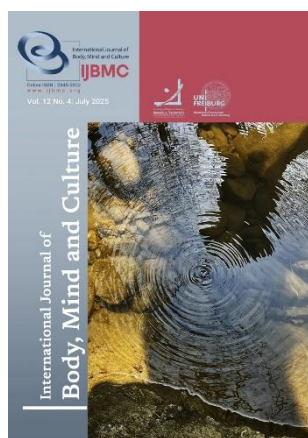


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## Introduction

Marital adjustment forms the foundation of optimal family functioning, facilitating parental roles, social development, and life satisfaction (Saxey et al., 2024). A decline in marital adjustment is associated with the

# Comparing the Effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and Mindfulness Therapy on Forgiveness and Perceived Fairness in Couples Facing Marital Discord

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to compare the effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness-Based Therapy (MBT) on interpersonal forgiveness and perceived fairness among couples experiencing marital discord. Interpersonal forgiveness is vital for re-establishing intimacy and emotional connection, while perceived fairness plays a crucial role in marital satisfaction and relationship stability.

**Methods and Materials:** The study employed a quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, control group, and a two-month follow-up. A total of 45 participants (15 couples) were selected through convenience sampling from a psychiatric clinic in Tehran in 2022. They were randomly assigned to three groups: CBT, MBT, and control (15 participants each). The intervention consisted of eight weekly 90-minute sessions for the experimental groups, whereas the control group received no intervention. Data were collected using the Interpersonal Forgiveness Questionnaire (Ehteshami-Zadeh et al., 2009) and the Perceived Fairness Questionnaire (Perry, 2004). Statistical analyses, including repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni post-hoc tests, were conducted using SPSS v26.

**Findings:** Significant improvements in interpersonal forgiveness and perceived fairness were observed in both experimental groups compared to the control group ( $p < 0.05$ ). Although CBT and MBT were equally effective in enhancing forgiveness, MBT demonstrated greater effectiveness in improving perceived fairness ( $p < 0.01$ ). These improvements were sustained at follow-up.

**Conclusion:** Both CBT and MBT are effective in improving forgiveness and fairness among couples facing marital challenges. However, MBT's emphasis on non-judgmental awareness and emotional regulation may make it more suitable for addressing issues related to fairness. Integrating mindfulness techniques into marital counseling can enhance relationship dynamics and overall well-being.

**Keywords:** Forgiveness, fairness, mindfulness therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, marital discord, couples therapy.

breakdown of family relationships, disrupted matrimonial bonds, and a diminished focus on building a cohesive family life (Hashemi et al., 2022). Moreover, it not only disturbs the psychological-emotional balance of family members but also leads to challenges in social

relationships, tendencies toward moral deviations, and a decline in cultural values among couples (Darwiche et al., 2022; Movahedrad et al., 2023; Nazari et al., 2016; Seyedali Tabar et al., 2015).

The adverse consequences of marital discord can persist for a long time and potentially cause enduring difficulties in the process of forgiving a spouse and resuming emotional exchanges (Çelik et al., 2022). Worthington et al. (2024) highlighted in their research that forgiveness, as a response to resentment and harm, can enhance positive emotions and marital satisfaction (Worthington, 2024). Forgiveness, in essence, facilitates the re-establishment of intimacy after threats and allows relationships to remain stable and long-lasting. Conversely, the absence of forgiveness creates numerous issues in mental health and emotions, increasing psychological vulnerability (Körner et al., 2022). Research findings also indicate that enhancing spousal forgiveness reduces symptoms of depression, anger, and resentment while increasing life satisfaction, empathy, well-being, compatibility, positive affect, mental health, and the resolution of family conflicts (Skipper et al., 2024).

Various factors can influence marital relationships, and although forgiveness has significant positive outcomes, it is not the sole determinant of strengthening spousal bonds. Supporting this claim, Walster et al. (1978) introduced equity theory, which provides a valuable framework for understanding the effects of imbalance, particularly in marital relationships. They suggested that equitable couples experience more positive feelings toward their partners and have higher self-confidence, whereas low levels of equity in marital relationships lead to dissatisfaction and distress (Mortezaei & Rezazadeh, 2021). Research has shown that inequity in spousal relationships is a significant contributor to tension and psychological pressure, while equity plays a crucial role in maintaining stable marital bonds (Lee et al., 2024).

