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## Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental social institution that plays a crucial role in fulfilling individuals' emotional, psychological, and social needs. Research indicates that a significant number of marriages experience marital

# The Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in Marital Conflict, Emotional Divorce, and Self-Differentiation Among Married Women with Relationship Distress

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study investigates the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in reducing marital conflict and emotional divorce, while enhancing self-differentiation in married women.

**Methods and Materials:** A quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and two-month follow-up was used. The sample consisted of 30 married women who sought counseling in Mashhad in 2022, randomly assigned to either an experimental group ( $n = 15$ ) or a control group ( $n = 15$ ). The intervention consisted of eight weekly sessions of ACT-based therapy. Data collection utilized the Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (Gutman, 2008), the Self-Differentiation Questionnaire (Skorn & Friedlander, 1998), and the Marital Conflict Questionnaire (Barati & Sanai, 2000). Data analysis included descriptive statistics, Bonferroni post hoc tests, and repeated measures ANOVA using SPSS version 26.

**Findings:** Significant improvements were observed in marital conflict ( $\eta^2=0.589$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), self-differentiation ( $\eta^2=0.714$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and emotional divorce ( $\eta^2=0.503$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) in the experimental group, with sustained effects during follow-up.

**Conclusion:** ACT-based couples therapy effectively reduces marital conflict and emotional divorce while fostering self-differentiation in married women. These findings suggest that ACT may be a promising intervention for marital counseling. Future studies should explore its long-term effectiveness with larger, more diverse populations.

**Keywords:** Marital conflict, self-differentiation, couple therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, emotional divorce.

conflict, which, if unresolved, can lead to emotional divorce and eventually legal separation (Tasew & Getahun, 2021). According to global divorce statistics, approximately 30-50% of first marriages end in divorce, with marital conflict cited as one of the primary contributing factors (Heaphy & Hodgson, 2023). While

marriage begins with affection and commitment, over time, differences in expectations, values, and conflict resolution skills can create psychological distress (Nihayah et al., 2023).

Marital conflict is defined as the persistent tension, stress, or disagreement between spouses, often arising from discrepancies in expectations, personality traits, attachment styles, and communication patterns (Bahrami & Akbari Borang, 2023). Studies suggest that unresolved conflict can lead to deterioration in emotional connection, culminating in emotional divorce, where couples remain legally married but experience profound emotional detachment (Damo & Cenci, 2021). Emotional divorce is a growing concern, with studies indicating that even in the absence of legal separation, psychological disengagement can severely impact marital satisfaction and overall well-being (Herrero et al., 2020).

One of the critical factors influencing marital stability is self-differentiation, which refers to an individual's ability to maintain emotional independence while remaining connected to their partner (Hocaoğlu & Işık, 2022). Bowen's Differentiation of Self Theory (Bowen, 1978) posits that individuals with higher self-differentiation can effectively regulate their emotions, make rational decisions under stress, and engage in constructive conflict resolution. Conversely, individuals with low self-differentiation are more prone to reactivity, emotional dependence, and avoidance behaviors, leading to heightened marital distress (Finzi-Dottan, 2023). Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that higher self-differentiation is associated with greater marital satisfaction and lower divorce rates (Plumed-Domingo et al., 2023).

Given the prevalence of marital distress and emotional disengagement, researchers have explored various therapeutic interventions to enhance relationship quality. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has gained attention as an effective approach to addressing marital conflict, emotional disengagement, and self-differentiation issues (Walser & O'Connell, 2021). Unlike traditional cognitive-behavioral approaches, ACT emphasizes psychological flexibility, encouraging individuals to accept their emotions, identify personal values, and engage in committed action (Roddy et al., 2020).

Recent studies indicate that ACT-based couples therapy significantly improves marital adjustment by reducing experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion, and ineffective relational patterns (Lu & McKay, 2018). ACT helps couples break negative interaction cycles, fostering emotional connection and adaptive problem-solving strategies (Reardon et al., 2020). Empirical evidence supports its efficacy, demonstrating notable improvements in marital satisfaction, emotional regulation, and self-differentiation (Mohammadi Tileh Noei et al., 2022).

While previous research has examined the effectiveness of ACT in improving general relationship satisfaction, few studies have specifically investigated its impact on marital conflict, self-differentiation, and emotional divorce simultaneously. Moreover, most prior studies have focused on heterogeneous couples, whereas this study uniquely targets married women as a distinct group. Additionally, long-term follow-up studies on ACT-based couple therapy remain limited, raising questions about its sustained impact over time (Jamshidzahi et al., 2021).

