

Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy on Marital Satisfaction, Emotion Regulation, and Resilience of Women Seeking Divorce in Tehran

Effat Jamshidi

Islamic Azad University, Shahrekord Branch,
Shahrekord, Iran

Sedigheh Ahmadi✉

Kharazmi University,
Tehran, Iran

Hossein Shokrkon

Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz
Ahvaz, Iran

Tayebeh Sharifi

Islamic Azad University, Shahrekord
Branch, Shahrekord, Iran

The aim of this study was to examine the effectiveness of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on marital satisfaction, emotion regulation, and resilience of women seeking divorce in Tehran. Present study applied a semi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and a two-month follow-up, and it involved an experimental and a control group. The study sample was 44 women who had already filed for divorce. These women were selected as a convenience sample, and were randomly assigned to either experimental or control groups (22 participants in each group). The experimental group attended 8 sessions of 90-minute mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and the control group did not receive any intervention (waitlist). Enrich (1998), Gratz, and Romer's (2004) Emotion Regulation, and Corner and Davidson's (2003) Resilience questionnaires were used for data collection. Repeated measures ANOVA showed that all the changes in marital satisfaction, emotion regulation, and resilience including pretest to post-test, and pretest to follow-up, were significantly greater for experimental group compared to control group (all p 's<0.01). However, the changes from post-test to follow-up were not statistically significant for marital satisfaction ($p=0.142$), emotion regulation ($p=0.523$), and resilience ($p=0.153$) indicating the maintenance of the therapeutic benefits in experimental group for a two months period. The results indicated that the mindfulness-based cognitive therapy significantly improves all three dependent variables and the benefits may last for two months. It seems mindfulness-based cognitive therapy technique can improve marital satisfaction, emotional regulation, and resilience of women seeking divorce.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Marital Satisfaction, Emotional Regulation, Resilience, Divorce

Divorce is one of the most detrimental phenomena to happen to any family which also has many social implications. According to the report of the Iranian Statistics Center, the divorce rate has increased by more than 100% in the years 2008 to 2019 (Ghorbani and Hosseinabadi, 2014). Divorce may be influenced by various factors, of which the decrease in couples' marital satisfaction is especially important (Mirza and Ghazlesflo, 2019).

✉ Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Sedigheh Ahmadi, Assistant Professor of Counselling, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran; Email: dr.ahmadi.sedighe@khu.ac.ir
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Among the causes of decreased marital satisfaction are conflicts and the inability to regulate emotions, especially aggression (Alageband et al., 2018) as well as the low resilience of couples in dealing with problems (Fyzikhah, Hassanzadeh and Abbasi, 2021).

Marital satisfaction is the feeling of satisfaction of the spouses when all aspects of their marriage are taken into consideration. Satisfaction is an attitudinal variable, so it is considered an individual characteristic for couples. According to the aforementioned definition, marital satisfaction is actually a positive and enjoyable attitude that a couple has in various aspects of their marital relationship (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). Marital



satisfaction is effective on mental and physical health, the satisfaction of life, success in one's job and social relationships; it is one of the most important indicators of satisfaction with personal and marital life. Many divorce decisions are due to the reduction of marital satisfaction. Therefore, improving this component is one way to prevent divorce (Dong, Dong & Chen, 2022).

The inability to regulate emotions can directly or indirectly lead to marital conflicts. The general concept of emotion regulation refers to the cognitive way of manipulating the input of emotional information (Herd & Kim, 2021). Emotion management is an internal and external process that is responsible for controlling, evaluating, and changing a person's emotional reactions, and any problem and defect in emotion regulation can make a person vulnerable to mental disorders such as depression and anxiety (Bettis et al., 2022). Emotion regulation strategies can be positive or negative. Negative emotion regulation strategies include blaming yourself or others, whereas positive emotion regulation strategies include acceptance and reevaluation (Pris et al., 2021). In recent years, emotion regulation has been targeted as one of the core processes in the treatment of marital problems and family counseling (Herd & Kim, 2021).

