Effectiveness Assessment of Group "Systematic Motivational Counseling" (SMC) on the Reduction of Marital Distress Rate in Iran

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Abstract
In this research, the effectiveness of group Systematic Motivational Counseling (SMC) on the reduction of marital distress rate was evaluated. The participants consisted of 18 couples among the clients who visited Arak's Counseling Center (Iran) having marital life experience from at least two years up to 15 years. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups: 8 in the experimental (intervention) group and 11 in the control group. A week prior to the study, a marital satisfaction pretest was accomplished due to marital distress. Then the experimental group was exposed to SMC for ten sessions while the control group did not receive any interventional program. A week after the final session, the marital distress post-test was carried out for both groups. Finally, the ANCOVA test was applied for the analysis of the derived results.

The results showed that SMC significantly reduced the marital distress rate. SMC also improved meaningfully such factors as the average score of participants on the subscales as reduction of co-operation, sexual relationship increase, mutual emotional reactions, attraction for offspring support, interpersonal relationship with their own relatives and increase in financial independence. Meanwhile, SMC did not significantly fulfill reduction on the average scores of participants on such subscales as family relationship with spousal relatives and friends. On the basis of the findings, the investigators recommend that in all health-related studies on changing behavior, the behavioral theories and models should be continuously applied.
Keywords: Systematic motivational counseling, Marital distress, Cooperative, Sexual relationship, Emotional reaction.

Background
Family is a phenomenon which is more than individuals who live in a physico-psychological environment. At present, family can be found in various forms, each of which could be considered as a single socio-cultural system. Family along with its all characteristics is based on a set of regulations so that each member plays a certain role. Furthermore, family consists of a power structure to which different aspects of communication forms, whether evident or hidden, will be manifested. Members of family enjoy much common background, internalized perceptions, hypotheses on the outer world and common understanding of life objectives. The families, from organizational prospect, include complicated emotional systems, consisting of three or, presently due to increment of life expectation, four generations. Each family relatively makes its efforts as a group for self-regulation, and if to be a modern one, it would be manifested unavoidably (Goldenberg, 2000).

In general, marriage is as prerequisite for family formation. The family life will be formed by marital life so it will last and survive as long as the latter continues as well. Marriage as the most important and key social tradition, has always been approved for achieving emotional and security needs of adults.

Paying attention to family, having a focal healthy and constructive environment, and enjoying intimacy interactions that will enable sustainable growth and development are counted as the main objectives and requirements of marriage. As studies shown, there is strong relationship between marriage and welfare (Diner, Goom, and Swashi, 2000).

Lack of intimacy, confidence and satisfaction are indicative of unsecured affectionate relations between the couples. In fact, the interaction between couples occurs through unsecured affectionate relations and defensive emotional patterns, which prevent confidence, intimacy and suitable reactions (Johnson, 2005).

Wiseman, Sheldon and Goring (2000) believe that there are relations between psychiatry disorders, whether physical, cognitive or behavioral, and marriage-related stresses, anxiety, phobia and panic. Further, Locus et al. (2003) have shown that marital satisfaction and life satisfaction interrelated positively. In the recent years, considering the consequences of marital distress on individual and social life, and the increment of divorce cases, it is essential to apply efficient therapeutic and counseling procedures to help distressed couples. Different theories of counseling and family therapy have recently appeared. Particularly in the due course of three decades, much effort has been made by family therapists as innovative strategies for elimination or reduction of marital distress (Soleymanian, 2004).

Therefore, diagnosis of marital distress and family dissolution is very important for prevention and treatment. Different theories emphasize on the role of a certain factor in the formation of psychological disorders including marital distress. Behavioral theories relevant to marital or marriage therapy are based on the principle that the whole marital conflicts are functions of cognitive rules and regulations. Communicative theories believe that family dissolutions and marital distresses are mostly related to insufficient skills of clients to establish an appropriate communication or their disability in problem solving. The cognitive theories are based on this presumption that marital problems and distresses arise from incorrect and wrong beliefs and attitudes (Nichols and Schwartz, 1998).

