



The Effectiveness of Group Dialectical Behavior Therapy on Reducing the Divorce Propensity and Self-Differentiation in Couples with Marital Conflict

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Abstract

Introduction: As divorce rates continue to rise, there is a critical need to explore effective interventions that can strengthen marriages and reduce family breakdown. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of group dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) in reducing the divorce propensity and self-differentiation in couples with marital conflict referred to the family court in Karaj City.

Methods: The present study employed a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design. The target population comprised all couples who filed for divorce at the Karaj Family Court in 2023. A purposive sample of 32 participants meeting the study's inclusion criteria was randomly assigned to experimental and control groups (n=16 per group). Participants completed the Divorce Propensity Questionnaire (DPQ) and Self-Differentiation Inventory (SDI) pre- and post-intervention. The experimental group received sixteen 90-minute group Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) sessions. Data were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in SPSS-27.

Results: The results revealed significant positive effects of group DBT. The results revealed significant positive effects of group DBT. The analysis shows that the Dialectical Behavioral Therapy group had a significantly lower divorce propensity score (89.31 ± 23.37) compared to the control group (123.13 ± 24.14) ($F= 37.73$, $P<0.001$). Moreover, their self-differentiation score was significantly higher (175.31 ± 16.85 vs. 125.75 ± 11.06) ($F=99.49$, $P<0.001$).

Conclusions: Based on the study's results, group DBT can be considered an effective intervention to reduce the divorce propensity and improve self-differentiation in couples referred to the family court.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage stands as one of the most significant and enduring interpersonal relationships, playing a pivotal role in an individual's transition to adulthood [1]. Establishing effective marital communication emerges as a crucial step in fostering and enhancing intimacy. However, the failure of spouses to effectively communicate their issues and reach mutually agreeable solutions can lead to a lack of expressed intimacy, potentially resulting in relationship strain or even termination [2]. It is worth noting that establishing communication can be challenging, even for individuals sharing a common language. Therefore, achieving a proper understanding of one another becomes essential for establishing a healthy relationship [3].

The absence of intimacy in marital relationships is strongly correlated with divorce propensity, defined as the inclination to dissolve the marital bond [4]. Rusbult

et al. [5] propose a multidimensional framework for understanding divorce propensity, encompassing four key constructs: 1) Desire for separation: This dimension reflects active contemplation and discussion of marital issues within the context of divorce, including strategies for exiting the relationship. 2) Affective expression: Research suggests that emotional satisfaction, characterized by affection, verbal communication, and emotional investment, is inversely related to divorce propensity. 3) Infidelity: Deficiencies in empathy and emotional expression are associated with increased risk of marital infidelity, consequently impacting relationship satisfaction. 4) Condonement: This construct refers to the maintenance of emotional or physical intimacy outside the marital bond, posing a significant threat to marital stability [5].

In pursuit of intimacy, happiness, and relief from loneliness, some married women may engage in extramarital relationships. When experiencing emotional distress, women may seek support and emotional fulfillment from external sources [6]. This can lead to emotional withdrawal from the spouse, neglect of marital responsibilities, and avoidance of marital conflicts. Such condoning behaviors contribute to divorce propensity and generate relational tension. Couples facing these challenges may benefit from couples therapy to address underlying issues and develop effective coping strategies [7].

Recent research has emphasized the pivotal role of early life experiences and parental attachment styles in shaping marital adjustment and subsequent levels of self-differentiation [8]. Individuals with low self-differentiation tend to prioritize relational harmony, often making decisions based on conflict avoidance and stability maintenance. Conversely, those with high self-differentiation exercise autonomy through rational decision-making [9]. Self-differentiation is a dynamic process rooted in psychological independence and emotional maturity, characterized by a continuous pursuit of personal integrity and reduced anxiety [10, 11]. In well-differentiated couples, intimacy, flexibility, and tolerance for differences are more pronounced. Such individuals exhibit greater resilience to stress and are less prone to anxiety-related impairments. Fundamentally, the family system, influenced by emotional dynamics, is intergenerational in nature, and individual well-being is contingent upon the degree of differentiation from this system [12, 13].

