

Effectiveness of Imago Therapy-Based Couples Therapy on the Improvement of Communication Skills, Conflict Resolution, and Sensitivity to Rejection among Couples

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Jalili, M., Eftekhari Saadi, Z., Pasha, R., Asgari, P., & Hafezi, F. (2024). Effectiveness of Imago Therapy-Based Couples Therapy on the Improvement of Communication Skills, Conflict Resolution, and Sensitivity to Rejection among Couples. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 5(3), 141-150.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.5.3.15>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of Imago therapy-based couples therapy on improving communication skills, conflict resolution, and sensitivity to rejection among couples attending counseling centers in Masjed Soleyman.

Methods: This quasi-experimental research was conducted with a pre-test, post-test, control group design, and follow-up. The population of this study included all couples visiting counseling centers in Masjed Soleyman in 2019, with twenty couples (40 individuals) randomly divided into experimental and control groups (10 couples per group). Participants in the experimental group underwent ten two-hour training sessions, while the control group did not receive any training. Participants were assessed using the Quinndom Communication Skills questionnaire, the Sanayi Zaker et al.'s Standard Sensitivity to Rejection, and the Downey and Feldman Marital Conflict questionnaire. Data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance via SPSS software version 22.

Findings: The results showed that training based on Imago therapy significantly altered the experimental group's communication skills, conflict resolution, and sensitivity to rejection compared to the control group.

Conclusion: Based on the findings of this study, Imago therapy training can be considered an effective method for improving communication skills, conflict resolution, and sensitivity to rejection among couples.

Keywords: Imago therapy, Communication skills, Conflict resolution, Sensitivity to rejection among couples

1. Introduction

Among the issues that have always been of interest throughout history and are somehow fundamental to

human existence, is marriage, whereby couples engage in a reciprocal relationship with their spouse (Bulanda et al., 2016; DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017). Marriage is a commitment with love and responsibility for peace,

happiness, and the development of family relationships, and moreover, choosing a partner and entering into a marital life is a milestone and personal achievement. It is undeniable that choosing a marital partner is one of the most significant decisions that occur in an individual's life. People marry for various reasons such as love, happiness, companionship, the desire to have children, physical attraction, or the inclination to escape from an unhappy and unsatisfactory situation (Rao, 2017). One of the dimensions of the relationship between spouses that is important in the outcome and product of marital relations is the level of existing conflicts and how they are managed constructively or destructively (Makhanova et al., 2018; Razeghi & Eslam, 2015). Marital conflict is considered the interaction between couples who have opposing interests, views, and beliefs. 61% of divorced individuals have reported excessive conflict as one of the reasons for their divorce (Amani, 2017). Some theories believe that conflict in family life is a natural event and is often considered an unavoidable phenomenon that occurs in all family relationships (Faircloth, 2012). From a systemic perspective, conflict is caused by any kind of struggle over the acquisition of bases and resources of power among couples (Fotuhi et al., 2018).

Research results have shown that of every two couples marrying for the first time, one couple gets divorced (deLusé & Braver, 2015). According to official statistics published in Iran, one divorce is registered against every four marriages (Hamid et al., 2018). Many studies have focused on a communication schema known as sensitivity to rejection among couples in the context of marital differences. Sensitivity to rejection is a personality trait characterized by excessive sensitivity to social rejection. Individuals sensitive to social rejection tend to expect and easily perceive anxiety or anger, and overreact to it (Gao et al., 2019). Developmentally, individuals who are rejected by their families form a schema of sensitivity to rejection and expect rejection in their future social relationships, especially in romantic relationships (Norona & Welsh, 2016). Sensitivity to rejection negatively affects individuals' adaptation, and this lack of adjustment can lead to dissatisfaction or a lack of feeling secure in relationships, hostility, jealousy, depression, aggression, and obstinacy (Kross et al., 2007). Deng, Chen & Liu (2019), in a study, showed that individual differences in romantic relationships are a significant predictor of appearance-based sensitivity to rejection (Deng et al., 2019). The findings of Meehan, et al (2018), indicate that individuals with sensitivity to rejection have a high avoidance stance and may act out of fear of acceptance of

rejection (Meehan et al., 2018). Findings by Norona & Welsh (2016), also confirm that sensitivity to rejection may lead individuals to emotional and behavioral distancing from their romantic partners (Norona & Welsh, 2016). Given that couples' satisfaction with their marital life plays an important role in creating stability in their lives and can keep couples safe from marital problems (Hasson-Ohayon et al., 2019).