The systematic motivational counseling (SMC), which will be discussed in the present study, is based on this belief that marital disorders of individuals are rooted in their maladjusted motivational structure (Cox and Clinger, 2002).
**Systematic Motivational Counseling (SMC)**

The (SMC) is based on the current disturbances theories. According to this theory, behavior, experience and cognitive activities of humans are organized on the axis of incentives and objectives (Emunz, 1999). Cox and Klinger (2002) believe that the process of selection and persuasion of the goals is called motivational structure. This structure differs from one person to another and is able to predict the individual attitudes toward such behaviors as drug and alcohol abuse and job satisfaction. Cox and Klinger (2002) have also characterized two motivation structures as adjusted (compatible) and maladjusted (incompatible), which are distinct from each other in the following two aspects:

1. Type of selected incentives for persuasion (follow up),
2. Persuasion procedure of the selected incentives.

Those individuals who have compatible motivational structure often spend their own resources for persuading healthy incentives and more often seek positives goals. They also make extra-commitments for their goals and expect much pleasure for achievement of the goals while they will be dissatisfied if the objectives are not achieved. They shall be optimist toward the successes and there is the least conflicts among their various goals (Soleymanian, 2004). Unlike the former group, the individuals with incompatible motivational structure intend to motivate their excitement through unhealthy ways so they shall be exposed to disorder and disturbance (Cox and Klinger, 2002). The Individuals who have incompatible motivational structure are characterized as:

a) Minimum positive incentives,
b) Avoidable motivation,
c) Minimum hope for goal achievement,
d) Minimum content or satisfaction for goal achievement or minimum dissatisfaction for not achieving the goal(s),
e) Feeling far from the goal upon time,
f) Minimum commitment towards the goals,
g) Feeling limited control over the goals,
h) Least information or ignorance about the goals.

These individuals have less control on their alcohol abuse while feel less life satisfaction and have low motivation for treatment and changing their behaviors (Cox, Potus and Hosyer, 2002).

**Instructions of SMC Implementation**

Similar to all counseling and therapeutic procedures, the counselor who intends to apply SMC, firstly should spend time on assessing the clients and establishing communication while trying to create an appropriate curative environment to give counseling services. It would require:

1) Introducing SMC and its logic to the clients,
2) Specifying the clients feedback toward SMC, and
3) If they will be intended to apply such procedure or not.

Cox, Klinger and Bunt (1999) presented the process of SMC sessions in eleven stages as follows:

**A) Primary Stages of Counseling**

Stage 1: Review on the clients' objectives and concerns,
Stage 2: Analysis of objectives interrelations,

**B) Objectives Determination Stages**

Stage 3: Determining curative objectives,
Stage 4: Determining the objectives hierarchy,
Stage 5: Determining the intersession objectives.
C) Follow Up Stages
Stage 6: Enhancing potentials to achieve the objectives,
Stage 7: Solving the objective conflicts,
Stage 8: Abandonment of inappropriate objectives,
Stage 9: Recognition of new incentives,
Stage 10: Change of life style from avoidable to diastrophism (attitudinal),
Stage 11: Reassessment of self-esteem **resources**

Cox and Klinger works upon applying SMC were initiated in the filed of drug addiction, which were then applied as a base in clinical studies. Applications of SMC have not been solely limited to alcoholics; rather this procedure has so far been successfully applied in such fields as drug addiction, emotional and personality disorders as well as enhancing the job satisfaction rate (Cox & Klinger, 2003)

**General Framework of the Sessions Held in the Study**

**Session 1:** Providing a good communication atmosphere full of confidence and secure between the couples, getting familiar with the couples, filling out the demographic forms of the participants, acquaintance of the couples with the therapist and study objectives, and getting acquainted with the rules and regulations of the session.

**Session 2:** Getting acquainted with the SMC approach, filling out the PCI Questionnaire, which is unavoidable in SMC.

**Session 3:** Reviewing and scoring (scaling) the clients objectives and concerns,

**Session 4:** Assessment of relations between the objectives via applying the objective matrices.

**Session 5:** Providing the objectives hierarchy, consisting of a series of small objectives as the initial base for achieving the final goal(s) or objective(s),

**Session 6:** Planning for achieving the objectives hierarchy,

**Session 7:** Solving the objectives conflicts,

**Session 8:** Abandoning of inappropriate objectives,

**Session 9:** Changing of the objectives from avoidable to diastrophism (attitudinal),

**Session 10:** Summary and Conclusions.

**Hypotheses**
- There is a significant difference between the couples participated in the group SMC and those not participated in the program,
- There is a significant difference between the couples participated in the group SMC and those not participated in the program in terms of marital distress in the subscale of attraction of sibling support,
- There is a significant difference between the couples participated in the group SMC and those not participated in the program in terms of marital distress in the subscale of reduction of the relations with the friends and spousal relatives,
- There is a significant difference between the couples participated in the group SMC and those not participated in the program in terms of marital distress in the subscale of financial independence of the couples,
- There is a significant difference between the couples participated in the group SMC and those not participated in the program in terms of marital distress in the subscale of reduction of cooperation,
- There is a significant difference between the couples participated in the group SMC and those not participated in the program in terms of marital distress in the subscale of reduction of the couples sexual relationship,
• There is a significant difference between the couples participated in the group that have not participated in the program in terms of marital distress in the subscale of emotional reactions between the couples.

