





## Original Article

# Comparison the effectiveness of Emotion-Focused Couple and Acceptance and Commitment Therapies on marital forgiveness in incompatible couples

Hossein Zaeimi <sup>1</sup>, Ali Reza Rajaei <sup>\*1</sup>, Mohammad Reza Saffaran Tousi <sup>1</sup>, Hamid Nejat <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Educational Sciences, Mashhad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mashhad, Iran.

**Corresponding author and reprints:** Ali Reza Rajaei, Associate Professor, Department of Educational Sciences, Mashhad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mashhad, Iran.

**Email:** [rajaei\\_46@yahoo.com](mailto:rajaei_46@yahoo.com)

**Received:** 5 Aug 2022

**Accepted:** 14 Jan 2023

**Published:** 05 May 2023

## Abstract

**Background:** Using effective interventions to reduce incompatibility among couples can play a role in preventing divorce in the family. The present study aimed to compare the effectiveness of emotion-focused couple therapy (EFCT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) on forgiveness in incompatible couples.

**Methods:** The present research is a quasi-experimental study that was done on couples referred to a family therapy clinic in Torbat-e-Jam City. Here, 24 incompatible couples were selected through purposive methods and randomly replaced in three groups. The first and second groups (8 couples in each group) received emotion-focused couples and acceptance and commitment therapies, respectively, and the third group as control (8 couples) did not receive any intervention during the study period. All three groups were evaluated before and after the intervention with a standard questionnaire of Bagarozzi forgiveness (2001). Data were analyzed through SPSS software version 20 and covariance analysis.

**Results:** The findings revealed that both therapies of EFCT and ACT had a meaningful effect on forgiveness ( $P < 0.001$ ,  $F = 41.73$ , and  $P = 0.031$ ,  $F = 5.13$ ; respectively); while the results indicated that the two groups under intervention have no significant difference in terms of effectiveness on the variable of forgiveness ( $P=0.63$ ,  $F=0.23$ ).

**Conclusion:** According to the results and effectiveness of the two therapy groups, it is recommended to use a combination of approaches according to the therapeutic goals.

**Keywords:** Acceptance and Commitment Therapy; Couples Therapy; Emotions; Forgiveness; Incompatible.

**Cite this article as:** Zaeimi H, Rajaei A.R, Saffaran Tousi M.R, Nejat H. Comparison the effectiveness of Emotion-Focused Couple and Acceptance and Commitment Therapies on Marital Forgiveness in Incompatible Couples. *Soc Determinants Health*. 2023;9(1):1-9. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22037/sdh.v9i1.39057>

## Introduction

Marital compatibility means the ability of two-way compatibility and the ability to adapt and at the same time enjoy the marital relationship, which leads to a high quality of the marital relationship (1). One of the factors that can be important in increasing marital compatibility and stability of relationships is forgiveness (2). According to Paleari et

al., forgiveness includes getting rid of negative thoughts, emotions and negative behaviors in response to wrong behaviors and replacing positive behaviors and reactions in dealing with anger and aggression caused by injury (3). Compatibility has a strong correlation with forgiveness (4, 5). In fact, forgiveness is a reaction in which couples continue to live

despite their failures and conflicts. Spouses' skills in establishing positive interactions and managing conflicts constructively have a significant relationship with creating a sense of trust and love (6). Research showed that it is difficult for some couples to forgive their spouses, and at such a time, couples need training and counseling so that they can increase their compatibility by releasing negative emotions and feelings (7).

Studies showed that there are different treatment methods to change and reduce marital incompatibility (8). Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is one of the impressive treatments that can be used in solving marital difficulties today. This approach has two principles that include: 1. Accepting or willing to experience discomfort or other disconcerting events without trying to handle them and 2. Action is based on value or commitment combined with the willingness to act as meaningful personal objectives before eliminating unfavorable experiences. ACT in the relationship helps the person to be more cooperative in the marital relationship and less involved with the past (9).

On the other hand, emotion-focused couple therapy (EFCT) was invented by Johnson and Greenberg in the early 1980s. This therapy is according to the adult attachment theory, points to the significant role of emotions in establishing communication patterns and considers it as a change agent (10). The main goal of EFCT is to help couples identify and express each other's main needs and desires and attachment concerns; therefore, the insecurities of couples' attachment are reduced and safe attachment is cultivated between them, which leads to the improvement of compatibility and increasing the commitment of couples to each other (11). This method has been effective in increasing marital compatibility (12).

