

The Effectiveness of Imago Therapy on Love Styles and Communication Problems in Married Women

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Abstract

Aim: The purpose of this research was the effectiveness of Imago Therapy on love styles and communication problems of married women.

Method: The research design was quasi-experimental with pre-test post-test control group. The statistical population of this study consisted of all women attending counseling centers in Alborz province in 2022. Since the research method was semi-experimental, 30 married women volunteered to participate in the study through convenience sampling. 15 participants were assigned to the experimental group, and another 15 individuals were assigned to the control group for the study. In the experimental group, the participants went through Imago therapy training consisting of 10 sessions lasting 60 minutes each, spread out over a period of six weeks (2 sessions per week). The control group did not receive any form of therapy. The Love Scale questionnaires (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986) and the Queendom Communication Skills Questionnaire (CSTR), were used for collecting data. The multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) test was used in the SPSS-22 software environment.

Results: Findings showed that the value of F resulting from the analysis of covariance of multiple variables (Wilks Lambda=0.347.0, $\eta^2=653$, $P=0.001$, $F(25 \text{ and } 2)=23.56$) is significant. This indicates that the implementation of Imago Therapy has had a significant effect on communication skills and passionate love.

Conclusion: Based on this, the hypothetical test concluded that Imago Therapy affects the styles of love and communication issues of married women.

Keywords: Imago therapy, Love styles, Communication problems, Married Women.



Introduction

One of the aspects of human social life in marital life includes the presence of healthy and constructive interactions between them, the existence of love towards each other, and expressing intimacy and empathy towards one another (Edalati & Redzuan, 2010). Love, a subject that has been widely discussed in literature and art for centuries, has also become an interesting topic in psychology. This is because love is considered a significant feeling in human life and leads to a commitment to a stable relationship, such as marriage. Love is an emotion expressed by individuals involved in a romantic relationship and is considered a key component of a satisfying relationship, along with intimacy, commitment, and passion, and is associated with mental well-being, happiness, and satisfaction in life. On the other hand, romantic relationships and being in love with a twin can be a source of stress, unhappiness, suffering, and negative emotions that negatively impact the quality of the relationship (Raffagnino & Puddu, 2018). Love is considered one of the most important components in creating a satisfying relationship (Kansky, 2018). The loss of love and affection can manifest as cognitive problems, psychiatric disorders, and physiological issues or create a groundwork for deviant social behaviors such as extramarital relationships, lack of commitment, sexual promiscuity, decreased sexual satisfaction, anxiety, depression, mistrust, and addiction (Karimian, 2011).

Some clinical, social, cultural, and potential scientific outcomes consider love as a motivating factor (Burunat, 2019), but sociologists have presented different attitudes about love: the theory of fluid love, the natural turmoil of love, love as passion and admiration, efforts to explain patterns of love in different societies, and to show fundamental changes in patterns and ways of loving. Although it cannot be argued that the patterns highlighted by the mentioned theorists exist in our society, everyday observations indicate the emergence of new forms of romantic relationships among couples (Farajian et al., 2021). According to Lee (2000, as cited in Jonason, Lowder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020), he explains six types of love through his six dimensions theory; erotic love, pragmatic love, romantic love, selfless love, friendship love, and game-playing love (Jonason et al., 2020). Some researchers have shown that some components of love such as passion and excitement can decrease and cool down over time in marital life. In fact, active love can prevent problems related to the stability of marriage and establish an optimal marital life (Karmi, 2019). Research demonstrates that couples who establish enduring and stable relationships possess communication skills such as active listening, clear communication, negotiation, handling anger effectively, and so on (Sajadi, 2014). Communication is considered one of the earliest and most superior achievements of humans, signifying connection, coherence, and relationship with others (Kalet et al., 2021). Communication refers to the process of conveying a message from one person to another or to other individuals using verbal and non-verbal messages (MacDonald-Phillips et al., 2022). Communication skills are abilities that individuals can use to effectively interact with others in interpersonal interactions, leading to positive outcomes and avoiding negative consequences in relationships (Cobb et al., 2019). Communication skills are fundamental and essential for many other skills, demonstrating a process in which information, meanings, and emotions are shared with others through verbal and non-

verbal messages(Karnieli-Miller et al., 2021). These skills enable couples to have stronger relationships, receive more social support, face fewer problems and challenges in life, be happier and more hopeful, and use adaptive and appropriate coping strategies(Yong & Ashman, 2019).