Methods
The present study is actually a quasi-experimental applied research consisting of two groups (experiment control). The target community of the study consisted of volunteer couples who invited according to the summons declared in Arak on Sep & Oct, 2008, while they were spending post marriage period from 2 up to 15 years. Furthermore, as the couples should participate at 10 training sessions, all of them were selected just from Arak provincial city to prevent and compensate the possible shortages far districts. The participants consisting of 18 couples selected from among the total of 80 couples to participate at the training course considering the rate of the couples marital distress and with the distress scores ranging from 115 to 134 (Sanaei and Barati, 2000). They were randomly assigned into two groups; 8 in the experimental group and 11 (10) in the control group.

Study Tools & Scale
In this study, the marital distress rate was measured using a self-reporting Questionnaire containing 42 questions developed modified by Sanaie & Barati (The Questionnaire itself has been emerged from the scale of marital satisfaction by Enrich and Sanaei's consulting experiences) and originally applied for assessment and recognition of the essence of marital distress rate.

The scale included seven sub-scales as: increment in sibling support, increase of inter-personal relationships with the relatives, reduction of family relationship with spousal relatives and friends, independence of financial affairs, reduction of co-operation, reduction of sexual relationship between the couples and increase of emotional reactions towards each other.

Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire
The content of the constructs of the scale has been provided as such having a close and direct relation with a certain variable. Therefore, for evaluating the validity of the questionnaire, it is possible to cite on its content validity. In addition to content analysis of the scales, to assess the content validity, the correlation of each question was determined for the test scores of each scale. Finally, after primary application and calculating of the correlation of each question with the questionnaire and its relevant scales, 13 out of the total of 55 questions were omitted because of the non-significant correlation with the total of the test scores. As a result, 42 questions remained as they were correlated with the whole scores.

Reliability of the Questionnaire
Choronbach a of the whole questionnaire in a group consisted of 32 participants was equal to 56% and for its 7 subscales as below:

- Reduction of co-operation: 30%
- Reduction of sexual relationship: 50%
- Increase of emotional reactions toward each other: 73%
- Increase in the attraction of sibling support: 60%
- Increase of inter-personal relationship with relatives: 64%
- Reduction of family relationship with the spousal relatives and friends: 64%
- Independence of the couples financial affairs: 51%
According to renormalization (Dehghani, ...), performed, the Chorobach α for the whole questionnaire in a group consisted of 30 participants was equal to 71% and for its 7 constructs (subscases) as below:
- Reduction of co-operation: 73%
- Reduction of sexual relationship: 60%
- Increase of emotional reactions toward each other: 74%
- Increase in the attraction of sibling support: 81%
- Increase of inter-personal relationship with relatives: 65%
- Reduction of family relationship with the spousal relatives and friends: 81%
- Independence of the couples financial affairs: 69%

Besides, in the present study, the Chorobach α for the whole questionnaire in a group consisted of 38 participants was equal to 66% and for its 7 constructs (subscases) as below:
- Reduction of co-operation: 67%
- Reduction of Sexual relationship: 56%
- Increase of emotional reactions toward each other: 81%
- Increase in the attraction of sibling support: 65%
- Increase of inter-personal relationship with relatives: 62%
- Reduction of family relationship with the spousal relatives and friends: 60%
- Independence of the couples financial affairs: 68%

Data Analysis
In this study, we used descriptive method for data description while ANCOVA was used for the two groups’ comparison. The results showed no significant difference between the two groups in such factors age, number of children, level of literacy, occupation, place of residence, enjoying counseling services, marriage duration, marriage type, health status, living with spousal family and income rate. The results also showed that there was no meaningful difference between the two groups in the pretest marital distress in all subscales.

Results
1st Hypothesis
There is a meaningful difference in marital distress between the couples who participated in SMC and those not participated in the program.

Table 1: The ANCOVA results attained for marital distress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change references</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>ms</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>Meaningfulness level</th>
<th>Eta coefficient</th>
<th>Power Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5349.9</td>
<td>234/89</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.878</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22.775</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

According to the data shown in Table 1, there is a meaningful difference between the posttest average scores of the experimental and control groups in terms of marital distress (P<0.01). This indicates that group SMC decreased the marital distress rate in the experimental (intervention) group.
2\textsuperscript{nd} Hypothesis

There is a meaningful difference due to marital distress increment on the subscale of attraction of sibling support between the couples who participated in the group SMC and those not participated in the program.