Since understanding and compatibility is considered an important structure in married life and plays an important role in

the maintenance, stability and marriage health. Its lack affects the separation of the marriage contract and the weakening of the family foundation, and it may even have serious consequences such as divorce (13). Therefore, in order to increase the compatibility of couples, it is necessary to know these important instruments and the effective factors for its preservation and continuation. Incompatibility consequences affect not only couples but also the family system. Children who grow up in incompatible families often suffer from behavioral problems and academic failure (14). Although there have been many studies regarding divorce, however the study of marital incompatibility in Iran is a relatively new issue. Moreover, the dimensions of the effectiveness of various therapies and approaches in Iranian society are unclear. Therefore, the current study was aimed to compare the effect of EFCT and ACT on forgiveness in incompatible couples.

## **Methods**

This is a quasi-experimental study with pre-test and post-test design and control group, which was carried out on incompatible couples referred to the family counseling clinic of Torbat-e-Jam City in 2019-2020. Participants were selected using the purposive sampling method. A number of 78 people (39 couples) acquiesced to participate in the research, then they were taken the spinner compatibility test and the couples who scored less than 100 were included in the study. To do so, 48 people (24 couples) who met the inclusion criteria were privileged and were placed by a simple random method through lottery in three groups (two experimental groups and one control group and 8 couples in each group), according to Carey view (15). Corey emphasizes that when the protocol is taught to people, the smaller the therapy groups, the greater and more lasting the therapeutic effect.

The criteria for entering the study included having at least a diploma, age 25 to 45

years, scoring below the cut-off level in the incompatible questionnaire, not having a diagnosis in axis I and axis II, not using any type of psychiatric and psychoactive drugs in the previous four months from the first session. People who missed more than one session or stopped cooperating were excluded from the study.

After obtaining approval from the Islamic Azad University, Branch Torbat-e Jam, the necessary arrangements were made with the city family counseling center regarding the objectives of the research. Among the couples willing to participate in the research, written consent was gotten and they were guaranteed about secrecy and privacy; then necessary explanations were given about the objectives and how to answer the questionnaires. Afterward, people were randomly allocated in 3 groups of experimental and control. After taking the pre-test from all groups, two

experimental groups were respectively trained in EFCT as 8 sessions of 90-minute training, and ACT as 10 sessions 90 minutes, and the control group didn't receive any teaching. Afterwards, the questionnaires were re-administered as a post-test for all three groups. In the end, in order to comply with research ethics, couples in the control group also received free counseling sessions for free. Tables 1 and 2 describe the content of the sessions.

In this study, Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (1976) was used, which has 33 items and is answered by the Likert-point scale, and its scores range is from zero to 150. Scores more than 100, indicate high marital relations and family compatibility (16, 17). In the study of Fallahnejad et al., the reliability of DAS was reported as 0.81 by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which indicates its high internal reliability (18).

Table 1. Content of emotion-focused couple therapy, according to the Johnson et al.'s study

Session	Content
First	Getting to know the common rules of therapy, evaluating the nature of the difficulty and relevance, evaluating the goals and prospects of the spouses from the therapy and acting the pre-test.
Second	Recognizing the cycle of negative interactive and revealing situations, evaluating the relationship and bond of attachment, familiarizing couples with the role of emotions in interpersonal interplays, reconstructing interplays and increasing plasticity.
Third	Reaching to unidentified feelings and focusing on emotions, facilitating the interaction of couples with each other and validating their attachment needs and desires, processing early emotions and increasing couples' awareness of them and hot acquaintances
Fourth	Reframing the difficult in terms of basic feelings and attachment needs, emphasis on the ability of couples to express emotions and show attachment behaviors to each other, making couples aware of the impact of their fear and defense apparatuses on emotional procedures
Fifth	Identifying rejected needs, teaching couples how to interact with each other with respect and empathy, expressing attachment needs and detecting repudiated requirements
Sixth	Informing couples about the primary emotions and determining the position of each spouse in the relation, underlining the acceptance of the spouse's experiences and new techniques of interaction, outlining the known feelings, underlining and re-explaining the attachment requirements and pointing out their healthy and naturalness.
Seventh	Facilitating the expression of requirements, developing primary feeling experiences in the field of attachment and recognizing internal relations, and establishing new attachments in spouses.
Eighth	Reinforcing the changes made during therapy, headlining the between current and old interactions, forming a relation based on a safe bond in such a way that discussing difficulties and searching for resolutions does not harm them, evaluating changes and implementing post-tests.

