

## Effectiveness of group counselling on improvement of marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers of students in Tehran city

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### Abstract

Disclosure of infidelity may have destructive effects both on couples and children. Given the fact that children's physical and psychological health depends on their parents' healthy mutual relationship, attending improvement of couples' relationships after infidelity disclosure seems necessary. The present study aimed to determine effectiveness of group counselling on improvement of marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers. This applied study used quasi-experimental design with pre-posttest approach. Of the study population comprising all infidelity-affected mothers of students in Tehran city who had referred to counselling centers of Department of Education, 16 mothers were selected and randomly divided into the experimental and control groups. Vaughan's Spouse Infidelity Questionnaire and scholar-made Improvement of Marital Relations Questionnaire were used. The experimental group received 20 sessions of group counselling twice weekly. Data were analyzed via covariance and multivariable variance analysis. The results confirmed positive effects of group counselling on improvement of marital relationships ( $F = 11/10$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and verbal communication skills ( $F=12.188$ ,  $P<0.05$ ) in infidelity-affected mothers, but it was not effective for enhancing security feeling of students growing up in these families ( $F=1.139$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

**Keywords:** Infidelity, Group counseling, Improvement of marital relationship, Mothers of students

### Introduction

Family is amongst the most important social systems, made by marriage of two individuals with opposite genders. A healthy family requires a healthy couple. In healthy families, couples are committed to family principles and do not rely on fading feelings. Their relations are based on human values and equality principles, and each member, besides being able to control his/her feelings and desires, can develop his/her internal abilities. Healthy relations among family members and the ability to communicate efficiently are signs of healthy families (Glading, 2002). However, divorce rate is rising rapidly and marital infidelity is one of the main causes of couples' referring to family counseling centers (Hawkins, Willoughby and Doherty, 2012). In a study, family therapists recognized marital infidelity as the third factor (after lack of love and alcoholism) mostly encountered in working with families (Whisman, Dixon and Johnson, 1997). As Snyder, Baucom and Gordon (2007) state, marital infidelity may bring catastrophic consequences for the preparator couple, his/her spouse, as well as his/her the nuclear, and distant family.

Infidelity is defined as any secret sexual or affective relationship beyond marital framework which threatens marital life (Pittman, 1989). Drigotas and Burta (2001) consider infidelity as the

individual's transcendence from marital relationship and making physical or emotional closeness with another one. Meta-marital relationship has different meanings for different persons. In fact, some people may consider a relationship as a meta-marital one, while others may not (Munsch, 2012). Gemmer (2013) suggests another definition for meta-marital relationship and divides it into three categories of one-night, sometimes, and long term engagements.

It seems that meta-marital relationship and divorce are highly correlated. Allen and Atkins (2012) state that meta-marital relationship may double or treble the probability of divorce. Olson (2001) reports that nearly 20% of women and 40% of men betray their spouses (Olson, 2004). In addition, 40% of divorced women and 44% of divorced men state that they had violated marital framework during their marriage more than once (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2004). Several studies have concluded that meta-marital relationship is more common in men than women (Petersen and Hyde, 2010; Munsch, 2010). Stefano (2012) reveals that in America 21% of men and 11% of women commit to treachery at least once during their marriage (Stefano & Oala, 2012).

Danger of infidelity exists in most marriages. Studies show that harmful effects of infidelity may last permanently or for a long time, unless couples receive a proper therapy (Baucom, Snyder & Gordon, 2009). One of the very common reactions of betrayed couples is to request divorce and ceasing the mutual life. On the other hand, infidelity to spouse is a kind of infidelity to children, too, since when such a problem happens to a family, children will also be affected by new challenges between parents. Actually, children may observe their parents' disturbances and tantrums and may be damaged by side effects of infidelity.