Communication skills are derived from the combination of five components: the ability to receive and send messages (the ability to understand verbal and non-verbal messages clearly and accurately), emotional control (the ability to regulate emotions, manage and control emotions, and deal with other people's emotions), listening skills (the ability to sense, store, interpret, and evaluate messages and respond to verbal messages), insight into the communication process (the ability to understand and comprehend others' intentions in communication and understand how to influence social relationships), and assertive communication (the ability to confidently express one's questions and concerns regardless of the type of reaction from others(Queendom, 2022)). Akbari and colleagues (2021) found in a research that cognitive-behavioral therapy and treatment have an impact on the communication skills, problem-solving skills, and mental health of couples(Akbari, 2021). Karimi Andani and colleagues (2021) demonstrated that the relationship between communication skills and family cohesion, as well as the relationship between all love styles except logical style, with family cohesion in couples, was meaningful(Karimi Andani, 2021). Family cohesion is influenced by variables that constitute a type and nature of individuals, including love styles that have the greatest impact on family cohesion.

One of the challenges nowadays is the increasing trend of divorce in society, with the rising divorce rates in the country taking such an upward trend in recent years. Therefore, conflict resolution skills are a key indicator of successful relationships for couples, and individuals with strong conflict resolution skills can increase the duration of their relationship. Imago therapy (relationship therapy) is one of the proposed methods in preventing marital conflicts and reducing divorce(Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013). The approach of Imago therapy (communicative imaging) was created by the collaboration of Dr. Harville Hendrix and his wife Helen Hunt, both of whom had experienced divorce and were eager to understand the reasons for their failed marriages(Hendrix, 2007). This approach is a comprehensive theory that has been conceptualized using fundamental concepts of high attachment, analytical theory of Jung, theory of object relations (theory of individual will), philosophy of Me-you Buber, social learning theory and integration of Gestalt psychology and neuroscience approach(Hendrix, 2022). In this perspective, the aim is to address marital problems by striving to maintain communication, and the goal of therapy sees the facilitation process and the re-establishment of communication. The core of this perspective is to assist couples in building a healthy relationship with each other and fostering greater empathy for understanding each other through mindful conversation and dialogue, creating a secure environment to meet needs and heal childhood wounds(Moazi et al., 2021). This perspective believes that the stages of growth and childhood, especially the initial relationships with parents, influence marital relationships. Selecting a spouse and marital relationships are not just a conscious

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process, but an important part of it is unconscious; and the result of the need to complete unfinished stages of childhood and heal emotional wounds. In this approach, spouses can learn skills to heal childhood wounds and create healthy behaviors by understanding their partner's unconscious processes. By transforming unconscious marriage and relationship into conscious marriage, spouses can achieve the necessary love and intimacy (Vahedi & Ghavi Panjeh, 2021). The importance of examining the quality of marital relationships and its impact on the health of individuals and society has always been an emphasized subject. Considering that the process of communication and deep connection between spouses takes place within the family framework and is currently at risk of collapse, the present study has investigated the effectiveness of Imago therapy on love styles and communication problems of married women. Imago therapy is an interpersonal approach that aims to understand the dynamics and relationship between partners. It also provides a conversational process for creating a deep connection between partners, with the aim of restoring each person's perceived experience of unity that was lost during childhood. Therefore, teaching the arts and strategies of marital life improves communication patterns and increases intimacy between couples. Considering that responsible and family-oriented communication patterns meet the needs of couples, it significantly contributes to the stability and longevity of the family. Neglecting communication patterns can lead to consequences such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and withdrawal for both the wife and husband, creating problems in family and marital relationships. On the other hand, providing training in communication skills and utilizing techniques such as Imago therapy may help couples facing marital problems to seek help from the court, family counseling centers, welfare organizations, counseling and education centers, and divorce prevention centers. Therefore, based on the information provided, the researcher is trying to answer the question of whether Imago therapy affects the love styles and communication problems of married women. Therefore, the aim of the present research is to examine the effectiveness of Imago therapy on the love styles and communication problems of married women referring to counseling centers in Alborz province.

