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1 Department of Psychology, Ct.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.  
2 Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Social Welfare & Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran.  
3 Department of Psychology, Ct.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

Corresponding author email address:  
[p.mohammadkhani@uswr.ac.ir](mailto:p.mohammadkhani@uswr.ac.ir)



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# Development and Effectiveness of an Empathy-Based Couple Therapy Model on Marital Interaction Stability among Couples on the Verge of Divorce

Elmira. Mohammadi<sup>1</sup>, Parvaneh. Mohammadkhani<sup>2\*</sup>, Anita. Baghdasarians<sup>3</sup>

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to develop an empathy-based couple therapy model and examine its effectiveness on marital interaction stability among couples on the verge of divorce.

**Methods and Materials:** An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was used. In the qualitative phase, grounded theory was applied to explore the lived experiences of couples on the verge of divorce in District 1 of Tehran in 2025. Eight couples (16 individuals) were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed until theoretical saturation. Data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. In the quantitative phase, a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control-group design with a three-month follow-up was conducted. Twenty participants were randomly assigned to an experimental group ( $n = 10$ ) and a control group ( $n = 10$ ). The experimental group received ten 90-minute sessions of the empathy-based couple therapy model. Marital interaction stability was measured using Gottman’s Marital Interaction Stability Questionnaire. Repeated-measures ANOVA was performed in SPSS version 26.

**Findings:** The qualitative phase identified individual mindset toward empathy, emotional factors, financial conditions, empathy-building skills, social support, relational factors, couples’ beliefs and values, and empathy-related transformations as core components of the model. Marital interaction stability increased in the experimental group from  $78.33 \pm 16.90$  at pretest to  $110.00 \pm 28.21$  at posttest and  $111.33 \pm 25.80$  at follow-up. Significant effects were found for time,  $F = 67.01$ ,  $p = .001$ , group  $\times$  time interaction,  $F = 50.46$ ,  $p = .001$ , and group,  $F = 42.80$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .60$ .

**Conclusion:** The empathy-based couple therapy model significantly improved marital interaction stability, and its effect was maintained at three-month follow-up.

**Keywords:** Empathy-Based Couple Therapy, Marital Interaction Stability, Divorce, Mixed Methods, Couples.

## Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important and fundamental decisions in every individual's life. A successful marriage leads to the improvement of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual health; conversely, marital failure and divorce result in severe individual and social consequences (Ruhmann et al., 2018). Many needs are fulfilled through marriage. Failure to meet any of these needs will lead to persistent and high levels of tension in social life (Sayehmiri et al., 2020). All couples desire stability in their marriage. Marital stability does not mean the absence of problems in marital life; rather, it refers to the presence of passion, intimacy, and commitment, which preserve marriage in a healthy and sound manner (Kremer et al., 2023). Marital stability, which encompasses marital quality and commitment to marriage, is a state in which couples enjoy relative peace and take pleasure in loving each other, understanding each other, and paying attention to one another (Siegel et al., 2021). In contrast, actual and parallel disintegration, in which each spouse seeks to end the relationship, indicates marital instability (Siegel et al., 2021).

According to evidence, empathy, alongside other important elements of life, can be one of the foundations of marital stability and can reduce distress while increasing a sense of security in couples' relationships (Ragabi et al., 2017). Long et al., (2025) states that empathy helps maintain and enhance intimate communication between couples over time. On the other hand, lack of empathy leads to feelings of not being understood and of being neglected or considered unimportant by one's spouse; this can negatively affect the nature of the relationship and the level of marital satisfaction (Scuka, 2013). Meanwhile, researchers seek to examine and understand how stable and enduring relationships are formed between couples. The study of couples' relationships helps clarify the structural frameworks within which relationships are formed (Brudek & Kaleta, 2023). In today's world, the family, as one of the most fundamental social institutions, faces numerous challenges. Divorce, as a social problem, not only affects the individual lives of couples, but its negative consequences can also be observed among children and in society. In this regard, empathy, as a key communication skill, plays an important role in

improving the quality of marital relationships. Considering that many couples on the verge of divorce face problems such as lack of mutual understanding, reduced emotional communication, and increased tensions, developing an empathy-based couple therapy guide can be proposed as an effective strategy for strengthening marital relationships and reducing the likelihood of divorce (EshaqAbadi et al., 2025).

