



Effectiveness of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy on Domestic Violence and Attitude to Life of Women With Emotional Divorce

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Abstract

Background & Aims: Many couples never refer to a therapist or counseling centers in courts while they suffer from various degrees of marital dissatisfaction and experience emotional divorce. The impacts of marital dissatisfaction are more lasting than divorce and extend to people who are close to couples and their acquaintances, especially children. The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) on domestic violence and the attitude to life of women with emotional divorce.

Materials and Methods: This quasi-experimental study was conducted using a pretest-posttest control group design. Forty women experiencing emotional divorce visiting the counseling centers of Ahvaz in 2021 were selected using convenience sampling and randomly divided into intervention (n=20) and control (n=20) groups. Participants completed the Domestic Violence Questionnaire and life orientation test in the pretest and posttest. The intervention group received eight 90-minute sessions of ACT. Data were analyzed using univariate analysis of covariance.

Results: The means \pm standard deviations of post-test scores related to domestic violence and attitude to life in the experimental group were 48.90 ± 6.99 and 25.65 ± 3.31 , respectively, which improved compared to the post-test of the control group. The results suggested that ACT improved domestic violence ($F=421.04, P<0.001$) and attitude to life ($F=172.37, P<0.001$) in the posttest.

Conclusion: This study achieved promising results concerning the applicability of ACT. ACT was effective in reducing domestic violence and improving attitudes to life in women with emotional divorce.

Keywords: Emotions, Divorce, Domestic violence, Acceptance and commitment therapy, Women

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1. Introduction

Marriage is the most exciting and stressful experience for every individual although it is quite normal to have arguments and disagreements [1]. Marital relationships are one of the deepest human pleasures, as well as one of the greatest sources of suffering in couples; however, relationship turmoil is diagnosed through mental evaluation of the relationship by couples. Persistent turmoil in a relationship often leads to divorce and separation. Some couples decide to separate despite having minor relationship problems, while others stay together despite having serious relationship problems and experience emotional divorce [2,3]. Divorce rates in Iran have sharply risen in this decade, and one in three marriages ends in divorce [4]. There is a stage before legal divorce called emotional divorce when couples live together, but there is little or no verbal and emotional connection between them [5].

Domestic violence is a common cause of emotional divorce which starts from simple arguments and spreads to verbal conflicts, quarrels, and violent actions [6].

During the coronavirus disease 19 pandemic, domestic violence has increased as couples spend more time together. Domestic violence against women is a major global human right concern and a major social and public health concern. In addition, it is a major cause of death and illness in women around the world [7]. Hurting women is a problem of global proportions that transcends cultural, geographical, religious, social, and economic boundaries. Violence against women is gender-based violence in which women are subjected to coercion and abuse of rights by the opposite sex; if this type of behavior is within the family and between husband and wife, it is referred to as domestic violence [8].

Attitude to life decreases in women exposed to domestic violence. Attitude to life is defined as the ability to better see the world and what happens in it and the ability to deal with the realities of life [9]. Scheier and Carver [10] define attitude to life as an individual difference variable that reflects the scope in which individuals retain desirable generalized experiences for the future. A dispositional attitude or the tendency to believe that a good thing will



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happen in life is defined as a relatively persistent personal trait that determines a person's behavior. The growing trend of marital conflicts and emotional divorce and their negative impact on the mental health of couples, their children, and society encouraged researchers to develop strategies to strengthen marital relations and the foundation of the family [11]. One of the major strategies is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), which aims to help individuals strive to create a rich and meaningful life and accept their suffering in life [12]. While being open to older clinical traditions and emphasizing the patient's behavioral performance rather than the causation and psychological resilience, the ACT has shown why it is detrimental to fuse empirical and cognitive avoidance [13]. ACT is a behavioral therapy aiming at practicing empirical avoidance and attempting to control disturbing experiences [14].

Glassman et al [15] believed that ACT teaches clients to accept their thoughts and emotions, choose new paths in life, and take committed action. Six underlying processes are defined as the major ingredients of ACT, including expansion and acceptance, cognitive defusion, the observing self, contact, and connection with the present moment, values clarification, and committed action [16].