Research methodology

This study was classified as an applied research in terms of purpose and a quasi-experimental study in terms of execution method. The research design was also quasi-experimental, pre-test post-test with a control group. The statistical population of this study consisted of all women attending counseling centers in Alborz province in 2022. ۷۶ married women were selected to participate in the research using convenience sampling method. The inclusion criteria included being married, women aged between 20 to 60 years old, not suffering from mental illnesses, having at least a high school diploma, having been in a marriage for at least two years, and the exclusion criteria included individuals with specific physical illnesses, women under psychiatric medication treatment, women with a history of using multiple types of drugs (opium, crystal, heroin, etc.), and having a previous experience of receiving similar interventions and not fully responding to questionnaires.

After responding to the questionnaires of love styles and communication skills, those who obtained the lowest averages in these two questionnaires were selected through simple random sampling method, and 30 individuals were chosen. 15 individuals were placed in the experimental group and 15 individuals were placed in the control group for the intervention. After responding to the questionnaires of love styles and communication skills, those who obtained the lowest averages in these two questionnaires were selected through simple random sampling method, and 30 individuals were chosen. 15 individuals were placed in the experimental group and 15 individuals were placed in the control group for the intervention. The completed questionnaire was collected and the experimental group underwent Imago therapy training at the counseling center by a therapist specialized in Imago therapy after obtaining ethical approval, while the control group did not receive any training. After the completion of the training sessions, both groups underwent a post-test under the same conditions (therapy sessions in the form of 10 sessions of 60 minutes each over a period of one and a half months (2 sessions per week) according to the book (Hendrix, 2007). Individuals responded to the same questionnaires they had answered in the pre-test as post-test questions. At this stage, both groups answered the post-test questions under similar conditions and each person answered another filled version of the love styles and communication skills questionnaires as post-test, stored under their name and code from the pre-test. After collecting pre-test and post-test data, the gathered information was analyzed using appropriate statistical tests and gratitude was expressed to all individuals who participated in the study. Ethical considerations taken into account in this study included obtaining necessary consent for collaboration in the study from participants, obtaining verbal consent and keeping the information of participating individuals confidential, and assuring them of the confidentiality of their information.

Instruments

The Passionate Love Scale (PLS): was designed in 1986 by Hatfield and Sprecher. The initial version of this questionnaire had 30 items, but changes were made to it in the following years, and the latest version has 15 items. This questionnaire is scored on a 9-point scale from completely to not at all. The score obtained from this questionnaire is also interpretable in five levels. Express your agreement or disagreement with each of its statements. This tool assesses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components related to love.

- Scores of 106 to 135 are reckless and passionate lovers
- Scores of 86 to 105 are emotional but with less intensity
- Scores of 66 to 85 have occasional bursts of emotions
- Scores of 45 to 65 are weak, with low levels of emotions
- Scores of 15 to 44 have lost their excitement



Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) conducted a study on 120 men and women at the university to assess love (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). They aimed to determine whether the love scale is (a) unidimensional, (b) stable as indicated by internal consistency (not affected by social desirability bias), and (d) related to other measures of love and intimacy. They found that the love scale is moderately stable. The alpha coefficient was 0.94. Furthermore, the alpha coefficient of the short version of the passionate love scale was reported to be 0.91. The Cronbach's alpha of this scale in this study was obtained as 0.81.

Communication Skills Test-Revised (CSTR):

The Communication Skills Questionnaire by Queendom is a scale consisting of 34 questions published by Queendom Institute (2004) and includes five subscales: ability to receive and understand verbal and non-verbal messages, emotional regulation, listening skills, insight into the communication process, and communicative assertiveness. The questions in this questionnaire are scored using a Likert scale ranging from never (1) to always (5). After obtaining a score for each statement, the subscales are ranked in order of ability to receive and send messages (29, 24, 22, 23, 21, 12, 6, 5, 4), emotional regulation (32, 30, 28, 16, 13, 11, 9, 8, 7), listening skills (34, 31, 27, 26, 25, 3), insight into communication process (20, 18, 17, 2, 1), communicative assertiveness (33, 19, 15, 14, 10). The higher an individual scores in this test, the more it indicates that they have high levels of communication skills and vice versa. To assess the validity of the communication skills test, the total validity of the test was calculated using the Cronbach's alpha method, which was equal to 0.69, indicating an acceptable internal consistency of the test. This value was 0.71 for university students and 0.66 for high school students. Additionally, the overall test validity coefficient was obtained as 0.71 using the validity ratio method in the current study.

