causality of betrayal, studies are looking for the use of therapeutic approaches that have the ability to explain the various causes of injury and can find suitable methods to deal with each one. The use of integrated approaches can be closer to fulfilling this purpose, among which the approach of CBCT is a combination of trauma response approaches, forgiveness and insight-oriented interventions in the treatment of infidelity. IBCT may be helpful because it combines strategies for change with strategies for acceptance. So far, there has been no study comparing these two approaches regarding the communication patterns of cheating couples. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of CBCT and IBCT on communication patterns in couples with extramarital relationships.

Method

This research was semi-experimental in the form of pre-test-post-test with a control group. The statistical population included couples who visited the psychological clinic of Dr. Alami in Mashhad city, 2020. The sampling method was convenience method. After the initial interview, if participants met the criteria they were selected as a sample. The inclusion criteria included having an experience of an extramarital relationship by one of the couples in the last one year, age between 20-50 years, willingness of the couple to participate in the study, and not having a chronic physical or psychological illness. Those who were taking psychiatric medications, divorce applicants, pregnant or missed more than four sessions, failed to complete therapy assignments during the couples therapy session, and couples who had not ended their infidelity were excluded from the study. Couples had signed a consent form to participate in the research. Before the intervention, the questionnaire of communication patterns was completed in pre and post-tests.

The tool used in this study was as follows:

Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ): The couple's communication patterns questionnaire developed by Christensen and Sullaway [7] with 35 questions and three scales of mutual constructive communication, mutual avoidant communication, and expectation/withdrawal communication was used in the present study. Christensen and Heavey estimated the reliability of this questionnaire and reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 and 0.81 for men and women in the mutual constructive relationship subscale, respectively. The reliability of subscales of constructive communication, mutual avoidance, and withdrawal expectation were calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient as 0.82, 0.79, and 0.83, respectively. Also, Heavey et al., [21] estimated the reliability of this questionnaire and reported Cronbach's alpha for CPQ subscales from 0.50 to 0.78. Samadzadeh et al., standardized this questionnaire in Iran

and its reliability was calculated and confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.76. Also, the convergent validity of the questionnaire was obtained from 60% to 95% [22]. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for mutual constructive communication, mutual avoidance communication, and

expectation/withdrawal communication was obtained as 0.71, 0.83, and 0.79, respectively.

In the CBCT group, each couple participated in 12 sessions (60-minute once a week) for three months, and in the IBCT group, each couple participated in 16 sessions (60-minute once a week) for four months.

Table 1. Structure of CBCT Sessions [9, 23]

Session	Content
First three sessions or assessment sessions	Communicating, assessing the couple's relationship, relationship with the third person, strengths and weaknesses of the couple's relationship, environmental stressors, couple's expectations from treatment, treatment rules and goals, crisis management.
4th and 5th sessions, prevention of further damage to marriage	Minimizing further damage to marriage and destructive interactions, promoting communication and the ability to share feelings, deciding who to tell about infidelity, being able to understand the feelings of the damaged couple, teaching interaction about talking about infidelity and taking breaks when emotions are heated
5th to 7th sessions, creating order in life again	Creating balance and order in personal life (social activities, nutrition and sports) and family life (two-person activities, taking care of family affairs), teaching about flashbacks and dealing with them, teaching the skills of expressing emotions, the skills of responding to emotions and the listening skills. Adjusting the emotions and setting a specific time for the conversation.
7th to 10th sessions, examining the factors that led to betrayal	Factors that existed in the relationship, environmental issues and stress, factors related to the breaching couple, the injured couple, the third party, facilitators and factors that caused the perpetuation of infidelity and the tasks related to them.
10th to 12th sessions, review of remission and termination of treatment	A general and extensive examination and acquisition of the relationship, strengths and weaknesses, double achievements, overcome difficulties, remain problems, raising the issue of forgiveness, beliefs that hinder forgiveness and challenges with them. Examining the factors that prevent betrayal and factors that strengthen commitment, examining the extent of achieving treatment goals and warning about hindsight to breaking the contract and the possibility of reinforcement sessions, termination of treatment and implementation of the post-test.