Several approaches have been proposed to address family and marital problems, one of which is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) (Ghasemi et al., 2022). CBT incorporates cognitive restructuring and various behavioral interventions to strengthen coping skills, enabling individuals to distinguish between their beliefs and reality (Denecke et al., 2022). This intervention provides couples with the opportunity to learn strategies

for identifying and modifying their thoughts and behaviors, and apply these skills when faced with future challenges. It is based on the premise that improving troubled relationships can be achieved through enhancing couples' bonds using appropriate strategies (Jiang et al., 2024). A review of studies on CBT's impact on marital and family constructs shows that this approach has been remarkably effective (Moggia et al., 2024).

Mindfulness therapy is one of the most effective therapeutic approaches in psychology and related fields. This method is used to treat various psychological and psychiatric distresses, as well as medical conditions, and to enhance individuals' health and well-being (Garrote-Caparrós et al., 2022). Mindfulness interventions employ targeted, purposeful attention techniques that encourage living in the present moment and foster the practice of refraining from judgment, thereby enhancing individuals' sustained and intelligent awareness (Wang et al., 2024). Supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness therapy, Kaya and Odacı (2024) found that mindfulness therapy improves forgiveness and life satisfaction (Kaya & Odacı, 2024). Edwards et al. (2024) described mindfulness therapy as an effective intervention in reducing aggression and improving romantic relationships (Edwards et al., 2024). Another study revealed that mindfulness-based interventions effectively enhance quality of life and emotional well-being in women with experiences of domestic violence (Uzun & Arslan, 2024).

Given the points above and the significance of marital relationships in sustaining family systems, as well as the destructive effects that discord and impaired communication can have on each spouse, it is reasonable to focus on family and marital issues more than ever. Therefore, practical research and strategies should be developed to reduce marital problems and improve spousal relationships to prevent further psychosocial consequences and marital distress, which could also negatively affect parent-child dynamics and the upbringing of future generations. To this end, the present study aims to compare the effectiveness of two intervention methods to identify the most effective psychological treatments. Accordingly, the objective of this research is to compare the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness therapy on

interpersonal forgiveness and perceived equity among incompatible couples.

## Methods and Materials

### Study Design and Participants

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, control group, and a two-month follow-up to compare the effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness-Based Therapy (MBT) on interpersonal forgiveness and perceived fairness among couples experiencing marital discord.

The statistical population included all couples who sought marital counseling at a psychiatric clinic in Tehran in 2022. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants, given the accessibility of the target population. A total of 45 participants (15 couples) were selected and randomly assigned to three groups: CBT ( $n = 15$ ), MBT ( $n = 15$ ), and a control group ( $n = 15$ ). The inclusion criteria were: (1) age between 25 and 50 years; (2) at least three years of marital life; (3) no current request for divorce; (4) a high school diploma or higher education level for comprehension of intervention materials; and (5) willingness to participate in the entire intervention process. Exclusion criteria included: (1) use of psychiatric medication; (2) substance or alcohol addiction; (3) receipt of concurrent counseling or therapy outside the study; (4) absence from more than one session; and (5) incomplete questionnaire data.

Randomization was performed by assigning participants to groups using a block randomization method to ensure equal distribution of demographic characteristics such as age, education, and marital duration.

Data were collected at three stages: pre-test (before the intervention), post-test (immediately after the intervention), and follow-up (two months after the intervention). Participants completed the IFS and PFQ at each stage under standardized conditions to ensure consistency and reliability of the results. Follow-up assessments were conducted by independent researchers who were unaware of the group assignments to minimize potential bias.

### Instruments

**Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS):** The Spanier (1976) DAS was used to identify incompatible couples. This questionnaire consists of 32 items and four subscales: dyadic satisfaction (9 items), dyadic cohesion (5 items), dyadic consensus (12 items), and affectional expression (4 items). The total score ranges from 0 to 150, with lower scores ( $\leq 101$ ) indicating incompatibility and marital problems. Responses are scored on a Likert scale, with positive and negative items to ensure validity. Spanier reported a reliability of 0.96 using Cronbach's alpha. In a national study, the reliability was reported as 0.85 (Hashemi et al., 2022), and in this study, reliability was measured at 0.80.