Table 1: Sessions of Imago Therapy Treatment

Session one
Topic: Establishing a good relationship between the counselor and group members, among group members, their familiarity with group rules, explanation of how body temperature, heart rate and skin resistance are measured, explanation of group program regulations and framework by the leader, members' familiarity with the concept of Imago therapy, gestalt therapy, body psychotherapy, and object relations
Objectives
1. Introduction of the group leader and group members through the techniques of introducing members to each other
2. Justification of group rules by the group leader
3. Determination of the program framework by the group leader
4. Necessary explanations regarding how to measure body temperature, heart rate, and skin resistance by the group leader

5. Familiarity of members with the concepts of Imago therapy, Gestalt psychotherapy, body psychotrauma, and object relations techniques/ activities .
Session two
Topic: Conflict Study
Goals 1. What changes or events declare the beginning of conflict in relationships? 2. What exact feelings flow within each of the partners and what topic does the conflict revolve around? 3. What do they say or do that fuels the fire of the conflict? 4. How is the emotional state of both at the most intense part of the conflict and when does it subside? 5. What is the ideal couple's mental image of their relationship ?
Session three
Topic :Reviewing the personal issues of each spouse and their main family history
Goals 1. Dealing with childhood frustrations and injuries 2. re-experiencing childhood feelings and memories and discovering object relationships 3. Examining the emotional planning of each couple 4. Identifying blockages, avoidances, hidden feelings, anxieties and traumas 5. Discovering behaviors, self-defeating thoughts and defenses that are used automatically 6. Raising awareness about body senses, emotions and memories, Hakomi technique training
Session four
Topic: Investigating the emotional dimensions of the body and its relationship with defenses, avoidances, blockages, anxieties and traumas
Goals 1. Identifying your feelings and emotions 2. Facing your feelings towards childhood objects 3. Being aware of your defensive behaviors, discovering the anxieties that led to these defenses, and finally discovering the hidden feelings that maintain or deny these anxieties (focus triangle) 4. Removing unconscious communication patterns
Session five
Topic: Increasing the level of closeness and intimacy with your spouse
Goals 1. People's ability to feel themselves and others 2. Defining personal boundaries clearly-



3. Attention to the psychological dimensions between couples and their interpersonal process -
Session six
Topic: Close extra outlets and re-romanticize
Goals 1. Accurate definition of problems and differences and changing the path of energy into the relationship 2. Identifying things that make your spouse happy (listing them and sharing them with each other) 3. Restructuring and shaping interactions 4. Performing loving behaviors (when.... I feel loving and lovable).
Session seven
Topic: deepening the emotional bond between spouses and increasing the sense of security and pleasure
Goals 1. Capacity to work with each other 2. Talking about their conflicts with each other 3. Helping them to be less spiteful 4. Examining the level of sexual understanding of spouses
Session eight
Topic: Awareness of the deepest spiritual needs of spouses and increasing the personal growth of spouses
Goals 1. Increasing the ability of members to feel themselves and others 2. Examining how members contact and withdraw and their presence in relation to others 3. Differentiation of couples and the ability to demarcate between oneself and the other
Session nine
Topic: The ability to express your anger and disgust towards your spouse in a safe and constructive way
Goals: 1. Awareness of the internalization of thoughts that cause discomfort and impulsive behavior in a person 2. Being aware of your feelings and emotions 3. Empathetic understanding of immediate and immediate experiences of spouses 4. Experiencing the emotions of the present time and trying to understand the reference of internal analogy 5. Accepting your feelings 6. Accepting the responsibility of one's role in this war and controversy 7. Relaxation training
Session ten

Topic: Recovering your lost self and your integrity**Goals**

1. Accepting the false and denied self and recombining them
2. Integration of poles within oneself
3. The embodiment of love
4. More mature interaction (less defensive), supporting each other, satisfying each other's needs, intimate communication, and more satisfying sex.
5. Facilitation and emergence of new solutions to solve old communication problems