One of the most important abilities in married life, resilience is another variable investigated in this research. Resilience refers to the flexibility of those who are exposed to risks and yet manage to avoid disorders (Masten et al., 2021). It is the ability to overcome stress and adversity (Wayland and Durach, 2021). Resilience is also defined as a dynamic process by which people show adaptive performance in the face of harm and adversity (Novak, Wu, & Dooley, 2021). Married life comes with its own challenges and thus requires couples to be resilient. In this regard, some studies show that low resilience accounts for many individuals' decision to divorce and to go through their decision (Cox et al., 2021).

Various therapeutic methods are used to help couples and individuals in the divorce process, one of the most effective of which is cognitive therapy based on mindfulness (Syeda & Andrews, 2021). One of the ways to prevent behavioral and communication problems is to improve the mental ability of couples, which can be done through mindfulness training. Practicing mindfulness by releasing negative thinking patterns and not dwelling excessively on in

the past or in the future can directly contribute to emotion regulation and indirectly to marital satisfaction and increased resilience (Brotto et al., 2021). Mindfulness is a method that, combined with meditation and specific mental orientations toward an experience, encourages awareness of the present moment in a non-judgmental way by minimizing conflict in thoughts and feelings (Syeda and Andrews, 2021). Through practicing mindfulness, people become aware of the daily activities and automatic functioning of their mind in the past and future, and through moment-to-moment awareness of thoughts, they can control their thoughts, emotions, and physical states. Studies have shown that mindfulness increases the quality of life, positive emotions and enjoyment of life, and reduces anger in interpersonal relationships. The general goal of mindfulness training is to improve people's adaptation to themselves, their environment, and others (Finchman, 2022).

Mindfulness is derived from cognitive-behavioral therapy and is considered one of the important components of the third wave of psychological treatment models (McCarney, Scholes & Gray, 2012). All of the mindfulness practices are designed to increase awareness of the body. New interdisciplinary fields such as mind-body medicine have proven the important role of the body in recent studies. It is worth noting that in research that uses mindfulness, the emphasis is on the interaction between physical, cognitive, and emotional processes (Michalak, Burg & Heidenreich, 2012). Researchers have shown the effectiveness of cognitive therapy based on mindfulness on a wide range of disorders including emotion regulation (Chiragpour, 2019; Hawks et al., 2019), life quality, tendency to divorce (Afshar et al., 2018), marital satisfaction (Hosseini et al., 2015), social anxiety and ineffective attitude reduction (Odinika, 2020), optimism increase (Validi Pak, 2014), obsessive-compulsive disorder (Ashiri et al., 2016), and the dimensions of aggression (Garofalo et al., 2019).

According to the background review, cognitive therapy based on mindfulness can be effective in improving individual and interpersonal problems; therefore, the present study examined the effectiveness of cognitive therapy based on mindfulness on marital satisfaction, emotion regulation, and resilience of divorce applicants in Tehran.

Method

Participants

The statistical population was consisted of divorce seeking females referring to the Tasmim System of the Tehran Welfare Organization. The participants were 44 of these women selected by using convenience sampling method and were randomly assigned into two groups including the experimental group ($n=22$) and the control group ($n=22$). Inclusion criteria were: a) Registering a divorce request on the online system of the Tehran Welfare Organization; b) having at least a high school diploma, 3) not experiencing an acute mental/personality disorder, and d) not being addicted to drugs. Exclusion criteria included a) not having attended more than one session in the intervention sessions, and b) having taken drugs that affect the person's psychological status.