Research on couples confirms that approximately 10 to 15 percent of married individuals regularly report significant communication problems (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017). Communication skills provide couples with tools to resolve conflicts, increase intimacy that meets the needs of both women and men, and improve their quality of life (Shadanloo et al., 2023). Ineffective communication causes a deep interpersonal distance that is experienced in all aspects of life. The consequence of communication breakdown is often loneliness, family problems, incompetence, job dissatisfaction, psychological stress, physical illness, and so forth (Makhanova et al., 2018).

Sociological family studies indicate that many couples facing marital life issues lack the necessary and essential abilities, making them vulnerable to daily life issues and its exigencies, whereas possessing life skills enables an individual to transform their knowledge, values, and attitudes into actual abilities, have healthy motivation and behavior, and create opportunities and a field for such behaviors. Familiarity with life skills in relationships and marital life makes it easier for each spouse to cope with situations, events, and inconsistencies that often occur in life, thus somewhat reducing the creation of these inconsistencies (Mohlatole et al., 2018; Norouzinia et al., 2014). Weak communication skills cause couples to be slow and delayed in thinking about preserving their marital relationships, that is, at a time when the inclination to separation culminates in divorce. Previous research findings have shown that unresolved conflicts among couples in marital life cause them to grow cold in their emotional relationships, and this increases their tendency toward divorce. Weak communication skills are one of the main reasons for family conflicts and the desire to separate (Razeghi & Eslam, 2015). Training in communication skills increases couples' satisfaction with life and reduces the desire for divorce (Hamid et al., 2018). Bulanda, et al (2016) in their research showed that communication skills and also capabilities based on resolving marital conflicts have improved marital relationships in couples facing problems and have led to a reduction in conflicts and an increase in

their mental health (Bulanda et al., 2016). The results of studies by Mohlatlole, Sithole & Shirindi (2018) also showed that the lack of proper communication directly influenced the tendency for divorce among couples. Various therapeutic methods have been employed to solve the problems of couples (Mohlatlole et al., 2018).

Among these methods, Imago Therapy stands out. Imago Therapy is an engaging and interesting educational method that can attract families and effectively strengthen the foundation of the family (Lawson, 2008; Luquet & Muro, 2018). Imago Therapy for couples is a process that educates couples to become aware of the unconscious aspects of their relationships and, instead of superficially resolving conflicts, deeply examines and resolves them (Hendrix et al., 2015). Hendrix (2006), the creator of Imago Therapy, believes that the Imago process involves committing individuals to understanding their own and their spouse's psychological injuries to learn new skills and interpret harmful behaviors, all while fulfilling their spouse's needs and reintegrating denied and lost parts of themselves, thereby achieving psychological and spiritual growth (Hendrix et al., 2015). Various research outcomes demonstrate its efficacy in improving the psychological components of couples experiencing conflicts and marital dissatisfaction. Fatemi, Karbalaee & Kakavand (2017) found that Imago Therapy enhances marital intimacy by increasing the use of healthy communication patterns and reducing destructive ones (Fatemi et al., 2016). Luquet & Muro (2018) showed that Imago Therapy plays a significant role in improving family and marital factors and uniquely affects the improvement of marital issues (Luquet & Muro, 2018). Gehlert et al. (2017) reported that Imago Therapy couples therapy has reduced boredom and marital conflicts (Gehlert et al., 2017). Muro, Holliman & Luquet (2016) demonstrated that Imago Therapy is effective in enhancing empathy among couples (Muro et al., 2016). Gehlert et al. (2017) also reported that Imago Therapy for couples led to a reduction in boredom and marital conflicts (Gehlert et al., 2017). These variables have been studied separately in research. Research by Matin & Hayati (2017) and Mansourian et al. (2019) demonstrated that Imago Therapy is effective in marital conflict (Mansourian et al., 2019; Matin & Hayati, 2017); Martin & Bielawski (2011) showed that Imago Therapy positively impacts sensitivity to rejection (Martin & Bielawski, 2009).