To address these gaps, this study investigates the effectiveness of ACT-based couples therapy in reducing marital conflict and emotional divorce while enhancing self-differentiation in married women. This study aims to assess the impact of ACT-based couple therapy on marital conflict, self-differentiation, and emotional divorce among married women. Based on previous research and theoretical frameworks, the study hypothesizes that ACT-based couples therapy will significantly reduce marital conflict in married women. ACT-based couples therapy will improve self-differentiation by increasing emotional regulation and autonomy. ACT-based couples therapy will reduce emotional divorce by fostering emotional reconnection and psychological flexibility.

## Methods and Materials

### *Study Design and Participants*

This study is applied in nature and follows a quasi-experimental design with a pretest-posttest control group and a two-month follow-up. The statistical population comprised all married women who visited a counseling center in Mashhad in 2022 due to marital dissatisfaction and relationship problems. Using a

convenience sampling method, 30 women were selected and randomly assigned to either the experimental group ( $n = 15$ ) or the control group ( $n = 15$ ). Inclusion Criteria were willingness and informed consent to participate, A minimum of three years of marital life with their spouse, no ongoing divorce request, an Age range of 25 to 50 years, obtaining the required score in dependent variables, and a minimum educational qualification of a high school diploma. Exclusion Criteria were failure to meet the inclusion criteria, incomplete responses to self-report tools, or withdrawal from participation, alcohol or drug addiction, use of psychiatric medications, receiving external counseling services, and missing more than one session of couple therapy.

### *Instruments*

1. Emotional Divorce Questionnaire (EDQ): The Emotional Divorce Scale (Gottman, 2008) is a single-factor scale with 24 items, derived from Gottman's book *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy*. Each item describes aspects of marital life, with binary responses ("Yes" = 1, "No" = 0). The total score ranges from 0 to 24, with higher scores indicating a greater likelihood of emotional divorce. The cutoff score is 8, above which individuals are considered at risk and recommended for professional intervention. The original Cronbach's alpha was 0.89, confirming the construct validity. In Iran, Vatan-Khah, Koch-Entazar, & Ghanbari-Panah (2021) reported an internal consistency of 0.83 (Vatan-Khah et al., 2021). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha = 0.78.

2. Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI): Developed by Skowron & Friedlander (1998), this 45-item scale assesses an individual's self-differentiation with four subscales: Emotional Reactivity (11 items), I-Position (11 items), Emotional Cutoff (12 items), Fusion with Others (6 items). Responses are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Completely False, 6 = Completely True). Higher scores indicate greater self-differentiation. The Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was 0.88 in the original study, with subscale reliabilities ranging from 0.82 to 0.86 (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). In Iran, Maroufi, Goodarzi, & Yar-Ahmadi (2021) reported a reliability of 0.79 (Maroufi et al., 2021). In this study, Cronbach's alpha = 0.75.

3. Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ): Developed by Barati & Sanaei (2000), this 42-item scale measures

marital conflict levels across seven subscales: Reduced Cooperation (5 items), Increased Emotional Reactions (8 items), Increased Seeking of Child Support (5 items), Increased Individual Relations with Family (6 items), Decreased Family Relations with Spouse's Relatives (6 items), Reduced Sexual Relations (5 items) and Financial Separation (7 items). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always), with total scores ranging from 42 to 210. Scores of 115–134 indicate mild conflict, while scores of 135 and above indicate severe conflict and high marital distress. The original Cronbach's alpha was 0.94, with subscale reliabilities ranging from 0.68 to 0.81. In Iran, Noorbakhsh-Baghbaderani & Latifi (2021) reported reliability of 0.72 (Noorbakhsh Baghbaderani & Latifi, 2021). In this study, Cronbach's alpha = 0.70.

### *Intervention*

The ACT-Based Couples Therapy intervention followed the protocol of Lu and McKay (2013). It was delivered in eight structured weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes, in a group format led by a licensed clinical psychologist trained in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. The sessions aimed to enhance emotional awareness, reduce experiential avoidance, and strengthen relational commitment through mindfulness practices, metaphors, and experiential exercises. Key techniques included the "Pitfall" metaphor for identifying ineffective relational patterns, the "Rose Garden" and "10th Wedding Anniversary" exercises for exploring shared values and commitment, and the "Bus Passengers" and "Fog Layers" metaphors to address emotional avoidance and cognitive fusion. The intervention also emphasized present-moment awareness, forgiveness, and value-based action planning to foster psychological flexibility and relational resilience among couples.

### *Data Analysis*

After randomly assigning participants (even numbers to the experimental group, odd numbers to the control group), the experimental group underwent Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)-based couple therapy. Post-tests were conducted after the intervention, followed by a two-month follow-up assessment. SPSS (Version 26) was used for data analysis.