Data analysis

The data analysis in this research was conducted in two parts: descriptive and inferential statistics. In the descriptive statistics section, the characteristics of the sample were described in terms of measures of central tendency and dispersion such as mean, median, mode, standard deviation, variance, tables, and frequency distribution charts. In the inferential statistics section, due to the nature of the research and the interval scale of the dependent variables, the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) test was used in the SPSS-22 software environment. In this study, to test the assumption of normal distribution of the data, the Shapiro-Wilk values for communication skills and passionate love were examined for both groups in both pre-test and post-test stages, and the Shapiro-Wilk value related to the components and total score of communication skills and passionate love in both groups in both pre-test and post-test stages was found to be non-significant at the 0.05 level. This article indicates that the distribution of data related to the components and total scores of communication skills and passionate love in the mentioned groups is normal. To test the assumption of homogeneity and error variance after testing the components and total scores of communication skills and passionate love among groups, the Leven test was used. The error variances of none of the components and total scores of communication skills and passionate love in the two groups are not significant at the 0.05 level, indicating that the assumption of equality of error variances for components and total scores of communication skills and passionate love is met. Additionally, the results of the homogeneity test of regression line slope between pre-tests and post-tests of components and overall scores of communication skills and passionate love showed that the difference in slope of none of the components and overall scores of communication skills and passionate love between the two groups is significant at the 0.05 level. It can be said that in this study, the assumption of homogeneity of regression slope for components and overall scores of communication skills and passionate love was established. The assumption of homogeneity of variance-covariance of dependent variables was tested using Box's M test in which the assumption of homogeneity of variance-covariance of dependent variables among the data of the present

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study was confirmed (Box's $M = 4.46$, $P = 0.250$, $F = 1.37$). The result of Bartlett test of sphericity was found to be significant at a level of 0.03 with 2 degrees of freedom ($p=0.030$, $\chi^2=7.05$). Therefore, it can be said that all assumptions held true during the data analysis .

Results

In this study, the mean and standard deviation of the age of participants in the experimental group were 43.13 and 7.01 years respectively, while in the control group, they were 39.20 and 5.99 years respectively. It is worth mentioning that the use of an independent t-test demonstrated that there was no significant difference in the mean age between the two groups. The mean and standard deviation of marriage duration for participants in the experimental group were 15.27 and 5.37 years respectively, while in the control group, they were 13.15 and 3.68 years respectively. It is worth mentioning that the use of an independent t-test showed that there was no significant difference in the mean marriage duration between the two groups (Table 2).

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the research participants

variable		groups	
		experiment (N=15)	(N=15) control
age	Mean	43.13	39.20
	Standard deviation	7.01	5.99
	0.110 = $P=1.65 \cdot t$		
Marriage duration	Mean	15.27	13.15
	Standard deviation	5.37	3.68
	0.215 = $P=1.27 \cdot t$		

Table 3: Mean $\pm$ standard deviation related to components of communication skills and passionate love .

Variables	Groups	Pre-test	Post-test
Receiving and sending messages ability	Experiment	6.40 $\pm$ 23.80	6.25 $\pm$ 30.93
	control	7.81 $\pm$ 24.60	5.15 $\pm$ 23.93
Emotional regulation	Experiment	5.34 $\pm$ 24.87	5.96 $\pm$ 31.70
	control	6.29 $\pm$ 24.20	6.68 $\pm$ 25.40
Listening skill	Experiment	3.47 $\pm$ 17.93	4.45 $\pm$ 22.37
	control	4.34 $\pm$ 17.60	4.31 $\pm$ 18.20
	Experiment	2.23 $\pm$ 14.87	3.19 $\pm$ 18.13

communication process insight	control	2.66 ± 13.65	3.21 ± 14.00
communicative assertiveness	Experiment	2.09 ± 15.27	3.64 ± 19.46
	control	3.57 ± 15.66	2.99 ± 15.67
Total score of communication skills	Experiment	16.59 ± 96.73	17.41 ± 122.65
	control	12.79 ± 95.67	10.24 ± 97.20
Passionate love	Experiment	9.40 ± 60.73	8.33 ± 68.76
	control	9.73 ± 62.28	8.72 ± 57.40

Table 3 shows that in the experimental group, compared to the control group, the mean scores of components and total score of communication skills, along with the mean of passionate love, have increased in the post-test phase .