The main strength of this study is the use of a sequential mixed-methods design, qualitative followed by quantitative. This is because, with regard to the experience of being on the path toward divorce, the researcher will gain access to the complexities of individuals' lives through a deep understanding of the issue and the discovery of deeper human behaviors; the absence of such information is clearly evident in quantitative studies, since such studies use questionnaires and statistical measurements.

Therefore, the researcher intends first to focus on the details of the lives of a number of married couples who have experienced marital conflicts and being on the path toward divorce and separation, in order to identify and examine their first-hand narratives and experiences as a social and psychological reality using grounded theory, which is a qualitative theory. Then, based on these lived experiences, a program will be developed through a quantitative approach to improve the quality of couples' relationships, enhance the stability of marital interactions, and reduce mental wandering; this program will then be taught to them in a group format. The gap for such a study is clearly evident.

It is hoped that this study will provide an approach for other researchers so that more comprehensive and robust studies can be conducted in the future. The present study will examine the lived experiences of married couples on the verge of divorce in order to identify their needs and challenges. Then, based on these experiences, a couple therapy guide will be designed and validated, including empathy-based techniques and strategies. The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of this couple therapy guide on relationship quality, interaction stability, and reduction of mental wandering among couples.

## Methods and Materials

### Study Design

In terms of its objective, this study was applied in nature and employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. In an exploratory sequential mixed-methods research design, the researcher first collects the required information through qualitative research methods and then, using quantitative research methods, collects and validates the data obtained from the qualitative phase. Considering the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the exploratory sequential mixed-methods research design on the one hand, and the objectives of the study on the other, grounded theory was used in the qualitative section of this study to identify the components required for developing the educational program. In the quantitative section, a quasi-experimental method with a pretest–posttest control-group design and a three-month follow-up was employed. The research population consisted of married couples on the verge of divorce in District 1 of Tehran in 2025. Using purposive sampling, couples were invited to participate in the study if they had applied for divorce and were between 25 and 40 years of age. Finally, 8 couples, totaling 16 individuals, entered the qualitative phase as the sample size. The statistical population of the study for developing the program included all married couples on the verge of divorce in District 1 of Tehran in 2025. The reason for selecting a specific district was to homogenize the samples in terms of demographic characteristics such as cultural, social, and economic class. A total of 20 married applicant couples were selected as the sample group using purposive sampling. Finally, considering the research design and after administering the pretest, the applicants were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, with 10 individuals, that is, 5 couples, placed equally in each group.

The present study began after obtaining ethical approval from the competent authorities and coordinating with family counseling centers and family court offices in Tehran. These approvals provided the basis for accessing the research population and ensuring compliance with ethical principles, confidentiality, and informed consent of the participants. In the first stage, the researcher identified the target population and carefully determined the inclusion and exclusion criteria

for each sub-study. For the qualitative sub-study, the participants were individuals who had direct and rich experience of being in a marriage on the verge of divorce and whose age range was between 25 and 40 years. Sampling in this section was conducted purposefully and theoretically in order to select individuals who could provide extensive and in-depth information about the research problem. This type of sampling enables the researcher, through the selection of representative and information-rich cases, to extract key concepts and themes. The researcher contacted eligible individuals and, during the interview sessions, explained the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of the data, and the possibility of withdrawal at any stage. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, and data were collected through note-taking and audio recording. The sample size was determined based on the criterion of theoretical saturation; that is, the interviews continued until no new information was obtained and the responses became repetitive. In this study, after conducting interviews with eight couples, the researcher reached theoretical saturation, and data analysis began. The collected data were coded thematically, and through careful reading of the interview transcripts, key concepts were extracted and categorized into themes and subthemes. This process made it possible to conduct an in-depth analysis and discover common patterns in the couples' experiences.