Given the increasing trend of divorce in recent years in Iran, it seems necessary to investigate and compare therapeutic approaches that could slow down this trend in the

future, as increasing this issue not only causes significant psychological damage to those involved in this process, such as children and the couples themselves but can also create numerous social problems, especially for women over time. It is clear that if the research results are effective, family counselors, psychologists, and couples with issues could use this therapeutic approach and its techniques to improve communication skills, reduce marital conflicts, and sensitivity to rejection, which would result in reduced divorce rates, increased adaptation, and satisfaction among couples. Considering the importance of family health and that in most issues and problems among couples, the role of communication skills, conflict resolution ability, and reducing unfounded sensitivity to rejection is crucial. Moreover, relying on the educational method of Imago Therapy, which focuses on awareness and information to couples, can deeply analyze and resolve conflicts instead of superficially addressing them. This study aimed to compare the effectiveness of Imago Therapy couples therapy training on improving communication skills, resolving conflicts, and sensitivity to rejection among couples.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study was conducted using a quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and follow-up with a control group. The population of this research consisted of all married individuals with marital issues who visited counseling centers in Masjed Soleyman in 2019. From the counseling centers in Masjed Soleyman, 4 centers were randomly selected, and subsequently, from all the couples visiting these centers, twenty couples (40 individuals) were voluntarily selected and randomly assigned to two groups: experimental and control (10 couples in each group). Before conducting the therapeutic sessions, couples were asked to completely respond to questionnaires on communication skills, marital conflict, and sensitivity to rejection. After the pre-test, the experimental groups received 10 two-hour sessions of Imago therapy, while the control group did not receive any training. After the end of the group therapy sessions, participants from both the experimental and control groups completed the questionnaires again, and two months later, a follow-up phase was conducted. Inclusion criteria for the study were: couples' attendance at the counseling center and their request for psychological treatment due to marital issues, both spouses' written consent to participate in the therapy, and having at least a middle school diploma.

Exclusion criteria included: addiction to drugs or alcohol by at least one of the spouses during the treatment, diagnosis of personality disorder or acute psychiatric disorder, use of psychiatric medications or psychotherapeutic interventions during the treatment, and history of hospitalization in a psychiatric hospital. Additional exclusion factors were spousal abuse, marital infidelity, and absence from more than two sessions during the training programs.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Communication Skills

This questionnaire was developed by Quinndom (2004) and contains thirty-four items (listening skills, ability to receive and send messages, insight into the communication process, emotional regulation, and assertive communication) scored on a five-point Likert scale (from never = 1 to always = 5). The scoring range of this measurement tool is from 34 to 170 and measures five skills: listening, ability to receive and send messages, insight into the communication process, emotional control, and assertive communication (Norouzinia et al., 2014). The convergent validity of this test reported by Quinndom (2004) is 0.76, which is high and acceptable. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was found to be 0.69 by Quinndom (2004) and 0.79 by Sheikh Al-Islami, Asadollahi, & Mohammadi (2017). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was 0.71 (Norouzinia et al., 2014).

