



The Effects of Stress Management Training on Communication Skills and Attribution Beliefs on Women with Adjustment Disorders

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Abstract

Background: Recognizing the effective factors in marital relationships, control and manage them are among the crucial methods in solving marital problems and achieving marital satisfaction. The present study aimed to investigate the effects of stress management training on communication skills and attribution beliefs on women with adjustment disorders.

Methods: The research method was quasi-experimental with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design and a control group. The statistical population included all women with adjustment disorders who were referred to the psychological clinics of district 1 of Tehran in 2020. Thirty women who were willing to participate in the study were selected as the sample using convenience sampling and randomly divided into experimental and control groups (n=15 per group). The experimental group underwent eight sessions (90 minutes sessions per week) of stress management training. The follow-up was performed after 60 days. The research instruments included the dyadic adjustment scale (DAS), the relationship attribution measure (RAM), and the Jarabak communication skills questionnaire (JCSQ). Data analysis was conducted using repeated-measures ANOVA.

Results: The results indicated that stress management training improved communication skills and attribution beliefs in women with adjustment disorders (Pvalue=0.0001).

Conclusions: Stress management training can be recommended as an intervention program to improve the quality of life of women with adjustment disorders.

Keywords: Stress management, Communication, Attribution, Beliefs, Adjustment, Women.

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Introduction

Marital satisfaction is associated with the sense of happiness and contentment experienced by wife and husband when considering their marital life and living together. Marital satisfaction is normally defined as a person's general attitude or feelings towards their spouse or relationship. This demonstrates that marital satisfaction is an intrapersonal phenomenon and an individual's personal perception of their spouse and relationship.¹ Accordingly, satisfaction is a one-dimensional concept and signifies an individual's general evaluation of their spouse or relationship.² The increasing rate of divorce and conflicts between couples has motivated researchers to identify the factors causing marital conflicts and propose a solution to

reduce them. The lack of marital compatibility is one of the main causes of divorce.³ Marital compatibility is defined as the objective feeling of satisfaction and pleasure experienced by the couples as well as a positive and enjoyable attitude towards all aspects of marital relationships.^{4,5} According to Spanier's theory, the four dimensions of marital compatibility are satisfaction, solidarity (extent of participation in joint activities), agreement (on issues related to marital relationships such as financial affairs and parenting styles), and expression of love. Marital conflicts and disagreements can be followed by detrimental consequences. Poor communication skills in dealing with life issues are the main cause of marital disputes.⁶

Understanding, controlling, and managing the factors affecting marital relationship are among the crucial methods in solving marital problems and achieving marital satisfaction. Stress management is one of these methods. At the same time, stress is an inseparable part of human life, and everyone should learn the methods and strategies to cope with it. Understanding the factors causing stress can help coping with them. Stress management strategies are methods used by each person to reduce their stress.⁷ Numerous studies have shown that stress can have a negative effect on marital satisfaction and adjustment. Anxiety reaction appears to be related to alpha-adrenergic in women and beta-adrenergic in men.^{8,9} The first receptor is responsible for vascular stenosis and the other one for angiectasis, respectively, which can cause psychosomatic disorders and cardiovascular diseases. According to Duijndam et al.¹⁰, there is a relationship between social inhibition and acute anxiety. Stress management is vital for people with marital conflicts, social maladjustment, and lack of life skills such as interpersonal relationships, attribution beliefs, or attribution orientation. Thus, a stress management program can serve as a control program, which uses the biological origins of stress, plus relaxation and concentration exercises, which are beneficial for controlling the development of stress, to train a person to cope with stress in order to reduce the unpleasant aspects of stress and threats.¹¹ Life skills protect this person against stress and learning stress management skills help reducing the stress and its threatening and unpleasant aspects. Teaching skills to control stress is a type of cognitive behavioral treatment (CBT) designed to help people to deal with stressful events by exposing them to harmless situations and earning their trust regarding their ability to cope with them. Sidan and Ziaei,¹² demonstrated that stress management training can affect the resilience and quality of life of women with marital conflicts.