## Findings and Results

The demographic data indicate that the mean age of participants in the experimental group was 39.67 years, while in the control group, it was 38.03 years. Regarding education, 5 participants (33%) in the experimental group and 4 participants (26%) in the control group had a university education, while 10 participants (67%) in the experimental group and 11 participants (74%) in the

control group had non-university education (high school diploma or lower). In terms of marital duration, in the experimental group, 8 participants (54%) had been married for 3 to 5 years, while 7 participants (46%) had been married for 6 years or more. In the control group, 10 participants (67%) had been married for 3 to 6 years, while 5 participants (33%) had been married for 6 years or more.

**Table 1**

*Means and standard deviations of dependent variables*

Dependent Variable	Group	Pre-Test (Mean ± SD)	Post-Test (Mean ± SD)	Follow-Up (Mean ± SD)
Marital Conflict	Experimental	112.05 ± 20.46	130.25 ± 18.03	130.78 ± 17.25
	Control	116.28 ± 23.14	115.06 ± 23.81	114.57 ± 23.90
Self-Differentiation	Experimental	66.52 ± 8.80	79.05 ± 10.68	80.65 ± 9.87
	Control	69.19 ± 10.81	68.78 ± 10.66	67.59 ± 11.49
Emotional Divorce	Experimental	17.74 ± 2.49	14.66 ± 2.43	14.26 ± 2.52
	Control	18.06 ± 2.46	18.33 ± 2.28	18.20 ± 2.36

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the dependent variables for both the experimental and control groups across pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages. The results show that in participants who attended the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)-based intervention sessions, there was an improvement in emotional divorce, self-differentiation, and marital conflict. Moreover, this effect was maintained during the follow-up period. However, in the control group, there was no significant change in the mean scores of these variables across different assessment stages (from pre-test to post-test and follow-up).

Before conducting ANCOVA, the normality assumption of the score distribution was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test, as well as the skewness and kurtosis indices. The Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the p-values for all dependent variables were greater than 0.05,

confirming the normality of the distribution. Additionally, the skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within the range of (-2 to +2), establishing a normal distribution. Therefore, ANCOVA was appropriate for analyzing the data. Moreover, Levene's test confirmed the assumption of homogeneity of variances across all dependent variables. The assumption of homogeneity of covariance matrices was assessed using Box's M test, which was not violated for marital conflict ( $P = 0.124$ ,  $F = 1.67$ , Box's  $M = 11.35$ ), self-differentiation ( $P = 0.423$ ,  $F = 5.446$ , Box's  $M = 37.01$ ), and emotional divorce ( $P = 0.184$ ,  $F = 6.96$ , Box's  $M = 47.32$ ). However, Mauchly's test of sphericity indicated a significant p-value of 0.001, suggesting a violation of the sphericity assumption. Therefore, the Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied for within-subjects effects.

**Table 2**

*Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) Results for the Effect of the Independent Variable on Dependent Variables*

Dependent Variable	Wilks' Lambda	F-Statistic	P-Value	Effect Size ( $\eta^2$ )
Marital Conflict	0.207	51.808	0.000	0.793
Self-Differentiation	0.185	59.549	0.000	0.815
Emotional Divorce	0.386	21.461	0.000	0.614

Table 2 indicates that the independent variable (ACT) had a significant effect on marital conflict (Wilks' Lambda = 0.207,  $\eta^2 = 0.793$ ,  $P = 0.000$ ), self-

differentiation (Wilks' Lambda = 0.185,  $\eta^2 = 0.815$ ,  $P = 0.000$ ), and emotional divorce (Wilks' Lambda = 0.386,  $\eta^2 = 0.614$ ,  $P = 0.000$ ).

**Table 3***Repeated Measures ANOVA Results for the Effect of the Independent Variable on the Dependent Variables*

Dependent Variable	Source of Change	Sum of Squares	Error Sum of Squares	F-Statistic	P-Value	Effect Size ( $\eta^2$ )
Marital Conflict	Group	1831.511	1831.511	7.896	0.009	0.290
	Time	1445.000	1278.326	71.987	0.000	0.620
	Time $\times$ Group	1990.956	1761.309	99.186	0.000	0.589
Self-Differentiation	Group	1067.778	1067.778	14.451	0.001	0.340
	Time	761.156	470.538	58.622	0.000	0.677
	Time $\times$ Group	1056.622	653.193	81.378	0.000	0.714
Emotional Divorce	Group	157.344	157.344	10.097	0.004	0.265
	Time	48.089	36.834	22.609	0.000	0.447
	Time $\times$ Group	60.356	46.230	28.376	0.000	0.503

Table 3 demonstrates that, in addition to the main effects of group and time, the interaction effect (Group  $\times$  Time) was also significant for marital conflict ( $\eta^2 = 0.589$ ,  $P = 0.000$ ), self-differentiation ( $\eta^2 = 0.714$ ,  $P = 0.000$ ), and emotional divorce ( $\eta^2 = 0.503$ ,  $P = 0.000$ ). This finding confirms that ACT had a significant effect on all dependent variables.