**Interpersonal Forgiveness Scale (IFS):** The IFS, developed by Ehteshamzadeh et al. (2010), was used to assess interpersonal forgiveness, adapted to Iran's cultural and social context. It contains 25 items, organized into three subscales: reconnection and revenge control (12 items), resentment control (6 items), and realistic understanding (7 items). Responses are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater forgiveness. Reliability coefficients for the scale and its subscales were reported to range between 0.57 and 0.80 (Safari et al., 2022). In this study, the overall reliability was 0.75, with subscale reliability ranging from 0.61 to 0.84.

**Perceived Equity Measure (PEM):** This 4-item questionnaire, developed by Perry (2004), assesses perceived equity across four domains: household tasks, income generation, spending, and childcare. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where one represents "very unfair to me" and 5 represents "fair to both me and my spouse." Scores range from 4 (low equity) to 20 (high equity). The tool's reliability was reported as 0.55 (Perry, 2004), with a higher value of 0.72 reported in national studies (Mortezaei & Rezazadeh, 2021). Reliability in this study was 0.74.

### Intervention

**Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** The CBT intervention followed Beck's (2011) structured protocol across eight sessions, each focusing on key elements of cognitive and behavioral change to improve marital and family adjustment (Beck, 2011). The first session introduced group members, the therapist, and core

concepts of family functioning. In session two, the focus shifted to exploring the types and roles of thoughts in daily life. Session three emphasized identifying cognitive distortions and training participants in the ABCD model to restructure maladaptive thinking. The fourth session examined the relationship between daily activities, mood, and marital satisfaction. Session five encouraged participants to enrich their lives with enjoyable activities. In session six, explicit and ambiguous goal-setting strategies were introduced to promote behavioral activation. Session seven centered on developing practical communication skills and expressing problems constructively. The final session was dedicated to reviewing all skills learned, summarizing the intervention content, and consolidating progress toward marital adjustment.

**Mindfulness-Based Therapy (MBT):** The MBT intervention was conducted by Kabat-Zinn's (2021) Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) protocol, designed to cultivate non-judgmental awareness and emotional regulation across eight weekly sessions (Kabat-Zinn, 2021). The first session involved participant introductions, clarification of therapy goals, and experiential exercises such as mindful raisin-eating to highlight the automatic pilot phenomenon. Session two introduced body scan meditation and the 3-minute breathing space, alongside home assignments. The third session incorporated mindful yoga stretches and a review of home practices. In session four, the emphasis was on mindful movement, identifying emotions and thoughts, and adopting an accepting attitude. Session five deepened participants' awareness of negative experiences through body scans and breathing exercises, while session six guided them in noticing positive experiences and the associated sensations. The seventh session reintroduced mindful yoga and introduced

mountain meditation, fostering stability and resilience. Finally, session eight focused on body scan meditation and reviewing the entire program to consolidate mindfulness skills.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS v26; repeated measures ANOVA was employed to examine changes across the three time points. Bonferroni post-hoc tests were used to identify significant group differences. Assumptions of normality (Shapiro-Wilk test) and sphericity (Mauchly's test) were tested, and appropriate corrections (e.g., Greenhouse-Geisser) were applied where necessary. To control for potential confounding variables, ANCOVA was used with baseline scores as covariates. Effect sizes ( $\eta^2$ ) and statistical power were reported to determine the magnitude and reliability of observed effects.

### Findings and Results

Demographic data indicate that in the CBT group, 6 participants (40%) were aged 25–30, and 9 participants (60%) were aged 36 and above. In the mindfulness group, 5 participants (34%) were aged 25–30, and 10 participants (66%) were aged 36 and above. Similarly, in the control group, 6 participants (40%) were aged 25–30, and 9 participants (60%) were aged 36 and above. Regarding education, 8 participants (53%) in the CBT group were university-educated, and 7 participants (47%) were not. In the mindfulness group, 9 participants (60%) were university-educated, and 6 participants (40%) were not. In the control group, 7 participants (47%) were university-educated, while 8 participants (53%) were not.

