

The Effectiveness of Short-term Solution-focused Couples Therapy in Increasing Different Dimensions of Couples' Problem Solving Ability

Zahra Jenaban*, Zhaleh Refahei and Zahra Ghaderi

Department of counseling, Marvdasht Branch, Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht, Iran

Corresponding author: Zahra Jenaban

ABSTRACT: The present study was to examine the effectiveness of short-term solution-focused couples therapy in increasing different dimensions of couples' problem solving ability. The method of this quasi-experimental study was pretest and posttest with control group. Samples of 16 pairs of couples were purposively selected among the couples who referred to eight counseling centers under the supervision of Shiraz's welfare organization in 2012. And then they were randomly assigned to two experimental group and control group. The experimental group was trained in eight sessions of therapeutic intervention. The instrument of this study was family problem solving scale (D'zurilla & Nezu 1990), which was back translated by Ahmadi (2008) in Iran, carried out in three phases of pre-test, posttest and follow up on both control and experimental group. After the elimination of pre-test effect, the results using analysis of covariance showed that short-term solution-focused therapy leads to an increase of couples' problem solving ability and its components. According to follow up test results, the effects were significant ($P=.05$). In general, the findings of this study indicated that short-term solution-focused couples therapy as a useful treatment plan can be used to promote couples' problem solving ability.

Keywords: Couples; Problem solving ability; Solution-focused couples therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Getting married is one of the most difficult and complex duties of adulthood. This important event is yet described as the most romantic and the simplest phases of lifecycle. Instead of considering marriage as a solution to family' problem or the ultimate problem of individual, it should be regarded as transition to a new stage of life that requires to forming goals, rules and different family's structures (Carter & McGoldric, as cited in Nazari & Navabi Nejad, 2006).

According to Nazari, (2012), "if a marriage is unhappy it can stop personal growth and lead to frustration. Failure in this regard can cause hurt and trauma which is time-consuming to heal". Therefore achieving a healthy society obviously depends on family health and the realization of family health is contingent on having good relations and mental health with each other. Accordingly, making a healthy family and their relations will certainly have positive effects on the society. Samani and Ahmadi study, (2011) (as cited in Nasr Esfahani, Etemadi & Shafi-Abadi, 2012).

Lumsdyn (1995) believes that a problem occurs when a person cannot find an immediate way to move from the current situation to the target situation. There will be no more problem when someone knows how to move from his current situation to where he wants to be. Moreover, a proper expression of a problem is also an important factor in solving a problem, problem-solving involves mental states of problematic situations (as cited in Mohammadi, 2004). Kurylo, Elliot & Shewchak, (2001) have introduced the process of problem-solving through the acronym FOCUS, which stands for Facts, Optimism, Creativity, Understanding and Solving. Findings indicate that facing with problems, difficulties, inconveniences are not so important, but it is important for people to act appropriately to cope with these kinds of situations. Any problem or decision essentially causes a stressful situation. As long as a person

has not actually solved the problem or has not taken a proper decision, the stress will be dramatically increased and eventually it causes to activate his unpleasant emotions (as cited in Shekoochi Yekta & Parand, 2008).

Problem-solving is a dynamic process which depends on knowledge, and learning process will be made by the learner himself. So in teaching-learning process trainers will confront people with challenges in problematic situations and give them the opportunity to think about the problem, gather information, make hypothesis and test them (Rastgoo, 2004). Numerous therapies are planned in order to enhance couples' problem-solving ability. Of these therapies short-term solution-focused couples therapy can be mentioned. Solution focused therapy approach is a kind of postmodern approach which was established by de Shazer and Inso Kim Berg.

According to solution-focused consultative viewpoints, changing is inevitable, especially useful changes are possible, so in this kind of therapy the focus is on the issues that are likely to change, but not the unchangeable and difficult issues, for this reason, solution-focused counseling is known as hope counseling. In this approach instead of focusing on the problem it entirely focuses on the solutions. It is different from traditional therapy in putting less emphasis on past to gain present and future. (Natalie study, (1993) (as cited in Nazari and Navaee Nezhad, 2006). Solution-focused therapist helps the couples to picture the common hopes and wishes for the future and he joins the couple in mutual relationship and helps them to consider their early success and instead of focusing on the cause and state of a special problem, therapists try to help the couples to find creative solutions. The assumption here is that the clients have already been aware of their problem-solving and therapist duty is to help the couples to use their previous knowledge in the present time (Nazari, 2012).

