



## Original Article

## The Effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Therapy on Emotion Regulation, Anger Rumination, and Marital Intimacy in Women Affected by Spouse Infidelity

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Emotion-based couple therapy is one of the couple therapy used to address the negative cycles of lasting interaction, tenderness, and emotions of clients. This study was conducted to investigate the effect of emotion-oriented couple therapy on emotion regulation, anger rumination and marital intimacy in women affected by infidelity.

**Methods:** In this quasi-experimental study, twenty women affected by infidelity referred to Iranmehr Counseling and Psychological Services Center in Rasht, Iran were included. Couple therapy sessions was performed for 8 two-hours weekly sessions. Emotion regulation, anger rumination and marital intimacy questionnaires were completed at baseline, after intervention, and one months later. Data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance.

**Results:** Emotion-based couple therapy had significant effects on emotion regulation ( $F = 11.27$ ,  $P$ -value  $< 0.001$ ), anger rumination ( $F = 308.7$  and  $P$ -value  $< 0.001$ ), and marital intimacy ( $F = 347.4$  and  $P$ -value  $< 0.001$ ) in women affected by infidelity.

**Conclusion:** Emotion-oriented couple therapy interventions can promote emotion regulation, reduce anger rumination, and increase marital intimacy. Further studies are warranted.

**Keywords:** Anger rumination, Emotion-Focused couple Therapy, Emotion regulation, Marital intimacy, Spouse infidelity.

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## Introduction

Marital infidelity is a shocking issue for couples and families and a common phenomenon for marriage and family therapists, and participation in extramarital affairs has a significant prevalence in clinical and normal settings that cause significant confusion for the involved persons. The results of numerous studies reported that most people expect monogamy in sexual relations and abstinence from illegitimate relationships from their spouses (1). There are no specific statistics in this field in Iran and the percentage of married people who break the covenant is unknown. One explanation for this limited information may be the

conservatism of respondents in answering questions (2).

Couples who have experienced infidelity often report poorer performance in marital relationships and more severe cognitive and emotional disturbances than couples who have never experienced infidelity, and when an extramarital affair is discovered, the affected spouse may experience behavioral imbalance (3).

Previous study showed that women with low emotion regulation have a lot of conflict in life roles (4). The individual's ability to control emotions helps to calm and regulate emotional arousal and change emotional experiences (5). In fact, people whose emotional regulation

skills focus on maladaptive strategies seem to have more unwanted thoughts. One of the types of unwanted thoughts in emotional disorders is occupations or rumination. Ruminants can show up in angry situations or about their anger. Anger rumination is an inevitable and repetitive cognitive process that appears during the experience of anger and is responsible for the continuation and increase of anger (6).

One of the factors that can increase marital adjustment is marital intimacy. Studies and clinical experiences show that in contemporary society, couples experience severe and pervasive problems when establishing and maintaining intimate relationships and compatibility with each other (7). Given the complex nature of infidelity and its catastrophic effects on couples' relationships, it is essential that effective interventions be made to help couples facing this problem. One of the interventions that can be used to reduce sexual desire differences, eliminate emotional problems (8), and increase marital satisfaction of couples (9) is emotion-based couple therapy (EFT).

EFT is one of the couple therapy methods that pays special attention to the negative cycles of lasting interaction, tenderness, and emotions of clients. The emphasis of emotion-focused couple therapy is on adaptive tenderness through care, support, and mutual attention to their own and their spouse's needs. This approach believes that marital disturbances are created and continue along with the pervasive state of negative emotion and attachment disorders (10). The step-by-step treatment plan for couples in EFT make it more effective than other approaches with lower recurrence rate (11).

