The Effectiveness of communication skills training on marital conflicts and its different aspects in women

Jahanshir Tavakolizadeh, Mahbobe Nejatian, Ahmad Soori

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of communication skills training on marital conflicts and its aspects in married women who referred to health centers of Gonabad in 2013. At this experimental study with pretest-posttest design and control group, Sixty married women, who have referred to health centers of Gonabad city, had been randomly selected and distributed in two groups as case and control. First, the pretest was administered for both groups. The pretest was consisted of a questionnaire on demographic information, communication skills and marital conflicts. Then the case group was presented with ten 45-minute sessions on communication skills. At the end of trainings, which lasted for 2 weeks, both groups filled the questionnaires. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 20 and independent and paired T-tests. The results showed In comparison to control group, communication skills training significantly reduces marital conflicts in case group (P=0.001). These trainings had also significantly influenced the five aspects of marital conflicts of case group including cooperation (P=0.048), sexual relationship (P=0.001), emotional reactions (P=0.019), personal communication with relatives (P=0.033) and familial communication with spouse relatives and friends (P=0.20), but did not influence the other 2 aspects which are children support (P=0.13) and financial issues (P=0.12). Regarding the impact of communication skills training on marital conflicts, it is recommended to train the women with marital conflicts with communication skills.

Keywords: Marital conflicts; communication skills; married women; Training; Gonabad

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1. Introduction

The quality of marital communications have critical role on the psychological health of spouses. In cases of inappropriate marital conditions, the spouse’s health would be endangered (Umberson et al, 2006). Although marital conflicts are inevitable and it happens that men and women’s interest would not be similar (Kline et al, 2006), however, if these conflicts become severe, it would have deteriorating psychological and physical influences for both sides. Most people experience conflicts in their communications as infinitely intensive (Halford, 2001; Holt-Lunstad, & Birmingham, 2008). Conflicts are also positively correlated with inappropriate psychological well-being conditions (Galinsky and Waite, 2014; Hawkins, & Booth, 2005), insecure attachment style (Gouin, 2009), several psychiatric disorders such as internalizing disorders (Brock, & Lawrence, 2011), depression (Wang, Wang, & Miller 2014), anxiety disorders (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004), sexual dysfunction disorders (Metz, & Epstein, 2002), and physical health problems (Galinsky and Waite, 2014) such as hypertension (Holt-Lunstad, & Birmingham, 2008), chronic pain (Cano et al, 2004) and ischemic heart diseases (Galinsky and Waite, 2014). The more unsatisfied the spouses are with their marital status, the higher is the probability of divorce (Gottman, 1997). Marital conflicts can also influence the family atmosphere and endanger the psychological health of children. These conditions may lead to rebels and antisocial behaviours in the children’s adulthood (Kew-Cheung, 1996).

Marital conflicts can be explained according to different theoretical point of views. According to the systemic therapists, conflicts are struggles over status and power sources, according to classic psychoanalysts it is the consequence of spouses intra psychic problems, according to behavioral approach is the payoff of spouse’s rewards and punishments towards together, and according to cognitive psychology it is the result of irrational expectations of spouses from each other, misunderstandings and cognitive errors. Based on structural theory, Minuchin believes, that when the family’s rules are not followed, its borders are either extremely rigid or loose, and the hierarchy of its members are ignored, the family would be dysfunctional. Bowen, in his inter-generational theory, argues that in most of the dysfunctional families, the members lack an independent and distinctive identity and that most of their problems are due to their dependence on their father and mother. Even in the attachment theory, it is believed that the attachment styles, in disordered attachments such as insecure and ambivalent anxious styles, can play a role in marital conflicts (Nejatian, 2013)

