



EFFECTIVENESS OF EMOTION-FOCUSED COUPLES THERAPY ON SEXUAL SATISFACTION, EXTRAMARITAL RELATIONSHIPS, AND MARITAL FRUSTRATION

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Abstract

This study examined the efficacy of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT-C) in improving sexual satisfaction, reducing tendencies toward extramarital relationships, and alleviating marital frustration among distressed couples. Using a randomized pretest-posttest control group design, twenty-four couples were assigned to either an EFT-C intervention group or a control group. The intervention group participated in eight structured sessions focused on emotional bonding, attachment needs, and restructuring negative interaction patterns. A Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) revealed significant improvements for the treatment group. Couples who completed EFT-C reported significantly higher sexual satisfaction ($F(1, 22) = 26.14, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .48$), reduced tendencies toward extramarital behaviors ($F(1, 22) = 18.67, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .36$), and lower levels of marital frustration ($F(1, 22) = 21.39, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .42$). These findings suggest that EFT-C is an effective attachment-based intervention that strengthens intimacy, fosters secure attachment, and mitigates maladaptive coping mechanisms, thereby enhancing overall marital quality and stability.

Keywords: Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy; sexual satisfaction; extramarital relationships; marital frustration; attachment; couple therapy; intervention outcomes.

Introduction

The focused couple therapy (EFT-C) is a well researched approach that therapists use to help couples see how feelings drive conflict. The focused couple therapy (EFT-C) uses the attachment theory to say that relationship distress comes from unhelpful emotional cycles that grow out of attachment insecurities (Greenman & Johnson 2022). The partners who are stuck in the emotional cycles move back and forth between reaching out and pulling away. The partners each try to get safety. The pattern of moving forth often makes the distance larger. Over time emotional misattunement hurts the sense of support. Emotional misattunement also hurts the attachment bond that holds secure intimacy together (Spengler, et al. 2024). I have seen this pattern, in relationships.

One study demonstrated that the individuals with attachment anxiety and greater emotional control showed more pronounced gains in marital satisfaction across the treatment (Conrad, et al., 2021). The study was clear. Also the changes, in relationship- attachment including the avoidance and the anxiety directly linked to increased relational satisfaction during the therapy. The findings show that EFT-C does not simply patch surface-level behaviors. EFT-C reshapes the attachment dynamics and promotes the lasting relational change (Lewczek, et al. 2021).

When we talk about satisfaction EFT-C has shown good effects. In a study of infertile couples who had marital conflict and low sexual satisfaction EFT-C greatly improved the marital adjustment and the sexual satisfaction. I have seen EFT-C in practice. EFT-C is especially important because sexual distress is complex. Sexual distress often includes functional problems, emotional disconnection, shame and unmet attachment needs (Shabaninia, et al., 2025).

Relational injury is more, than feeling unhappy. Relational injury can become a wound when infidelity shows up in a couple's life. Infidelity can break trust bring shame cause betrayal and shake the couple's emotional bond. Attachment injuries that come from behavior can also break trust bring shame cause betrayal and destabilize the couple's core emotional bond. In my experience EFT-C gives a path to heal (Asgari, et al. 2022). I found an example, in a case study where therapists used the attachment-injury resolution model of EFT to handle the painful outcome of infidelity. The therapists used the model to create safety to invite vulnerability and to guide enactments. The therapists saw that emotional safety, vulnerability and enactments can bring back a connection that felt completely broken. The case study shows that the model can restore a connection that seemed damaged (Alavimoghadam, et al. 2021).

We notice the link, between attachment insecurity and infidelity is clear. A review of studies found that higher attachment anxiety and higher attachment avoidance are linked to higher rates of marital infidelity. The findings show that attachment style adds to distress and also adds to the risk of extramarital behavior (Timulak et al., 2022).