In the quantitative sub-study, after obtaining the necessary approvals and coordinating with family counseling centers, the researcher published a call for participation in the therapeutic program. The statistical population of this section included married couples on the verge of divorce in District 1 of Tehran. The purpose of selecting a specific district was to homogenize demographic characteristics and reduce the effect of extraneous variables on the research results. Applicants for participation in the program were selected based on the inclusion criteria, including an age range of 25 to 40 years, at least a high-school diploma, obtaining a score below the cut-off point on the Couples' Relationship Quality Questionnaire, and obtaining a score above the cut-off point on the Mind Wandering Questionnaire. The exclusion criteria included substance use during the study, hospitalization in psychiatric hospitals, and receiving individual counseling services during the therapeutic sessions. Among the eligible applicants, 20

individuals were selected using purposive sampling, and after the pretest was administered, they were randomly divided into experimental and control groups, with each group consisting of 10 individuals. The experimental group received the therapeutic intervention, while the control group received no intervention, so that the effect of the program could be compared. After the completion of the treatment period, posttest data were collected and analyzed using appropriate statistical methods. Data analysis included examining the effect of the intervention on the quality of couples' relationships and the level of mind wandering, and comparisons of means and statistical tests were conducted to evaluate differences between the groups. Thus, the research process proceeded in a coherent and purposeful manner, from identifying the population, obtaining approvals, and accessing participants to selecting the sample based on precise criteria, collecting data through scientific methods, and analyzing the data. In this way, both sub-studies, qualitative and quantitative, made it possible to extract valid and reliable results, while observing the

ethical principles of research and maintaining the confidentiality of participants' information.

*Instruments*

*Marital Interaction Stability Questionnaire*

This scale was developed by [Gottman & Levenson \(1999\)](#) to measure the degree of stability in marital interactions. The instrument consists of 20 items, to which respondents answer in a yes/no format. The scoring of this test is 1 and 0, assigned respectively to "yes" and "no" responses. This questionnaire has only one total score; higher scores indicate higher marital stability, while lower scores indicate lower marital stability. In the study by [Sheikh Esmaeili et al. \(2019\)](#), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this questionnaire was reported as 0.95. The reliability of this questionnaire in the present study, calculated using Cronbach's alpha, was 0.77.

*Empathy-Based Couple Therapy Guide*

This therapeutic guide was implemented for the experimental group in ten 90-minute sessions.

**Table 1**

*Researcher-Made Empathy-Based Therapeutic Guide*

Session	Experienced Concepts	Description of Sessions and Therapeutic Process
<b>Session 1</b>		Introduction and establishment of the therapeutic relationship; familiarity with the general rules of therapy; assessment of the spouses' goals and expectations from therapy; setting the general policy while considering confidentiality; inviting individuals to introduce themselves to one another; familiarizing members with the therapist; identifying the current status of the couples; establishing a therapeutic alliance; creating a safe environment; receiving an initial description from each spouse about the reasons for seeking therapy; learning about the history of the relationship; and assessing the current functioning of the relationship.
<b>Sessions 2 and 3</b>	Emotion regulation; communication factors	Brief review of the previous session; conversation and discussion about the experienced concepts of emotion control and communication factors; use of cognitive and experiential strategies; emphasis on discovering childhood roots; therapeutic communication; acceptance and reflection of the couples' shared experiences, both interactional and emotional; discovering problematic emotional interactions and identifying negative disruptive interactional cycles; creating conditions in which spouses reveal their negative interaction cycle; clarifying the relationship between couples' emotional responses and their level of empathy; assessing the problem and barriers to empathy; familiarizing couples with the principles of empathy-based therapy and the role of empathy in interpersonal interactions; restructuring interactions and increasing spouses' flexibility; and establishing a therapeutic agreement.
<b>Session 4</b>	Attitude toward financial resources; attitude toward individual differences; attitude toward the spouse; attitude toward empathy	Discovering and identifying couples' attitudes toward the concept of empathy; discovering basic fears and insecurities in couples' communication; helping couples re-experience emotions and facilitating their interaction with one another; validating their experiences, needs, and attachment desires; discussion and conversation about couples' financial resources; discovering the individual and family history of the couples; training in how to make requests of one's spouse; assignment: re-experiencing interactions accompanied by the expression of genuine feelings.
<b>Session 5</b>	Cultural and social adaptation or conflict between couples	Therapist's explanations about the importance of cultural and social factors; identification and assessment of contextual factors; observation of couples' socio-cultural interactions through discussion of the experienced concepts; practice in reconstructing real cultural situations; and explanation of how the experienced concepts affect the couple's relationship.
<b>Sessions 6 and 7</b>	Social support from families; role of friends; role of supportive institutions; livelihood and economic status	Challenging each spouse's cognitions and creating an alternative perspective; training in the use of effective techniques for dealing with the supportive role of family and friends; raising awareness about the role of supportive institutions; and raising awareness regarding the management of financial resources.
<b>Sessions 8 and 9</b>	Self-awareness; self-regulation; effective	Training in communication skills techniques; couple behavioral activation, including romantic days, affectionate days, companionship activities, and shared recreational activities; training in communication skills and active listening; training