The results of Saemi et al. (12) showed that emotion-based couple therapy was more effective compared to Guttmann's method in the four components of emotional regulation difficulty in rejection of negative emotions, difficulty in performing purposeful behavior, and difficulty in controlling impulsive behaviors. The results of Arianfar et al. study (13) showed that emotion-oriented and integrated couple therapy was effective in increasing the marital intimacy of couples affected by infidelity. The results of Mutzel study (14) showed that couple therapy and emotion therapy have been effective in improving the couple's sexual relationship and the couple's needs in the marital relationship.

Considering marital infidelity as one of the most common problems faced by couples and family therapists, the present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of emotion-based

couple therapy on emotion regulation and rumination of marital anger and intimacy in women affected by infidelity.

## Methods

### *Study type and study population*

This was a quasi-experimental study conducted on 20 women affected by infidelity who referred to Iranmehr Counseling and Psychological Services Center in Rasht, Iran during 2020. Inclusion criteria were willingness to attend training sessions, betrayal, no history of mental disorder based on clinical interview, at least one year of living together, having at least a diploma, at least 20 years and a maximum of 50 years of age. Exclusion criteria were having psychotic disorder, unwillingness to continue cooperation, legal divorce, and ongoing infidelity.

The protocol of this study was approved by ethical review board of Guilan University of Medical Sciences and the study was initiated after obtaining the necessary permission from the clinic officials. The objectives and research method were explained to the participants and after obtaining their informed consent and signing the relevant form, a questionnaire was provided and a complete and clear answer method was explained. The confidentiality of the obtained information and no obligation to continue the study was emphasized to the participants.

After completing the questionnaires, the emotion-based couple therapy intervention was performed on 20 pairs of couples for eight 2-hours weekly sessions. Each session was hold separately for each pairs of couple. The package of therapy sessions was taken from literature (15). A brief description of emotion-focused couple therapy sessions is presented in Table 1. At the end and three months after the intervention initiation, subjects were invited to complete the questionnaires again. It should be noted that both people participated in couple therapy sessions, but the questionnaires were completed only by women.

### *Research tools*

The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire developed by Granfski and Kraj (16) was used to identify cognitive coping strategies after experiencing negative events or situations. This questionnaire was a self-report tool and has 30 items to assesses the cognitive strategies of self-blame, blaming others, mental rumination, catastrophic perception, acceptance, refocus on planning, positive refocus, positive re-evaluation, and adoption of perspective.

**Table 1.** A Summary of the Emotion-Focused Couple Therapy Plan

Session number	Subject	Brief content of meetings
1	Evaluation and coherence	Getting to know, exploring the motivation for treatment
2	Identifying the negative interaction cycle Assure the damaged partner that this will not be repeated	Discover problematic interactions and negative cycles, Assessment of attachment issues
3	Analysis and change of emotions	Finding new attachment experiences Accepting fundamental unconfirmed feelings
4	Relationship reconstruction	Access to hidden needs, fears, and promoting acceptance by the spouse
5	Relationship Reconstruction	The more emotionally involvement of the partners
6	Deep emotional involvement	Expressing emotions, acceptance of emotions
7	Consolidation and integration	Reconstruction of interactions, discover new solutions to old problems
8	Consolidation and integration	Acceptance of new situations, create a secure attachment

The items were scored with a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The range of total achievable scores was between 36 and 180 points. Total points were then classified into the poor emotion regulation (36-72), moderate cognitive emotion regulation (73-108), and strong cognitive emotion regulation (109-180). Granfski et al. (17) believed that cognitive emotion regulation strategies can be considered as a construct with one dimension (cognitive coping). It can also be divided into two types of adaptive coping strategies (with 23 items) and maladaptive strategies (with 13 items). In Iran, Yousefi (18) confirmed the reliability of the questionnaire with Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82.

Anger rumination questionnaire was developed by Sakhodolovsky et al. (19) and measures the tendency to think about existing anger-provoking situations and recall periods of anger in the past. This scale consists of 19 items in 5 components: 1. The thought of anger (after arguing with someone I constantly fight with in my mind), 2. Memories of anger (I think about the injustices done to me), 3. Thoughts of revenge 3. (After a conflict, I have a lot of fantasies about revenge), 4. Understanding the causes (I think about why people mistreat me). Each item is scored in a 5-point Likert manner from never (with a score of 1) to forever (with a score of 5). The test is scored in such a way that a higher score indicates more anger chewing (19). The reliability of this scale was confirmed based on Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89 by Besharat et al. (20).