2.2.2. Marital Conflict

This questionnaire was developed by Sanaei Zaker, Alaqband, Fallahti, & Houman (2007). It is a 54-item tool that measures eight dimensions of marital conflict. Each question in this questionnaire is scored on a five-point scale ranging from 1 to 5; the maximum total score of the questionnaire is 270, and the minimum is 54. The maximum score of each subscale is equal to the number of questions in that subscale multiplied by 5. In this tool, a higher score indicates more conflict, and a lower score indicates a better relationship and less conflict. During the test item analysis phase after preliminary implementation and calculation of the correlation of each question with the overall questionnaire and its scales, 13 questions from the initial 55 were removed. In the research by Khazaei (2006), all components of the marital conflict questionnaire had significant correlations ranging from 0.31 to 0.82 with the

overall marital conflict score at a significance level of 0.01. The reliability of this tool was reported through Cronbach's alpha method by Sanaei Zaker et al. (2007) as 0.96. In this study, the reliability of this tool through Cronbach's alpha method was 0.83 (Fotohi et al., 2018).

2.2.3. Rejection Sensitivity

This questionnaire, developed by Downey & Feldman (1996), measures rejection sensitivity with 18 two-part questions (parts A and B) scored on a six-point Likert scale. In part "A", responses range from 1 (not worried at all) to 6 (very worried), and in part "B", responses range from 1 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely). Ahmadi, Hamid, & Marashi (2018) reported the convergent validity (correlating this questionnaire with another subscale of Robbins' following scale) of this test as 0.49, which is significant at the 0.05 level. The divergent validity (correlating this questionnaire with Robbins' self-following subscale) was calculated as 0.39. Downey & Feldman (1996) reported the internal reliability of this questionnaire as 0.85. The reliability of the questionnaire through Cronbach's alpha method was reported above 0.70. In this study, the reliability of this tool through Cronbach's alpha method was 0.73 (Ahmadi et al., 2018).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Imago Therapy

This Imago Therapy intervention protocol is designed to be delivered over 10 sessions, each lasting approximately two hours. The protocol aims to improve communication skills, resolve conflicts, and reduce sensitivity to rejection among couples. The therapy sessions are structured to build progressively on the skills and insights gained in previous sessions, integrating therapeutic techniques that foster understanding, empathy, and connection between partners. Each session involves guided exercises, reflective discussions, and practical applications that encourage partners to explore their relationship dynamics, personal triggers, and the unconscious factors influencing their interactions (Amini Khoei et al., 2014; Fatemi et al., 2016; Gehlert et al., 2017; Hendrix et al., 2015; Luquet & Muro, 2018; Mansourian et al., 2019; Martin & Bielawski, 2009; Matin & Hayati, 2017; Mirza Hosseini & Movahedi, 2016; Muro et al., 2016).

Session 1: Introduction to Imago Therapy and Establishing the Framework

In the first session, therapists introduce the couples to the fundamentals of Imago Therapy, including its main concepts and goals. Couples are briefed on the structure of the therapy process and what they can expect in subsequent sessions. The session aims to build a safe and open environment, where couples feel comfortable sharing their experiences and vulnerabilities. Therapists also begin to gather detailed histories of each partner's relationship experiences and current issues.

Session 2: Exploring the Imago Dialogue

Session two focuses on introducing and practicing the Imago Dialogue, a central technique in Imago Therapy. This structured way of communication emphasizes active listening and validation. Couples are taught to mirror each other's statements, validate their partner's feelings, and express empathy. This session is crucial for helping partners understand each other's perspectives without judgment, fostering a deeper emotional connection.

Session 3: Uncovering Childhood Influences

In this session, couples explore how their childhood experiences influence their current relationship behaviors and expectations. Therapists guide each partner to identify and discuss significant childhood memories and the traits of their primary caregivers. The goal is to help partners see the link between past experiences and their current relational patterns, enhancing self-awareness and mutual understanding.

Session 4: Identifying Relationship Triggers

Couples are assisted in identifying specific triggers that lead to conflicts or emotional reactions within their relationship. This session helps partners understand the origins of these triggers, often tied to unresolved childhood wounds. Through exercises and discussions, couples learn strategies to manage these triggers constructively rather than reactively.