Table 4: One-way covariance analysis of the main hypothesis

Statistics	values	F	P
Pillai's Trace	0.653	23.56	0.001
Wilk's Lambda	0.347	23.56	0.001
Hotelling's Trace	1.884	23.56	0.001
Roy's largest root	1.884	23.56	0.001

In Table 4, the effect of Pillai's Trace, Lambda and Wilk's impact, and Hotelling's Trace, considering that the value of sig is less than 0.05; therefore, the effect of Imago therapy on love styles and communication problems of married women is significant.

Table 5: Box test to check the equality of variances matrix

Box s m	f	Df1	Df2	sig
4.46	1.37	1	28	0.250

Table 5 shows Box M statistic. This test examines the null hypothesis that the covariance matrices of the observed dependent variables are equal across different groups. In the above table, since the value of f is not significant at the given error level, the null hypothesis is not rejected. This means that the covariance matrices observed between different groups are equal.

Table 6: Results of multivariate analysis of covariance comparing the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variables.

Variables	sum of squares	Freedom degree	average of squares	Fisher	P	η^2
Love styles	0.653	2	0.653	62.521	0.001	0.653
Communication problems	0.437	2	0.347	45.390	0.001	0.653

As shown in table 6, the value of F resulting from the analysis of multivariate covariance (Wilks' Lambda =0.347, $\eta^2=0.6532$, $P=0.001$, $F(25 \text{ and } 2)=23.56$) is significant. This indicates that the implementation of Imago therapy has had a significant effect on communication skills and passionate love. Based on this, the null hypothesis was rejected indicating that Imago therapy has an impact on marital women's love styles and communication problems.

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of Imago therapy on love styles and communication problems of married women. The results indicated that Imago therapy has an impact on love styles and communication problems of married women. The results of the findings are consistent with the research of Ahmadian & Jahangiri, 2023; Bidari, 2022; Halajian et al., 2022; Hendrix et al., 2015; Jalili et al., 2024; Luquet & Muro, 2018; Mousavi, 2018; Movahedi, 2017; Muro et al., 2016; Schmidt & Gelhert, 2017; Zaker Esfahani et al., 2023. Tae and colleagues (2012), through examining the effectiveness of group Imago therapy (relationship therapy) on the attitudes of love among couples attending the counseling center in Ahvaz, showed that group Imago therapy training leads to an increase in love attitudes(Tae et al., 2012). Yalcin (2017) conducted a study in which he provided training in Imago therapy to 21 couples who had enrolled through advertisement, and after the training, he showed that the result of this approach had a significant effectiveness on the love and affection of the experimental group compared to the control group(Yayci, 2017).

In explaining this finding, it can be said that love has been shaped by an unconscious force within us and our childhood experiences, and our romantic choices are influenced by childhood patterns. In this approach, more than any other therapeutic couple, love and its process are addressed, and individuals are encouraged in their search and understanding of their love, helping them to break free from their way of loving, expectations, and reconstruction of the concept of love(Fatemi, 2019). Imago therapy focuses on the unacknowledged and denied aspects of individuals' personalities within its structure and reconstructs individuals' imaginary images by presenting a true picture of love. Imago therapy helps individuals adjust their expectations from their spouses and address the denied and hidden aspects of their personalities(Farajian et al., 2021). The main assumption of this approach is that mate selection based on romantic attraction at the end of childhood is done unconsciously; therefore, choosing a spouse is the result of competition - unconscious between a mental image of parents or caregivers created in

childhood and called (Imago) and the absolute features of attractiveness of spouse (Karimi Andani, 2021). Imago is an effective agent in selection, driven by the unconscious aim of improving individual integrity through re-establishing broken connections, both personal and interpersonal, that childhood failures have disrupted. Therefore, romantic love, at any level, is the result of a predicted need for satisfaction; thus, Emagotherapy changes the styles of love and the love styles between couples are implemented based on the interests and needs of their spouse (Karmi, 2019).