Willingness to Forgive questionnaire designed by Enright, Santos and El Mabut (1993) was also used (19). This test consists of 60 items that evaluates forgiveness in three fields: cognitive, emotional and behavioral. Higher scores mean more forgiveness. The test score is obtained from the sum of scores from 1 to 60, and as a result, the range of test scores is between 60 and 360. This scale is a 6-point Likert scale that for some questions, scoring is positive (1, completely disagree to 6, completely agree) and for others inverse (1, strongly agree to 6, strongly disagree). In the study of Tutu, the reliability initial of the test and its retest reliability after 4 weeks using

Cronbach's alpha were obtained 0.98 and 0.86, respectively (20). The reliability of 0.96 was obtained by Khodayari Fard et al., (21). The implementation of confirmatory and exploratory factor analysis was confirmed and showed that the test correlation was 0.68. Also, the criterion validity of the test was obtained with Beck's depression scale and Spielberger's trait-state anxiety scale and revealed that there is a high correlation between their scores.

Data were analyzed through SPSS software version 20 and covariance analysis test was applied to check the effectiveness of the variables.

Table 2. Content of couple's therapy sessions based on ACT based on Hayes et al.'s study

Session	Content
First	Acquainting couples with the program of treatment sessions, establishing rules and regulations and conducting pre-treatment evaluations, using the practice of eating raisins, teaching coping behavior patterns, practicing focusing on breathing.
Second	Teaching mindfulness techniques, introducing thoughts and feelings and the relationship between them, and teaching how to record desirable life events, providing homework for the next session focusing on breathing exercises and generalizing mindfulness, creating moral therapy.
Third	Meditation and breathing training, sitting in a meditative position and being aware of the body, breathing and emotions, reviewing the homework of the previous session as well as breathing exercises, examining the costs related to coping behaviors with schemas, the table of consequences related to coping behaviors with schemas, discussion about creative helplessness and presenting the metaphor of swamp and ditch digging.
Fourth	Seeing and hearing practice, psychological training about values, training to identify and clear ambiguity about values and their consequences and providing worksheets for determining values, examining existing obstacles against valuable actions and presenting worksheets, metaphor of bus passengers, assigning homework next session.
Fifth	Meditation and body awareness, sounds and thoughts, a review of the previous session's assignments and psychological training about fusion and breaking, presenting the metaphor of the giant on the bus and presenting the obstacle worksheet, teaching breaking techniques, presenting the metaphor of thoughts on the clouds, objectifying and playing the role of the schema thoughts and assigning homework for the next session.
Sixth	Reviewing the homework of the previous session, psychoeducation of fault with a focus on valuing vs. Description and providing experiential exercises, examining self-evaluation vs. Discussion, reinforcing self as context vs. Self as content, using chess metaphor and worst-case visualization, the metaphor of the beggar at the door and the metaphor of the farm in marital relations and determining the homework of the next session.
Seventh	Examining passion versus inescapable pain and loss in relationships, discussing anger and its costs as a coping mechanism, and sitting meditation and reviewing home exercises, eating chocolate with mindfulness, and setting homework for the next session.
Eighth	Using paper labels, psychological education about emotions and the role of control in marital relationships, examining the costs of avoiding painful emotions through experiential exercises, rope pulling exercises, practicing oneself as an observer, and setting homework for the next session.
Ninth	Discussing effective communication, practicing disconnection and alternative responses, visualization to create mindfulness and compassion for the pain created by schemas and visualization of forgiveness to help the person, repeating the tug-of-war exercise with the giant; Remembering the farm metaphor, assigning homework next session.
Tenth	Teaching compassion and kindness, exercises to increase compassion and forgiveness, discussing obstacles and creating strategies for valuable actions, creating commitment to valuable actions, conducting post-treatment evaluations.