Numerous researches have shown the effectiveness of solution-focused therapy in couples' problems and conflicts. Among them Treyger, Ehlers, Zajick & Trepper, (2008), made a research entitled "Helping the Couples to Cope with the Consequences of their Partner's Behavior": they realized that the couples who had sexual problems, could help their partners to cope with the consequences of the behavior by using the concepts of solution-focused approach. Likewise Nazari (2004), Dibaeian (2005), Nazari and Navaei Nezhad (2006), all have done researches about the effectiveness of solution-focused group therapy in marital conflicts and such researches showed the effectiveness of this therapy. Ahralian, Soodan and Hossein Pour (2010) and Davoodi, Etemadi and Shah Sia (2012) have done researches about the effectiveness of solution-focused in marital compatibility, the results of which subsequently showed the effectiveness of solution-focused therapy.

With regard to ever-increasing problems that the couples are faced with and their weakness in solving problems ability, which can lead to irreparable psychological and social damages, training the couples and helping them to increase their problem-solving ability has a particular significance. Regarding the above mentioned literature review about the efficiency of solution-focused couple therapy, and the importance of couples' problem-solving ability, the current research was to examine the effectiveness of short-term solution-focused therapy in couples' problem-solving ability, and to answer the question whether solution-focused couples therapy can increase couples' problem-solving ability and its different dimensions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Method

The present study as a quasi-experimental design was a type of pretest, posttest designs with control group. The researcher used back translated version of family problem solving scale D'zurilla & Nezu (1990) which was done by Ahmadi (2008). It consisted of three phases of pretest, posttest and follow up with control group.

Participants

The population of the study was the couples who referred to 8 counseling centers under the supervision of Shiraz's welfare organization in 2012. From the given population the samples of 16 couples were purposively selected. To select the samples the following terms were considered:

The duration of the marriage should be between 2 to 15 years (Choosing 2 years is due to the elapsed time of the marriage which is known as a romantic love and the couple is not still encountered with the reality of life).

- Having an educational degree over diploma.
- Being over the age of 25.
- Achieving a minimum score of family problem solving questionnaire.
- Lacking in physical illness and psychological disorders.
- Not being divorced or attempting to do it.

The method of sampling was available in the current study and the selected samples were 16 couples (8 pairs in control group and 8 pairs in experimental group) among the volunteers to participate in sessions. In this design, solution-focused couple therapy and couples' problem solving ability were considered as dependent variable and independent variable respectively. To do this, first 16 pairs of couples were selected among the population and they completed family problem solving ability questionnaire as a research tool. Then couples were divided into two groups. The experimental group received 8 sessions of solution-focused therapy and the control group received no therapeutic intervention. The sessions were held weekly. A posttest was administered to the couples at the end of therapy sessions and again after 30 days the couples had another test in order to determine the changes that have been taken place.

In order to analyze the data gathered from the completed questionnaire, covariance analysis method was used. The summary sessions based on solution-focused approach are presented as follows:

First session: Getting acquainted and communicating with members, expressing the rules and objectives of group, stating the general principles of solution-focused counseling, training the goals determination based on solution-focused approach.

Second session: Determining the goals positively, objectively and accessibly by the members and training them to reframe the problems.

Third session: Helping the members frame their problems and usefully enabling them to change their understandings of the inconveniences of preceding problems. Training them utilize a 0 to 10 scale.

Fourth session: Helping the members distinguish the positive exceptions with their spouse to increase their hopes and reduce their scope of problems in their life.

Fifth session: Using the miracle question.

Sixth session: Maintaining the irresistible positive expression of the problem. Teaching the members do something different at the outbreak of trouble.

Seventh session: Utilizing a 0 to 10 scale to evaluate the achievement of goals.