Table 2. Structure of IBCT Sessions [13, 24]

Session	Content
1st to 3rd session related to communication, couple and relationship evaluation	Gathering information and evaluating the relationship, stating the rules and goals of couple therapy, individual meetings with each couple to check the level of confusion, checking their strengths and weaknesses and the extent of their commitment to each other and to the treatment, checking the history of the relationship from the perspective of each of them and feedback
4th to 6th sessions, investigating and analyzing repetitive patterns of interaction and its effects	Determining the goals of the treatment with couple harmony, examining the differences between the couples and explaining them. Examining different behaviors with similar performance and repetitive interaction to solve the problem without result and feeling of disappointment. Making the couple aware of it and giving them the skills to deal with and remove these patterns, as well as holding the perpetrator accountable for giving appropriate information to the injured person and accepting both people without judgment.
6th to 9th sessions, interventions based on empathic alliance and integrative detachment	Creating frequent emotional experiences and familiarizing couples with secondary emotions and primary emotions and validating both of these emotions. Revealing the couple's vulnerabilities without attacking each other. Empathetic alliances emerge, refer to traumas and sensitivities of developmental history, relationship history, softening interactions, looking at the couple's problems from a distance while being on the same front, without hot excitement like two people writing a letter to a third person for the ending the treason issue. Double effort to eliminate flashback and mental rumination in the injured person.
10th to 11th sessions, acquainting the couple with the process of treating infidelity, and comprehensive examination of relationship problems in addition to infidelity	Understanding and accepting the damaged trust in the damaged couple. Creating tolerance in the cheating partner for the slowness of the re-trusting process. Discussion for different directions of pervasive conflicts in the relationship. How to communicate and solve the problem in addition to the issue of betrayal.
12th to 14th sessions, interventions related to building tolerance	Dealing with things that cannot be changed or change at a very slow rate. Learning to build tolerance by highlighting the positive aspects of negative behavior. Pretending negative behavior between sessions to desensitization. Using the self-care strategy to reduce the intensity of conflict and rumination and increase the ability to cope and endure.
14th to 16th sessions, discussion about the future	Teaching behavioral exchanges, communication skills, teaching problem solving and stressing on couples who will have conflicts in other cases. Examining the treatment goals and the extent of their achievement, ending the treatment and performing the post-test.

In this research, data were analyzed with SPSS software version 20. Covariance analysis test was used to compare the effect of CBCT and IBCT on the communication patterns of couples.

In this study, sufficient explanations were given to the participants that they could withdraw their participation at any stage of the research. All ethical considerations regarding the confidentiality of the participants' information were informed and respected, and the control group was assured that after the end of the research, treatment will be held for them as well. The design of this research has been approved by the Islamic Azad University of Torbat-e Jam with the code of ethics IR.IAU.MSHD.REC.1398.085.

Results

Demographic findings showed that the age of the participants in the study was 37.9 ± 8.3 years. The mean of marriage duration was 14.0 ± 8.4 years. The majority of participants 21 (53.8%) had academic degree, and 18 (46.2%) high school education or diploma. Based on the results, two groups of intervention and control were homogeneous in terms of age, spouse's age, length of marriage, spouse's education and education, and the number of children ($P > 0.05$). The descriptive indices of the tested variables are also shown in Table 3, which indicates the scores of the communication patterns in the pre-test and post-test phases.

The presumption of normality of the dependent variables was done using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. As shown in Table 4, the data had a normal distribution ($P > 0.05$). The results of Levene's test for checking the homogeneity of the variances showed that the variances of CBCT and

IBCT groups for communication patterns in couples are not significant ($P > 0.05$); Therefore, the variances of both intervention and control groups were the same.

The equality of variance-covariance matrices through the Mbox test is presented in Table 4. Considering that the significance levels of variables were more than 0.05, it means establishing the assumption of variance or dispersion of the scores of three variables among all groups. ($F = 2.04$, $P > 0.05$). The values of Wilks's lambda for expectation-withdrawal, mutual constructive and avoidance pattern respectively showed that there is a difference between the three groups ($P = 0.001$).

The results of the multivariate covariance analysis are shown in Table 5. According to the findings, significant differences were observed between experimental and control groups in the average scores of the communication pattern of withdrawal expectation ($F(2, 72) = 46.52$, $P < 0.001$, $\eta = 0.56$), the mutual constructive communication pattern ($F(2, 67) = 135.27$, $P < 0.001$, $\eta = 0.79$), and avoidance communication pattern ($F(2, 67) = 59.89$, $P < 0.001$, $\eta = 0.62$).

