

The effect of emotion regulation training on marital conflicts of parents with autistic children

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of emotion regulation training on the marital conflicts of parents with autistic children. The research population included all parents with autistic children studying at Tehran schools who were selected by a cluster randomized sampling from these schools. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups of control (15 couples) and experimental (15 couples) in a pretest and post-test design with a control group. In the pre-test stage, all subjects were assessed by Sanaei marital conflicts questionnaire. Then, the experimental group received 8 sessions of emotion regulation training based on Gross model. During this period, the control group did not receive any training. After the completion of the training sessions of the experimental group, both groups were re-assessed by the research tool in the post-test stage. Finally, all data were analyzed by SPSS 19 software and multivariate covariance analysis (MANCOVA). The results revealed a significant difference between the two groups in terms of reduction in the scores of reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional response, increased support for children, increased individual relationship with relatives, reduced family relationship with spouse relatives and friends, and separation of financial affairs ($F = 4.042$, $P < 0.05$). Additionally, the results showed that emotion regulation training significantly reduced the marital conflicts of the parents in the experimental group compared to the control group. Therefore, it can be concluded that teaching emotion regulation strategies can be very useful in resolving marital conflicts.

Keywords: emotion regulation, marital conflict, autism, parents

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ADHD) is one of the most complex neurodevelopmental disorders in childhood that is associated with a wide range of behavioral problems. According to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the diagnostic criteria of autism spectrum disorder include a defect in the socio-emotional interaction, defect in non-verbal communication behaviors, and defect in establishing, maintaining and understanding the relationships. Studies have not yet been able to discover the exact cause of this disorder, but various studies have shown that genetics and hereditary

factors play a key role in this regard ^[1]. One of the most important categories related to the well-being and health of the parents of autistic children is the quality of marriage and marital relationship that has long been considered by researchers. Marital quality is defined as the performance evaluation and the success of marital partnership ^[2]. Since the 1950s, researchers such as Farber (1959), (1960) and Gath (1978) have argued that the stress of parents of a child with developmental disorders negatively affects their marital relationship. This hypothesis is still valid and reports suggest that many of these parents have been divorced. ^[3] In addition to the marital quality, marital satisfaction and marital adjustment variables have also been investigated by researchers. In these studies, parents of children with developmental disorders reported lower satisfaction and marital adjustment than the control group. ^[4-6] Another variable investigated by researchers is marital conflict. Marital conflict and marital satisfaction are of the topics that have long been considered by researchers ^[7]. Different definitions have been suggested for conflict. Regardless of similarities and differences in all of these definitions, all of them agree that there is a kind

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of conflict between two people or two groups. It is better to distinguish this concept from the concept of violence of couples because the violence of couples refers to some kind of harm to a person, but conflict is not necessarily associated with violence [8]. Family plays a key role in the emotional development and health of a child, and as most autistic children have emotional problems, it affects the emotional regulation of the family. The emotion regulation therapy is among the emotion-focused therapies [9] which have a functional view of emotions and contemporary cognitive-behavioral therapeutic packages that are increasingly emphasizing on emotion. They include Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) [10]; Compassion-focused Therapy; [11] Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy; [12] Acceptance and Commitment Treatment (ACT) [13]; Acceptance-based behavioral therapy; [14] and Behavioral Activation. [15] Therefore, the aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of emotion regulation training on the marital conflicts of parents with autistic children.

Methodology

Due to the manipulation of the independent variable, the present study is experimental based on a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The research population of the present study included all parents of children with autism who were willing to participate in the study and their children were studying at autism schools in Tehran. Thirty couples were selected by a cluster randomized sampling from Torab, Ayin-e Mehr Varzi, and Besharat schools and they were randomly assigned into an experimental group (n=15) and a control group (n=15). Then, the experimental group received emotion regulation training. The research tool was Sanaei marital conflicts questionnaire. This questionnaire is a 42-item tool designed to measure marital conflicts based on clinical experiences of Sanaei (2000). [16] The questionnaire assesses 7 dimensions of marital conflicts, including reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional response, increased support for children, increased individual relationships with relatives, reduced family relationships with relatives of spouse and friends, and separating financial affairs from each other. The reliability of the questionnaire by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.94 for the whole questionnaire. It was calculated for 7 subscales as follows: reduced co-operation (70%), reduced sex (72%), increased emotional response (73%), increased support for children (81%), increased individual relationship with relatives (75%), reduced family relationships with relatives of spouse and friends (69%),

separating financial affairs with each other (68%). Each question is scored on a 5-point Likert scale, and a higher score means more conflict and a lower score means a better relationship.