In addition to these theoretic viewpoints, it is important to note that most of the couples with marital conflict do have problems in communication with each other. These couples are mostly engaged in ineffective communication patterns (Gottman, 1997). Therefore, it seems that in addition to the therapeutic approaches that are originated from these viewpoints, the communication skill training can play a role in reducing these conflicts. These training programs emphasize on learning the communication skills such as enriching the relationship, self- assertiveness, empathy and active listening. Enhancement of such skills is crucial for couples because communication challenges are among the most common in married couples. More than 90 percent of disturbed couples assert this challenge as their major problem in their marital relationships. Communicational problems are the key problems in familial communicational approaches. These approaches analyze marital conflicts as dysfunctional communication. These struggles often lead to a vicious cycle in which any attempt to find a beginning point is pointless (Rezazadeh, 2008). A healthy communication is defined as the ability of people in explaining their needs, demands and preferences and also the ability of attending to others and inviting them for clarifying the issues. Dysfunctional communication leads to a loosened connection among family members and lack of common concepts and verbal communications between them (Bray, 1995). Effective communication skill is one of the most important health predictives for interpersonal relationships. Thus, communications skills training is one of the most crucial elements of life skills training. The importance of communication in efficacy of family has been demonstrated in several models of family interactions. McMaster’s model has considered family functioning in the six dimensions, two of which are communication and affective responsiveness (Mendenhall et al, 1996). Several studies have shown that appropriate communication plays a role in adaptation and marital satisfaction (Yalcin, Ka & Karahan, 2007; Schilling, et al., 2003; Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001; Shirali, 2008). Gottman’s study (2004) showed that the communication skills training increase the sense of marital satisfaction. Hosseinin et al (2005) studied the impact of conflict-solving skills training on marital conflicts and its different aspects in women. They found that the different aspects of marital conflicts in women, such as affective reactions, cooperation, sexual relationships, support from children and familial relationships with spouse’s relatives, would improve after the training. Johnson et al (2005) showed that problem-solving skills such as using the positive emotions and controlling the negative ones would have an important role in reducing the marital conflicts. Khojasteh Mehr (2008) has, too, argued that communication skills training can
influence the positive emotions toward spouse.

The main purpose of this study is to determine the impact of effective communication skills training on marital conflict and its different aspects in women, in referring married women to the health centers of Gonabad city in 2013. The hypotheses are as follows:

1. Communication skills training reduces the marital conflicts in married women.
2. Communication skills training improve the cooperation in married women.
3. Communication skills training improve the sexual relationships in married women.
4. Communication skills training improves the emotional reactions in married women.
5. Communication skills training increases the support from offspring.
6. Communication skill training improves the personal relationship with spouse’s relatives in married women.
7. Communication skills training improves the familial relationship with spouse’s relatives and friends in married women.
8. Communication skills training improves the financial issues in married women.

2. Method

This research was an experimental study with an case and control double group in a pre- and post-test research design. Our studied population was consisted of all married women who had registered in health centers. Based on proportions comparison formula, the sample size for each group was determined to be 30, with a statistical power of 80% and confidence interval of 95%. The sampling method was random stratified and it was among the married women in Gonabad city whose marriage was at least 2 years old. Sixty married women were randomly selected. Each participant had to fill a conscious consent form in order to participate. Both group filled the questionnaires on effective communication skills and marital status. Then the members of case group were presented with ten 45-minute sessions which was about effective communication. Two weeks later both groups filled the marital conflicts questionnaire once again.

Marital Conflicts Questionnaire: this is a 42-question instrument, which was developed by Sanayi-Zaker and Barati in 2007 to measure the seven dimensions of marital conflicts: reduced cooperation, reduced sexual intercourse, increased affective reaction, increased child support, increased personal relationships with relatives, reduced familial relationships with spouse’s relatives and friends, separating the financial issues from each other. For each question, there are five options which increase in the degree of agreement from 1 to 5. The minimum score for questionnaire is 42 and the maximum is 210. Those who score between 70 to 114, are considered to have normal marital status, those who score between 115 to 134 are considered to have abnormal marital conflicts and those who score more than 135 are considered to have severe conflicts. The reliability and validity of this questionnaire have been shown to be acceptable. Dehghan investigated the reliability of this questionnaire independently, and found a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.71 for it. In the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha was determined as 0.76 (Sanayi-zaker, 2007).