In Blow's view (2005), reactions of betrayed couples might include anger, loss of trust, damaged self-esteem, fear of rejection, experiencing affective problems, depression, and even losing job (Blow, 2005). Glass' study (2003) on negative effects of infidelity on couples' relationships showed that betrayed spouses may experience depression, anxiety and feeling of rejection after infidelity disclosure.

Several reasons have been mentioned for marital infidelity. Previous research indicate that those with divorced parents, former marriages and divorce, involved in pre-marriage sexual relationships, having the first sexual relationship at younger ages, and also those who have a positive view toward sexual and meta-marital relationships may commit infidelity more (Munsch, 2012). Bravo and Lmpkin (2010) in their introduced model for explaining marital infidelity, mention unfulfilled needs and defects in empathic response and fatigue as some of the main causes of this phenomenon which lead to reduction of marital satisfaction. In addition, Wright (2012) found that watching pornography movies is positively related to having more than one sex partner and meta-marital relationship.

Shaye (2010) founded a negative significant relationship between marital satisfaction and emotional and physical infidelity. This researcher introduced low marital satisfaction as the best predictor of marital infidelity. In addition, it has been confirmed that instability in a relationship is the most important predictor of marital infidelity which has a negative correlation with marital satisfaction. In fact, there is a negative mutual relationship between defected marital relations and marital infidelity, in a way that defected relationships increase the likelihood of marital infidelity and marital infidelity in its turn, may terminate in destruction of marital relationship (Peluso, 2007).

Visiting a couple/family counselor is a way that many infidelity-affected couples try it out with the hope of reviving their lost love. As Brown (2005) states, 70% of couples seek counseling due to infidelity. Except those marriages that terminate in divorce, there are a lot of unsuccessful marriages which continue for various reasons (Greeff and Malherbe 2001). In this regard, group counseling may be a good tool to offer solutions for improving quality of these marriages and increasing their durability likelihood. In fact, studies on couple therapy for infidelity issues indicate

that a great number of infidelity-experienced couples can benefit from these therapies (Abrahamson, 2012). Group counselling can improve communication skills and it teaches participants how to express their damaged feelings and suppressed anger without deteriorating the relationship, which in its turn, paves the way for renewing sincere love. Apparently, the best way for solving marital problems is to communicate with a loving language or “the language of choice theory” since it provides each negotiator with an opportunity to suggest helping ways which increases possibility of finding a mutual-agreed solution (Glasser, 2010).

As marital relationships improve, couples can better understand their needs and feelings, solve their conflicts more effectively, have mutual self-disclosure, and therefore, provide an opportunity for mutual spiritual growth (Vanden Brouke, Vandereycken and Vertommen, 1995). Halford et al (2007) investigated couples’ relations and found that effective communication helped to improve and maintain intimacy (Halford, Nicholson & Sanders, 2007). Guerrero and Foster Bachman (2008) share a similar viewpoint and comment that after infidelity occurrence, a constructive communication may lead to a new intimacy while using aggressive language may terminate in more distance or even taking revenge. A study through a website also inquired women damaged by marital faithlessness. The outcomes of this study with participation of 1083 sexually betrayed women demonstrated that quality of communicating about infidelity as well as the extent of husbands’ responses to ruined feelings of their women were significantly related to betterment of marital relationship (Vaughan, 2008).

Given review of literature, infidelity has become a main problem of many couples all over the world. However, no exact figures on the rate of infidelity have been reported in Iran, although, it does not mean that this country is not affected by this phenomenon. In fact, lack of exact statistical figures on this issue is the sign of inattention toward social harms. Many news about infidelity in various journals, increase of calling to “Counselor Voice” programs, and daily increment of couples referring to family courts due to infidelity, as well as considering disloyalty as one of the major causes of divorce or even honor killings, all make this bitter fact clear that this social dilemma is secretly common in our society and is the basis of many stresses and damages targeting marital relations.