Methodology, instrumentation and data analysis

Finally, the collected data were transferred to SPSS 19 software and analyzed. To analyze the data, we, firstly, examined the demographic characteristics of the participants through frequency tables and charts. Then, the descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviations of the participants were reported in the research variables and, finally, after analyzing the assumptions of the statistical tests, we used multivariate and one-variable covariance analysis to analyze the data

Results

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of emotional regulation training on marital conflicts of parents with autistic children. The demographic characteristics of the subjects are presented in Table 1.

Table 1- Descriptive indices of demographic variables of subjects

Variable	levels	F	%
gender	female	30	50
	male	30	50
	total	60	100
education	Under diploma	6	10
	diploma	18	30
	associate	7	7.11
	bachelor	22	7.36
	Master	5	3.8
	PhD	2	3.3
	total	60	100

Table 2 presents the results of the descriptive statistics of the research variables in the experimental and control groups in the pretest and posttest stages. According to Table 2, it is seen that in terms of marital conflict and its components, including reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional response, increased support for children, increased individual relationship with relatives, reduced family relationship with spouse relatives and separation of affairs, the experimental group subjects obtained lower mean score compared to the control group subjects in the posttest stage (Table 2).

Table 2- Descriptive statistics of the research variables in the experimental and control groups in the pretest and posttest stages

variable	stage	Control group		Experimental group	
		mean	SD	mean	SD
reduced cooperation	Posttest	89.767	27.097	84.600	23.183
	pretest	9.233	3.114	13.000	5.988
	Posttest	11.466	8.336	9.633	3.614
	pretest	10.433	3.202	13.900	5.542
Reduced sex	Posttest	89.767	27.097	84.600	23.183
	pretest	9.233	3.114	13.000	5.988

	Posttest	10.766	3.147	10.133	2.979
Increased emotional response	pretest	15.866	5.042	21.900	9.147
	Posttest	16.233	5.593	16.000	6.607
Increased support for children	pretest	11.200	3.055	14.800	5.121
	Posttest	11.000	3.332	10.733	3.590
Individual relationship with relatives	pretest	10.966	4.398	15.533	7.205
	Posttest	12.066	5.570	10.900	3.366
Family relationship with relatives of the spouse	pretest	11.100	4.588	15.666	7.666
	Posttest	11.833	4.434	10.733	3.786
Separation of financial affairs	pretest	17.200	6.149	20.733	6.559
	Posttest	16.400	3.479	16.466	5.049

The assumption of the normality of the data was examined by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and it was obtained above 0.05 for all data, indicating that the data were normal. In addition, to test the homogeneity assumption of variances, we used Levene's test. The results show that as the significance value of the Levene's test for most research variables is higher than 0.05, it can be stated that the homogeneity assumption of variances to perform the final analysis is confirmed. Due to the fact that the significance value of the ANOVA test is higher than 0.05, we can conclude that the homogeneity assumption of variances to perform the final analysis is confirmed.

To respond to the hypothesis that emotional emotion regulation affects the marital conflict of a parent with autistic child, due to the existence of seven dependent variables (reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional response, increased support for children, increased individual relationship with relatives, reduced family relationship with relatives of spouse and friends and separation of financial issues with each other) as well as the existence of one independent variable (group) that has two levels (control group and experimental group) with a covariate variance (pre-test), we used multivariate covariance analysis (Table 3).

Table 3- Results of multivariate covariance analysis for post-test scores of reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional response, increased support for children, increased the individual relationship with relatives, reduced family relationship with relatives of spouse and friends and separation of financial affairs with each other in control and experimental groups

	value	F	Df	Degree of freedom error	P	ETA ²
Pillai's Trace	0.339	3.298	7	45	0.006	0.339
Wilks Lambda	0.661	3.298	7	45	0.006	0.339
Hotelling's Trace	0.513	3.298	7	45	0.006	0.339
Roy's Largest Root	0.513	3.298	7	45	0.006	0.339

Considering the significance of the box test ($F = 4.042$, $P < 0.05$), we decided to use the values of the Pillai's Trace for comparison of the groups. As seen in Table 3, the significance level of the Pillai's Trace test suggests that there is a significant difference between the two groups in terms of scores of reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional

response, increased support for children, increased individual relationship with relatives, reduced family relationship with relatives of spouse and friends and separation of financial affairs with each other. Table 4 presents the results of the Test of Between-Subject Effects to determine the differences separately for the dependent variables.