Session 5: Re-romanticizing the Relationship

Session five is designed to help couples reintroduce positive feelings into their relationship. Techniques such as caring behaviors, appreciation dialogues, and love lists are used. Couples engage in activities that highlight the positive aspects of their relationship and each partner, which helps to balance the focus on problem areas with positive reinforcement.

Session 6: Reducing Negative Interactions

This session focuses on reducing destructive behaviors and increasing positive interactions. Couples learn about the concept of the "Negative Love Cycle" and how to replace negative patterns with supportive and affirming behaviors.

Therapists help couples develop new ways to interact that promote understanding and closeness rather than distance and conflict.

Session 7: Developing Conflict Resolution Skills

Couples are equipped with tools to address and resolve conflicts in a healthy manner. This includes strategies for calming down when heated, negotiating solutions that satisfy both partners, and consolidating agreements. This session aims to transform how couples manage disagreements, ensuring they contribute to relationship growth instead of deterioration.

Session 8: Building a Shared Vision of the Relationship

In session eight, couples work together to create a shared vision for their future. This includes discussing individual and shared goals, values, and dreams. Therapists facilitate exercises that help couples align their aspirations and plan realistic steps to achieve these goals, strengthening their partnership and shared purpose.

Session 9: Intimacy and Sexuality

This session delves into the aspects of physical and emotional intimacy. Couples discuss their needs and desires openly, explore their sexual relationship, and address any issues or dissatisfaction in this area. Therapists provide a safe space to discuss sensitive topics and offer strategies to enhance intimacy.

Session 10: Consolidation and Future Planning

The final session focuses on consolidating what has been learned throughout the therapy and planning for the future. Couples review the progress they have made, revisit their goals, and discuss how to apply their new skills and insights moving forward. The session ends with establishing a maintenance plan that includes regular check-ins and ways to continue supporting each other in their relationship journey.

2.4. Data Analysis

For data analysis in this study, the SPSS software and statistical methods such as descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), and univariate analysis of variance (ANCOVA) were used.

3. Findings and Results

Fifty percent of the participants in both the experimental and control groups were female; in terms of education, 17.5% of the participants in the experimental group held a high school diploma, 27.5% held a bachelor's degree, and

5% held a master's degree. In the control group, 17.5% of the participants held a high school diploma, 30% had an associate degree, and 17.5% held a master's degree. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 30 years in the experimental group (32.5%) and in the control group (35%), from 31 to 40 years in both groups (12.5%), and from 41 to

50 years in the experimental group (5%) and in the control group (2.5%). Furthermore, the results of the Chi-square test between the experimental and control groups for variables such as level of education, gender, and age group showed no significant differences between these two groups ($p \geq .05$).

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Variables of Communication Skills, Marital Conflict, and Sensitivity to Rejection in Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Variable	Indicator	Pre-test	Post-test	Follow-up
Experimental	Communication Skills	Mean	95.10	110.50	109.60
		Standard Deviation	16.20	12.33	13.41
Control	Communication Skills	Mean	94.10	94.10	98.00
		Standard Deviation	13.53	20.21	20.23
Experimental	Marital Conflict	Mean	85.00	77.80	80.60
		Standard Deviation	8.30	7.18	8.93
Control	Marital Conflict	Mean	85.20	84.10	84.60
		Standard Deviation	7.94	12.51	10.37
Experimental	Sensitivity to Rejection	Mean	73.20	66.90	69.40
		Standard Deviation	6.10	7.09	8.16
Control	Sensitivity to Rejection	Mean	73.20	72.00	73.00
		Standard Deviation	6.88	9.56	-

As shown in Table 1, the mean communication skills variable in the experimental group increased by 15.4 points in the post-test compared to the pre-test, and the mean marital conflict variable in the experimental group decreased by 7.2 points in the post-test compared to the pre-test. Additionally, the sensitivity to rejection variable in the experimental group decreased by 6.30 points in the post-test compared to the pre-test.