Eighth session: Summarizing the topics being taught, administering the posttest.

Follow up session: Administering follow up test to determine the changes that have been made.

Research instrument

The research instrument used in this study was the back translated version of family problem solving scale (D'zurilla & Nezu 1990) to assess the problem solving skill by 30 questions in 5 sub-scales as: orientation towards problems, logical skills of problem solving, being impulsive, carelessness, shunning and avoidance. It was graded in a five-level Likert scale which were arranged on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always). Each item is scored from 1 to 5. The items of 9, 10, 12, 17, 18, 21, 25, 26, 30 were reversely scored.

Data Analysis

- Inferential statistics method was analysis of covariance. First, Levene's test was used to **examine** the homogeneity of internal group. And then regarding the homogeneity of internal group, analysis of covariance was calculated by means of SPSS software.
- Descriptive statistics method was mean and standard deviation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of problemsolving ability score in pre-test, post-test and follow up

Variable	Group	Pre test		Post test		Follow up	
		Mean	Variance	Mean	Variance	Mean	Variance
Problem solving ability	Men's experimental	79.375	9.96	113.875	6.15	113.125	6.62
	Men's control	91	4.63	95.13	5.743	93.375	4.44
	Women's experimental	88.125	5.67	109.5	5.06	106.75	4.19
	Women's control	82.125	7.51	88.5	7.91	87.125	7.845

Table 2. Levene's test to assess homogeneity of variances of two groups in couples' problem solving ability

Sig Level of significance	df2 degrees of freedom	df1 degrees of freedom	F
0.281	12	3	0.59

Table 3. Analysis of covariance results of couples' problem solving ability scores

Source of changes	Sum of squares SS	degrees of freedom df	mean squares Ms	Test statistic F	p-values
Pre-test effect	5.496	1	5.496	3.189	0.071
Group effect	250.147	1	250.147	0.117	0.0279
Error	969.357	13	74.56		
Total	1225	15			

Table 4. Levene's test to assess homogeneity of variances of two groups in couples' orientation towards the problem

Sig Level of significance	df2 degrees of freedom	df1 degrees of freedom	F
0.557	13	2	0.231

Table 5. Analysis of covariance results of couples' problem solving ability scores in couples orientation towards the problem

Source of changes	sum of squares SS	degrees of freedom df	mean squares Ms	Test statistic F	p-values
Pre-test effect	741.3	1	3.741	2.778	0.0358
Group effect	207.636	1	207.636	0.678	0.036
Error	729.98	13	56.152		
Total	941.357	15			

Table 6. Levene's test to assess homogeneity of variances of two groups in logical skill of couples' problem solving ability

Sig Level of significance	df2 degrees of freedom	df1 degrees of freedom	F
0.774	11	4	0.455

Table 7. Analysis of covariance results of couples' problem solving ability scores in logical skill of couples' problem solving

Source of changes	sum of squares SS	degrees of freedom df	mean squares Ms	Test statistic F	p-values
Pre-test effect	4.556	1	4.556	4.449	0.009
Group effect	467.643	1	476.643	1.003	0.048
Error	633.801	13	48.753		
Total	1106	15			

Table 8. Levene's test to assess homogeneity of variances of two groups in couples' impulsivity component

Sig	df2	df1	F
Level of significance	degrees of freedom	degrees of freedom	
0.297	12	3	0.115

Table 9. Analysis of covariance results of couples' problem solving ability scores in couples' impulsivity dimension

Source of changes	sum of squares	degrees of freedom	mean squares	Test statistic	p- values
	SS	df	Ms	F	
Pre-test effect	3.775	1	3.775	4.996	0.074
Group effect	445.884	1	445.884	0.945	0.041
Error	1086.336	13	83.564		
Total	1272	15			

Table 10. Levene's test to assess homogeneity of variances of two groups in couples' carelessness

Sig	df2	df1	F
Level of significance	degrees of freedom	degrees of freedom	
0.336	10	5	0.23

Table 11. Analysis of covariance results of couples' problem solving ability scores in couples' carelessness dimension