One of the main skills that a person should learn is the ability to communicate accurately with others. Communicating based on trust and equality might be the most important skill in improving health. The followings are the main principles of such communication: Empath, honesty, positive respect, which help to understand each other's status and viewpoints. Communication is also a factor for exchanging information between couples. The therapists believe that communicative problems are the most prevalent and destructive problems in failed marriages.¹³

In marital life, when facing a problem, an individual mainly senses the feelings of failure and humiliation, and feelings and emotions prevail over reason and logic in spouses. Therefore, recognizing and directing the correct methods to cope with marital conflicts and emotional situations is required for preserving mutual relationships.¹⁴ Communicative skills include disparate skills. For instance, active listening ability is a major skill in interpersonal relationships.¹⁵ A variety of studies demonstrated that teaching communicative skills and the principles of creating correct communication between spouses can increase their adjustment in marital life and leads to growth and development of feelings and values in a family.^{16,17} It increases emotional competence, ability to endure stress, and solve daily problems and these skills can help a person succeed in dealing with unexpected environmental pressures. Creating close relationships in the home environment is greatly effective on the mental peace of the family members. In case these relationships are not fulfilled in the home environment, they can cause stress. This leads to disparate crises and family issues and intensifies stress.¹⁸

One of the important approaches in predicting the success or failure of a marriage is the theory of attribution. In general, we seek to understand the fundamental causes of behavior in ourselves and other people, to understand why we act in a certain way in specific situations, this is called relationship attribution.¹⁹ The relationship attributions consist of two main types, i.e., causal attribution and responsibility attributions. The causal attribution emphasizes the internal/external attributions, stable/unstable, general/specific attributions. However, responsibility attributions emphasize the intentional and informed basis of behavior, the selfishness of violating spouse, and reproach. On the other hand, attachment styles affect the manner of attribution of individuals to communicative events through creating internal models. In fact, communication attributions enjoy an intermediary potential between the attachment styles and the quality of close relationships.^{20,21} Several studies demonstrated that people with a secure attachment style use the positive relationship enriching

attributions to justify the negative behaviors of their spouse and insecure people use negative attributions in this regard.^{22,23} Therefore, the attachment style of insecure avoidance-anxiety causes the spouses to carry out a negative evaluation of their communicative and romantic experiences. In other words, they become trapped in negative attributions.

Isa Morad and Khalili Sadrabad,²⁴ investigated the relationship between work-family conflict and job stress. They argued the moderator role of psychological capital, i.e., self-efficacy and attribution or positive attribution (optimism). Positive attribution and optimism have a positive relationship with stress reduction and it probably is a bidirectional effect. Accordingly, by stress management, people's tendency to optimism and positive attributions increases. The more logical the spouse's beliefs are, the more optimistic their relationship attributions become and they experience more marital happiness. Accordingly, this study aimed to investigate the effects of stress management training on communication skills and attribution beliefs on women with adjustment disorders in Tehran.

Materials and Methods

The research method was quasi-experimental, with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design and a control group. The statistical population included all women with adjustment disorders who were referred to the psychological clinics of district 1 of Tehran in 2020. Thirty women who were willing to participate in the research were selected as the sample using convenience sampling and randomly divided into experimental and control groups (n=15 per group). After selecting the sample, a pre-test was performed for the experimental and contra groups. The experimental group received eight sessions (90-minutes session per week) of stress management training while the control group did not receive any training. Table 1 presents a summary of the training sessions. After the training sessions, post-test was done in the experimental and control groups under the same conditions. The follow-up was done in the experimental and contra groups after 60 days. The inclusion criteria included: age range between 20 and 50 years, have at least a high school level, getting a score lower than mean in the dyadic adjustment scale, and written consent to participate in the intervention program. The exclusion criteria included: Absence of more than two sessions from treatment, using alcohol and addictive drugs. For ethical considerations, the researchers received written consent from the participants for participation in the research.