To verify the normal distribution of scores, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used. Given that the scores for communication skills ($p = .23$), marital conflict ($p = .11$), and sensitivity to rejection ($p = .09$) were not significant in the pre-test and post-test, it can be stated that the data are normally distributed. The Levene's test was used to check the

homogeneity of variances. Levene's test for homogeneity of variances indicated that the variances of the experimental and control groups for the variables of communication skills ($p = .27$), marital conflict ($p = .56$), and sensitivity to rejection ($p = .23$) were equal ($p \geq .05$). The variance difference between all combinations related to the groups (sphericity) should be the same. The Mauchly's sphericity test was used to verify this assumption, which showed that the assumption of sphericity was not met ($p \leq .05$). Based on this, the Greenhouse-Geisser criterion is used in the hypothesis testing to obtain a more accurate approximation, and the results of the within-group analysis of variance are calculated considering the failure to meet the sphericity assumption.

Table 2

Mixed Variance Analysis Test of the Scores of the Components of Communication Skills, Marital Conflict, and Sensitivity to Spouse Rejection Using the Greenhouse-Geisser Criterion

Variable	Statistical Index of Factors	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F Ratio	Significance Level	Ita Coefficient
Communication Skills	Test (Repetition of Measurement)	1949.07	1.47	1328.96	11.37	.001	.23
	Test $\times$ Group Interaction	1241.87	1.47	846.76	7.24	.004	.16
	Intergroup	2803.33	1.00	2803.33	4.48	.041	.11
Marital Conflict	Test (Repetition of Measurement)	349.27	35.1	258.07	6.32	.009	.14

Sensitivity to Rejection	Test × Group Interaction	80.189	35.1	140.24	3.43	.047	.09
	Intergroup	50.367	1.00	367.50	3.76	.043	.10
	Test (Repetition of Measurement)	281.67	1.36	207.78	5.13	.019	.12
	Test × Group Interaction	137.40	1.36	101.36	4.50	.02	.11
	Intergroup	252.30	1.00	252.30	4.63	.01	.13

The results from Table 2 indicate that for the within-group factor, the calculated F value for the effect of the stages (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up) was significant at the .05 level for the components of communication skills, marital conflict, and sensitivity to rejection ($p < .05$). Therefore, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of pre-test, post-test, and follow-up for communication skills, marital conflict, and sensitivity to rejection across the three stages. The Bonferroni post-hoc test was conducted to examine the differences between the means at different treatment stages. The results showed a significant difference between communication skills, marital conflict, and sensitivity to rejection from pre-test to post-test and from pre-test to follow-up. However, there was no significant difference between the scores for communication skills, marital conflict, and sensitivity to rejection from post-test to follow-up, indicating that the scores for communication skills, marital conflict, and sensitivity to rejection did not change significantly from post-test to follow-up.

Moreover, according to the results of Table 2 concerning the interaction of stage and group factors, the calculated F value for the effect of the stages (pre-test, post-test, and follow-up) between the two groups of Imago therapy and control was significant at the .05 level for communication skills, marital conflict, and sensitivity to rejection ($p < .05$). Consequently, there was a significant difference observed between the mean scores of pre-test, post-test, and follow-up for communication skills, marital conflict, and sensitivity to rejection between the two groups.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the effectiveness of Imago therapy training on improving communication skills, resolving conflicts, and sensitivity to rejection among couples in Masjed Soleyman. Based on the results of this study, there is a significant and positive relationship between Imago therapy training and the improvement of couples' communication skills. Therefore, Imago therapy training is effective in improving couples' communication skills, thus confirming the first hypothesis. These results are consistent