Table 2: The ANCOVA results attained for the subscale of increment in the attraction of sibling support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change references</th>
<th>df</th>
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<th>f</th>
<th>Meaningfulness level</th>
<th>Eta coefficient</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26/194</td>
<td>8/307</td>
<td>0/007</td>
<td>0/201</td>
<td>0/799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3/163</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 2, there is a meaningful difference between the post-test average scores of the experimental and control groups (P<0/01), indicating that SMC significantly decreased the attraction of sibling support in the experimental (intervention) group.

3\textsuperscript{rd} Hypothesis

There is a meaningful difference on marital distress due to the increment of interpersonal relationship with relatives between the couples who participated in SMC and those not participated in the program.

Table 3: The ANCOVA results attained for the increment of interpersonal relationship with relatives

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Change references</th>
<th>df</th>
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<th>Meaningfulness level</th>
<th>Eta coefficient</th>
<th>Power Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>45.145</td>
<td>12.304</td>
<td>6.001</td>
<td>0.0372</td>
<td>0.926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.669</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

According to the data shown in Table 3, there is a meaningful difference in the post-test average scores of the experimental and control groups (P<0/01). In other words, SMC decreased the inter-personal relationship with relatives in the experimental (intervention) group.

4\textsuperscript{th} Hypothesis

There is a meaningful difference on marital distress in the subscale of reduction of family relationships with the spousal relatives and friends between the couples who participated in SMC and those not participated in the program.

Table 4: The ANCOVA results attained for the reduction of family relationships with the spousal relatives and friends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change references</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>ms</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>Meaningfulness level</th>
<th>Eta coefficient</th>
<th>Power Test</th>
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<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.93</td>
<td>2.778</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>0.537</td>
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<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.215</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 4, there is no meaningful difference between post-test average scores of the experimental and control groups (P<0/67), indicating that SMC was not able to increase meaningfully the family relationship with the spousal relatives and friends.
5th Hypothesis

There is a meaningful difference on marital distress in the subscale of financial independence between the couples who participated in SMC and those not participated in the program.

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<th>Meaningfulness level</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41/353</td>
<td>5/181</td>
<td>0/01</td>
<td>0/136</td>
<td>0/599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7/982</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

According to the data shown in Table 5, there is a meaningful difference in the post-test average scores of the two groups (P<...), indicating that SMC changed meaningfully the financial independence between the couples in the experimental group.

6th Hypothesis

There is a meaningful difference on marital distress in the subscale of cooperation (cooperative relations) reduction between the couples who participated in SMC and those not participated in the program.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Meaningfulness level</th>
<th>Eta coefficient</th>
<th>Power Test</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>204/875</td>
<td>35/371</td>
<td>0/000</td>
<td>0/517</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8/92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As Table 6 shows, there is a meaningful difference in the post-test average scores of the two groups (P<0/01), confirming that SMC increased cooperation between the couples in the experimental (intervention) group.

7th Hypothesis

There is a meaningful difference on marital distress in the subscale of sexual relations reduction between the couples who participated in SMC and those not participated in the program.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>f</th>
<th>Meaningfulness level</th>
<th>Eta coefficient</th>
<th>Power Test</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
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<td>264/904</td>
<td>39/327</td>
<td>0/000</td>
<td>0/544</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6/736</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

As shown in Table 7, there is a meaningful difference in the post-test average scores of the experimental and control groups (P<0/01), suggesting that SMC could increase sexual relations between the couples in the experimental (intervention) group.

8th Hypothesis

There is a meaningful difference on marital distress due to increment of emotional reactions between the couples who participated in SMC and those not participated in the program.
Table 8: The ANCOVA results attained for the subscale of emotional reactions between the couples

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Change references</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>ms</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>Meaningfulness level</th>
<th>Eta coefficient</th>
<th>Power Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>363/502</td>
<td>54.089</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.621</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>672</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Table 8 shows that there is a meaningful difference between the posttest average scores of the two groups (P<0.01), indicating that SMC decreased emotional reactions between the couples.

Conclusions

The results derived from the study indicated that group SMC was effective on reducing the marital distress rate in the experimental (intervention) group as compared with the control group (P=0.01). Further, SMC was effective towards reducing the marital distress rate in different dimensions of marital relations including: reduction of cooperation, reduction of sexual relations, increment in the attraction of sibling support and increase of inter-personal relationship with family relatives, independence of financial affairs and increase of emotional reactions between the couples at the level of P<0.01. But it could not significantly affect on the subscale of reduction of family relationships with spousal relations and friends (P=0.67). These finding are in consistent with the findings of Soleymanian (2005).