Table 1. Summary of stress management training

Session	Session contents
First	Introduction, building relationships, familiarizing individuals with relaxation, deep breathing (inhale and exhale) exercise, clenching, and flexing exercise. Setting homework.
Second	Reviewing the previous topics, introducing the concept of mindfulness, mindfulness exercise such as concentrating on body parts, concentrating on chewing a raisin, concentrating on objects in the environment such as street signs, etc. Setting homework.
Third	Reviewing previous topics, introducing rational-emotive beliefs (Albert Ellis), teaching six major beliefs, and a list of main emotions such as anger, mixed feelings such as despair. Setting homework.
Fourth	Reviewing previous topics, teaching six other major rational-emotive beliefs, exercising the list of emotions, deliberation and familiarizing with ones' self-emotions. Setting homework.
Fifth	Reviewing previous topics, introducing communicative skills such as active listening, dual dialogue, and empathy. Setting homework.
Sixth	Reviewing previous topics, introducing communicative skills, anger management, exercise using anger evaluation sheet. Setting homework.
Seventh	Reviewing previous topics, introducing a healthy lifestyle, daily workout, healthy diet, and breaking previous bad habits at stressful moments.
Eighth	Distributing and completing the questionnaires again, asking and answering the questions, discussing and making a conclusion regarding the whole sessions, closing sessions.

Spanier's dyadic adjustment scale (DAS): Dyadic adjustment scale (DAS) is a 32-item questionnaire for evaluating an individual's perceptions of his or her relationship with their partner. This scale was designed by Spanier in 1976.²⁵ All items are scored on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 5, except for items 23 and 24 which is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 to 4. Different scoring was used for these items and the total score ranged between 0 and 151. The higher the score, the better the adjustment between couples and vice versa.²⁶ In a study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to be 0.85.

Jarabak communication skills questionnaire: In the present research, the communication skills of women were assessed using the communication skills inventory by Jarabek. This is a 34-item inventory that should be answered using a 5-point Likert scale (1=Never, 5=Always). Baniasadi et al.²⁷ reported an alpha Cronbach coefficient of 0.84 for the questionnaire. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.82.

The Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM): Fincham and Bradbury²⁸ designed this scale to measure the relationship attributions of couples. The designers first considered three general dimensions to be causal attributions, responsibility attribution, and blame attributions. Then, due to the strong correlation between the responsibility attribution and blame attributions, and since there was no significant difference in the couples' reactions to these two dimensions, they merged them together and proposed general subscales of causal attributions and responsibility attributions. Both of these scales had a significant relationship with marital satisfaction. This tool included questions regarding four negative hypothetical situations that assessed the probable causes of spouses' behaviors in those four situations and covers seven attributions in the general dimensions of causal and responsibility attribution. This 28-item questionnaire evaluates communication attributions in 7 dimensions. The items are scored based on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). The minimum and maximum scores on this questionnaire are 28 and 168, respectively, and higher scores indicate higher levels of attribution problems. Sobouhi translated this questionnaire into Farsi and assessed some of its psychometric features.²⁹ Bahrami et al.³⁰ evaluated its reliability as 0.92. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.88 for the questionnaire.

Data were analyzed by descriptive and inferential statistics, such as mean, standard deviation, and repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). The Bonferroni post-hoc test was utilized to investigate the difference between the means of communication skills and attribution beliefs of women with adjustment disorders among the pre-test, post-test, and paired follow-up. SPSS version 24.0 was further used to analyze the data.

Results

The participants included 30 women with adjustment disorders. According to the descriptive statistics, the mean age of participants in the experimental group was 45.23 ± 7.34 years, whereas the control group was aged 44.87 ± 6.79 years. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation (SD) of the research variable in the experimental and control groups in the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up.