	communication skills; self-control; resilience	in conflict resolution skills; training in compromise and negotiation skills; training in emotional expression; creating emotional discussion; and assessing the couples' level of resilience.
<b>Session 10</b>	Constructive effects of empathy	Expressing expectations and developing a set of rules for empathic interaction; training in mindfulness techniques, including mindful breathing, meditation, and loving-kindness meditation; training in techniques for developing patience and tolerance; summarizing skills; techniques for maintaining, preserving, and generalizing techniques and skills; and obtaining feedback from the couple.

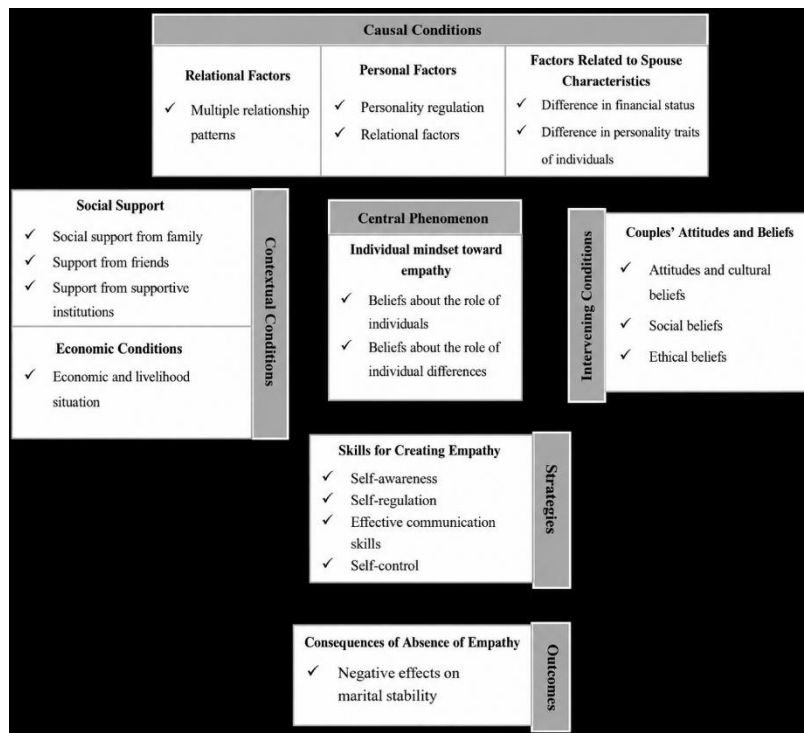
After extracting the components of the therapeutic package from the couples' lived experiences, the content validity ratio (CVR) was calculated based on the opinions of 10 evaluators. Since the CVR index was obtained as greater than 0.62, it can be concluded that the developed package has content validity. In addition, since the content validity index (CVI) of each item was close to 1, content validity was confirmed.