The results of the study generally show that group SMC was effective on the reduction of marital distress and its dimensions expect for family relationships with spousal relatives and friends, suggesting that it was able to reduce marital distress through changing incompatible motivational structure.

According to Cox & Klinger (2003), SMC is a technique for evaluation and changing of the incompatible motivational structure aiming at directing the individuals toward a satisfactory and successful life.

As mentioned in the Introduction, one of the main features or characteristics of those individuals who have incompatible motivational structure is that they often intend to achieve avoidable goals so far as attitudinal. Such avoidable goals usually lead to negative emotions, causing some disturbances in marital relations (Watson & Clark, 1984).

On the other hand, the attitudinal goals are more compatible with positive emotions and feeling of satisfaction. Gateman (1998) has shown that there is a firm and strong relation between positive emotions and satisfaction in marital life.

Of the other characteristics of those individuals having compatible or adaptive motivational structures is conflict among their life objectives (goals). Such a conflict can lead to troubles through developing permanent psychological disorders and lack of behavioral control for the couples who have good emotional relations and intimacy toward each other (Palizolitie, 1983).

Considering the fact that the participants receive a series of skills in the process of SMC, they will be able to apply them to convert their avoidable goals into attitudinal ones and, at the same time, enhance their self control over goals achievement, and then solve possible conflicts via association analysis among their goals. Seemingly, SMC succeeded to reduce marital distress in the intervention group compared with the control group through changing the individuals' motivational structure.

One of the skills that couples learn in the SMC sessions conflict solving strategy of goals (Benazon, 2000); narrated by Soleymanian, 2005.

Furthermore, goals conflicts are associated with stress and emotional problems as well (Guttman, 1998). The existence of such factors as depression, emotional problems and stress in the couple's marital relations may often lead to problems in their sexual relationship (Kevin, Thompson & Palmer, 2002).
SMC, succeeded to increase positive emotions and intimacy of the couples through enhancing their skills to solve the conflicts, and thus considerably improve their sexual relationship as well. Also it could reduce negative behaviors and extra control on the behaviors through changing the incompatible motivational structure and reducing the goals conflict or shifting avoidable motivation towards attitudinal as well as determining the tangible (concrete), attainable and objective goals, leading to decreased emotional reactions in the experimental group.

Bernstein (1993) and Klinger (1987) indicated that there is a positive and direct association between feeling well and life meaningfulness with tangible (concrete), attainable and objective goals and feeling life satisfaction. Of the other skills of SMC taught for the couples is the skill of compiling goals ladder. The couples are taught to write their general and ambiguous goals as attainable, concrete and objective ones, and then provide the essential ladder to achieve their own goals. It seems such activity will lead to reach common goals, resulting in common interests between the couples. This in turn will lead to increase in their mutual cooperation in various dimensions of their life. Further, considering the structure and procedure of SMC and the couples’ increasing cooperation trend, the inter-personal relations with their own relatives and attraction of sibling support will be decreased.

In explanation of ineffectiveness of SMC on reduction of family relationship with the spousal relatives and friends, it is to be added that, first of all, the couples who live independently from spousal family will enjoy the chance to freely exchange their visits with the spousal family, since living with them may cause having an excuse to encounters and unwanted visiting. Secondly, such dimension of marital distress is mostly beyond the mutual relations of the couples, in other words, it is out of their control. Therefore, the mentality formed as such about them from their families’ side needs necessarily longer time and deeper training. So that it may even seem essential to hold sessions with their relevant families in this respect. Accordingly, the group SMC can definitely be applied for the reduction of marital distress.

Recommendations of the study

1. As in this study, the effect of SMC procedure was observed in association with some of the social and personal characteristics of the participants, so for specifying such procedure more accurately, it is recommended to select the participants from a certain social class considering their social and personal characteristics.

2. Due to time limitation, this study does not contain the relevant follow-up data. Meanwhile, regarding the fact that acceptance of new models and substituting of them in the family, particularly for those couples suffering from average to severe conflicts in their marital relations, needs longer time, thus it is recommended to consider the participants’ follow-up in future studies.

3. Considering the fact that the present study was applied on a group of educated couples, it is recommended to evaluate other social classes according to SMC in future studies.

4. Since most of the counseling courses are upon traditional theories, it is recommended to extent SMC training and application as a practical and objective method to different related areas.

5. As the couples marital distress is an effective factor on the increment of behavioral and psychological problems in the society, it seems that the required trainings and enhancing of the relevant skills in the field of solving distress (conflict) as well as promotion of communication skills, whether at the pre- and post-marriage periods, will be effective on the enhancement of psychological health levels and the couples marital satisfaction as well as prevention of the resulting problems in due course.
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