As shown in table 3, all multivariate tests indicate the significance of the variance of group-time interaction (Pvalue=0.0001). Since the effect size of this factor is equal to 0.71, it can be said that stress management training could significantly improve the communication skills in women with adjustment disorders.

Pairwise comparisons were used to compare pre-test, post-test, and follow-up results (Table 4). The results showed that there was a significant difference between pre-test and post-test mean values and also between pre-test and follow-up mean values of communication skills. Accordingly, the post-test and follow-up mean scores of communication skills were significantly higher than those of the pre-test (Pvalue=0.001). However, there was no significant difference between the post-test and follow-up results, indicating the stability of the intervention effects until the follow-up period. It can be hence concluded that stress management training had lasting positive effects on the communication skills in women with adjustment disorders (Table 4).

Table 5 reports the results of multivariate tests to investigate the effect of stress management training on attribution beliefs. According to table 5, all multivariate tests indicate the significance of the variance of group-time interaction (Pvalue=0.0001). Since the effect size of this factor is equal to 0.78, it can be stated that stress management training could significantly improve the attribution beliefs of women with adjustment disorders.

The results of pairwise comparisons showed that there was a significant difference between pre-test and post-test mean values and also between pre-test and follow-up mean values of attribution beliefs. The post-test and follow-up mean scores of attribution beliefs were significantly lower than those of the pre-test (Pvalue=0.001). Moreover, there was no significant difference between the post-test and follow-up results, indicating the stability of the intervention effects until the follow-up period. It can be hence concluded that stress management training had lasting effects on attribution beliefs of women with adjustment disorders (Table 6).

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation (SD) of the dependent variable in experimental and control groups in the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up

Dependent variable	Phase	Experimental group	Control group
		Mean±SD	Mean±SD
Communication skills	Pre-test	85.20±8.21	87.13±9.14
	Post-test	103.53±9.10	87.93±8.53
	Follow-up	103.40±9.03	88.00±9.00
Attribution beliefs	Pre-test	112.86±9.21	111.40±11.56
	Post-test	83.93±12.12	113.23±12.53
	Follow-up	85.06±11.87	113.87±11.12

Table 3. Results of repeated measurements to investigate the effect of stress management training on communication skills

Effect	Variable	Value	df	Error df	F	Pvalue	Partial η^2
Repeated factor	Pillais trace	0.72	2	27	67.69	0.0001	0.72
	Wilks lambda	0.06	2	27	67.69	0.0001	0.92
	Hotelling's trace	8.42	2	27	67.69	0.0001	0.72
	Roy's largest root	8.42	2	27	67.69	0.0001	0.72
Group \times repeated factor	Pillais trace	0.71	2	27	67.69	0.0001	0.71
	Wilks lambda	0.07	2	27	67.69	0.0001	0.71
	Hotelling's trace	5.62	2	27	67.69	0.0001	0.71
	Roy's largest root	5.62	2	27	67.69	0.0001	0.71

Table 4. Bonferroni post-hoc test for pairwise comparison of the communication skills across time series in the experimental groups

Variable	Phase A	Phase B	Mean difference (A-B)	SE	Pvalue
Stress	Pre-test	Post-test	-9.57	0.53	0.001
		Follow-up	-9.53	0.56	0.001
	Post-test	Follow-up	0.03	0.11	0.11

Table 5. Results of repeated measurements to investigate the effect of stress management training on attribution beliefs

Effect	Variable	Value	df	Error df	F	Pvalue	Partial η^2
Repeated factor	Pillais trace	0.77	2	27	86.34	0.0001	0.77
	Wilks lambda	0.03	2	27	86.34	0.0001	0.77
	Hotelling's trace	6.02	2	27	86.34	0.0001	0.77
	Roy's largest root	36.02	2	27	86.34	0.0001	0.77
Group \times repeated factor	Pillais trace	0.78	2	27	75.33	0.0001	0.78
	Wilks lambda	0.02	2	27	75.33	0.0001	0.78
	Hotelling's trace	23.36	2	27	75.33	0.0001	0.78
	Roy's largest root	23.36	2	27	75.33	0.0001	0.78