Effective Communication Questionnaire: this questionnaire has been designed by Miller et al and has been translated into Persian by Bahari (2009). This questionnaire has 25 questions on effective communication, each of which has 6 options which differs in the frequency (from “rarely” to “always”). The maximum score for questionnaire is 150 and the minimum is 25 and in some questions the scoring is reversed. The reliability of this questionnaire has been investigated through cronbach alpha (0.73) in this study.

The training sessions were scheduled for ten 45-minute sessions. In these sessions, the participants were trained so that they would be able to use the skills and techniques for establishing proper communication. The main items that were discussed in the sessions are as follows: definition of communication and its importance, effective and ineffective communication, behavioral styles training, verbal and non-verbal elements of communication, recognition of communication’s components, active listening training, effective methods in active listening, friendly communications, communication’s obstacles, recommendations for making the verbal communications more efficient. Two weeks after the training, both groups filled the Marital Conflict Questionnaire again. The results were analyzed and compared together.

The analyses of results were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Science software ver. 20 and using the independent and paired analytic T-test. P < 0.05 was considered as significant.
3. Results

48% Table 1 shows that most of the participants (46.6% of control group, 43.3% of case group) belong to the 26 to 30 year-old age group. It also shows that the educational degree of the majority of them is diploma. In addition, 26.6% of women in control group and 30% of those in case group, were married to a relative, 30% of control group and 33.3% of case group were employed. Generally, 76.3% of those in control group and 80% of those in case group were satisfied by their marriage.

Table 1 frequency distribution of participants according to their personal information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal information</th>
<th>Case group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>below 20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>primary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>secondary</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diploma</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>73.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher BA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative proportion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non relative</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housekeeper</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 general comparison of effective communication in married women of case and control group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective communication</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>Difference of Mean</th>
<th>p**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case group</td>
<td>62.43</td>
<td>21.27</td>
<td>112.75</td>
<td>28.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control group</td>
<td>63.04</td>
<td>21.88</td>
<td>64.12</td>
<td>22.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p*</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p** with T test- difference of means

According to the table 2, before intervention there was not any significant difference in their communication skills between the two group, (p=0.28). However, the difference became statistically significant after the study (p=0.0000). Also, the pre-test and post-test mean scores of the case group demonstrated a significant advance (p=0.0000), showing the impact of communication skills trainings in case group in comparison to the controls. Table 3 depicts the analyses of these results.
According to the table 3, the absolute value of calculated $T$ (12.46) in degree of freedom (58) is larger than $T$'s value in table. Therefore it can be concluded with 95 per cent confidence that there is significant difference between case and control groups in their scores in Marital Conflict Questionnaire, which in turn means, that the communication skills training had reduced the conflicts between couples.

According to the table 4, in sub-scales such as reduced cooperation, reduced rate of sexual intercourse, increased emotional reactions, increased personal relationships with relatives, and decreased family relationships with spouse’s relatives and friends, because the calculated $T$ (6.98, 3.66, 6.55, 6.11, 7.86) with a degree of freedom of 58 were bigger than the $T$ in table, we can conclude with a 95% confidence that there is a significant difference between the means of case and control groups. In other words, skills trainings had significantly improved the cooperation, the sexual intercourse, the emotional reactions, the personal relationships with relatives and family relationship with spouse’s relatives and friends. However, this is not true in sub-scales such as child support and separating the finances because the calculated $T$ were (1.03, 1.66) smaller than the one in the table which means that we can conclude with a 95 percent confidence that there was no significant difference between the two groups of case and control groups. In other words, the trainings had no effect on child support and separating the finances.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The results of the present study confirmed our first hypothesis. This is in agreement with the findings of Schilling, et al (2003) ; Halford et al (2001) ; Gottman, (2004); Hosseini (2005); Nazari & Navabinejad, (2006), Yalcın, & Karahan, (2007); Khojaste Mehr, (2008) studies. It seems that the communication skills training had strongly influenced the marital conflicts in women. Using different skills of effective communication such as active listening, empathy, problem-solving and self-assertiveness increased the possibility of healthy connection with husband and, as a result, reduced their conflicts. When the conflicts are subsided, couples care much more about each other’s crucial necessities. On the other side, aggravating the marital conflicts could cause indifference and disrespect to the partner’s needs. In such conditions spouses are not able to express their real needs because they believe that their partner should understand these needs himself. Therefore, after a while, they become disappointed and try to get the attention negatively. This leads to maladaptive behaviors such as sulking, fault-finding,
threatening, criticizing and blaming, which in turn aggravate the conflicts and maladaptive behaviors.