**Table 1**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Interpersonal Forgiveness and Perceived Equity Across Groups and Measurement Stages*

Dependent Variable	Group	N	Pretest (M ± SD)	Posttest (M ± SD)	Follow-Up (M ± SD)
Reconnection Component	CBT	15	23.40 ± 5.26	27.73 ± 4.99	28.06 ± 3.88
	Mindfulness	15	21.86 ± 4.03	26.40 ± 3.45	26.93 ± 3.10
	Control	15	23.46 ± 4.43	22.20 ± 3.68	21.80 ± 3.74
Resentment Control	CBT	15	11.35 ± 2.31	14.86 ± 2.38	15.46 ± 1.80
	Mindfulness	15	11.13 ± 2.82	15.26 ± 3.51	15.80 ± 2.98
	Control	15	13.40 ± 2.72	12.80 ± 2.93	12.53 ± 2.97
Realistic Understanding	CBT	15	13.33 ± 2.79	16.60 ± 2.89	16.26 ± 3.01
	Mindfulness	15	14.20 ± 3.40	17.26 ± 2.65	17.70 ± 2.18
	Control	15	14.66 ± 4.60	14.26 ± 4.77	14.00 ± 4.24

Interpersonal Forgiveness	CBT	15	48.08 ± 10.36	59.19 ± 10.26	59.78 ± 8.69
	Mindfulness	15	47.19 ± 10.25	58.92 ± 9.61	60.43 ± 8.26
	Control	15	51.52 ± 11.75	49.26 ± 11.38	48.33 ± 10.95
Perceived Equity	CBT	15	8.86 ± 1.92	12.80 ± 2.27	13.13 ± 2.38
	Mindfulness	15	11.26 ± 2.63	15.13 ± 2.61	15.60 ± 1.54
	Control	15	12.80 ± 3.16	12.86 ± 2.69	12.66 ± 3.10

The descriptive statistics (Table 1) indicate that the mean scores for interpersonal forgiveness and perceived equity in the two intervention groups (CBT and mindfulness) improved from the pretest to the posttest

and follow-up stages. However, no significant changes were observed in the control group's scores across the measurement stages.

**Table 2**

*Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA for Dependent Variables*

Dependent Variable	Source of Change	F Statistic	p-value	Effect Size ( $\eta^2$ )	Statistical Power
Interpersonal Forgiveness	Group	7.428	0.002	0.261	0.925
	Time	61.193	0.000	0.593	1.000
	Time × Group	29.941	0.000	0.588	1.000
Perceived Equity	Group	4.850	0.013	0.188	0.772
	Time	38.055	0.000	0.475	1.000
	Time × Group	9.868	0.000	0.320	1.000

The results (Table 2) indicate that both interventions (CBT and mindfulness) had a significant effect on

improving interpersonal forgiveness and perceived equity among incompatible couples.

**Table 3**

*Bonferroni Post-Hoc Test Results for Dependent Variables*

Dependent Variable	Group Comparison	Mean Difference	p-value
Interpersonal Forgiveness	CBT vs. Mindfulness	0.156	1.000
	CBT vs. Control	5.978	0.005
	Mindfulness vs. Control	5.822	0.006
Perceived Equity	CBT vs. Mindfulness	-2.400	0.010
	CBT vs. Control	-1.178	0.002
	Mindfulness vs. Control	-1.222	0.006

The results (Table 3) demonstrate that both interventions had a positive impact on interpersonal forgiveness and perceived equity. However, while the effectiveness of the two approaches on interpersonal forgiveness was similar, mindfulness therapy was significantly more effective than CBT in improving perceived equity.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to compare the effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Mindfulness Therapy on interpersonal forgiveness and perceived equity in incompatible couples. The results demonstrated that CBT significantly improved scores for interpersonal forgiveness and perceived equity. These findings align with previous research (Bahraini Pour,

2022; Beck, 2011; Dei, 2019; Denecke et al., 2022; Dugal et al., 2018; Ghasemi et al., 2022; Gregory Jr, 2021; Hartmann et al., 2021; Heirani Rashtabadi, 2020; Jiang et al., 2024; Moggia et al., 2024; Naseri & Puryousef, 2021).