Table 6. Bonferroni post-hoc test for pairwise comparison of the attribution beliefs across time series in the experimental groups

Variable	Phase A	Phase B	Mean difference (A-B)	SE	Pvalue
Attribution beliefs	Pre-test	Post-test	13.67	0.49	0.001
		Follow-up	12.93	0.71	0.001
	Post-test	Follow-up	-0.73	0.35	0.131

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the effects of stress management training on communication skills and attribution beliefs of women with adjustment disorders in Tehran in 2020. By the results, stress management training was effective in improving communicative skills and reducing negative attributions in married women with adjustment disorders. This finding is consistent with the research results of Fathi Ashtiani et al.³¹ and Amini et al.³². The post hoc tests after two months of following-up indicated the continued effect of the intervention. Stress management training can enhance the quality of marital life. Active listening, expressing feelings and requests (with determination), considering anger as a choice, anger management or (analysis responsibly and fighting vituperative thoughts and do's and don'ts), which cannot be created without provocative thoughts and it can be controlled, all of which are among the skills taught in the stress management course. Taking into account that stress has been the most important source that had a considerable effect on the quality of individuals' perception of each other in close relationships and it is a threat to marital satisfaction or its lifespan. Coping skills are among the crucial skills for dealing

with stressful situations in life that include the cognitive and behavioral components. In general, coping is an effort made by an individual to increase adjustment to the environment or an attempt to prevent negative consequences of stressful situations.³³

Individuals who passed the stress management courses will probably employ the required skills for improving their relationships in stressful situations and this training appeared to be efficient in this regard. The maladjusted couples are less inclined to attribute the problems to personal characteristics and unchangeable, plus they are less likely to attribute the problems to transient behaviors and situations.³⁴ Therefore, attribution not only affects a person's feelings regarding their relationship, but it also affects their behavior. Shahbazi et al.³⁵, in their study, demonstrated that marital standards and communicative attributions have a crucial role in women's adjustability. They defined adjustment as a constructive reaction instead of a destructive reaction to potentially destructive action. Each of us reacts differently when facing a potentially stressful situation and selects a coping style to deal with it. We might select an approach that will lead to our despair and we cannot enjoy our experiences. Besides, our

reactions to stress depend on our control over our lives, the status of personal interactions, and physical status. If we can properly cope with our stress, stress will turn into a friend that empowers us to deal with various life issues. However, in case we show weakness, we will lose control over it and it will turn into an enemy that can cause physical problems (disparate diseases such as chronic heart diseases or muscle fatigue), or mental problems, plus dissolution of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, since we cannot change the stress, the best option is to manage stress and change the style of coping with it, abandon inefficient beliefs, and improve the communicative skills.

The main research limitation was the use of a non-random sampling method. Moreover, it was not possible to match the participants in terms of age, educational attainment, and material and spiritual conditions. To increase the generalizability of findings, future studies are recommended to use random sampling methods, personality tests, and diagnostic counseling in psychology clinics to screen and isolate people with personality disorders.

The present research concluded that stress management skills have a positive and constant effect on improving the communicative skills of women with adjustment problems. Active listening, determination, and problem-solving had a positive and significant relationship with stress management training. The results indicated individuals' technical knowledge and professional learning of effective reaction can be increased by listening to others to understand their intention. Purposive conversation and time management are associated with positive respect to a spouse, which highlights two crucial principles, i.e., attention and respect, in interpersonal relationships. Training stress management skills to improve the communicative skills of women with adjustment problems had a positive and constant effect. There was a positive and significant correlation between decreasing the negative attributions and the stress management course, which indicates that when selecting a wise approach over inefficient thought, prevents depression and the pessimistic explanatory style in examining the effect.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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