On the one hand, the increase in divorce and marital dissatisfaction and, on the other hand, the demand of spouses for improving marital relationships indicate the need for specialized interventions and training in this field. Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is one of the approaches that has long-term effectiveness through skill development by intervening in the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains [14]. DBT is a combination of methods related to emotional, behavioral, and cognitive therapies that includes four intervention components in its group therapy approach: mindfulness and distress tolerance as acceptance components, and emotional regulation and interpersonal effectiveness as change-based components [15, 16]. This approach is a hierarchical treatment that can be adapted and applied to different populations [17]. Research results have confirmed the effectiveness of DBT in improving marital quality of life, reducing emotional divorce in couples at risk of divorce, increasing self-differentiation, improving the modification of irrational and automatic beliefs, and improving emotion regulation in couples [18-20]. Rady et al. (16) demonstrated the efficacy of DBT for couples in improving marital adjustment and emotion regulation. Badakhshan et al. [18] found that DBT

positively influenced family functioning among women experiencing marital conflict. Similarly, Samadi Fard et al. [20] reported positive outcomes of DBT-based couple therapy in addressing emotional regulation difficulties and cognitive impairments within conflicted marriages.

Marital conflict is a well-established precursor to divorce. While passionate connections often characterize the early stages of relationships, emotional erosion can occur due to individual or mutual neglect. This deterioration may progress to a state of cohabitation without genuine companionship, ultimately culminating in divorce. To date, the efficacy of group DBT in addressing the psychological challenges of couples facing divorce proceedings remains unexplored. Accordingly, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of group DBT in reducing divorce propensity and enhancing self-differentiation among couples experiencing marital conflict and referred to the family court.

METHODS

The statistical population of this research consisted of all couples applying for divorce who had been referred to the family court in Karaj City in 2023 to file for divorce or marital disputes. Accordingly, a sample of 32 people was selected using the purposive sampling method and considering the inclusion criteria of the study and randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups. Participants were randomly assigned to either the control or intervention group using a random number table. A priori power analysis with G*Power determined a sample size of 16 per group (effect size = 1.09, alpha = 0.05, power = 0.90). The inclusion criteria for the study included informed consent to participate in the study, having at least a high school diploma, age between 18-45 years, no substance abuse, no concurrent participation in other treatment programs, and no individual counseling or medication. The exclusion criteria were unwillingness to continue cooperation in the research, and absence from more than two sessions of the treatment sessions. After a pretest was conducted on all participants, group DBT was performed for the experimental group in sixteen 90-minute sessions, but the control group received no treatment. Group CBT sessions were held in one of the psychological counseling centers in Karaj. A summary of the group DBT sessions is presented in Table 1. After the completion of the intervention sessions, the posttest was performed on all participants in both groups. It is worth noting that after the completion of the research, the treatment method was also implemented in a condensed form for the control group. In this research, informed consent was obtained from all participants to comply with ethical considerations. To ensure ethics in research,

it was announced that the responses to the questionnaires would be confidential.

Table 1. Summary of the dialectical behavioral therapy program

Content	Goals	Sessions
Session 1 and 2	Introduce the DBT program and mindfulness concepts.	Introduction to the program, outlining the goals and rules. Members are introduced to the concept of mindfulness through three mental states: logical, emotional, and wise mind. Clients are taught to identify these states.
Session 3 and 4	Teach core DBT skills: observing, describing, and participating effectively.	This session focus on teaching core DBT skills: "What" skills (observing, describing, and participating) and "How" skills (taking a non-judgmental stance, maintaining self-respect, and acting effectively).
Session 5 and 6	Practice and solidify core DBT skills.	The skills of "what" and "how" were practically practiced in the group because these exercises are considered the central core of DBT, so they are taught at the beginning.
Session 7 and 8	Introduce emotion regulation skills and their components.	In addition to reviewing skills from previous sessions, a focus is placed on introducing emotion regulation skills, including defining emotions and their components.
Session 9 and 10	Continue teaching emotion regulation strategies.	Another set of emotion regulation skills are covered in this session. Clients learn to identify and label their emotions, which can lead to increased ability to manage them.
Session 11 and 12	Teach skills for accepting and managing emotions.	This session includes reviewing previous skills and introducing skills for accepting emotions, even negative ones. Clients are also taught skills to reduce vulnerability to negative emotions.
Session 13 and 14	Teach crisis survival skills and self-soothing techniques.	The focus here is on teaching crisis survival skills, including distraction techniques and self-soothing with the five senses.
Session 15 and 16	Review all DBT skills and practice their application.	In the final sessions, there is a review of all the previously taught skills. Crisis survival skills, such as the pros and cons technique for dealing with frustration or anger, are practiced in the group. Additionally, generalizing the skills to situations outside of therapy sessions is addressed.