The Bonferroni post hoc test confirmed that significant differences existed between pre-test and post-test scores, as well as between pre-test and follow-up scores for marital conflict, self-differentiation, and emotional divorce. However, no significant difference was observed between post-test and follow-up scores ( $P > 0.05$ ), indicating that the effects of ACT remained stable over time. These findings suggest that ACT was effective in reducing marital conflict and emotional divorce while improving self-differentiation, and the effectiveness persisted during the follow-up period.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for couples in reducing marital conflict and emotional divorce while enhancing self-differentiation in married women. The findings confirmed that ACT-based couples therapy had statistically significant effects on all three variables, with improvements sustained over the two-month follow-up period.

The significant reduction in marital conflict aligns with previous research (Mohammadi Tileh Noei et al., 2022; Najjar-Asl et al., 2021), which highlights the role of

psychological flexibility and acceptance in improving relationship dynamics. By reducing cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance, ACT helps individuals respond to conflict with greater emotional regulation rather than reactive behaviors. The ACT approach encourages values-based interactions, which may have enhanced communication and problem-solving skills in participants, leading to improved marital adjustment.

The increase in self-differentiation was the most pronounced effect in this study. This can be explained by ACT's emphasis on mindfulness, self-awareness, and emotional regulation (Lu & McKay, 2018). Participants who practiced ACT strategies likely developed greater emotional independence, allowing them to navigate relational tensions without losing their sense of self. This aligns with Bowen's Differentiation of Self Theory, which suggests that individuals with higher differentiation experience lower emotional reactivity and engage in healthier conflict resolution (Hocaoğlu & Işık, 2022).

The reduction in emotional divorce supports previous findings (Jamshidzahi et al., 2021; Feyzi-Khah et al., 2021). ACT fosters emotional reconnection by helping individuals reframe negative thoughts about their partner, leading to a renewed sense of commitment and emotional intimacy. Additionally, cognitive defusion techniques in ACT allow individuals to view thoughts as temporary mental events rather than absolute truths, reducing negative attributions toward their spouse (Walser & O'Connell, 2021).

Interestingly, self-differentiation showed the largest effect size in this study. One possible explanation is that



self-differentiation is an intrapersonal skill, meaning it does not rely on direct behavioral change from the spouse. In contrast, reductions in marital conflict and emotional divorce require reciprocal changes from both partners. Since ACT focuses on internal cognitive and emotional processing, it is logical that self-differentiation improved more significantly than relational outcomes. Future studies should investigate whether longer interventions or interventions involving both spouses would result in greater reductions in conflict and emotional disengagement.

Although the findings are promising, several limitations must be acknowledged: The study had only 30 participants ( $n = 15$  per group), limiting statistical power and generalizability. Future research should use larger sample sizes (e.g.,  $n = 50+$  per group) to increase external validity. The two-month follow-up does not allow assessment of long-term effects. Previous studies suggest that marital therapy outcomes can fluctuate over time (Rothman et al., 2021). Future studies should include 6- to 12-month follow-ups to assess whether the improvements are sustained. The study only included women, which means the effectiveness of ACT for husbands or mixed-gender couples remains unclear. Future research should involve both partners to examine gender-based differences in therapy outcomes. Relying solely on self-reported questionnaires introduces social desirability and response bias. Future studies should complement self-reports with objective measures to enhance the accuracy of findings. The study used convenience sampling rather than randomized selection, which may introduce selection bias. A randomized controlled trial (RCT) would provide more substantial evidence of causality.

Based on these findings, several areas for future research are recommended: Investigate whether men and women respond differently to ACT-based couples therapy. Examine whether ACT is equally effective across different cultural settings. Conduct studies with 6-12 month follow-ups to assess the durability of therapy outcomes. Implement ACT for both partners together rather than individual therapy. Compare individual vs. couple-based ACT interventions to determine which is more effective in reducing marital distress. Future studies should incorporate physiological or observational data (e.g., heart rate variability, video-

coded interactions) to measure emotional regulation objectively.

This study provides empirical support for the effectiveness of ACT-based couples therapy in reducing marital conflict and emotional divorce while enhancing self-differentiation in married women. The findings suggest that ACT fosters emotional flexibility, acceptance, and values-based commitment, contributing to healthier marital relationships.

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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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