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Comparing the Effectiveness of Gottman Couple Therapy and Emotion Focused Couple Therapy on Sexual Intimacy in Couples with Emotional Divorce

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Emotional divorce, characterized by emotional disengagement between spouses, often coexists with diminished sexual intimacy. This study aimed to compare the effectiveness of Gottman Couple Therapy and Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) in enhancing sexual intimacy among couples experiencing emotional divorce.

Methods and Materials: A quasi-experimental design with pretest–posttest and 3-month follow-up was used. Thirty couples (N = 60) identified as experiencing emotional divorce were purposively selected from counseling centers in Iran and randomly assigned to three groups: Gottman therapy (n = 10), EFT (n = 10), and control (n=10). The sexual intimacy subscale of Bagarozzi's Marital Intimacy Questionnaire was administered at all three time points. The Gottman group received ten 90-minute sessions; the EFT group received eight 90-minute sessions. Data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA with Bonferroni post hoc comparisons.

Findings: Both experimental groups showed significant improvements in sexual intimacy compared to the control group ($p < .001$). There was no statistically significant difference between the EFT and Gottman groups at posttest or follow-up. Effect sizes indicated large improvements for both therapies (partial $\eta^2 > .65$). Treatment effects were maintained at the 3-month follow-up.

Conclusion: Both Gottman and EFT models are effective in improving sexual intimacy among emotionally disengaged couples. Despite differences in theoretical orientation, their shared emphasis on emotional expression, communication skills, and affect regulation may account for comparable results. Tailored selection based on couple needs and preferences is recommended. Future studies should use larger samples and examine longer-term outcomes.

Keywords: Marital Therapy, Emotion-Focused Therapy, Gottman Method, Sexual Intimacy, Emotional Divorce.

Introduction

When people think about the end of a marriage, they typically imagine scenarios filled with constant arguments and shouting, culminating in legal separation. However, this is not always the case. Some couples gradually drift apart over time as the romantic bond they once shared slowly fades. This gradual disintegration is known as emotional divorce or silent divorce (Damo & Sensi, 2021). Emotional divorce occurs when a physical, psychological, mental, and spiritual separation emerges between spouses, despite living under the same roof and continuing to perform their marital duties (Al-Shahrani & Hamed, 2023). Although such couples strive to maintain the "structure of the family," in reality, the family becomes hollow from within (Salemi et al., 2024). Couples experiencing emotional divorce often report a lack of intimacy, emotional indifference toward their partner, and emotional distance (Jafarzadeh et al., 2021). Although the consequences of formal divorce have received substantial attention at both national and international levels (Rashid et al., 2021), emotional (silent) divorce still requires greater attention from researchers, especially in identifying the associated factors and variables that can serve as a reference point for prevention and intervention programs.

One construct that stems from emotional dissolution and has been relatively underexplored is sexual intimacy, which progressively pushes individuals toward marital separation (Weekly et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2018). In defining sexual intimacy, Bagarozzi (2001) describes it as the need to share romantic experiences, express thoughts, feelings, and sexual fantasies, and fulfill the need for physical contact, sexual intercourse, stimulation, and mutual sexual satisfaction between spouses. According to the existing literature, sexual activity alone is often insufficient to fulfill individuals' intimacy needs (Blattierer, 2016), and enhancing intimacy, including sexual intimacy, enriches the relationship and improves overall satisfaction, regardless of gender (Masoumi et al., 2017; Prause et al., 2021). In this regard, findings by Ince and Isik (2022) demonstrated that multiple forms of physical intimacy—such as affectionate touch, hand-holding, and kissing—are positively correlated with greater marital satisfaction.

Given the impacts and outcomes related to sexual intimacy and the understanding of its precursors and

associations with emotional divorce, it appears that psychological interventions could significantly improve sexual intimacy and, consequently, reduce emotional divorce and its related psychological problems in couples' relationships. One such intervention, repeatedly emphasized in previous studies, is Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) (Saleh Pour et al., 2018). The overall goal of EFT is to help couples access and process emotional experiences to restructure their interaction patterns (Johnson, 2019). In EFT, the therapist addresses both the intrapsychic perspective (attachment-related emotional experiences) and the interpersonal perspective (dysfunctional interaction patterns), aiming to strengthen the attachment bond between partners. This therapeutic approach conceptualizes dysfunctional interaction patterns as arising from an insecure attachment bond, where both partners, often unintentionally, exhibit attachment distress that keeps them emotionally disconnected (Greenman et al., 2019; Johnson & Zuccarini, 2010). The positive effectiveness of EFT on marital problems has been highlighted in various studies (Payamani et al., 2024; Van Diest et al., 2023; Webb et al., 2019; Vazapilly & Reiss, 2018; Azoudeen et al., 2021).