According to theories proposed in psychology, love is formed by an unconscious inner force and our childhood experiences, and our romantic choices are influenced by childhood patterns. As stated, Imago therapy takes a new approach to the issue of love and does not consider it as a secondary and marginal subject. In this approach, more than any other therapeutic approach, emphasis is placed on love and its process, leading individuals in their search for and understanding of their love, helping them with their way of loving, expectations, and rebuilding the concept of love (Shapur., 2019). Imago therapy focuses on the neglected and denied aspects of individuals' personalities and reconstructs their imaginary image by presenting a real image of love. Imago therapy helps individuals adjust their expectations from their spouse and address the denied and hidden aspects of their personality. Visualization in therapy is a theoretical and therapeutic approach that emphasizes committed partnership with a focus on marital relationships (Shah & Dokani, 2021).

The main assumption of this approach is that marital choice based on romantic attraction at the end of childhood is unconsciously made. Therefore, spouse selection is the result of competition - unconscious between a mental image of parents or caregivers created during childhood known as the (Imago) and the absolute characteristics of spouse attractiveness (Jalili et al., 2024). Imago is an influential factor in selection, driven by the unconscious, with the aim of improving an individual's integrity through rekindling connections, both intrapersonal and interpersonal, that have been fractured by childhood failures. Therefore, romantic love, at any level, is the result of a predetermined need for satisfaction (Zaker Esfahani et al., 2023).

Additionally, it was also demonstrated that Imago therapy has an impact on the communication problems of married women. This finding was consistent with the results of the research by Lawson (2008), Smith and colleagues (2016), Amini khoei and colleagues (2015), and Shojaiyan (2017) (Amini Khoei et al., 2014; Lawson, 2008; Shojaeian, 2017; Smith, 2016). For instance, Smith and colleagues (2016) concluded in their study that therapeutic communication or Imago therapy leads to an increase in constructive communication patterns and a decrease in avoidant communication patterns and expectation/withdrawal (Smith, 2016). In another study, Amini Khoei and colleagues (2015) reported that Imago therapy led to an increase in constructive communication patterns and a decrease in avoidant communication patterns and expectation/withdrawal (Amini Khoei et al., 2014). Explaining these results based on Smith and colleagues' theory (2016), it can be said that problem-solving cognitions and behaviors of couples have been learned (Smith, 2016).

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In explaining the results of the research, it can be stated that the Imago Therapy approach is effective in improving the communication problems of couples. This is because based on the complementary creator pattern of this approach, couples easily talk about their issues and problems and strive to resolve them. Couples undergoing treatment avoid aggression (Amini Khoei et al., 2014). Furthermore, following the pattern of mutual avoidance, couples refrain from arguing and adopt an approach to avoid irrational reactions and conflicts with each other, trying to create a relationship and reduce conflicts. Based on the expectation/withdrawal pattern of spouses from blame, criticism, and threats from their own spouse, which ultimately leads to withdrawal or avoidance by the spouse, they avoid such behaviors (Moazi et al., 2021). Imago therapy (communication imagery) provides couples with awareness and information as an important process, and also educates them about the unconscious aspects of their communication. Instead of superficially solving their problems, it helps them to intervene and examine them more accurately and deeply. This results in improvement and emotional security in relation to others. Therefore, couples learn to see their conflicts as an opportunity for more intimacy and connection with each other. As a result, two important tools, the process of conversation and deep communication, help couples make better changes in their behavior, which in turn leads to an improvement in the patterns of communication between couples. In other words, the use of the method of Imagotherapy enhances intimacy between couples, growth in self-understanding and understanding of one's spouse, understanding of childhood and its impact on the individual's subconscious, increase in self-confidence, and growth in the conversation and communication of couples (Vahedi & Ghavi Panjeh, 2021). Therefore, specific communication patterns existing in the family lead to the perpetuation of problematic cognitions and behaviors. Couples with communication problems lack in communication skills, problem-solving abilities, stress management, expression of emotions, etc., which in turn lead to an increase in communication problems between partners (Amini Khoei et al., 2014). Couples therapy using Imago therapy helps couples to learn skills for healing childhood wounds and separating marital relationships from past influences by understanding unconscious processes. This creates a healthy and constructive connection with their spouse, increasing understanding and creating a safe space for controlling and expressing their negative emotions, ultimately reducing psychological-emotional distance between partners (Shojaeian, 2017) (Shojaeian, 2017). Since in the constructive communication pattern of couples, all possible solutions are examined and emotions are expressed towards each other, in the avoidant communication pattern, couples refrain from communication and take no action to resolve issues. In the expectation/withdrawal communication pattern, one partner blames the other while the other withdraws from communication, therefore couple therapy training using Imago therapy techniques through the mechanisms mentioned above leads to an increase in constructive communication patterns and a decrease in avoidant and expectation/withdrawal communication patterns (Schmidt & Gelhert, 2017).