## Results

In this study, participants were between 25-45 years old. The average duration of marriage of the participants was 5.67 years. Table 3 displays the average of forgiveness score in the pre-test and post-test periods in the three groups of ACT, EFCT, and control. With respect to the findings, the mean forgiveness in the post-test of the ACT group has increased compared to their pre-test. Moreover, forgiveness has significantly increased in the post-test of the EFCT group in comparison with its pre-test; while there was no difference between its mean in the pre-test and the post-test of control group.

Table 3. The average scores of forgiveness in the studied groups

Group	Pre-test, Mean $\pm$ SD	Post-test, Mean $\pm$ SD
EFCT	213.37 $\pm$ 25.14	280.18 $\pm$ 34.27
ACT	209.87 $\pm$ 24.68	234.50 $\pm$ 21.32
Control	199.81 $\pm$ 33.06	200.5 $\pm$ 33.27

At first, the normality of the data distribution was investigated with the Kolmogorov–Smirnov, the results indicated that the distribution of data is normal ( $P > 0.05$ ). Before performing

covariance analysis tests, the Levene's test was checked, and the homogeneity assumption of variances was established.

The findings of covariance analysis on the post-test of forgiveness in the studied groups are shown in table 4. According to the results, the groups of ACT and control had a meaningful difference has in average forgiveness ( $F(1.29) = 5.13$ ,  $P = 0.031$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.15$ ). Also, a meaningful difference was seen between the mean forgiveness ( $F(1.29) = 41.73$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.59$ ) of the groups EFCT and control. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected with 95% confidence.

The results of univariate covariance analysis on mean scores of forgiveness in ACT and EFCT groups are revealed in Table 5. With respect to the results, no significant difference was seen between the mean forgiveness ( $F(1.29) = 0.23$ ,  $P = 0.63$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.008$ ) in the two experimental groups.

The descriptive statistics of forgiveness in two groups after adjusting the pre-test are presented in Table 6. The results indicated that the adjusted mean of forgiveness in two experimental groups haven't significant difference.

Table 4. The results of the covariance analysis on the mean scores of forgiveness in the studied groups

Group	Variable	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	Etha coefficient
ACT and control	Groups	1012.84	1	1012.84	5.13	0.031	0.15
	Error	5723.66	29	197.36			
EFCT and control	Groups	2023.18	1	2023.18	41.73	0.001	0.59
	Error	1405.99	29	48.48			

Table 5. The results of univariate covariance analysis on mean scores of forgiveness in the therapy groups

Variable	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	Effect size	Power test
Group	50.72	1	50.72	0.23	0.63	0.008	0.07
Error	6189.62	29	213.43				

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of forgiveness of two groups after pre-test adjustment

Group	Adjusted mean	Standard deviation error	Mean differences	P-value
ACT	175.05	3.747	2.63	0.086
EFCT	177.69			

## **Discussion**

The current study evaluated the effects of ACT and EFCT on forgiveness in incompatible couples. Based on the findings, ACT has been effective in augmenting the rate of incompatible couples' forgiveness. In other words, people who participated in ACT-based sessions reported higher forgiveness after completing the sessions, and this improvement was stable during follow-up. This finding was in line with the results of Heydarian Far (22); Kausian, Harifi and Karimi (23); Alipour (2016); and Worthington et al., (24). According to Enright et al.'s model, forgiveness occurs in four stages: discovery, decision, work, and result. In the last stage, a person realizes the suffering he causes to himself through not forgiving. A person realizes that he is not perfect. He remembers himself when he needed to be forgiven by others. In addition to that, the person comes to the knowledge that although he himself was abused, the abuser is also upset because of the behavior he did. According to Ray et al., understanding that a person has a new solution in life as a result of this oppression generates a new sense of purpose and direction in life. Achieving this awareness requires facing feelings and accepting them (3).