On the other hand, many women stand all difficulties and problems due to their motherhood affection, and in some cases, because of social, economic and cultural issues, they continue their marital lives even after disclosure of their spouses’ infidelity. However, this kind of marital life may harm children since mothers may not be able to forgive their spouses’ faults and therefore, may unitedly endanger their children’s mental and physical health. Children growing up in damaged families may not trust the opposite gender in adulthood due to negative impacts of their early experiments on their beliefs on others’ loyalty. So, offering effective interventions seems critical for couples affected by infidelity.

Apparently, group counselling can provide an opportunity for individuals to void their negative feelings and emotions, heal their old wounds, and acquire needed skills to cope efficiently with infidelity damages by gaining feedback from other group members. Therefore, given the importance of infidelity and extra-marital relations and their destructive effects on mental health of family members, the present study was conducted with the aim examining the effectiveness of group counselling on improvement of marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers of students in Tehran city. The hypotheses include:

1. Group counselling is effective for improving marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers.
2. Group counselling is effective for improving verbal communications skills in infidelity-affected mothers.

3. Group counselling can enhance feeling of security in students growing up in infidelity-affected families.
4. The effects of group counselling on improvement of marital relationships in infidelity-affected mothers depends on the number of children.

### **Materials and Methods**

This semi-experimental study had a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The statistical population consisted all students' mothers with infidelity experiment who had referred to a counselling center of Department of Education in Tehran city in 2013. To launch the study, first, announcement papers of holding 20 sessions of group counselling were distributed in family counselling centers of Department of Education. Then, all volunteer mothers participated in an individual diagnostic interview and they completed the Spouses' Infidelity Questionnaire and the Improvement of Marital Relationship Questionnaire. Finally, among all who gained high scores on these questionnaires, 16 mothers were selected via purposive and accessible sampling method and randomly assigned to the experimental (N=8) and control (N=8) group. At the first session, the subjects of both groups participated in the pre-test and then, the experimental group received 20 sessions of group counseling twice weekly, each lasted for 120 minutes. These sessions began in March 2012 and ended in June 2013. The post-test was performed after the intervention termination. The following is a brief description of each session:

*First and second sessions:* First, the pre-test was performed and the subjects introduced themselves. After that, the group rules were issued. Finally, the facilitator explained the procedure of group counselling sessions, and the importance of infidelity as well as its negative effects on marital relationships. She also mentioned briefly the results of several studies about causes of infidelity.

*Third and fourth sessions:* Gender differences on expressing and listening to contradictory issues were discussed and several tips about having an effective communication were expressed.

*Fifth and sixth sessions:* Forgiveness and the pattern of its stages were briefly explained.

*Seventh and eighth sessions:* Mental barriers of forgiveness and its eight stages were discussed.

*Ninth and tenth sessions:* Improvement of marital life based on the support rule was explained.

*Eleventh and twelfth sessions:* Improvement of marital life based on the attention rule was explained.

*Thirteenth and fourteenth sessions:* The importance of sexual relations in marital life, and the possibility of changing the insight about this issue was discussed.

*Fifteenth and sixteenth sessions:* Improvement of marital life based on the time rule was explained, and some tips on the importance of self-caring were offered.

*Seventeenth and eighteenth sessions:* Improvement of marital life based on the honesty rule was educated, and principles of resentment control and trust reconstruction were discussed.

*Nineteenth and twentieth sessions:* Several behavioral exercises with a quick effect on prevention of spouses' infidelity were thought, and the post-test were performed

#### **1. Vaughan's Spouses' Infidelity Questionnaire (SIQ)**

This questionnaire is designed by Vaughan (2008) and contains 35 questions. SIQ was made through a study on 1083 sexually betrayed women and its validity was calculated 0.73. For the purpose of the current study, SIQ was translated into Persian. To become assure of the translation accuracy, and also to verify its validity, the Persian version was re-translated into English and confirmed by a profession. Butler et al (2009) in a clinical research on infidelity affected women

calculated SIQ validity 0.69 (Butler, Harper & Seedal, 2009). SIQ validity in the present study was computed 0.71