Various studies have pointed out the effectiveness of ACT in improving interpersonal forgiveness and distress tolerance in female victims of domestic violence; In addition, ACT could improve social anxiety and attitude to life in female-headed households, as well as the meaning of life, life satisfaction, cognitive resilience, and suicidal thoughts of individuals with depression. Further, this method improved psychological capital and neuroticism in mothers of children with Down syndrome. Moreover, it could improve marital turmoil, marital conflict, and optimism in married women, as well as life satisfaction in mothers of children with cancer [17-19].

Although religious traditions and beliefs in Iranian society condemn divorce in most marriages, statistics show that the divorce rate is on the rise in recent years, and experts state various reasons for it. Many couples never refer to a therapist or counseling centers in courts while they suffer from different degrees of marital dissatisfaction and experience emotional divorce. The effects of marital dissatisfaction are more lasting than divorce and extend to individuals who are in close connection with couples and their acquaintances, particularly children. This study sought to prevent domestic violence and improve the attitude to life in women experiencing emotional divorce. Considering that mothers play a major role in maintaining the psychosocial balance of the family and given the various problems and issues they face, the need is felt to address the problems they face in this regard. Accordingly, this study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of ACT on domestic violence and the attitude to life of women with emotional divorce.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design and participants

This quasi-experimental study was conducted using a pretest-posttest control group design. The statistical population consisted of all women experiencing emotional divorce visiting the counseling centers of Ahvaz in 2021. A sample of 40 women (20 per group) was selected using convenience sampling from among those who met the inclusion criteria, and they were randomly divided into intervention and control groups (Figure 1). In the present study, 20 women with an emotional divorce were included in each group by the use of G-power software with an effect size of 1.81, a test power of 0.90, and $\alpha = 0.05$.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria were diagnosing emotional divorce by the therapist, giving informed consent to participate in the study, having a minimum secondary education, and being in the age range of 20-45 years. The other criteria were obtaining a higher-than-average score on the Domestic Violence Questionnaire and a score lower than average on the Attitude to Life Scale, not being a divorcee, and not participating in other therapy programs at the same time. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria included receiving concomitant psychological therapies, taking psychiatric drugs, showing unwillingness to cooperate and continue the study, facing a severely stressful event, and missing more than two therapeutic sessions.

At the end of the study, to observe ethical considerations, a summary of therapy sessions was provided to the control group. Moreover, to take ethical considerations, the authors received written consent from the women for participation in the study.

2.3. Instruments

Domestic Violence Questionnaire: To investigate violence against women, the Haj-Yahia's Violence Against Women Questionnaire [20] was used, which is adapted from several other questionnaires, including the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) Questionnaire, the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory, the Composite Abuse Scale (CAS), and the Index of Spouse Abuse (ISA). The 32-item Violence Against Women Questionnaire measures psychological violence, physical violence, sexual violence, and economic violence. In this inventory, never, once, twice, and more responses are scored 1, 2, and 3, respectively, and the scores range from 32 to 96. Ghazanfari [21] reported the reliability of this questionnaire to be equal to 0.89 based on Cronbach's alpha coefficient. In the present study, this coefficient was 0.87.

Life Orientation Test: Attitude to life was measured using the Life Orientation Test developed by Scheier and Carver [22]. They developed this scale to validate the efficiency of optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles,