*Data analysis*

Data analysis in the qualitative section was conducted through coding in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the quantitative section, at the inferential level, considering that the assumptions of parametric statistics were met, repeated-measures analysis of variance was used to compare the pretest, posttest, and follow-up scores of the experimental and control groups. After data collection, the data were analyzed using SPSS software, version 26.

**Findings and Results**

In the present study, considering the research objective, the grounded theory approach was adopted to analyze the data obtained from interviews with the participants. Therefore, the data were coded in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the open-coding stage of this study, a total of 375 initial codes were identified. After merging and removing repeated items, a set of categories and classes was obtained to explain the process of the formation or weakening of empathy in couples' relationships. The axial coding model, based on the paradigmatic model of Strauss and Corbin's approach (2008), is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1**

*Axial Coding Model Based on the Paradigmatic Model*

In the selective-coding stage of this study, couple empathy was considered the core phenomenon of the study, and other components were identified as factors influencing its formation and strengthening. The individual's mindset toward empathy, including emotional maturity, moral value, signs of love, and fear of being the loser, was considered a determining foundation for empathic behaviors. This mindset determines the path through which couples' emotional and communicative interactions are formed. Couples who recognize empathy as an important value show a greater tendency toward active listening, acceptance of differences, and control of negative reactions. Intrapersonal characteristics, such as self-awareness, the ability to regulate emotions, emotional maturity, and responsibility, provide the basis for understanding one's own feelings and those of one's spouse, and form the foundation of individual empathy skills. Limitations such as hidden anger, psychological burnout, and controlling behavior hinder empathy and require management and change. At the same time, interpersonal characteristics, including understanding the spouse's mental framework, accepting differences, mutual respect, and the ability to think collaboratively, act as mediators in

creating empathic communication and cause couples' interactions to be problem-solving-oriented and empathic rather than blameful or coercive.

In the domain of emotional and communicative factors, emotion regulation plays a key role. Anger control, acceptance of the spouse's emotional needs, and forgiveness are prerequisites for creating a safe space for expressing feelings. Empathic communication skills, such as active listening, constructive conversations, clear expression of expectations, and joint problem solving, are directly related to couples' emotional capacity. Couples who manage their emotions well are able to build empathic relationships and resolve conflicts with the least tension. Couples' attitudes toward financial resources, individual differences, the spouse, and empathy also determine the direction of behavioral choices and conflict-resolution strategies. A positive attitude toward individual differences leads to the acceptance of cognitive empathy and flexible behaviors in decision-making. Attitudes function as "evaluative lenses" and determine whether couples behave empathically when facing crises or differences, or instead become blaming and passive.