Accepting and facing emotions is one of the most central processes that occur in ACT. As noted, the aim of this therapy is creating a pleasurable and meaningful life, however the person accepts the inevitable suffering in it. Although it is only through conscious action that one's life becomes meaningful (9). Of course, when a person starts trying to build such a life, he/she will face all types of obstacles in the form of unwanted inner experiences. The ACT approach to managing these inner experiences teaches effective mindfulness skills to individual. This awareness makes the participants aware of the sufferings that they impose on themselves and the other party through unforgiveness and can disrupt the entire

family process and cause long-term damage, without a positive change in the main problem. Therefore, this process can increase a person's willingness to forgive. Also, some couples got used to not forgiving each other due to the relationship they establish with their emotions. They are used to make critical judgments about the existence of their unpleasant experiences and make an increasing effort to avoid these experiences (25). ACT therapy teaches couples to face their personal life experiences more consciously and stop looking at each other critically, and with acceptance exercises they learn to complement each other (9, 25).

In this study, the results also showed that EFCT was effective on forgiveness in incompatible couples. This means that people reported higher forgiveness after completing the EFCT sessions, and this improvement was stable during follow-up. This finding was in agreement with the results study of Honarparvaran (26), and Etemadi and Barabadi, (27). Carroll also concluded in a recent study that emotional therapy increases forgiveness (28). In explaining this finding, we can point to the effectiveness of EFCT. The participants in the EFCT sessions found unidentified emotions that are the basis of interactive situations and realized that they always use relatively similar emotional methods to deal with communication stress. Participants were asked to focus more on their emotions. This focus revealed the needs and fears of attachment. This two-way interaction and awareness of needs and fears led two people towards mutual empathy and understanding and facilitated the interaction of spouses with each other and validation of their experiences, needs and attachment tendencies. Discussing about primary emotions and raising awareness about them made couples realize that they have created negative emotions in the other party in order to fulfill their unconscious desires, and this process increased forgiveness in both parties.

Examining the findings related to the comparison of the two intervention groups of EFCT and ACT showed that the two groups do not differ significantly from each other. This result confirmed the findings of Ghahari et al., study (29). Moreover, in the study of Nemati et al. (30), two therapy groups of ACT and EFCT had the same effectiveness on well-being of couples. Contrary to the findings of our study, Zakhirehdari et al., (31) concluded that EFCT is more effective than cognitive-behavioral couple's therapy in increasing the intimacy of couples. This inconsistency in the findings can be justified due to the difference in the investigated variables and also the studied samples in the Zakhirehdari et al. study, which were normal couples. In justification of this finding, it can be said that EFCT focuses on emotion, and forgiveness is a function that is closely related to emotion. In fact, a person's lack of forgiveness is due to the emotions and anger that a person feels. Forgiveness requires reaching emotional awareness and the ability to regulate emotions, which was learned during the training that was given to the participants in the sessions. On the other hand, in the final stages of forgiveness, a person must accept himself and the other person and be able to accept the wrongdoer despite the mistake he made. This requires increased acceptance and the ability to be mentally flexible. Flexibility is the most important function of ACT, which helps a person to be able to understand his environmental and cognitive conditions as well as his mistakes and to be able to forgive him. For this reason, it seems that this has caused the relatively similar effectiveness of the two methods.

In the process of this research, the researcher faced some limitations that may have affected the quality of the research. Among other things, considering that the research subjects were selected from a counseling center, they may not be representative of the entire population. Available sampling was used and the tests were self-report. In addition, it was not

possible to accurately check the intellectual health of participating people, and the self-reporting of the participants was enough. It is suggested that the therapist should use an integrated approach when dealing with incompatible couples according to the background problems and their individual characteristics, so that they can create maximum positive changes in the client's relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Considering that EFCT and ACT showed similar effectiveness in the field of forgiveness, it is suggested that these two therapeutic approaches be used in an integrated manner in improving the conflict of incompatible couples.

### **Acknowledgment**

The authors would like to thank all the participants and officials of Torbat-e-Jam City Counseling Center. Because conducting this study would not have been possible without their cooperation.

### **Authors' contribution**

Study conception and design: ZH and RAR; data collection: ZH; analysis and interpretation of results: ST and MR; draft manuscript preparation: ZH and NH; final version of the manuscript: All authors approved.

### **Ethical considerations**

This article is taken from a doctoral thesis approved by the Islamic Azad University, Mashhad branch with the ethics code of IR.IAU.MSHD.REC.1399.208. In this study, written consent was obtained from the subjects to participate in the research and they were assured that the collected information would remain confidential. Also, all subjects were free to withdraw from the study.

### **Funding**

None

### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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