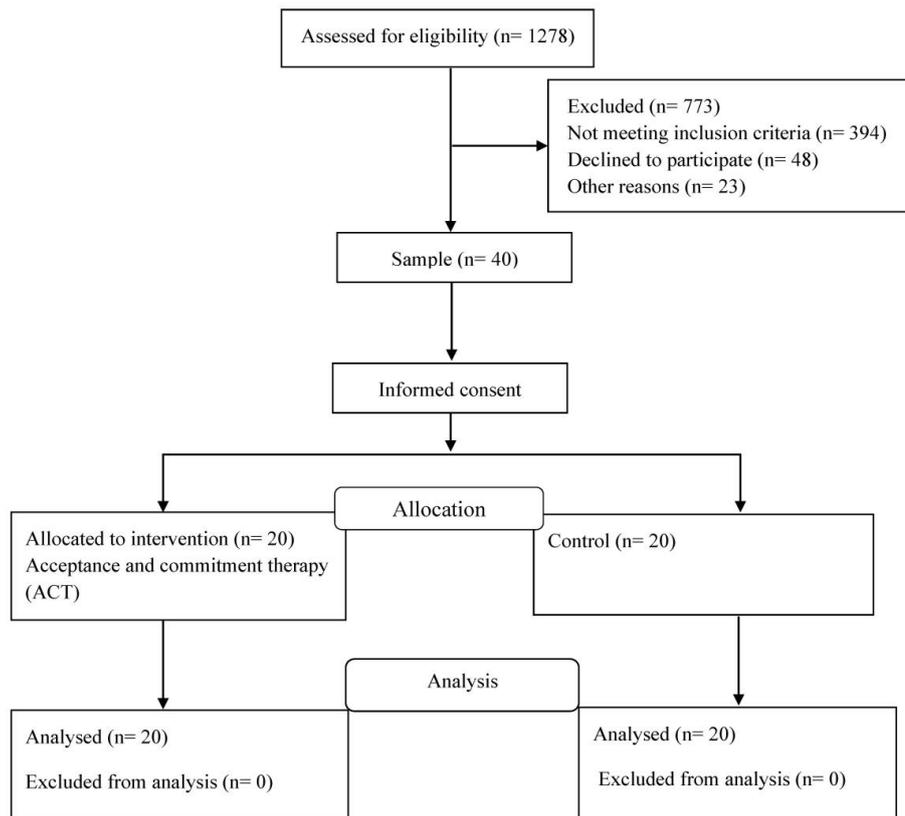


Figure 1. Flowchart of participant selection

and individuals responded to them according to life outcomes. They believed that the questionnaire is highly valid and evaluates the individual's overall expectations and consequences for the desirable future consequences of their actions. Khodaei et al [23] reported the reliability of this questionnaire as 0.88 based on Cronbach's alpha coefficient. In the present study, the mentioned coefficient was equal to 0.91.

2.4. Intervention program

ACT: The content of eight 90-minute ACT sessions according to Hayes et al [24] is provided in Table 1. Following therapy sessions, the intervention and control groups completed the posttest under the same conditions.

2.5. Statistical Analyses

Quantitative data were analyzed using the mean and standard deviation. One-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to examine the effect of ACT on research variables. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and Levene's test were also applied to indicate the normal distribution of data, and finally, data were analyzed by SPSS, version 27.0.

3. Results

In this study, 38% and 62% of participants were within the age range of 20-31 and 32-45 years old, respectively. The mean age of the intervention and control groups

was 32.77 ± 7.21 and 33.19 ± 6.68 , respectively. Table 2 presents the indicators of central tendency and dispersion and results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for domestic violence and attitude to life.

As shown in Table 2, the mean of variables in the intervention group changed in the posttest compared to the pretest, while no significant changes were reported in the control group. A univariate ANCOVA was used to find the significant difference between the two groups. The assumptions of ANCOVA were measured before analysis. First, the absence of outliers was confirmed given the skewness and kurtosis indices provided in Table 1 (in general, then data are not normally distributed if the skewness and kurtosis are not in the range of -2 to 2). The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (Table 2) indicated the normal distribution of data in the pretest and posttest for domestic violence and attitude to life ($P > 0.05$), and data were normally distributed when analyzing covariance. In addition, Levene's test was employed to examine the homogeneity of variances (equality of variances in the intervention and control groups), which was $F = 1.40$ and $P = 0.992$, as well as $F = 2.26$ and $P = 0.141$ for domestic violence and attitude to life, respectively. Further, the regression line slope for domestic violence ($F = 2.86$, $P = 0.071$) and attitude to life ($F = 0.862$, $P = 0.431$) was calculated to verify the homogeneity assumption. The one-way ANCOVA after controlling the effect of the pretest was used to compare