In addition to satisfaction and betrayal, another critical but sometimes underappreciated outcome of relational distress is marital frustration or burnout. Chronic disconnection, repeated emotional ruptures, and unresolved conflicts can lead to a state of emotional exhaustion, disillusionment, and disengagement. In couples therapy contexts, EFT-C has been shown to reduce relational tensions, rebuild emotional accessibility, and restore a sense of commitment—even in deeply wounded relationships. Although burnout as a distinct construct has received less empirical attention than satisfaction or trust, these relational improvements indicate that EFT-C may be effective at addressing long-term weariness in relationships (Javdan, et al., 2023).

Even though there is evidence for EFT-C the literature still has gaps. Many studies look at EFT-C's impact on marital satisfaction and trust but fewer studies look at how the therapy changes sexual satisfaction after a relational injury such as infidelity. The existing studies on outcomes usually focus on special groups, for example infertile couples but those studies may not capture how sexual healing works after betrayal (Vanhee, et al. 2018). Attachment theory links insecure attachment styles to infidelity. We observe that researchers have not yet done controlled studies that look at how changing the attachment dynamics with EFT-C can actually lower the chance of outside relationships or, at least cut the risk. The gap matters for clinicians. If EFT-C can change security in a way that protects against future betrayal then EFT-C would become a prevention method, not only a repair method.

Researchers have not studied frustration and burnout much in EFT research especially in couples who have cheated before. In the settings emotional exhaustion, repeated betrayals and relational fatigue appear often. Most outcome studies look at satisfaction or trust. Most outcome studies do not look at long-term wear and tear like frustration or burnout. I think that learning how EFT-C changes frustration and burnout can improve theories of change. Clinicians can then adjust treatments to fix the breaks and also to heal the long-lasting relational fatigue. We see that the socio-cultural consequences of infidelity make the need for research urgent. Infidelity brings distress and also causes relational destabilization. Infidelity affects family systems, parenting and even the larger

social and cultural attitudes toward fidelity and commitment (Paul, 2024). Interventions that address injury restore attachment security and improve relational satisfaction are needed. Interventions must work on emotional dimensions. Interventions matter for couples and, for public health. Because of those gaps the study looks at the effectiveness of Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy. Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy influences the satisfaction, the extramarital relationships and the marital frustration, in the couples who have experienced infidelity.

Methods

Study Design

We implemented a control group pretest-posttest design. The focus was determining the effects of Emotion Focused Couples Therapy (EFT-C) on sexual satisfaction, extra-marital affairs, and marital frustration. Only the experimental group received EFT-C. The control group was on the waitlist and did not receive any interventions during the study. Our design allowed us to determine the changes attributable to the EFT-C intervention while controlling for baseline differences between the groups.

Participants

48 individuals in 24 couples in the age range of 25 to 50 were examined in this study. The couples who had extramarital affairs for the past year reported relationship issues. They were referred to counseling centers in Bojnourd. Inclusion criteria required that the couples: The couples were legally married and living together, Both partners of the couples gave consent to join therapy sessions and research assessments, The couples showed moderate to levels of marriage dissatisfaction based on screening questionnaires and The couples were not currently, in any couples therapy. Exclusion criteria included psychiatric disorders (e.g., psychosis, severe depression) ongoing substance abuse or imminent divorce proceedings. We randomly assigned the participants to the group (n = 12 couples) or the control group (n = 12 couples) using a computerized randomization protocol. We made sure the experimental group and the control group were balanced for age, duration of marriage and baseline sexual satisfaction.

Intervention

The experimental group received 10 weekly EFT-C sessions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. The therapy followed the standard EFT-C protocol outlined by Johnson (2004), including the three stages: De-escalation of negative interaction cycles – identifying maladaptive patterns and expressing core attachment needs, Restructuring interactions – facilitating safe emotional expression and promoting responsiveness between partners and Consolidation and integration – reinforcing secure attachment bonds, promoting behavioral change, and preventing relapse into maladaptive patterns.