Instruments

The Divorce Propensity Questionnaire (DPQ): The DPQ was designed by Rusbult et al. (5) to assess the willingness of couples to divorce. It is a 28-item questionnaire that measures four dimensions, each with 7 items: Desire to leave: This dimension assesses the willingness to leave the marriage. Willingness to compromise: This dimension assesses the willingness to compromise to save the marriage. Expression of feelings: This dimension assesses the ability to express feelings openly and honestly. Loyalty: This dimension assesses the commitment to the marriage. Each item is rated on a 7-point scale (1=never, 2=rarely, 3=very rarely, 4=sometimes, 5=often, 6=very often, 7=always). The total score ranges from 28 to 196, with higher scores indicating a higher willingness to divorce. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the DPQ was .88.

Self-Differentiation Inventory (SDI): The SDI is a 46-item self-report questionnaire developed by Skowron and Friedlander [21] to assess individual differentiation. The SDI focuses on individuals' important life relationships and their relationships with their family of origin. The SDI consists of four subscales: Emotional reactivity: This subscale measures the tendency to experience emotions intensely and be overwhelmed by them (11 items). Emotional cutoff: This subscale measures the tendency to avoid or suppress emotional expression (11 items). Sense of self: This subscale measures the degree to which individuals have a clear and well-defined sense of identity (11 items). Enmeshment with others: This subscale measures the tendency to be overly involved and dependent on others (11 items). The SDI is scored on a 6-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 1 (Never true of me) to 6 (Completely true of me). The total score ranges from 46 to 276, with lower scores indicating

lower levels of differentiation. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the SDI was .85.

Statistical Analyses

The normality of data distribution was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, while Levene's test was employed to verify the homogeneity of variances. One-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to analyze the data using SPSS-27, with a statistical significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 32 individuals experiencing marital conflict, comprising 14 women (43.75%) and 18 men (56.25%). The mean age of male participants was 42.75 years, while that of female participants was 37.20 years. Occupationally, eight men were employed in government positions and ten were self-employed, whereas six women were employed and eight were homemakers. Childbearing was reported by 82% of the experimental group and 76% of the control group. Demographic equivalence between the experimental and control groups was established through statistical analysis. Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation, and Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test results for the research variables at the pretest and posttest stages.

As shown in Table 2, the mean of the research variables in the experimental group changed from pretest to posttest, but no significant change was observed in the control group. Before conducting the ANCOVA, its assumptions were checked. First, the absence of influential outliers in the research variables was confirmed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test. The results confirmed the assumption of normal distribution of the data. In addition, the Levene's test was used to check the assumption of homogeneity of variances, which yielded $F=0.78$ and $P=0.383$ for the variable of decreased divorce propensity and $F=0.06$ and $P=0.103$ for the variable of self-differentiation. Finally,

to compare the experimental and control groups based on their posttest scores, after controlling for the effect of the pretests, one-way ANCOVA was used to determine the effect of group DBT intervention on decreased divorce propensity and self-differentiation in couples. Table 3 shows that the effect size was 0.57 for the variable of decreased divorce propensity and 0.78 for the variable of self-differentiation, indicating that 57% and 78% of the total variances in the experimental and control groups, respectively, were due to the effect of the independent variable (group DBT). There was a

significant difference between the mean pretest and posttest scores of decreased divorce propensity in couples with marital conflict after controlling for the effect of the pretest ($\eta^2=0.57$, $F=37.73$, $P<0.001$). Therefore, it can be concluded that group DBT was effective in reducing divorce propensity. There was also a significant difference between the mean pretest and posttest scores of self-differentiation after controlling for the effect of the pretest ($\eta^2=0.78$, $F=99.49$, $P<0.001$). Therefore, it can be concluded that group DBT was effective in improving self-differentiation.

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation, and Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for the divorce propensity and self-differentiation

	Pretest	Posttest	Kolmogorov-Smirnov test	
			Z	P
Divorce propensity				
Dialectical behavioral therapy	131.88±8.86	89.31±23.37	0.11	0.200
Control	129.31±12.02	123.13±24.14	0.15	0.200
Self-differentiation				
Dialectical behavioral therapy	122.69±7.33	175.31±16.85	0.10	1.247
Control	126.31±7.40	125.75±11.06	0.14	0.200

Data in table are presented as Mean ± SD

Table 3. Results of the analysis of covariance on posttest scores of divorce propensity and self-differentiation

Variable	SS	df	MS	F	P	η^2	Power
Divorce propensity	11156.03	1	11156.03	37.73	0.001	0.57	1.00
Self-differentiation	19890.53	1	19890.53	99.49	0.001	0.78	1.00

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of group DBT on reducing divorce propensity and self-differentiation in couples referred to the family court in Karaj City. The first finding showed that group DBT was effective in reducing divorce propensity in couples. This finding is consistent with the results of Habibalahzadeh et al. [22], who showed that DBT combined with self-regulation couple therapy was effective in reducing emotional divorce in couples at risk of divorce.