### **2. Improvement of Marital Relationships Questionnaire**

This scholar-made questionnaire (IMRQ) has 65 questions and assesses several subscales including the most important spouse's needs, the most important women's affective needs, reduction of negative feelings, improvement of verbal communication, increase of forgiveness capacity, increase of self-care, trust revival, improvement of sexual relations, and students' security feelings. Mothers were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with each item using a five-point scale (strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, no idea=3, agree=4, or strongly agree=5). Face and content validity of IMRQ were confirmed by several counselling professors working at various family counselling center. Validity of this questionnaire in the present study using Cronbach's alpha was 0.92

## **Results**

**Table 1: Results of covariance analysis for effectiveness of group counselling on improvement of marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers**

Index of sources of changes	Sum of squares	Freedom degree	Mean of squares	F	Sig.	Eta coefficient
Control variable effect	476790.25	1	476790.25	612.124	.000	.978
Group effect	8649.000	1	8649.000	11.104	.005	.442
Error	10904.750	14	778.911			
Verified total sum	496344.00	16				

Given figures of Table 1, group counselling has been effective for improving marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers ( $F=11.104$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) in an acceptable level (Eta coefficient=0.442).

**Table 2: Results of covariance analysis for effectiveness of group counselling on improvement of verbal communication skills in infidelity-affected mothers**

Index of sources of changes	Sum of squares	Freedom degree	Mean of squares	F	Sig.	Eta coefficient
Control variable effect	5513.062	1	5513.062	530.923	.000	.974
Group effect	126.562	1	126.562	12.188	.004	.465
Error	145.375	14	10.384			
Verified total sum	5785.000	16				

According to Table 4, group counselling has improved verbal communication skills in infidelity-affected mothers ( $F=12.18$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) in an acceptable level (Eta coefficient=0.46.5)

**Table 3: Results of covariance analysis for effectiveness of group counselling on security improvement of security feeling in students growing up in infidelity-affected families**

Index of sources of changes	Sum of squares	Freedom degree	Mean of squares	F	Sig.	Eta coefficient
Control variable effect	1681.000	1	1681.000	146.174	.000	.913
Group effect	16.000	1	16.000	1.391	.258	.090
Error	161.000	14	11.500			
Verified total sum	1858.000	16				



Figures of Table 3 demonstrate that counselling group has not been successful in improving security feelings of students growing up in infidelity-affected families ( $F=1.391$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

**Table 4: Results of MANOVA for effectiveness of group counselling on improvement of marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers based on the number of children**

Indexes of sources of changes	Sum of squares	fd	Mean of square	F	Sig.
Effect of number of children	Improvement of marital relationship	565.208	2	282.604	.574
	Improvement of Verbal communication skills	15.125	2	7.562	.405
Error	Improvement of marital relationship	2275.667	5	455.133	
	improvement verbal communication	34.750	5	6.950	

Given Table 4, the impact of group counselling on improvement of marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers is independent of the number of their children.

### Discussion

Most of the couples with marital-relationship experiences, react to this happening with strong feeling of anger, high degrees of depression symptoms, and insecurity feeling. So, this kind of relationship is amongst the most interesting research issues for sociologists (Muncsh, 2012). Due to undeniable negative effects of marital infidelity on mental health of the whole family members, the present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of group counselling on improvement of marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers which was confirmed by the outcomes. This influence can be attributed to group counselling power in helping these women to gain insight on their own misdemeanors in infidelity process, empathy with their husbands, and change their behavior patterns with the aim of reviving their mutual intimacy. In fact, group interactions and instructions admonish the subjects of their abilities to have an effective role in improving their marital relationships by having an optimistic view toward future and focusing their energy on reviving their former enjoyable relationship (Gordon, Bauco&, Snyder,2004, Atkins, Jacobson & Baucom,2001).