Another leading model for marital intervention was developed by John Gottman (2011). Known as the Gottman Method, this approach has achieved high success rates in improving relationships, marital satisfaction, and both internal and external well-being since its inception (Findley, 2020; Turner et al., 2023; Gottman, 2023). From Gottman's perspective (2018), for a marriage to succeed, couples must not allow negative thoughts and feelings toward their spouse to overpower their positive perceptions. Gottman's enrichment approach aims to influence individuals' thinking, enabling each spouse to perceive their partner's interactions and contributions more effectively. The effectiveness of the Gottman Method in enhancing relationship satisfaction (Irwin et al., 2024; Garanzini et al., 2017) and marital intimacy (Farhadnia, 2017; Soheili, 2019; Shapiro et al., 2015) has been well-documented.

Given the above, both Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy and the Gottman Method possess the potential to improve marital intimacy. However, to date, no study has directly compared the effectiveness of these two therapeutic interventions on sexual intimacy among couples experiencing emotional divorce. While one study

indicated the superior effectiveness of EFT in enhancing marital intimacy and communication patterns (Payamani et al., 2024), another study found no significant difference in the effectiveness of EFT and the Gottman Method regarding marital intimacy (Daryaei Lal et al., 2022). It is clear that there are notable differences and variations in the specific skills and principles across the wide range of techniques used in these two approaches, and thus it is plausible to question which intervention—Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy or the Gottman Method—is more effective in enhancing sexual intimacy among couples experiencing emotional divorce.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

The present study was applied in terms of purpose and quasi-experimental in terms of methodology, utilizing a pretest-posttest design with two experimental groups and one control group, along with a three-month follow-up period. The statistical population included all couples who referred to the Avaye Taranom Daroun, Taranom Zendegi, and Narvan psychological counseling centers in Tehran, and were invited through an open call to participate in this study. The sample consisted of 30 couples (60 individuals) who met the eligibility criteria and volunteered to participate. These individuals were selected through convenience sampling and randomly assigned into experimental and control groups (10 couples/20 individuals in each group).

The inclusion criteria were: scoring 8 or higher on the Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (Gottman, 1995); providing informed consent to participate according to the scheduled program; having at least three years of marital life; cohabitation (both partners living together in the same residence); having at least a high school diploma; not having received any form of couple therapy, either jointly or individually, according to self-report; no substance abuse or dependency; no use of psychiatric medications as per self-report; and no apparent physical or motor disabilities. The exclusion criteria were:

Table 1.

Summary of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy Sessions

| Session | Brief Session Content | Goal |
|---------|---|--|
| First | Introduction, building therapeutic alliance, assessing treatment motivation, stating rules and participation guidelines, obtaining commitment for regular attendance, conducting pretest, introducing the concept of emotion regulation and its applications. Assignment: Monitoring pleasant (e.g., joy, pleasure) and unpleasant (e.g., anger, sadness) emotional states. | Assessment and bonding, identifying problematic interactions, creating therapeutic agreement |

absence from more than two therapy sessions and unwillingness to continue participation.

Instruments

Intimacy Needs Questionnaire: This 41-item questionnaire was developed by Bagarozzi (2001) and evaluates eight dimensions of intimacy: emotional, psychological, intellectual, sexual, physical, spiritual, aesthetic, and recreational-social intimacy. Given the purpose of this study, only the five items related to sexual intimacy were used. Participants rated their level of agreement with the questionnaire items on a scale from 1 (no such need at all) to 10 (a very high need). Higher scores in a particular dimension indicated a stronger need for that type of intimacy from the spouse, and lower scores indicated weaker needs. The minimum and maximum possible scores for each dimension ranged from 5 to 50. Bagarozzi (2001) reported a content validity coefficient of 0.58 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.82 over a two-week interval. Etemadi (2005) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 for the Persian version, indicating high internal consistency. Test-retest reliability coefficients for individual dimensions were reported as 0.89 (emotional), 0.82 (psychological), 0.80 (sexual), 0.80 (physical), 0.65 (spiritual), 0.76 (aesthetic), and 0.51 (recreational-social). The convergent validity of the questionnaire, by correlating it with the Intimacy Scale (Walker & Thompson, 1983), was reported as 0.58.

Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT)

The EFT intervention was based on the information, techniques, and assignments presented in the book *Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy* by Johnson (2015) and following the protocol of Karimi (2012). The therapy was conducted in eight 60-minute group sessions (once a week). Content and face validity of the program were reviewed by seven marriage counseling experts, confirming its appropriateness for clinical use. The Cohen's Kappa coefficient for inter-rater agreement was calculated at $K = 0.65$.

| | | |
|---------|---|--|
| Second | Identifying problematic interaction patterns and negative cycles, assessing attachment injuries, accessing unacknowledged emotions. | De-escalation and recognition of negative interaction cycles |
| Third | Deepening key attachment experiences, acceptance of unacknowledged core emotions regarding injuries, acceptance of interaction cycles. Assignment: Re-experiencing pure emotional interactions. | Emotional processing and restructuring |
| Fourth | Accessing vulnerabilities, hidden needs, fears, and self-models, promoting acceptance between spouses, expanding client interactions. | Attachment bond reconstruction |
| Fifth | Increasing emotional engagement of the injured partner, enhancing sensitivity to the pain of the injured spouse. | Strengthening the bond |
| Sixth | Expressing emotions, identifying attachment needs, accepting emotions, deepening emotional engagement. | Deep emotional engagement |
| Seventh | Restructuring interactions, discovering new solutions for old problems, emotionally responsive caregiving. | Consolidation and integration |
| Eighth | Intimate engagement with the spouse, acceptance of new interaction patterns, creating a secure attachment, constructing a new relationship narrative, conducting posttest. | Consolidation and integration |

Gottman Couple Therapy

The Gottman therapy sessions were designed based on the Gottman Method and the Sound Relationship House Theory (Navarra et al., 2016), following the protocol of Soheili (2019). The intervention consisted of **Table 2**.

Summary of Gottman Couple Therapy Sessions

| Session | Brief Session Content | Goal |
|---------|--|---|
| First | Introduction and rapport building, reviewing brief life histories, stating session objectives and rules. | Establishing rapport and assessment |
| Second | Completing the "Love Map" questionnaire to understand the quality of the love map, explaining its importance and enhancement strategies. Assignment: "Who Am I?" exercise. | Enhancing love maps |
| Third | Teaching methods for enhancing affection and appreciation, focusing on positivity in the relationship. Assignment: "Marriage History" and "Marriage Philosophy" exercises. | Strengthening fondness and admiration |
| Fourth | Teaching ways to improve the emotional bank account, training in proper dialogue techniques, receiving feedback. Assignment: "Emotional Bank Account" and "Stress-Reducing Conversation" exercises. | Building a culture of appreciation and dialogue |
| Fifth | Emphasizing shared power and respect for the partner's perspective instead of domination. Assignment: "Don't Try to Win" exercise. | Accepting influence |
| Sixth | Training on distinguishing between solvable and perpetual conflicts, recognizing conflict warning signs, receiving feedback. Assignment: Identifying solvable vs. perpetual problems. | Conflict resolution |
| Seventh | Teaching techniques for managing solvable problems, including soft start-up, repair attempts, self- and partner-soothing, and reaching compromise. Assignment: "Soft Start-Up," "Self-Soothing," and "Partner-Soothing" exercises. | Continued conflict resolution and overcoming barriers |
| Eighth | Managing perpetual problems by exploring underlying dreams. Assignment: "Dreams within Conflict" exercise. | Targeting gridlock and identifying underlying dreams |
| Ninth | Teaching couples how to create shared meaning in life. Assignment: "Rituals," "Goals," and "Roles" exercises. | Creating shared meaning |
| Tenth | Final discussion, feedback collection, and conducting posttest. | Final review and closure |

Analysis

For data analysis, SPSS version 27 software was used. Based on the measurement level and statistical assumptions, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (repeated measures ANOVA and post hoc tests) were applied. A significance level of 0.05 was considered.

Findings and Results

The participants in this study consisted of 30 couples (60 individuals) experiencing emotional divorce. The mean ages and standard deviations were 38.15 ± 4.934 years for the Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) group, 39.35 ± 5.806 years for the Gottman therapy group, and 37.2 ± 5.89 years for the control group.

ten 90-minute group sessions (once a week). Content and face validity were confirmed by seven marriage counseling specialists. The Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated at $K = 0.75$ to ensure the precision of content validity.

Ethics

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity of their information, and ensuring no harm would come to them. Additionally, the present study obtained an ethical approval code (IR.IAU.ARAK.REC.1403.148) from the Research Ethics Committee of Arak University of Medical Sciences.