This finding can be explained by the fact that DBT is a cognitive-behavioral therapy that can help reduce divorce propensity in couples through some of its principles and techniques. DBT helps couples learn conflict resolution, anger management, healthy communication, and positive interaction skills. By using DBT, couples can identify and solve their problems together, express their emotions in a healthy and rational way, and respect and strengthen each other's achievements [23]. DBT also helps couples improve their relationships by monitoring the cognitive processes and external factors that may lead to conflict. In fact, DBT tries to show couples the two different poles of an action in the process of divorce: how an emotion, thought, or behavior can lead to either improving or destroying a relationship [24]. DBT shows couples these two poles and their consequences, and through mindfulness training, emotional control skills, interpersonal communication skills, and distress tolerance, it helps couples manage their conflicts and

increase their interpersonal intimacy by better understanding each other [25].

The results of the study also showed that group DBT was effective in improving self-differentiation in couples. This finding is consistent with the results of studies by Aghayousefi et al. [26] and Haft et al. [27]. As Aghayousefi et al. [26] showed, DBT intervention can be effective in helping to increase self-differentiation and has positive practical implications for the treatment and prevention of substance abuse. In another study, Haft et al. [27] found that DBT was effective in improving cultural adaptation and self-differentiation.

One possible explanation for this finding is that self-differentiation refers to a person's ability to have a clear and accurate understanding of themselves and their partner. This skill is very important for resolving marital conflicts. The role of self-differentiation in marital relationships refers to the differences and disagreements that exist between a man and a woman in a marital relationship. These differences may be due to gender, cultural, social, economic, and other factors [26]. For example, gender differences can lead to disagreements in communication style, how to deal with family matters and raising children, the division of gender roles in the family, and so on. Cultural differences can also lead to misunderstandings and incompatibilities in the marital relationship. To resolve these differences and disagreements, it is necessary for both parties to listen carefully to each other's opinions and perspectives, communicate with each other, and find appropriate solutions to problems. In this regard, DBT is a

therapeutic approach that has been recognized as an effective method for individuals with mood disorders, anxiety, and personality disorders. This therapy is designed to strengthen individual skills in emotion management, improve social relationships, and enhance mindfulness [27]. In couples, DBT can potentially promote the development of self-differentiation. Given that marital interactions are often laden with emotions and concerns, couples may experience imbalances and become unable to manage their emotions effectively. By utilizing DBT, couples can develop the necessary skills to manage emotions and appropriately address their concerns, leading to a significant improvement in their self-differentiation.

In conclusion, it can be inferred that DBT helps couples to face the challenges of their lives with an accepting attitude. This accepting attitude increases the information-processing capabilities of couples and enables them to make more appropriate decisions in their relationship. DBT is a therapeutic approach that has been recognized as an effective method for improving marital communication. This therapy is based on behavioral and mindfulness-based theories and helps couples learn better and more effective communication skills. With this method, couples will be able to deal with their communication challenges constructively and empathetically and change unhealthy and hostile patterns in their communication.

Some limitations of this study can be mentioned. First, the study was conducted on couples referred to the family court in Karaj City. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to couples referred to family courts in other cities and with different cultures. Second, the study did not consider gender differences. Third, the self-report method was used, and social desirability bias may have unintentionally intervened, and there was a possibility of response distortion. Finally, since the follow-up phase was not performed, the sustainability of the effect of dialectical behavior therapy was not investigated.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of group DBT for couples facing marital challenges. The findings demonstrated statistically significant positive effects of the intervention. Compared to the control group, couples who participated in the DBT program showed a substantial decrease in their likelihood of divorce. Furthermore, the program led to a significant improvement in self-differentiation, a key skill for navigating relationship complexities. These results suggest that group DBT can be a valuable tool for enhancing marital stability and promoting healthy relationship dynamics. Future research could explore the specific mechanisms by which DBT exerts its positive effects, investigate long-term treatment

outcomes, and examine the generalizability of these findings to more diverse populations.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz branch (code: IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1402.039).

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

AE: Study concept and design, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation of data, and statistical analysis. PA: Administrative, technical, and material support, study supervision. PE and SS: Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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