The Marital Intimacy Questionnaire prepared by Thompson and Walker (21), which has 17 items and was used to measure love and intimacy. It scores on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The higher the score in this questionnaire, the higher the intimacy. Sanaei confirmed its reliability coefficient with Cronbach's alpha of 0.96 (21).

#### Statistical Analysis

Data were described using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation according to the type of variable. Repeated Measured Analysis of variance was used to explore mean difference in three time periods of the study. Post hoc tests were used for paired comparison. P-value less than  $< 0.05$  was considered as significant. All analyses was performed in SPSS version 19.

#### Results

The age group of the female participants was 20 to 50 years

old and the highest percentage (60%) belonged to the age group of 20 to 30 years old. table 2 illustrates Personal characteristics of the study participants. The frequency of emotion regulation, rumination of anger and marital intimacy in women affected by infidelity in three time points of the study is shown in Table 3. At baseline, 30% had medium cognitive regulation, 80% had strong anger rumination, and 75% had weak marital intimacy. The percentage improved to strong cognitive regulation, weak anger rumination, and medium marital intimacy in all of participants at the end of intervention and one month later.

The mean values of emotion regulation, rumination of anger and marital intimacy are shown in Table 4. The mean values of three constructs showed that the intervention was effective in improving emotion regulation, reducing anger rumination and increasing the intimacy of women affected by infidelity. The repeated measure analysis of variance showed statistically significant difference in three time points of study in emotion regulation ( $F = 11.27$ ,  $P\text{-value} < 0.001$ ), anger rumination ( $F = 308.7$ ,  $P\text{-value} < 0.001$ ), and marital intimacy ( $F = 347.4$ ,  $P\text{-value} < 0.001$ ).

**Table 2.** Personal Characteristics of the Study Participants

Variable	EFT	
	Number	Percentage
Age		
Less than 30	12	60
31-40	4	20
More than 40	4	20
Education		
Diploma	3	3
Bachelor	13	65
Higher education	4	20
Job		
Housewife	5	25
Free job	8	40
Employee	7	35

#### Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of emotion-based couple therapy on emotion regulation, anger rumination, and marital intimacy in women affected by infidelity. The results showed that emotion-based couple therapy had a significant effect on emotion regulation, anger rumination, and marital intimacy in women affected by infidelity.

**Table3.** Frequency of Emotion Regulation, Anger Rumination and Marital Intimacy in Women Affected by Infidelity in Three Time Points of Study

Constructs	At baseline N = 20		After the intervention N = 20		3 months after baseline N = 20	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Cognitive regulation of emotion						
Weak	0	0	0	0	0	0
Medium	6	30	0	0	0	0
Strong	14	70	20	100	20	100
Anger rumination						
Weak	0	0	20	100	20	100
Medium	4	20	0	0	0	0
Strong	16	80	0	0	0	0
Marital intimacy						
Weak	15	75	0	0	0	0
Medium	5	25	20	100	20	100
Strong	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Table 4.** Emotion Regulation, Anger Rumination and Marital Intimacy in Women Affected by Infidelity in Three Time Points of Study

Constructs	At baseline	After the intervention	3 months after baseline
	N = 20	N = 20	N = 20
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Emotion regulation	117 (10.2)	124 (7.1)	123.9 (7.6)
Anger rumination	65.2 (7.4)	26.5 (3.4)	26.9 (3.4)
Marital intimacy	31.1 (4.6)	60.3 (4.7)	60.3 (4.7)