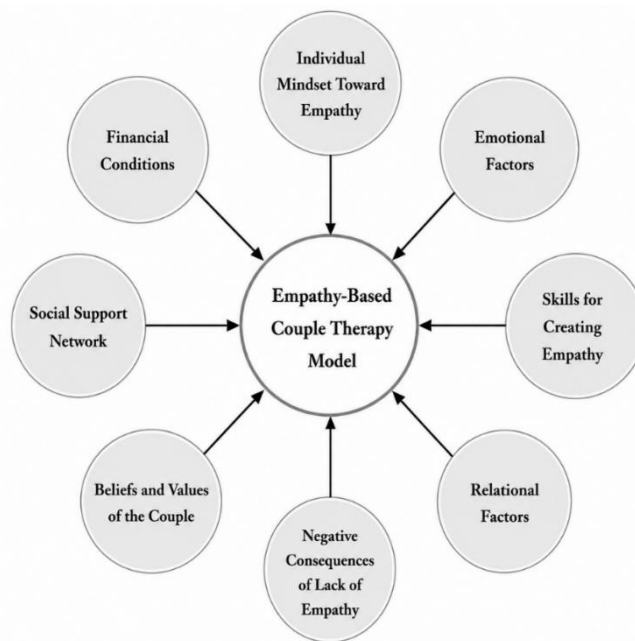


Figure 2

Paradigmatic Model of the Empathy-Based Couple Therapy Framework

Causal and contextual conditions also play an important role in strengthening or weakening empathy. Fundamental beliefs and values, including the role of traditions, moral values, and individual independence, shape the path of empathic interactions. Social support from family, friends, and supportive institutions, together with financial conditions, affects couples' emotional and practical capacity for empathy and can moderate the effects of skills and attitudes. Empathy-building skills, including self-awareness, self-regulation, effective communication skills, self-control, and resilience, as intervening factors, are directly related to the positive outcomes of empathy. These skills increase couples' ability to manage conflict, express feelings constructively, and create a supportive atmosphere in the relationship. The outcomes of strengthening empathy include consolidation of the emotional bond, a sense of worthiness, reduced psychological burnout, increased life satisfaction, improved social interactions, and increased resilience. Couples who experience individual and interpersonal skills, positive attitudes, and supportive contextual conditions will be able to

create deeper empathy and reduce the likelihood of divorce.

In the quantitative section, the frequency-distribution information of the sample under study, including gender, marital status, and educational level, showed that the mean and standard deviation of the participants' age in the experimental group was 28.15 years, while in the control group it was 29.05 years. The mean duration of married life among participants in the experimental group was 6.4 years, and in the control group it was 6.6 years. In the experimental group, there were 5 women and 5 men, and in the control group there were also 5 women and 5 men. In terms of educational level in the statistical sample, 2 individuals had a diploma or lower, 4 had an associate degree, 10 had a bachelor's degree, and 4 had a master's degree or higher. The descriptive indices, including mean and standard deviation, of marital interaction stability scores in the empathy-based couple therapy guide training group and the control group at the pretest, posttest, and follow-up stages are presented below.

**Table 2**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Marital Interaction Stability by Measurement Stage in the Groups*

Group	Index	Pretest	Posttest	Follow-up
<b>Experimental</b>	Mean	78.33	110.00	111.33
	Standard deviation	16.90	28.21	25.80
<b>Control</b>	Mean	77.33	78.00	77.59
	Standard deviation	20.31	30.52	36.93

As can be observed, the mean score in the empathy-based couple therapy guide training group increased at the posttest stage compared with the pretest stage. Based on the results presented in the table, it can be stated that training based on the empathy-based couple therapy model led to an increase in the stability of marital interactions among married couples on the verge of divorce. According to the results of the Shapiro–Wilk test and the obtained significance levels for each of the research variables, which were greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis was confirmed, and the data of the variables in both groups were normal; therefore, parametric tests could be used to test them. In order to examine the significant difference between the mean

scores of marital interaction stability in the two groups across the three therapeutic stages, the assumptions of homogeneity of variances and sphericity were first examined. It was observed that the assumption of equality of variances was met ( $P > 0.05$ ). The variance of the differences among all combinations related to the groups, namely sphericity, should be equal. Mauchly's test of sphericity was used to examine this assumption. It was observed that the assumption of sphericity was not met ( $P < 0.05$ ). Accordingly, in hypothesis testing, the Greenhouse–Geisser criterion was used to obtain a more accurate approximation, and the results of within-subjects analysis of variance were calculated considering the violation of the sphericity assumption.

**Table 3**

*Repeated-Measures Analysis of Variance for Scores of Marital Interaction Stability, Couples' Relationship Quality, and Mind Wandering*

Effects	Source	SS	Df	MS	F	P value	Effect Size
Within-subjects	Time	846.06	1.58	533.84	67.01	0.001	
	Time × Group interaction	637.08	1.58	401.98	50.46	0.001	
	Error	353.51	19.37	7.96			
Between-subjects	Group	1202.67	1	1202.6	42.80	0.001	0.60
	Error	786.75	17				

As shown in the table above, the effect of time was significant for the variable of couples' marital interaction stability ( $P < 0.01$ ). Therefore, there was a difference among the three stages of pretest, posttest, and follow-up in this variable in the experimental and control groups. Also, based on the results of the table, which show an interaction between group and time in the variable of couples' marital interaction stability ( $P < 0.01$ ), it is clear that there was a difference between the experimental and control groups across the pretest, posttest, and follow-up stages in this dependent variable.