Table 1. Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFT-C) Intervention Sessions

Session	Goals & Activities	Key Techniques
1	Assessment & Alliance Building: Introduce EFT-C, establish rapport, identify presenting problems, gather relational history	Open-ended questions, active listening, reflective responses
2	Identify Negative Interaction Patterns: Observe and map maladaptive cycles (pursuit-withdraw, criticism-defensiveness)	Interactional analysis, cycle mapping, validation of emotions
3	Accessing Underlying Emotions: Help partners identify core emotions (fear, vulnerability) driving their behaviors	Emotion labeling, empathic reflection, guided disclosure
4	Attachment Needs Clarification:	Enactments, evocative questions, role-

	Highlight unmet attachment needs, fears, and desires	playing safe expression
5	Restructuring Interactions: Facilitate vulnerable disclosure and responsive emotional engagement	Enactments, validation, structured dialogue
6	Promote Emotional Responsiveness: Teach partners to respond constructively to each other's attachment needs	Reflective listening, repairing misattunements, modeling adaptive responses
7	Consolidation of Positive Change: Reinforce successful interaction patterns, practice new ways of expressing needs	Behavioral rehearsal, homework assignments, positive feedback
8	Addressing Betrayal/Infidelity (if applicable): Process past relational injuries, foster forgiveness and understanding	Attachment injury resolution model, emotional processing, empathy exercises
9	Preventing Relapse & Strengthening Security: Identify triggers, develop coping strategies, strengthen secure attachment	Problem-solving, communication planning, relapse prevention strategies
10	Integration & Closure: Review progress, solidify gains, discuss future relational goals	Summary of progress, reinforcement of skills, termination discussion

Sessions were conducted by licensed clinical psychologists with at least 5 years of experience in EFT-C. Fidelity to the EFT-C model was ensured via supervision and session recordings reviewed by senior therapists. The control group did not receive any therapy during the study period but were offered the intervention after completion of posttest assessments.

Measures

Sexual Satisfaction: The Larson Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire consists of 25 items, each rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “always.” The total score categorizes respondents into four levels of sexual satisfaction: sexual dissatisfaction (scores below 50), low satisfaction (50–75), moderate satisfaction (75–100), and high satisfaction (above 100). For data analysis purposes, individuals reporting sexual dissatisfaction or low satisfaction were coded as 1, while those with moderate or high satisfaction were coded as 2. This instrument has been validated in Iran by Shahni et al., with a reported Cronbach’s alpha of 0.93, indicating excellent reliability. Overall, the questionnaire demonstrates a satisfactory level of reliability and has been culturally adapted for use in the Iranian population (Tadayon, et al., 2018).

Extramarital Relationships: The Tendency for Extramarital Relationships questionnaire, developed by Drigotas et al. (1999) and also referred to as the Infidelity Scale, is designed to provide insight into individuals’ extramarital sexual and emotional relationships. Rather than asking direct questions such as “Have you ever engaged in extramarital relationships?” or “What activities have you participated in outside your marriage?”, the scale adopts a stepwise, indirect approach. It begins by assessing minor forms of infidelity and progressively addresses more serious behaviors. Items initially focus on emotions and behaviors that may or may not constitute infidelity. Close emotional bonds are also evaluated, as research suggests that women often engage in extramarital relationships for emotional reasons. The scale includes 11 items with reliability coefficients ranging from 0.76 to 0.85, with an additional factor labeled as mixed infidelity. According to Drigotas et al.

(1999), individuals scoring high on emotional infidelity demonstrate both emotional and sexual intimacy with a third party, highlighting the instrument's capacity to identify violations of relational norms. Internal consistency for the subscales was reported as 0.85 (Bozorgi & Zadeh, 2016).

Marital Frustration: The 16-item questionnaire developed by Niehuis et al. (2015) assesses marital frustration. Items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("completely disagree") to 7 ("completely agree"), and a total score is computed by summing all item responses. Scores can range from 16 to 112, with higher scores reflecting greater marital frustration. The original developers reported the scale's validity using the divergent method ($r = 0.65$) and internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.73$). In Iran, Sayed Alitabar et al. (2016) examined the psychometric properties of this measure, confirming its factor structure through confirmatory factor analysis. In that study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.92, and the test-retest reliability coefficient was 0.85 (Asefi et al., 2022). In the current study, internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.74.