with the prior findings (Amini Khoei et al., 2014; Fatemi et al., 2016; Gehlert et al., 2017; Hendrix et al., 2015; Luquet & Muro, 2018; Mansourian et al., 2019; Martin & Bielawski, 2009; Matin & Hayati, 2017; Mirza Hosseini & Movahedi, 2016; Muro et al., 2016). It can be explained that Imago therapy, by concretizing communication problems and offering appropriate solutions, can affect the quality of marital relations and be a useful method (Fatemi et al., 2016). Communicative imaging (Imago therapy) leads to increased intimacy in marital relationships by increasing the use of healthy communication patterns and reducing destructive patterns (Mirza Hosseini & Movahedi, 2016; Muro et al., 2016). Moreover, the Imago therapy approach helps spouses understand unconscious processes and acquire skills to heal childhood wounds and separate marital relationships from past influences. Imago therapy teaches practices that increase caring behaviors and reduce emotional and psychological distance, ultimately leading to enhanced intimacy and constructive communication (Amini Khoei et al., 2014).

This study also found a significant and positive relationship between Imago therapy training and resolving conflicts among couples. Therefore, Imago therapy training is effective in resolving conflicts among couples, thus confirming the second hypothesis. These findings are somewhat in line with prior studies (Gehlert et al., 2017; Mansourian et al., 2019; Martin & Bielawski, 2009; Matin & Hayati, 2017). The mutual relationship is nothing but a reflection of each spouse's reality; in other words, the marital relationship is influenced by internal dynamics and also affects them. Throughout the Imago therapy sessions, couples are helped to accept their role in incidents that occurred and thereby see their share more clearly and with acceptance of their role, the thoughts of blame and resentment towards each other are reduced, leading to a psychological discharge of negative emotions, which increases the level of psychological well-being in couples (Mansourian et al., 2019). Moreover, the Imago therapy approach, through practices such as revisiting past romantic memories, giving unexpected gifts, and engaging in joint recreational activities, leads to increased positive feelings and emotional closeness and reduces negative feelings such

as anger, which increases intimacy and ultimately reduces the frequency of conflict and problems among couples (Matin & Hayati, 2017).

In this study, there was a significant and positive relationship between Imago therapy training and a reduction in sensitivity to rejection among couples. Therefore, Imago therapy training is effective in reducing sensitivity to rejection among couples, thus confirming the third hypothesis. The results of this hypothesis are in line with prior findings (Amini Khoei et al., 2014; Gehlert et al., 2017; Hendrix et al., 2015; Martin & Bielawski, 2009). It can be concluded that during the training in communicative imaging, couples learn through practicing conscious dialogue (Imago dialogue) to share their issues, problems, and concerns with each other to save themselves from falling into negative interactions and to resolve conflicts arising in the relationship, experiencing greater intimacy. The more interactions between spouses are filled with affection and empathy, the more satisfaction they will have from being together and their marital relationship, and the less they will feel rejected and neglected by each other (Martin & Bielawski, 2009).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

A limitation of this research was the dispersion of the statistical sample and the fatigue of some participants due to the lengthy therapy process. Therefore, considering the findings of this research, it is possible to elaborate on the role of therapeutic approaches such as Transactional Analysis and Imago Therapy in the emergence of marital problems in pre-marital training sessions in family counseling centers and marital workshops, thus paving the way for preventing marital problems. Given that the variables of marital conflicts, marital intimacy, and sensitivity to rejection are culturally dependent, it is suggested that this research be conducted among other Iranian cultures.

Overall, the results indicate the effectiveness of therapeutic approaches like Imago therapy in improving communication skills, resolving conflicts, and reducing sensitivity to rejection among couples seeking counseling. Consequently, family counselors can use Imago therapy training approaches to improve communication skills, reduce conflicts, and decrease sensitivity to rejection among visiting couples.

Authors' Contributions

In this study, Zahra Eftekhari Saadi, as the guiding professor, supervised and strategized the overall research process and finalized the article revisions. Masoumeh Jalili was responsible for developing the research plan, the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings, and writing the article text. Overall conclusions from the findings and their interpretation were jointly discussed and carried out by all collaborators, with the third author acting as the thesis advisory professor.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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