ANOVA results indicated that the groups were homogeneous in age, with no significant statistical differences among them ($p = 0.477$; $F = 0.751$). Regarding educational levels, the majority of participants in the EFT group (45%; 9 participants) and the control group (40%; 8 participants) held a bachelor's

degree, while most participants in the Gottman therapy group (65%; 13 participants) held an associate degree. Chi-square test results showed that the groups were homogeneous in terms of education, with no significant differences among them ($p = 0.124$; $\chi^2 = 10.008$). Table 3 presents the descriptive indices of the experimental and control groups on sexual intimacy across the pretest, posttest, and follow-up phases. As seen in Table 3, the **Table 3.**

Descriptive Indices of Research Variables by Group Across Pretest, Posttest, and Follow-Up

| Variable | Group | Pretest | SD | Posttest | SD | Follow-Up | SD |
|-----------------|---------------|---------|------|----------|------|-----------|------|
| Sexual Intimacy | Gottman Group | 19.95 | 3.59 | 23.50 | 2.87 | 22.90 | 3.47 |
| | EFT Group | 19.80 | 3.67 | 22.95 | 3.33 | 23.00 | 3.27 |
| | Control Group | 19.40 | 3.69 | 19.60 | 3.44 | 19.00 | 3.43 |

Next, the assumptions of repeated measures ANOVA, including homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of the variance-covariance matrix, and normality of the data distribution, were examined. Normality was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which showed that the distribution of variables in the experimental and control groups was normal ($p > 0.05$) across the pretest, posttest, and follow-up phases. Homogeneity of variances was assessed using Levene's test, confirming **Table 4.**

mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the dependent variable were almost identical at the pretest stage. However, following the implementation of the Gottman and Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy programs, changes in the experimental groups' mean scores were observed at the posttest and follow-up stages. The significance of these changes was assessed using repeated measures ANOVA.

this assumption for sexual intimacy in the posttest stage ($F = 0.55$; $p = 0.57$). The homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices was tested using Box's M test, which was nonsignificant ($F = 1.19$; $p = 0.10$), indicating that this assumption was also met. The assumption of sphericity for sexual intimacy was not violated ($p = 0.063$). The results of repeated measures ANOVA are presented in Table 4.

Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA for Within-Group and Between-Group Differences

| Variable | Source | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Effect Size |
|-----------------|------------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|--------|-------------|
| Sexual Intimacy | Group | 289.21 | 2 | 144.60 | 4.44 | 0.016 | 0.13 |
| | Time | 182.21 | 2 | 91.10 | 66.54 | 0.0001 | 0.53 |
| | Group*Time | 100.38 | 4 | 25.09 | 18.33 | 0.001 | 0.39 |

According to Table 4, the effect of time on sexual intimacy scores across the pretest, posttest, and follow-up stages was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, the group effect revealed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the mean scores of sexual intimacy across all phases ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, the group \times time interaction effect

was significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating the effectiveness of both Gottman and Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy programs in enhancing sexual intimacy at the posttest and follow-up stages compared to the control group. Tables 5 and 6 present the Bonferroni post hoc test results for pairwise comparisons between groups and over time.

Table 5.

Bonferroni Post Hoc Test Results for Pairwise Comparisons Between Groups

| Variable | Comparison | Pretest Mean Difference | Sig. | Posttest Mean Difference | Sig. | Follow-Up Mean Difference | Sig. |
|-----------------|---------------|-------------------------|------|--------------------------|------|---------------------------|------|
| Sexual Intimacy | EFT - Gottman | -0.15 | 1.00 | -0.55 | 1.00 | 0.10 | 1.00 |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------|------|------|------|-------|------|-------|
| EFT - Control | 0.40 | 1.00 | 3.35 | 0.005 | 4.00 | 0.001 |
| Gottman - Control | 0.55 | 1.00 | 3.90 | 0.001 | 3.90 | 0.002 |

The pairwise comparisons shown in Table 5 indicate that there were no significant differences between groups in sexual intimacy at the pretest stage ($p>0.05$). However, at the posttest and follow-up stages, significant differences were observed between the experimental **Table 6**.

groups and the control group ($p<0.001$). No significant differences were found between the EFT and Gottman groups in sexual intimacy at either the posttest or follow-up stages.