Table 4- Test of Between-Subject Effects on scores of reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional response, increased support for children, increased the individual relationship with relatives, reduced family relationship with relatives of spouse and friends and separation of financial affairs with each other in the control and experimental groups

Dependent variable	SS	Df	MS	F	P	ETA ²
Reduced cooperation	218.377	1	218.377	5.901	0.019	0.104
Reduced sex	60.023	1	60.023	15.219	0.001	0.230
Increased emotional response	163.110	1	163.110	7.820	0.007	0.133
Increased support for children	68.825	1	68.825	12.835	0.001	0.201
Individual relationship with relatives	144.342	1	144.342	10.024	0.003	0/164
Family relationship with relatives of spouse	147.928	1	147.928	19.737	0.001	0.279
Separation of financial affairs	43.381	1	43.381	3.001	0.089	0.056

According to the results of Table 4, it is observed that there is a significant difference between the two groups of control and experimental in terms of reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional response, increased support for children,

increased the individual relationship with relatives, reduced family relationship with relatives of spouse and friends. That is, emotion regulation training has led to a reduction in marital conflicts in these cases. The adjusted mean and standard error of

the variables of research in the two groups showed that the adjusted mean of the experimental group is significantly lower than the control group in the variables of reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional response, increased support

for children, increased individual relationship with relatives, reduced family relationship with relatives of spouse and friends, indicating the effectiveness of emotional regulation training in reducing marital conflicts in these cases (Table 5).

Table 5- Adjusted mean and standard errors for variables of reduced cooperation, reduced sex, increased emotional response, increased support for children, increased the individual relationship with relatives, reduced family relationship with relatives of spouse and friends, and separation of financial affairs in two groups of control and experimental

variable	group	index	
		mean	SD
Reduced cooperation	control	12.653	1.169
	experimental	8.447	1.169
Reduced sex	control	11.553	0.382
	experimental	9.347	0.382
Increased emotional response	control	17.934	0.878
	experimental	14.299	0.878
Increased support for children	control	12.047	0.445
	experimental	9.686	0.445
Individual relationship with relatives	control	13.193	0.729
	experimental	9.774	0.729
Family relationship with relatives of the spouse	control	13.014	0.526
	experimental	9.553	0.526
Separation of financial affairs	control	17.371	0.730
	experimental	15.496	0.730

Discussion

The results of the multivariate covariance analysis, testing the hypothesis that emotional regulation training affects the marital conflict of parents with autistic children, showed that emotional regulation training significantly improved the marital conflicts of parents with autistic children compared to the control group. These results are in line with the results of the research conducted by Wilson *et al.*, (2017), Frankel, Umemura, Jacobvitz and Hazen (2015), and Ghahari, Davoodi, Yekehfallah and Mazloumi (2018). In explaining this result, we can refer to the role of maladaptive emotion regulation in marital conflicts and the role of adaptive emotional regulation strategies in making marital satisfaction and adjustment. Research has shown that negative emotions if they are not resolved, can cause tension in the family atmosphere and couples' relations. When a husband and a wife (or both) has difficulty in adjusting their emotions, a cycle of distressing conversations and ineffective behaviors are formed and they will pave the way for the creation and continuation of marital conflict. Naturally, as long as maladaptive emotion regulation strategies do not change into adaptive emotion regulation strategies among couples, the marital conflict will not be resolved. Therefore, by replacing adaptive emotion regulation strategies (such as re-evaluation), people learn to adjust their behaviors so that they can bring more satisfaction and adjustment for themselves and their spouses. In addition, a therapeutic relationship plays a key role during this treatment to the extent that this relationship has a powerful emotional regulation function. Empathic linking of

values and valuable goals with emotion regulation and other therapeutic actions to reduce marital conflicts is essential. The link of values increases the motivation and engagement with the very difficult task of knowing distressing emotions, accepting distressing emotions as part of human existence, and using useful emotion regulation strategies. Although clients may prefer not to experience unpleasant emotions, creating emotion regulation strategies can replace this experimental avoidance. In this treatment, the therapist respects the capability and individual steps of clients by persuading them to face distressing emotions and experiences, including thoughts, physical feelings, and emotions. Accordingly, in the empathic relationship with the therapist, the parents learn how to face emotions that initiate marital conflicts and use adaptive strategies to cope with them.

Conclusion

The results of this study showed that teaching emotion regulation strategies can be very helpful in resolving marital conflicts. As one of the main causes of marital conflicts is lack of effective communication and one of the main factors in the lack of effective communication is the existence of negative emotions in husband or wife or both of them, teaching the use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies can improve the effective communication, resolve the conflict, and improve the marital satisfaction and adjustment. Emotion regulation skills at treatment session, daily life, and various types of "real life practices" or homework, including work with experiential

avoidance and exposure, are essential. In addition, providing the conditions and emotional emotion regulation skills will enable clients to experience efficiency. These skills allow the clients to accept and tolerate distressing symptoms and cope with emotions related to them. A part of the treatment focuses on understanding and recognizing the emotions. In the thought-emotion-behavior triangle, special attention is paid to emotion. This emphasis on emotion helps clients create a link among thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to enhance their perception of emotions as well as the sense of efficiency in coping with emotions. By understanding and recognizing the relationship among thoughts, emotions, physical senses and behaviors (including emotional behaviors), parents of children with autism can learn to influence their emotional experiences.

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