Comparison of groups was determined using post-hoc test (Table 6). The results showed that there is a significant difference between the scores of mutually constructive communication pattern, expectation of withdrawal and avoidance of the intervention groups of CBCT and IBCT with the control group ($P < 0.05$). Furthermore, the comparison of the intervention groups showed that CBCT is more effective regarding the mutually constructive communication pattern, and the IBCT had a higher mean difference regarding the avoidant communication pattern and withdrawal expectation.

Table 3. Examining the Communication Patterns of the Three Studied Groups

Variable	Group	Mean \pm SD	Mean \pm SD
Communication pattern of withdrawal expectation	CBCT	32.5 \pm 4.5	22.3 \pm 3.4
	IBCT	30.8 \pm 7.3	19.4 \pm 4.2
	Control	32.0 \pm 7.2	31.4 \pm 6.3
Mutual constructive communication pattern	CBCT	7.3 \pm 2.7	10.7 \pm 2.7
	IBCT	7.9 \pm 2.4	10.3 \pm 2.5
	Control	7.8 \pm 2.7	7.9 \pm 2.2
Communication pattern of mutual avoidance	CBCT	19.5 \pm 2.8	13.0 \pm 2.2
	IBCT	17.6 \pm 5.3	10.9 \pm 2.3
	Control	18.5 \pm 4.0	17.6 \pm 3.8

Table 4. Multivariate Tests of Overall Effects of the Group and Pre-test Scores on Dependent Variables

Variable	Effect	Value	F	df	df error	P	Eta Squared
Withdrawal expectation	Wilks's lambda	0.36	41.1	3.00	70.00	0.001	0.63
Mutual constructive	Wilks's lambda	0.22	80.67	3.00	70.00	0.001	0.77
Mutual avoidance	Wilks's lambda	0.60	15.38	3.00	70.00	0.001	0.39

Table 5. Results of Multivariate Variance Test

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Squares	F	P	Eta Squared
Withdrawal expectation	863.03	1	863.03	119.09	0.001	0.62
Group	148.28	2	74.14	46.52	0.001	0.56
Error	505.45	72	7.02			
Mutual constructive	385.26	1	385.26	241.73	0.001	0.77
Group	1899.23	2	949.61	135.27	0.001	0.79
Error	114.75	72	1.59			
Mutual avoidance	236.16	1	236.16	46.50	0.001	0.39
Group	598.09	2	299.04	59.78	0.001	0.62
Error	365.60	72	5.07			

Table 6. Pairwise Comparisons of Means in Experimental and Control Groups

Variable	Group		Means Difference	P
The communication pattern of withdrawal expectation	CBCT	Control	-9.44	0.001
	CBCT	IBCT	1.83	0.01
	IBCT	Control	-11.27	0.001
The mutual constructive communication pattern	CBCT	Control	3.28	0.001
	CBCT	IBCT	0.93	0.009
	IBCT	Control	2.35	0.001
The communication pattern of mutual avoidance	CBCT	Control	-5.13	0.001
	CBCT	IBCT	1.24	0.05
	IBCT	Control	-6.37	0.001

Discussion

The present study aimed to compare the effectiveness of CBCT and IBCT on the communication patterns of couples with extramarital relationships. The results showed that CBCT is effective on the improvement of communication patterns. This finding is in line with the research of Roohi Karimi et al., [25]. They showed that the CBCT method specific to infidelity, reduced the negative and unpleasant feelings of couples to each other. Ggharagozloo et al., [26] and Baran-Oladi et al., [27] indicated that CBCT is effective in reducing stress disorder after infidelity, and the treatment reduced the desire for divorce. Bodenmann et al. [28] believed that different types of marital conflicts may be resolved through constructive communication and development of skills and cognitive restructuring. Shahbazfar et al., [29] showed that CBCT helps to improve the marital quality of couples by increasing individual skills such as emotion awareness, communication skills and effective communication. In its explanation, it can be said that CBCT is a structured treatment for relationship distress in which specific skills are designed to promote thinking, realism and more adaptive behaviors. This therapy manages the crisis and calms the couple with structured and command strategies, by providing the expression of feelings and conversation.