Table 1. The content of acceptance and commitment therapy sessions

Sessions	Content
1	Communicating and building good relations, concluding a medical contract and therapeutic alliance with clients, stating the rules, goals, and number of treatment sessions, and conducting a pretest in the first session
2	Calling and discovering, trying to promote re-reading of couples' experiences consciously, encouraging clients to abandon ineffective strategies, and measuring and giving feedback
3	Demonstrating conflict-inducing and distressing issues and focusing on resolving them, listening to and discovering clients' narratives of extant problems, as well as collecting information about the history of original attachment style and their current relationship and controlling them
4	Increasing knowledge about underlying emotions and desire positions, identifying negative interaction cycles and painful aspects of participants' experiences, observing emotional processing style, and identifying intrapersonal and interpersonal issues, as well as practicing the metaphor of bus passengers and the mindful bus metaphor and reviewing defusion construction
5	Reviewing previous assignments, weakening conceptualized self-reliance, distinguishing the conceptualized self from the observing self, and creating awareness about the observing self
6	Reviewing assignments, facilitating the wants and needs for reconstruction, interacting new perceptions, and creating new essential solutions
7	Expressing the concept of values, objectives, and dreams
8	Summarizing and concluding with the help of clients and performing posttest

Table 2. Mean±SD and results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of variables in experimental and control groups

Variables	Group	Phases	Mean ±SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	z	P
Domestic violence	ACT	Pre-test	89.85±4.70	0.40	-0.97	0.19	0.064
		Post-test	47.90±6.99	0.27	1.06	0.18	0.078
	Control	Pre-test	90.10±4.83	-0.12	1.39	0.15	0.200
		Post-test	90.25±6.33	-0.31	-0.63	0.12	0.200
Attitude to life	ACT	Pre-test	15.00±2.99	0.51	0.42	0.18	0.085
		Post-test	25.65±3.31	0.59	-0.22	0.14	0.200
	Control	Pre-test	15.30±3.51	0.73	-0.78	0.17	0.128
		Post-test	14.15±2.58	-0.25	-0.46	0.16	0.170

Note. SD: Standard deviation; ACT: Acceptance and commitment therapy.

the intervention and control groups using posttest scores and to determine the effect of ACT on domestic violence and attitude to life in women experiencing emotional divorce (Table 3).

Based on data in Table 3, there was a significant difference in the pretest and posttest scores of participants in domestic violence when eliminating the influence of the pretest results ($F=421.04$, $P<0.001$). Therefore, the ACT proved effective in improving domestic violence. Additionally, there was a significant difference in the pretest and posttest scores of attitude to life when eliminating the influence of the pretest results ($F=172.37$, $P<0.001$). Thus, the ACT could improve attitude to life.

4. Discussion

The present study sought to investigate the effectiveness of ACT on domestic violence and attitude to life in women with emotional divorce. The results revealed the effect of ACT on improving domestic violence and attitude to life, which is consistent with the results of previous studies [25,26]. To explain this issue, marital conflicts cause verbal and physical conflict, reduced social capital, and ultimately emotional neglect and divorce. The findings of this study are in line with the functionalist perspective; according to functionalists, there are different and contradictory ideas in the family, and violence is occasionally used to resolve them. It

seems that different dimensions of domestic violence can be effective in shaping emotional divorce between couples by disrupting the family structure and balance and distancing of couples. Some family problems are rooted in behaviors that are not widely addressed in the Iranian culture for some reasons, but research has shown that many of these problems can be rooted in hidden family realities. Unfortunately, some separations and cold family relationships are closely related to violence against women, and many women complain about it [25].

Violence occurs when a spouse does not value the relationship as much as the other one does or when the essential needs of a spouse are ignored. Here, emotional-marital satisfaction and intimacy fade, and they do not want each other. Healthy relationships promote men's and women's health in marital life. On the other hand, the ACT encourages women to connect with and be fascinated by the real values of their lives. This strategy helps women to imagine a more rewarding life despite unpleasant thoughts and feelings; this mindset leads to a reduction in marital problems such as domestic violence. The ACT helps women detach themselves from their thoughts and emotions in order to modify negative cognitions such as depression and reduce domestic violence [26].