Measurement Instruments

Enrich Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire. This questionnaire was prepared by Olson (1998) and contains 47 questions and 12 subscales of contractual response, marital satisfaction, personality issues, marital relationship, conflict resolution, financial supervision, leisure activities, sexual relations, marriage and children, relatives and friends, egalitarian roles and ideological orientation. In this questionnaire, a five-choice Likert-type scale is used, with scores ranging from 1=completely disagree to 5=completely agree. The questionnaire has a number of reverse items that receive reverse numerical values. In Iran, for the first time, Soleimianian (2013) calculated and reported the internal consistency as being 0.93 for the long form and 0.95 for the short form. In a validation study on Enrich, Sharif-Niya (2010) calculated the validity of the marital satisfaction questionnaire against Family Assessment Tool (FAD) and found a 0.92 correlation between the total scores. Enrich has also shown strong correlation with family satisfaction scales (0.6) and life satisfaction scales (0.41) (Mahdavian, 2017). The concurrent validity of this questionnaire with its original form of 115 questions was calculated by Soleimianian (2013) to be 0.95. The reliability obtained in the present research to be 0.89.

Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS). This scale, prepared by Gratz and Romer in 2004, is a self-report index to assess difficulties in emotion regulation, consisting of 36 questions and 6 subscales. The subscales include non-acceptance of emotional responses, difficulties engaging in goal-directed behavior, impulse control difficulties, lack of emotional awareness, limited access to emotion regulation strategies, and lack of emotional clarity. This scale has an internal consistency of 0.93 for the whole scale and a good test-retest reliability for the overall scores of this scale (0.88). Also, the reliability of the internal consistency of the Persian form was calculated during a preliminary study on 148 students of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and obtained an internal consistency of 0.86, which indicates the optimal internal consistency of the tool (Nik Fallah & Barkat, 2022).

Resilience Questionnaire (CD-RAS). This questionnaire was prepared by Connor and Davidson (2003) to measure the ability to deal with pressure and threats. The creators of this scale believe that this questionnaire can well separate resilient people from non-resilient ones in clinical and non-clinical groups and can be used in research and clinical situations (Mohammadi, 2014). This scale contains 25 questions and is evaluated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from zero to 4 including the descriptors never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always corresponding to the numbers. The minimum resilience score is 0 and the maximum score is 100. The internal consistency, the test-retest reliability, and convergent and divergent validity of this scale have been reported acceptable by Connor and Davidson. Connor and Davidson reported Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the resilience scale to be 0.89. Also, the reliability coefficient obtained from the retest method in a four-week interval was 0.87. This scale was standardized in Iran by Mohammadi (2014). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.89 for the reliability of the Persian form.

Procedures

This study was a semi-experimental research with pre-test, post-test, and a 2-month follow-up design. Participants in experimental group participated in eight 90-minute sessions of dialectical behavioral group-interventions according

to the therapeutic manual of cognitive therapy sessions, based on Kabat-Zinn's approach to mindfulness (2015) while the participants in the control group were in waitlist. Measurements took place both before and after the implementation of the interventions as well as in a two-month followup.

Results

The age range of the participants in the present study was 20 to 56 years with an average age of

36.56. In the experimental group, 25% had a high school diploma, 55% had a bachelor's degree, and 20% had a master's degree. In the control group, 15% had a high school diploma, 65% had a bachelor's degree, and 20% had a master's degree. In table 1 below, the mean and the standard deviation of the dependent variables are presented for both experimental and control groups.

Table 1.
Mean and Standard Deviations in Experimental and Control Groups

DV's	Stages	Groups	Mean	S.D
Marital Satisfaction	Pre-Test	Experimental	112.38	6.54
		Control	109.27	6.39
	Post-Test	Experimental	160.44	2.74
		Control	100.45	5.11
	Follow Up	Experimental	150.05	3.33
		Control	108.27	5.98
Emotion Regulation	Pre-Test	Experimental	129.89	8.77
		Control	127.78	8.29
	Post-Test	Experimental	92.67	4.41
		Control	123.56	8.65
	Follow Up	Experimental	115.27	6.98
		Control	121.27	8.23
Resilience	Pre-Test	Experimental	49.22	1.68
		Control	52.21	5.42
	Post-Test	Experimental	69.89	6.16
		Control	51.11	4.12
	Follow Up	Experimental	64.89	5.75
		Control	50.93	4.84