One important communication visualization technique is known as "conscious dialogue", which can help couples change this pattern of communication. In communication visualization, dialogue is the underlying structure of therapy. Through

practicing conscious conversation, couples learn that by addressing their issues, problems, and concerns with each other, they can prevent themselves from getting stuck in negative interactions, resolve conflicts that arise in the relationship, and experience greater intimacy. The more interactions between spouses and the higher level of love and companionship in these interactions, the more satisfaction they will have from being together and their marital relationship. Presenting communication-centered solutions leads individuals to find greater problem-solving abilities within themselves and to effectively utilize them when facing various issues (Mateen, 2016). During this process, couples learn an effective way of communication that can help them resolve their problems and conflicts. In fact, they learn that instead of avoiding discussing their issues, they can effectively address their conflicts through dialogue, so the effectiveness of this therapy is not far from changing avoidant communication patterns and unrealistic expectations. Based on Fatemi and colleagues' opinion (2019), it can be said that proponents of Imago therapy believe that one of the main reasons for divorce and marital problems among couples is the presence of unresolved wounds in each of the partners and their impact on their current relationships (Fatemi, 2019).

Limitations of the study

The primary constraint of this study from a cognitive viewpoint is the inability to apply the results to a broader population. While significant outcomes from smaller groups are more accurate, the small size of the treatment groups reduces the overall external validity of the research. In upcoming research, using larger sample sizes can address this limitation. Unfortunately, one of the frequently encountered drawbacks of this research and similar studies is the inability to apply the findings to other couples due to the diverse cultural and social conditions prevalent in the country. The research focused solely on women seeking counseling services in Alborz province, so it is important to exercise caution when extrapolating the results to future studies.

Conclusion

In this study, the implementation of Imago therapy had a significant impact on communication skills and passionate love. Based on this, the examination concluded that Imago therapy affects the love styles and communication problems of married women. As a result, this approach helps spouses to acquire skills for healing these wounds and separating marital relationships from past influences by understanding unconscious processes. In this way, it creates conditions for healthy relationships with understanding, empathy, and creating a safe space for expressing healthy anger and sadness. Moreover, engaging in exercises to increase attention and caregiving behaviors such as anger management, participating in enjoyable activities together, recognizing positive and negative traits of oneself, parents and spouses, and reconstructing a realistic mental image of one's spouse can significantly help couples in resolving issues, improving intimacy, and increasing positive emotional interactions.



Practical recommendations

It is recommended that counselors specializing in family, marriage, and divorce use Imago Therapy approaches more in their counseling centers to effectively resolve marital conflicts. Based on the results of this study, which demonstrate the impact of this treatment, it can be suggested that this method be used to improve love styles and communication problems of couples experiencing marital conflicts seeking counseling. The current research can demonstrate to family counselors and other professionals the impact of various psychological variables on the marital relationship of couples to reduce their marital dissatisfaction and improve their marital quality through enhancing the couples' skills.

Research recommendations

Given that the present study has been conducted on women visiting counseling centers in Alborz province with their own specific cultural and social conditions, it is suggested that the effectiveness of the above approaches be tested in other provinces and regions of the country with different social and cultural conditions. It is proposed that in future research, extensive analyses be conducted based on variables such as the impact of Imago therapy on sexual and emotional problems in marital relationships, diversity-seeking and thrill-seeking, proving masculinity and feeling of youthfulness, considering extramarital relationships harmless for marital relationships, experiences of relationships with the opposite sex before marriage, low self-confidence, having a job that allows for more interaction and communication with the opposite sex.

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