In this therapy, experiential avoidance creates a traumatic process that contributes to the development and spread of marital and family conflicts. When a spouse

Table 3. Results of one-way analysis of covariance on post-test scores

Variables	SS	df	MS	F	P	η^2	Power
Domestic violence	17019.94	1	17019.94	421.04	0.001	0.92	1.00
Attitude to life	1344.39	1	1344.39	172.37	0.001	0.82	1.00

Note. SS: Sum of squares; df: Degree of freedom; MS: Mean squares.

experiences domestic violence, he/she makes continuous and fruitless efforts to get rid of the situation. The ACT targets these avoidances in order to create a fundamental reopening to experience rather than to control or change the negative assessments of domestic violence in one's life. Therefore, in the ACT, women not only have a full experience of thoughts and emotions but also allow their spouses to have such an experience in order to reduce their marital burnout and domestic violence [27]. In addition, through acceptance and defusion practices, women learn to accept their spouse the way he is without judging, humiliating, insulting, or comparing him. Teaching a new concept of curiosity used in the ACT makes spouses' relationships take on a new form; hence, the treatment is effective in improving marital relations and reducing domestic violence. The mechanism of change is such that when defined for participants, values become important and personal to them, and they resolve conflicts and avoid domestic violence in more adaptively, thus experiencing a better view of the relationship with their spouse [25,28].

The results indicated that the ACT improved the attitude to life in women experiencing emotional divorce. This finding is consistent with the results of previous research [18]. Women who receive ACT can improve their hope and resilience by promoting their problem-solving skills and self-awareness, increasing their meaning of life, and improving their level of adjustment, resulting in fewer marital conflicts. On the other hand, studies suggest that people who experience positive emotions exhibit unusual, flexible, and creative patterns of thinking. Positive emotions increase the desire to have multiple choices in life, and they create multiple behavioral choices for individuals. In addition, positive emotions build a flexible and extensive cognitive structure in individuals and improve their ability to integrate broad topics [18].

On the other hand, using this practice, women realized that many sufferings occur because individuals see people through their thoughts and feelings and consider those thoughts true. Through acceptance, the individual tends to move in the direction of his/her values; they turn to solution-based behaviors instead of focusing on unsuccessful solutions. The negative thought and judgment cycle is broken, leading to an improvement in their performance. Maintaining value-based behavior significantly improves the attitude to life in these women [29].

It is claimed that through awareness-based exercises, the ACT builds the grounds for creative helplessness towards solutions used by the person in relation to his/

her unpleasant thoughts and feelings. These situations pave the way for introducing acceptance as an alternative solution, and through acceptance, an opportunity is provided to the individual to pay attention to the important and valuable matters in life [30]. Based on the results, when women try to avoid or get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings, they not only fail but also suffer a lot due to experiencing marital conflicts. This helped clients to feel unpleasant thoughts and feelings instead of trying to control them, which made those experiences seem less threatening. Expressing pure and impure suffering helped women blame themselves less and be kinder to themselves. By ACT, researchers aim not to create the feeling of helplessness or belief in helplessness, but rather give up one's previous strategies used to control these thoughts and feelings.

This study was conducted on women experiencing emotional divorce visiting counseling centers in Ahvaz; therefore, caution should be exercised when attempting to generalize these results to other centers and cities. Convenience sampling and self-report were the other limitations of this study.

5. Conclusion

ACT was effective in reducing domestic violence and improving attitudes to life in women with emotional divorce. By providing optimistic concepts of life to women with emotional divorce, the therapeutic and educational ACT raises hope and resilience in them in the face of marital conflicts. It reduces domestic violence and boosts their attitude to life. It is therefore recommended that this intervention be provided, along with other psychological interventions to reduce the psychological and physical burden of caring for women with emotional divorce.

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Conflict of Interests

All the authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz Branch (code: 950517294).

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