Table 2.*The Results of Repeated-Measures ANOVA*

Variables	Sources	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F	P-Values
Marital Satisfaction	Time	92.82	2	64.14	15.80	0.001
	Time*Group	112.46	2	65.32	18.28	0.001
	Group	260.10	1	251.12	8.58	0.01
Emotion Regulation	Time	198.02	2	102.44	31.97	0.001
	Time*Group	265.08	2	125.54	42.29	0.001
	Group	392.71	1	293.71	7.42	0.01
Resilience	Time	178.12	2	109.67	26.14	0.001
	Time*Group	205.86	2	93.10	32.65	0.001
	Group	254.54	1	251.54	5.21	0.01

Table 3.*The Results of LSD Post Hoc Test to Compare the Means in Three Steps*

Variables	Sources	Difference of Means	Standard Errors	P-Values
Marital Satisfaction	Pre-test to Post-test	3.41	0.294	0.001
	Post-test to follow-up	0.784	0.384	0.142
	Pre-test to follow-up	2.52	0.41	0.01
Emotion Regulation	Pre-test to Post-test	2.54	0.52	0.001
	Post-test to follow-up	2.98	0.457	0.523
	Pre-test to follow-up	1.42	0.581	0.001
Resilience	Pre-test to Post-test	2.41	0.418	0.001
	Post-test to follow-up	0.89	0.634	0.351
	Pre-test to follow-up	2.12	0.582	0.01

According to Table 1, mean score of the marital satisfaction increased in post-test compared to pre-test in experimental group; however, it slightly decreased in follow-up compared to post-test. The mean score of emotion regulation of the experimental group decreased in post-test compared to pre-test, but it slightly increased in the follow-up, while the mean score of the resilience of experimental group increased in post-test compared to pre-test and slightly decreased in the follow-up. In order to test the statistical significance of these differences, a repeated measures ANOVA was run, the results of which are shown in Table 2.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test were not significant for any of the dependent variables (all p 's>0.05). In order to check the assumption of

homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, the M-box test was run. The results of M-box test were not significant for marital satisfaction (p >0.05) and the assumption of homogeneity of variance/covariance matrices is confirmed. Also, the results of M-box test for both emotion regulation and resilience were not significant (all p 's>0.05); indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variance/covariance matrices is observed.

According to Table 2, the time*group interaction effects were statistically significant for all three dependent variables including marital satisfaction, emotion regulation, and resilience (all p 's<0.001) indicating that the changes in the scores of all three dependent variables from pre-test to

post-test, as well as from post-test to follow-up were significantly greater for the experimental compared to control group. In order to test the statistical significance of the differences between the three repeated measurement times, the post hoc LSD test was run, whose results are presented in Table 3.

According to Table 3, there is a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test in all three variables including marital satisfaction, emotion regulation, and resilience as well as between the follow-up and pre-test, but there were no significant differences between post-test and follow-up, indicating that the interventions caused a significant improvements on all the three dependent variables for experimental compared to control group, while the effects of the interventions endured until 2-month follow-up.

Discussion

The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the effectiveness of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on marital satisfaction, emotion regulation, and resilience of women filing for divorce. The results showed that the changes in mean scores of marital satisfaction, emotion regulation, and resilience from pre-test to follow-up were significantly greater for the experimental compared to control group (all p 's <0.05). Since, there were no significant differences between the experimental and the control group in any of the marital satisfaction, emotion regulation, and resilience in the pre-test stage, the hypothesis of initial differences can be rejected. In addition, the results of the data analysis showed that the changes in the variables remained stable in the two-month follow-up period. These findings are aligned with the research results of Afshar et al. (2018), Hosseini et al. (2015), Ashiri et al. (2016), Odinka et al. (2020), Cheraghpour (2019); Garofalo et al. (2019), and Hawkes et al. (2019).