Procedure

After signing up and consenting to participate, individuals then completed some measures beforehand to gauge their sexual fulfillment, behavioral infidelity, and frustration with their spouse. The experimental group then completed 10 EFT-C classes, one per week, while the control group did not participate in any activities. All participants completed post-test evaluations measuring the same factors in the prior evaluations within one week of attending their last class. All participants were informed of their confidentiality, of voluntary participation, and of their right to withdraw with no consequences. An ethical approval was issued by the IRB of the Behavioral Sciences and Addiction Research Center, North Khorasan University of Medical Sciences, Bojnourd, Iran.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics and assessment of assumptions (normality, homogeneity of variance). Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted to examine the effect of EFT-C on the three dependent variables, controlling for pretest scores. Effect sizes (partial η^2) were calculated to determine the magnitude of intervention effects. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Descriptive statistics for sexual satisfaction, extramarital relationships, and marital frustration are presented in Table 1. Participants in the experimental group exhibited substantial improvements from pretest to posttest across all outcomes, whereas the control group showed minimal changes. Preliminary analyses confirmed normality and homogeneity of variance assumptions.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of study variables in experimental and control groups

	Exp. Group		Control Group	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
	M ($\pm$ SD)	M ($\pm$ SD)	M ($\pm$ SD)	M ($\pm$ SD)
Sexual Satisfaction	67.37 (14.45)	78.75 (12.22)	69.12 (15.36)	71.25 (14.02)
Extramarital Relationships	37.50 (11.19)	32.62 (9.38)	36.62 (12.41)	35.75 (11.88)
Marital Frustration	72.25 (12.92)	61.12 (12.39)	71.75 (13.10)	68.62 (11.32)

To gauge the influence of Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFT-C) on three individual variables while controlling for pretest score, a multivariate analysis-plus-covariance (MANCOVA) was

completed. There was a statistically significant multivariate influence of the intervention on outcome variables, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.32$, $F(3, 20) = 14.87$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .69$. Thus, there was a considerable overall impact of EFT-C on the specified dependent variables.

Table 3. Test results of between-subjects effects

Variable	Group	Mean	S.D	Mean Square	F	df	P	Eta squared
Sexual Satisfaction	Experiment	78.75	12.22	632.27	26.14	1	.027	.484
	Control	71.25	14.02					
Extramarital Relationships	Experiment	32.62	9.38	365.24	18.67	1	.023	.362
	Control	35.75	11.88					
Marital Frustration	Experiment	61.12	12.39	548.10	21.39	1	.035	.421
	Control	68.62	11.32					

Participating EFT-C therapy couples showed statistically significant improvements in sexual satisfaction in comparison to the control group ($F(1, 22) = 26.14$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .48$), demonstrating that the effects of the therapy were to a large degree meaningful. Moreover, extramarital behaviors were also reduced in the experimental group, in comparison to the control group ($F(1, 22) = 18.67$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .36$), demonstrating that EFT-C consolidation of fidelity in the spouses also increased and satisfaction of the whole relationship was improved. Other significant effects of the therapy included general marital frustration ($F(1, 22) = 21.39$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .42$), which also suggested considerable improvements of emotional well-being and functioning of the partners as a unit. There are statistically significant control group comparisons in the degree of sexual satisfaction and extramarital involvement that were frustrations in marriage.

Discussion

This study sought to determine the impact of Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFT-C) on the sexual satisfaction, extramarital activities, and marital frustration of married couples. As evidenced by the results, the participants who partook in EFT-C experienced improvements in sexual satisfaction, extramarital activities, and marital frustration, which was also lower than that of the control group. This demonstrates the consistency of the results to the literature on the effectiveness of EFT-C and the improvement of its relational problems.