SD, Standard deviation

The results of this study are consistent with the findings of Saemi, et al. (12). The results of IsaNejad and Ramezani study (22) also showed that emotion-oriented couple therapy and short-term couple therapy in a self-regulatory manner have been effective in improving coping strategies and cognitive emotion regulation to reduce marital conflicts. Explaining this finding, it can be said that emotion-based couple therapy is an eclectic and short-term approach and focuses on helping couples to establish a close relationship that creates a secure attachment for the person and in practice is a combination of two issues. Intimacy and emotion regulation focus on helping couples build a close relationship that creates a secure attachment for the individual. This method plays a powerful role in increasing couples' emotional control by emphasizing the categories of empathy, self-disclosure, deep understanding of their own and others' needs, acceptance, expression of thoughts and feelings, and creating an emotional atmosphere. On the other hand, negative emotions and lack of control over emotional impulses are associated with marital conflicts. These conflicts are not only due to the inability to regulate emotions, but also arise from negative expectations and beliefs about the others. Emotion-based therapy improves couples' relationships by correcting a person's negative feelings and thoughts about themselves. On the one hand, safe emotional contact leads to secure attachment, thus reducing marital conflicts and increasing couples' ability to regulate emotions.

The results of this study on the effect of emotion-based couple therapy on reducing anger rumination in women affected by infidelity are consistent with the findings of Davoodi et al. (23) and Hedayati et al. (24) Emotion-oriented couple therapy creates an atmosphere of trust and communication between couples, increases marital satisfaction and reduce aggression in shaky relationships.

Explaining the effectiveness of emotion-based couple therapy on reducing anger rumination, it can be said that if anger is an emotion, anger rumination means thinking about this emotion. People who have high emotion regulation can better control their negative emotions, including anger. In this way, the couple therapy model improves the internal active models by targeting attachment injuries in its treatment process, and the improvement in these models, in turn, leads to the formation of a safe communication space in the troubled couple relationships. It can systematically help them regulate their emotions, process cognitive information correctly and away from negativity, and ultimately solve communication problems in a participatory and constructive manner that ultimately reduces anger rumination.

Another finding of the study showed that emotion-based couple therapy is effective in increasing marital intimacy in

women affected by infidelity. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of Ghaderi et al. (25) and Arianfar and Etemadi (13). The results of Mutzel study (14) showed that emotion-based couple therapy and art therapy has been effective in improving the couple's sexual relationship and the couple's needs in the marital relationship. Explaining this finding, it can be said that emotion-oriented couple therapy has more power in increasing empathy, acceptance and understanding, looking at the world from the perspective of a partner, not criticizing and blaming or avoiding couples, and thus expressing emotions and Sharing positive and negative feelings, as well as more ideas, thoughts and beliefs with their spouse, helps and provides the ground for their emotional and intellectual intimacy. Sexual intimacy in couples' relationships is manifested by complaining and accusing each other, blaming each other, and this area of relationships is extremely threatening attachment, because for couples, sex is something to achieve harmony and joint activity and create positive emotions and attachment relationship. Thus, emotion-oriented couple therapy helps couples to have more sexual intimacy by intervening in their spouses' responses and softening the blame spouse, as well as making the avoidant spouse available.

One of the limitations of this study was the lack of a control group due to considering professional ethics by the researcher due to the distress of the injured partner at the time of referral and also the existence of a crisis in the family and the obligation to receive intervention that can bias the results. Further research with the control group are warranted.

### Conclusion

According to the results, emotion-based couple therapy is effective in increasing emotion regulation, reducing anger rumination, and also increasing marital intimacy in women affected by infidelity. This approach is one of the best therapies for couples that experience sustainable negative interaction due to deep emotional vulnerability, confusion due to negative interaction cycles, and injuries that make secure attachment impossible.

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### Ethical consideration

The study protocol was approved by ethical review board of Guilan University of Medical Sciences. ethical code (IR.GUMS.REC.1399.662).

**Conflicts of interests**

Authors declared no conflict of interest.

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