These results, also, confirmed the second hypothesis which is in agreement with different studies (Buttler & Wampler, 1999; Schilling, et al, 2003; Halford et al, 2001; Hosseinian, 2005; Yalcin, & Karahan, 2007). Cooperation, here, means the inclination of each spouse to attend to the other’s opinions, to come to a common conclusion on different issues and to avoid disagreeing and illogical refusal of spouse’s opinions. It seems that the communication skills training can lead to a stronger pair-bonding, more emotional expression (specially, positive ones) and enhancement of dialogues and intimate listening in both part. Such a condition may increase the sense of cooperation among couples.

The third hypothesis is also confirmed, and this in agreement with the results of Metz & Epstein (2002), Yeh, et al (2006), Litzinger, et al (2005) and Ashdown et al (2011). Marital conflicts can weaken the love, intimacy and affection between the partners. This can significantly diminish the quality of partner’s sex life. It is specifically important for women, because their sexual satisfaction is more influenced by the emotional context. It can be, thus, concluded that the training may have increased the skills among the spouses which in turn have improved their emotional status (specially the women’s) and as a consequence, their sexual satisfaction. It has been shown that the intimacy and affection, is the key factor of healthy marital life (Hatami, 1385).

The results confirmed the forth hypothesis which is in line with Gottman etal (1998) study. It seems that those trained with effective communication skills could have replaced their negative emotions such as anger, anxiety and sorrow with positive emotions such as affection, kindness, respect, and love. They could have controlled their negative emotions and instead express their needs in a direct and courageous way.

This survey did not confirm the fifth hypothesis which is contrary to what Hosseinian (2005) has found. It may be the result of having no children or very young children, which make their roles trivial in marital conflicts. In principle, in order to influence their parent’s interactions, the children should be old enough to be able to express their opinions and comments.

This study did also confirm the sixth and seventh hypothesis. This was in agreement with studies of Hosseinian (2005) and Soodani et al (2010). James Framo argues that family problems are usually rooted in Marriage Systems. The identity and quality of a marital relationship is influenced by the familial relationships within the families of husband and wife, specially the degree to which their conflicts are resolved (Barker, 2007). It is, therefore, plausible to conclude that those experienced the training, had been able to improve their marital status and thus their relationships with spouse’s relatives and friends. This is in concordance with Bowen’s inter-generational theory. He believed that in most of dysfunctional families, the members lack an independent identity and most of the challenges in the family are results of this psychological dependency on the father of family. (Barcker, 2007). In the case of intense conflicts, the communication of each side is increased with his/her own relatives (specially the father) and, gradually, takes the place of marital relationship. The strong dependency of couple to friends and relatives is one of the important factors that reduces the marital satisfaction and thus, leads to divorce. (Beach, 2006). In addition, constant physical presence and possible interventions of husband or wife family in couple’s life, blurs the borders of private environment of couples with outside and this leads to more conflicts.

This study did not confirm the eighth hypothesis. This finding is coordinate with the results of Hosseinian (2005) and Soudani Studies Nowey (2003) has shown that disagreement on financial issues is one of the main reasons of marital conflicts. Marital conflicts make both the husband and wife more anxious, so, each tries to maintain his/her financial sources in order to reduce this anxiety. It seems, however, that our participants either had no financial conflicts or if they had had, their conflicts were immune to the communication skills training.

There had been some limitations in our study. One is that our sample is limited to married women. In addition, our only source of information had been the self-measured instruments and that the researcher had no access to the family of participants. Some of the husbands opposed to the presence of their wives in the session and some of the women came to sessions with their offspring. Considering these issue in designing and performing future surveys would be of immense importance.

References