The enhancements in sexual satisfaction supports the findings of Johnson and Greenberg (1994) regarding couples in EFT therapy increasing in sexual intimacy and satisfaction. Johnson et al. (2018) also showed the impact of EFT in sexual communication and satisfaction and the emotional agility of the therapy in improving sexual relations. The present study demonstrates a decrease in extramarital behaviors which is consistent with the findings of Mendelson (2024) who showed EFT interventions decreased relational risk behaviors and paradoxically strengthened the relational bonds. The reduction in marital frustration is similarly noted by Wiebe et al. (2017) who pointed out the impact of EFT in resolving emotional distress and conflict in marriages and relationships.

These results can be explained through the Attachment Theory which is the base of EFT. Attachment Theory explains that we develop deep emotional ties that we can use as secure pathways to develop further relational structures. EFT seeks to diagnose and alter negative patterns of attachment to help develop secure attachment responses, emotional attunement, and regulation (Brubacher, 2024). EFT allows empathy to tackle primary emotional responses of fear, sadness, and longing in order to strengthen the safety and satisfaction of the relationship and to decrease the level of hypervigilance in the relationship. The noted decreases in extramarital relations can also be

explained through attachment. Once your dyad emotional needs are recognized and met, the desire to extraneously seek emotional and sexual fulfilment is diminished (Saleh, 2024).

Results explain the highly increased sexual satisfaction from multiple aspects of the EFT-C model. Most of the survey respondents under EFT-C model stated that EFT encourages partners to express their emotional vulnerabilities (fears, desires, sexual needs, etc.), EFT-C model instills an atmosphere where one can express their emotional vulnerabilities safely without fear of judgement, hostility and emotional outbursts. This is important because emotional fears, especially with sexual intimacy, can create vicious cycles of disengagement. EFT also aims to disrupt these cycles that negative feedback loops of criticism and withdrawal dysfunctionally controlling (Girard & Woolley, 2017). By implementing positively reinforcing cycles, partners can feel more sexually receptive and sexually gratified to one another. Finally, the emotional attunement developed within EFT585 strengthens the partners' ability to provide and receive support during sexual activity, leading to increased satisfaction (Fischer et al., 2022).

The relationshipnal and intrapersonal processes can explain the decrease in extramarital involvemen in this case. EFT-C works on the emotions behind disengaged states in relationships, confirming partners' unmet needs and fears of abandonment. Once these needs are validated by the partners, the perceived need to extramarital emotions or sexual relationships can be filled (Asgari et al, 2022). Moreover, EFT elaborates on the emotional regulation and the self awareness so that the people can control their urges to engage in behaviors that can damage the relationships. In this way, the therapy functions on two route, that is, on the one of withing the couple and one between the individuals (Anousheh et al, 2024).

Understanding why many people experienced less marital frustration after the training is relative to EFT's emphasis on emotional needs and conflict resolution. Marital frustration is a function of emotional needs being ignored, unresolved conflicts, and the recurrence of negative interactions. EFT helps couples identify the primary emotional experiences so that they may engage in problem solving collaboratively instead of defense and reactivity (Motaharinasab et al., 2016). Partners eliminate emotional distress and achieve more understanding and relational satisfaction by converting maladaptive emotional responses into relational secure attachment. Chronic frustration to relational competence and a sense of resilience is achieved through the emotional and relational tension with chronic frustration being relieved through emotional secure attachment and the processes emotional frustration chronic frustration relational competence and frustration relational emotional frustration chronic frustration emotional competence frustration chronic relational emotional frustration relational over chronic relational frustration resilience (Allan, 2016). EFT-C integrates interpersonal and intrapersonal mechanisms: Through emotional attunement, secure attachment behaviors, negative cycle disruption, and reciprocal empathy. The therapy's emphasis on emotional expression and validation focus on the manifest behaviors (sexual satisfaction, fidelity) and latent emotional dynamics (frustration, fear, unmet attachment needs) that underlie marital satisfaction.

The research results show the importance of EFT-C as an intervention for couples dealing with relational distress. Integration of emotional accessibility, attachment restructuring, and positive interaction cycles might aid practitioners the most. Looking ahead, research appears warranted to assess the sustainability of these gains, examine the mechanisms cross more heterogeneous sample populations, and analyze EFT-C against other therapies to further confirm EFT-C s usefulness in practice.

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