Furthermore, regarding the group effect, based on the F values and significance levels, it can be observed that there was a significant difference in the variable of couples' marital interaction stability between the experimental group receiving the empathy-based couple therapy guide package and the control group ( $P < 0.01$ ). Pairwise comparisons of these groups by each measurement stage, namely pretest, posttest, and follow-up, are presented below. Moreover, according to the effect-size column, it can be observed that the effect of the empathy-based couple therapy model package on marital interaction stability was 60%.

**Table 4**

*Results of the Bonferroni Post Hoc Test for Pairwise Comparison of the Mean Scores of Marital Interaction Stability in the Empathy-Based Couple Therapy Model and Control Groups*

Variable	Groups	Pretest	Posttest	Follow-up
Marital interaction stability	Control / Empathy-based couple therapy model	-1.00 / 1.043 / 0.096	-32.00* / 9.323 / 0.001	-33.74* / 10.291 / 0.0001

According to Table 4, a significant difference was observed between the empathy-based couple therapy guide group and the control group in the variable of marital interaction stability ( $P < 0.05$ ). The results of the Bonferroni post hoc test, calculated to examine differences between means across the therapeutic stages, showed that there was a significant difference between marital interaction stability scores from pretest to posttest and from pretest to follow-up. However, there was no significant difference between marital interaction stability scores at the posttest stage and the follow-up stage, indicating that marital interaction stability scores did not change significantly at follow-up compared with posttest.

based couple therapy model is effective in improving interaction stability among married couples on the verge of divorce. In this regard, empathy-based interventions emphasize strengthening mutual understanding, reducing negative reactions, and modifying interactions, which is of particular importance for couples on the verge of divorce. [Ghezelseflo et al. \(2016\)](#) introduced marital empathy and relationship-maintenance strategies as predictors of marital stability. [Rostami & Khormaei \(2021\)](#) showed that empathy training has a positive effect on forgiveness; forgiveness is one of the important factors in the stability of interactions. [Jafari et al. \(2021\)](#) found that empathy training reduced marital burnout and increased adjustment, which contributes to interaction stability. [Reza et al. \(2021\)](#) showed that empathy is related to forgiving behavior; both forgiveness and empathy are predictors of interaction stability. ([Allen & Thomas, 2024](#); [Li et al., 2020](#); [Yadollahi et al., 2025](#)) showed that emotional empathy improves marital adjustment and satisfaction, which strengthens interaction stability. Most studies have highlighted

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The present study was conducted with the aim of developing an empathy-based therapeutic model and examining its effectiveness on the stability of interactions among couples on the verge of divorce. The findings of the present study showed that the empathy-

cultural, social, or individual limitations, such as Chaboki & Zarean (2018), who showed that social and religious factors can play an important role in the stability of interactions. This indicates that empathy alone may not be able to fully guarantee interaction stability, but its positive effect is clearly observable.

To better understand these findings, it is necessary to refer to the therapeutic protocol used in this study. The protocol includes various sessions with specific objectives for each stage of treatment. This protocol was inspired by therapies such as emotion-focused couple therapy, in which the therapist uses techniques such as restructuring emotional interactions and strengthening empathy to change negative patterns in marital relationships. The main aim of these interventions is to increase emotional connection between couples and reconstruct their interactions in such a way that a sense of security and mutual acceptance is created in the relationship. In this regard, numerous studies have shown that increasing empathy and responding appropriately to each other's emotional needs can effectively improve interactions and relationship stability among couples.