Bonferroni Post Hoc Test Results for Within-Group Comparisons Across Time

| Variable | Group | Comparison | Mean Difference | Sig. |
|-----------------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------|
| Sexual Intimacy | EFT Group | Pretest–Posttest | -3.15 | 0.001 |
| | | Pretest–Follow-Up | -3.20 | 0.001 |
| | | Posttest–Follow-Up | -0.05 | 1.00 |
| | Gottman Group | Pretest–Posttest | -3.55 | 0.001 |
| | | Pretest–Follow-Up | -2.95 | 0.001 |
| | | Posttest–Follow-Up | 0.60 | 0.39 |

Based on Table 6, there was a significant improvement in sexual intimacy from pretest to posttest ($p<0.001$) for both experimental groups. However, there were no significant differences between posttest and follow-up scores ($p>0.05$), indicating the stability and persistence of the improvements achieved in the posttest phase.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to compare the effectiveness of Gottman Couple Therapy and Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT) on sexual intimacy among couples experiencing emotional divorce. The findings indicated that Gottman Couple Therapy significantly improved sexual intimacy among these couples, and that this improvement was sustained during the three-month follow-up period. This finding is relatively consistent with previous studies that have confirmed the positive effectiveness of Gottman Couple Therapy on relationship satisfaction, marital intimacy, and sexual satisfaction (Irwin et al., 2024; Garanzini et al., 2017; Farhadnia, 2016; Soheili, 2019; Shapiro et al., 2015).

Regarding sexual intimacy, research has shown that frequent and positive communication plays a fundamental role in fostering satisfying sexual relationships among couples (Prause et al., 2021). Positive and affectionate communication is also linked to more frequent sexual contact (Diebolt et al., 2017; Schoenfeld et al., 2017). Meanwhile, a sense of disconnection and detachment from one's partner—

characteristic features of emotional divorce—is associated with physical distance, emotional silence, and a lack of intimacy (Ince & Isik, 2022). Thus, this finding can be explained by the fact that Gottman Therapy emphasizes enhancing couple relationships by reducing negative emotions and increasing positive emotions during conflicts, generating positive emotions outside conflict situations, and creating a balance between inconsistent emotions (Irwin et al., 2024). Gottman's approach can be seen as a method focused on strengthening an optimistic perspective to achieve greater adaptation. Increasing self-disclosure and the ability for mutual understanding in expressing affection and improving interactions were key principles employed during therapy in this study.

Another finding of the research indicated that Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy was also significantly effective in improving sexual intimacy among couples with emotional divorce. This finding is consistent with previous research supporting the positive effects of EFT (Payamani et al., 2024; Webb et al., 2019; Vazapilly & Reiss, 2018; Van Diest et al., 2023). This can be explained by the EFT therapist's strategy of creating a safe emotional environment where each partner can express experiences openly and empathetically. According to EFT, when individuals perceive their partner as emotionally unavailable, unresponsive, critical, or rejecting, they often deploy emotion regulation strategies that inadvertently maintain or escalate relationship distress and weaken

the attachment bond (Van Diest et al., 2023). Such strategies include anxious blaming, demanding, withdrawal, and emotional avoidance. Accessing and exploring emotional experiences is not merely for catharsis or insight but rather for experiencing new aspects of the self that elicit new responses from the partner (Van Diest et al., 2023). Thus, it can be inferred that in the present study, emotion management through the EFT approach, by influencing attachment representations and altering interaction patterns, contributed to enhanced sexual intimacy.

The comparison of Gottman Couple Therapy and Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy on sexual intimacy, although showing differences in group means at the posttest and follow-up stages, revealed that these differences were not statistically significant. Thus, the two therapies had an equal effect on improving sexual intimacy among couples with emotional divorce. This equivalence can be interpreted in the sense that both interventions, through different or sometimes similar foundational mechanisms and techniques, can enhance sexual intimacy among these couples. EFT operates by increasing engagement with primary and secondary emotions and directly targeting emotional responses (Johnson, 2019), whereas Gottman Therapy, based on a cognitive-systemic approach, works by changing behaviors and recognizing distorted relational patterns and thoughts, aiming to induce secondary emotional change through behavior and cognition (Gottman, 2023). Although the two therapies employ seemingly different models—one focused on emotional responses (EFT) and the other on cognitions and behaviors (Gottman Therapy)—the ultimate outcome in both is the improvement of communication patterns and subsequently the enhancement of sexual intimacy.

One limitation of the present study was the use of self-report measures, which might involve biases or distortions in participants' responses. Additionally, the study sample was limited to couples experiencing emotional divorce who sought help at counseling and psychological service centers in Tehran, potentially restricting the generalizability of the findings to other populations or broader contexts. Thus, expanding future samples to include more diverse populations across different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and marital stages could enhance the generalizability of the results. Moreover, combining objective measures, such as

interviews or behavioral observations, alongside self-report tools, would help mitigate biases related to self-reporting. Overall, the findings of the present study highlight Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy and Gottman Couple Therapy as promising strategies for enhancing sexual intimacy among couples experiencing emotional divorce, offering valuable insights for couple therapists seeking to promote deeper emotional and sexual connections in their clients.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

By the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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