As an explanation, it can be stated that mindfulness is an effective skill and the ability to be fully present and aware of thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and behavior at the present moment without judging ourselves and others can produce beneficial effects on the mental health of female participants. Mindfulness skills such as focusing on one object, mindful eating and mindful breathing help people be in the moment and not

think about the future or past conflicts. When people are in contact with others in the present moment, they will have the opportunity to ask the necessary questions, resolve ambiguities and prevent misunderstandings in the relationship (Chiragpour, 2019). Paying conscious attention to others makes a person aware of the expectations that others have (such as the need for attention or support), emotions (such as anger, shame, anxiety, etc.), and whether there is a need to exchange something in the process of their relationship with another individual (such as asking questions, presenting reminders and expressing wishes) (Finchman, 2022).

One of the things that is emphasized in connection with these people is basic acceptance with an open mind (like a white board) without judgment; that is, they leave the previous and old judgments behind and do not bring them to the present moment because negative labels pave the way for inappropriate behaviors (such as rejection, aggression, etc.) and strong negative emotions. Labeling others causes them to become angry and mistreat them (Brotto et al., 2021). Labeling is influenced by a phenomenon called judgment. Because judgments can trigger intense and overwhelming emotions in a relationship, they can cause suffering to ourselves and others, prevent us from being in the present moment, and ultimately cause resentment towards something or someone. Having a mental occupation, being in the present and without judgments makes them feel more satisfied in the relationship because most couples' unhappiness is related to their past challenges (Seritan et al., 2022).

In explaining the effectiveness of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on emotional regulation, it can be stated that attention awareness does not seek to achieve an ideal final state but to create a psychological distance between the emotion and the person in order to limit the behavioral consequences. Creating psychological distance from unpleasant emotions can be a part of the reappraisal process. But mindfulness has an important difference from such a process in which (reappraisal) reducing, labeling, or monitoring experiences are considered as the ultimate goal; rather, in mindfulness, these things act as a means to control emotions.

Awareness training teaches people to separate the psychological and physical aspects of their

emotions in order to increase their moment-to-moment awareness of the current stimuli. Through frequent observation of their emotional states, as a matter of interest, people realize that emotions have their own physical signs and that fluctuations in their intensity and duration can be a kind of continuous clue to focus and refocus attention on them, even when the allocation of limited psychological resources to ruminative processing has become a default mode (Syeda & Andrews, 2021).

Mindfulness training expands the perspective of an outside observer by encouraging participants to pay more attention to thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations and to consider these experiences as passing events. For example, during guided mindfulness exercises, participants prepare to cultivate the perspective of an external observer by practicing metaphor (viewing their thoughts as clouds floating in the sky). As a result, the more they separate themselves from their thoughts, the less excitement is generated and the more reasonable their behavior becomes. Instead of focusing only on the content of thoughts and emotions, attention awareness deals with all aspects of internal experience, including physical and internal experiences, and affects the regulation of people's emotions (Cattanach et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In explaining the effectiveness of cognitive therapy based on mindfulness on resilience, it can be claimed that by using mindfulness exercises people are encouraged to pay attention to the present moment without evaluating, judging, or suppressing the content of what is experienced. People learn to let private inner experiences (thoughts and feelings) come and go, to simply sit with them and notice them as they are in the moment. The purpose of mindfulness exercises is to expand people's behavioral treasury and increase their flexibility and resilience (Afshar et al., 2018). Mindfulness exercises are related to all flexibility processes. Mindfulness seeks to develop a loving, kind, friendly, and accepting awareness of one's experience at the moment, regardless of what that experience is. For this reason, all mindfulness exercises strengthen people's ability and resilience in the long run (Michalak et al., 2012). One of the techniques of

mindfulness to increase resilience is to use the mind to control stress and alleviate anger. To control stress, steps such as writing down stress-inducing thoughts, seeing the bigger picture, seeing the worst-case scenario, breaking down the problems, approaching the problems from different angles, explaining the cause of stress to others, not seeking perfectionism, and knowing the value of things which are beneficial for them as well as steps such as awareness of the physical feeling of anger, breathing, connecting with bodily senses, paying attention to thoughts, taking a step back and talking to the other party are used to subside anger, hence increasing the resilience of people, especially those filing for divorce whose resilience has been adjusted.

Author Note:

All the authors actively participated in conceptualization, methodology, editing and review.

Statements:

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