CBT offers individuals the opportunity to adopt a different perspective on conflicts and marital discord, encouraging self-reflection and a reevaluation of the roles of all parties involved. It enhances awareness of personal limitations and fosters a better understanding of the situations that caused resentment or hurt. By addressing negative emotions and replacing distorted beliefs with rational, evidence-based thoughts, individuals experience improved emotional states. Participants learn to openly express their feelings, reduce unilateral judgments, and avoid defensive behaviors toward their partners. These skills increase



empathy, strengthen interpersonal bonds, and ultimately enhance intimacy and marital harmony, creating an environment conducive to forgiveness. Interpersonal forgiveness, particularly in couples, emphasizes the emotional aspect of relationships, promoting a deeper emotional connection and increased trust.

In line with Sullivan's (2008) perspective, perceived equity reflects an implicit sense of balance in relationships. In inequitable marital relationships, one partner benefits disproportionately, leaving the other partner feeling undervalued. Perceived equity improves when individuals feel understood and validated by their partners. CBT enhances communication skills, enabling couples to articulate their needs more effectively and fostering a sense of fairness. Increased perceived equity leads to higher positive emotions, greater marital satisfaction, reduced conflict, and enhanced cooperation in managing family responsibilities.

The results also revealed that mindfulness therapy significantly improved interpersonal forgiveness and perceived equity among incompatible couples. This finding aligns with prior research (Edwards et al., 2024; Eyring et al., 2021; Farmanian, 2022; Garrote-Caparrós et al., 2022; Kabat-Zinn, 2021; Kaya & Odacı, 2024; Sam Khaniani et al., 2020; Stephan, 2021; Uzun & Arslan, 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Mindfulness therapy helps individuals accept emotions as they arise. Incompatible couples dealing with psychological and emotional challenges learn to acknowledge their feelings and physical reactions without judgment. This process enhances emotional regulation and self-management, enabling couples to address conflicts more effectively and improve marital intimacy. Mindfulness enhances awareness, promotes emotional regulation, and encourages non-judgmental observation of emotions and thoughts, thereby reducing stress and improving overall well-being.

Mindfulness therapy impacts perceived equity through practices that enhance stress management and reduce self-critical thought patterns. Participants learn to observe family dynamics without attachment or control, enabling them to understand others' behaviors and motivations better. By improving emotional regulation and reducing fear of negative evaluation, mindfulness therapy enhances perceptions of fairness within the family environment. The structural and

theoretical components of mindfulness therapy emphasize intentional focus, non-judgmental awareness, and the development of human strengths such as wisdom, courage, and moderation. This approach enables individuals to step out of habitual thought patterns, focus on strengths, and engage positively in relationships, which ultimately leads to improved perceptions of fairness in marital interactions.

The findings showed no significant difference between the effectiveness of CBT and mindfulness therapy on interpersonal forgiveness, as both approaches were equally impactful. However, mindfulness therapy was more effective than CBT in improving perceived equity. The superiority of mindfulness therapy in this area may be attributed to its dual focus on mindfulness and the cultivation of positive human traits. This approach emphasizes accepting present circumstances without judgment, focusing on strengths, and managing emotions effectively, which collectively enhance perceived fairness in marital relationships. Mindfulness therapy's unique ability to combine emotional regulation with a strengths-based perspective sets it apart from CBT in improving perceived equity.

The limitations of this study include: A restricted sample population confined to incompatible couples in Tehran, a limited follow-up duration, and reliance on self-report questionnaires. To enhance generalizability, future studies should: apply these interventions to other demographic groups and locations, conduct longer-term follow-up sessions, and utilize diverse data collection methods.

Both CBT and mindfulness therapy effectively improved interpersonal forgiveness and perceived equity among incompatible couples, with mindfulness therapy showing a greater impact on perceived equity. While both interventions facilitate perspective-taking and the application of therapeutic strategies to daily life, mindfulness therapy's emphasis on non-judgmental awareness and human strengths makes it particularly effective in fostering fairness in marital relationships. These findings underscore the importance of integrating tailored interventions like mindfulness therapy in marital counseling programs to address the unique challenges faced by incompatible couples.

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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 Declaration of Helsinki, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study included the fact 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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