At the beginning of the therapeutic process, the therapeutic protocol starts with establishing a therapeutic alliance and creating a safe space. This stage is important because couples can participate deeply in the therapeutic process only when they feel that they are in a safe and supportive environment. In these sessions, the therapist uses methods such as open-ended questions and reflection of experiences to create an appropriate space for expressing the couples' vulnerable needs and feelings. Creating this safe space enables couples, in the later stages of treatment, to share their experiences and feelings freely and without fear of rejection or judgment. In subsequent sessions, the focus is placed on identifying and modifying negative interactions and emotional patterns that increase tension in the relationship. Using techniques such as "restructuring emotional interactions" and "reflecting experiences," the therapist helps couples not only identify the roots of their conflicts but also respond effectively to each other's emotional needs. In this process, couples learn how to identify and deal with their negative patterns. This stage of treatment is especially crucial for couples on the verge of divorce, because many

of these couples are trapped in negative interaction cycles that continuously intensify their problems.

In the therapeutic protocol presented, various sections, including identifying and changing couples' attitudes and beliefs toward each other, are also addressed. Using techniques such as "acceptance and reflection of experiences," the therapist helps couples achieve a deeper understanding of each other's needs and desires and, through this, manage existing differences in their relationships constructively. Changing these attitudes can significantly contribute to stability in couples' interactions. Research has shown that when couples are able to respond to each other's emotional needs and reach agreement regarding their differences, more positive interaction patterns are formed, which helps sustain relationships.

In the later stages of treatment, the therapeutic protocol focuses on increasing couples' resilience and communication skills. In these sessions, the therapist teaches self-regulation and emotional-management techniques so that couples, when facing crises and conflicts, can use effective strategies to manage tensions instead of reacting negatively. Training in effective communication skills, such as active listening and non-critical expression of feelings, can help reduce misunderstandings and strengthen positive interactions. In particular, conflict-resolution and negotiation skills are taught in these sessions so that couples become able to communicate more effectively with each other and solve problems through constructive methods. In this regard, various studies have shown that couples who learn conflict-resolution skills experience less severe tension when facing marital problems and can establish more stable relationships (Gottman & Levenson, 1999).

At the end of treatment, one of the vital stages of the therapeutic protocol is strengthening mindfulness and meditation skills. This stage helps couples understand their own emotions and their partner's emotions with greater awareness and respond with fewer reactions to stressful situations. Research has shown that mindfulness techniques can increase empathy and mutual understanding and help couples move away from negative communication patterns. Since many couples on the verge of divorce face high levels of anxiety and tension, the use of mindfulness techniques can help reduce these tensions and create greater stability in their interactions. Numerous studies in the field of empathy-

based couple therapy have shown that this approach significantly improves the quality of interactions and reduces conflicts between couples, and it can create particularly lasting positive effects for couples at risk of divorce (Allen & Thomas, 2024). In fact, empathy-based therapies, especially for couples whose relationships are affected by negative and damaging patterns, have a protective role and can guide their relationship toward more positive interactions.

Finally, this study showed that the empathy-based couple therapy guide, using specific techniques focused on strengthening empathy, emotion regulation, communication skills, and attention to social and cultural contextual factors, can effectively improve the stability of interactions among married couples on the verge of divorce. These findings are consistent with existing scientific evidence indicating that empathy-based interventions can help relationships move out of crisis and contribute to their stability. These results also show that empathy-based therapeutic interventions, particularly for couples on the verge of divorce who are involved in negative communication cycles, can significantly improve the quality of interactions and reduce conflicts. Overall, this therapy is presented as an effective and reliable method for treating marital problems and preventing divorce, and it can be directly applied to improving the relationships of couples at risk of separation.

The limitations of the study included the fact that it involved only a short-term pretest and posttest, and the long-term effects of the interventions were not examined. In addition, the questionnaires used to measure interaction stability were based on participants' self-reports, and there is a possibility of response bias. It is recommended that, in addition to interviews, observational methods, daily records, or reports from spouses and specialists be used to reduce the likelihood of self-report bias. Furthermore, designing longitudinal studies and following couples over longer periods can better reveal emotional and behavioral changes and examine the long-term effects of pre-divorce conditions. Considering the significant effectiveness of this intervention on the stability of couples' interactions, counseling centers can use this guide as a standard program for couples on the verge of divorce.

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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

In accordance with 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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