The results of the study showed efficacy of IBCT on the improvement of the communication patterns of couples. Sevier et al. [30] and Baucom et al., [31] revealed that IBCT reduces the avoidant pattern and predicts marital satisfaction in the next two years. Kalai and Eldridge [32] showed that IBCT is effective in stimulating behavior change and acceptance. During sessions of this therapy the participants are guided to acceptance. Actually, acceptance is involved in backing down in the struggle to try to change the other. One way to generate this acceptance is by placing the behavior of one partner in contact with his/her personal history. The IBCT is a useful treatment for couples who are very anxious. In this therapy, when managing infidelity, the couple is encouraged to express their pain and fear without attacking the other, which creates empathy [11]. The approach of this therapy better explains the conflict cycles of infidelity by focusing on polarization and mutual trap in the communication pattern of couples and its main focus is on strengthening the acceptance and validity of each party from the experiences of the other [20].

In this study, the effect of IBCT was more than the CBCT and caused a significant reduction of two patterns of avoidance and expectation/withdrawal. These results

were consistent with the findings of Marín et al. [33] and Atkins et al. [34]. They found that couples with high levels of infidelity who entered therapy made more progress than couples without infidelity problems. Also, in couples with extramarital relationships that were followed up for five years, those who stayed together after infidelity showed marital stability and satisfaction. Roddy et al. [35] revealed that relationship satisfaction is defined through the mechanism of improving the level of negative communication, emotional intimacy and self-confidence, and the severity of the problem. In the study of Salari Feizabad et al. [36], the effect of IBCT and CBCT on reducing emotion and increasing resilience in couples affected by infidelity was the same. Fia [37] found that both CBCT and IBCT approaches were effective in reducing marital discord and violent communication, although IBCT was more effective. Baucom et al. [31] showed that communication strategies in CBCT, are prescriptive and the couple is trained on how to communicate. As a result, changes happen faster and more clearly. However in IBCT, as a result of a more open communication that is influenced by the emotional behavior of each partner, this effect is created more slowly but with a more stable duration. In the IBCT approach, the strategies of calling and forming change happen naturally during the emotional experiences provided in the treatment. This type of internal change is associated with a sense of validity and correctness for the client and is less directive, and the person feels that he has made this change himself and remains committed to it [31]. On the other hand, IBCT works on the recipient of the response, if the partner's behavior is unchangeable; it increases the recipient's tolerance, which also leads to the realization of tolerance strategies. Moreover, by encouraging the person to take care of clients as one of the treatment strategies, it keeps the person away from mental ruminations and hindsight of betrayal [20].

The greater effectiveness of IBCT can be explained in several aspects. This therapy comprehensively deals with problems and takes into account both causal and remote historical factors, as well as close and intermediate factors, and investigates the meaning of cheating behavior in relation to the history of each partner and the history of the relationship, and identifies the conflict patterns [38]. In fact, when the couple in the safe treatment environment reveals the primary feelings, vulnerabilities, emotional sensitivities and pressures that they get from the environment, the other partner understands the reason and meaning of his behavior, and it creates an

empathic alliance [18].

This study faced limitations such as long questionnaires which effect internal reliability. The used scale has been developed in a western culture although it is has been validated in the Iranian culture. This issue without any doubt effects the external reliability. The economic and social characters of couples was different which can affect the external reliability of study. This study included only couples with extra marital relationships. It is not clear whether effectiveness of IBCT and CBCT is different in other couples. It is recommended to use integrated methods to improve marital relationship. According to the findings of this study, each therapy can effect different aspects of marital life. It is recommended to develop a short form of an Iranian questionnaire regarding communication patterns. Moreover, it is vital to control the social and economic levels of the participants.

Conclusion

According to the findings of the present study, there was a significant difference between the scores of the mutually constructive communication pattern, expectation/withdrawal and avoidance in the intervention groups of CBCT and IBCT with the control group. The comparison of the intervention groups showed that regarding the mutually constructive communication pattern, CBCT has shown more effectiveness, and regarding the avoidance and expectation/withdrawal communication pattern, the IBCT group has obtained a higher mean difference. In general, both interventions of CBCT and IBCT were effective in improving couples' communication patterns. with respect to the results, the IBCT approach can be used with more emphasis in the treatment of extramarital relationships, because this approach in treatment is not only limited to the damage of betrayal and relationship, but also individual vulnerabilities and sensitivities that their identification can be a big step for the future of married life.

Conflict of Interest

In this study, no conflict of interest has been reported by the authors.

Ethical Approval

The present study has fully adhered to the standard ethical rules in research.

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