Effectiveness of counselling on relationships of couples after infidelity disclosure was also admitted in the study of Atkins et al (2010) who performed a meta-analysis on results of couple therapy on couples involved in marital infidelity. In this study, outcomes of interventions on 145 couples with and 385 couples with non-marital infidelity problems were compared. The results indicated although in early stages of couple therapy, couples with marital infidelity problems had higher levels of disturbances and depression symptoms, their recovery continued as interventions went up, and at the end of therapy, they were not recognizable from those with non-marital infidelity problems.

It was also found that group counselling could enhance verbal communication skills in infidelity-affected mothers. Actually, in the group process these women reached this insight that uncontrollable burst of anger after infidelity disclosure leads only to much more hate and resentment while mutual communication and proper expression of thoughts and emotions helps men to better comprehend their wives' damaged feelings. Here, Glasser's (2010) theory of choice language can be pointed to, since he also believes that the only effective way for solving marital problems is to communicate kindly. Other studies also revealed that what makes marital relationships more attractive is lack of mutual censure and blame (Gordon, Baucom and Snyder, 2004; Guerrero, 2008). In this regard, Aviram and Amichai-Hamburger (2005) report that stability in a marital relationship and degree of couples' self-disclosure are positively correlated; So, those who feel they are not allowed to self-disclose in their marital relationships may turn to meta-marital relationships more.

Although group counselling could improve marital relationships and verbal communication skills in infidelity-affected mothers, it did not succeed in improving security feelings of students growing up in these families. This may be justified by the fact that a father who deals with an extra-marital relation, due to its secret nature, has to spend a great deal of his energy for preventing its disclosure, and therefore, he may not be able to focus his attention on his children's needs. In addition, mental and behavioral disturbances of an infidelity-affected mother may lower her ability to observe her motherhood responsibilities. On the other hand, children usually empathy with their emotionally-damaged mothers and may develop an undesirable feeling toward their fathers. This may cause problems in parents-children relations and lead to children academic failure, as well as unacceptable behaviors in long terms. Therefore, these deep emotional injuries make their psychological and spiritual healing a formidable affair.

This study also manifested that the effect of group counselling on improving marital relationship in infidelity-affected mothers is independent of the number of their children. In support of this finding it can be assumed that occurrence of infidelity imposes such a terrible harm and agony on women that they, regardless of their ages, marriage duration, study levels and number of their children, try to find ways to get rid of conflicts caused by their spouses' infidelity and to crenellate their marital life by passing this painful experience. However, this finding is in contrast with Liu's (2000) research who concluded that having children is a kind of human investment and makes couples' commitment to their marital life stronger.

### **Conclusions**

According to the given review of literature and findings of the current study, it is clear that marital infelicity traces its negative effects both on the couples and their children, and may threaten their physical and psychological health even in long term. Therefore, it is strongly suggested to use media as well as curriculums of schools and universities to encourage people to keep their commitments to marital life, and to inform them about negative impacts of extra-marital relationships on family members, and health and security of the whole society members. In addition, given that children growing up in infidelity-affected families may experience various problems in adulthood including lack of tendency to form a marital life, taking revenge on spouses, and committing disloyalty, which may have root in childhood experiences, it seems wiser to investigate aspects, causes and consequences of marital infidelity in Iran in a careful way and by observing values and norms, because it seems clear that ignoring these issues do never lead to their solvation, but conversely, terminates in inexorable sufferings on families and the society.

Limitations of this study make it necessary to be cautious while interpreting study findings. First, the sample volume was small and homogenous. Second, the interval between sessions was short. And third, a follow up was not performed due to time limitations. Therefore, it is recommended to perform similar studies on larger, heterogeneous groups of infidelity-affected women, with longer interval between sessions, and a follow up, to gain more assurance of the findings accuracy.

It should also be stated that shorter marriage duration, higher study levels, and younger age seemed to be effective in improvement of marital relationship after infidelity disclosure, although the small sample and its relative heterogeneity prevented exact citation to this assumption.

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