Source of changes	sum of squares	degrees of freedom	mean squares	Test statistic	p-values
	SS	df	Ms	F	
Pre-test effect	4.553	1	4.553	3.889	0.009
Group effect	295.846	1	295.846	1.09	0.033
Error	906.338	13	69.72		
Total	1207	15			

Table 12. Levene's test to assess homogeneity of variances of two groups in couples' shunning and avoidance

Sig	Df2	Df1	F
Level of significance	Degree of freedom	Degree of freedom	
0.552	13	2	0.288

Table 13. Analysis of covariance results of couples' problem solving ability scores in couples' shunning and avoidance dimension

Source of changes	sum of squares	degrees of freedom	mean squares	Test statistic	p-values
	SS	df	Ms	F	
Pre-test effect	3.112	1	3.112	2.776	0.011
Group effect	356.335	1	356.335	0.667	0.028
Error	1022.77	13	78.67		
Total	1382	15			

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present research was done to determine the effect of solution-focused couple therapy on problem-solving ability of couples. Findings showed that after removing the effect of pre-test, there was statistically significant difference between the score of two groups in couples' ability of problem-solving. Thus, solution-focused couples therapy has been significantly effective in couples' problem-solving ability and increased its degree. These findings were in-line with Treyger, Ehlers, Zajicakl and Trepper (2008) who found that solution-focused therapy can help couples to cope with each other, and also the findings of Zimmerman, Prest & Watzel (1997) showed that the couples who participated in solution-focused counseling, had high marital understanding, mutual agreement, emotional expression and also closer relationship than control group. They were also in-line with Soodani findings (2006), Soodani and et al. (2010) who realized that solution-focused therapy affects to reduce the marital conflicts in

a group or individually. Moreover, they were in accordance with the findings of Davoodi and et al. (2012) who found that solution-focused approach has increased the marital compatibility.

Thus, from the results of the present study and relevant literature review that were discussed, it can be concluded that solution-focused approach focuses less on problems and more on solutions, so it can help the clients lead to make their relations towards solving problems. In this approach, it is believed that the clients are capable of finding the solutions that can cause their life improvement, but since they don't know how to use their capabilities, experiences and resources, they will face with difficulties in their life and they need to change their approach to problematic situations. Problem-solving is also a skill that requires training, and it can be said that solution-focused approach is essentially a training approach. In this study changing attitudes, exception questions, expression changing and miracle questions were taught to the couples. These techniques could help couples to destroy the problems and find possible solutions. As this method does not concern the cause of the problem, and just focuses its attention on innovative solutions to problem-solving, the couples were able to solve the problems and a better relation were made between them. Small changes resulted in bigger changes and could affect the couples' interaction. In addition, in this research the couples' problems were not chronic and deep-seated and also they had an optimum level of education. Finally it can be said that the aforementioned reasons have resulted in the effectiveness of solution-focused approach. According to the findings of the present study, solution-focused couples therapy was effective in couples' problem solving ability and its different dimensions.

This study suggests a range of further research which includes the effect of education and cultural training. To do so, more attention should be paid to these two factors through workshops and doing similar researches with long term follow up periods. In terms of other couples' education and culture, it is also suggested other studies to be carried out.

REFERENCES

- Ahmadi KH. 2008. Family problem solving scale. Institution of Poya Azmonyar.
- Ahromian A, Soodani M, and Hosseinpour M. 2010. The effectiveness of group teaching solution-focused approach in happiness and marital compatibility of couple referring to Busher Counseling Centers. *Counseling Research and Developments* 39:7-29.
- Davoodi Z, Etemadi O, Bahrami F, and Shah Siah M. 2012. The effect of short-term solution-focused approach on marital compatibility of men and women who are prone to divorce in Isfahan. *Journal of Principles of Mental Health* 55:190-203.
- Dibaeian SH. 2005. The effectiveness of solution-focused therapy in increasing marital satisfaction. Master's thesis, University of Allameh Tabatabaee, Tehran.
- Kurylo MF, Elliot TR, Shewchak RM. 2001. Focus on the family caregiver: A problem solving training intervention. *Journal of Counseling and Developments* 79:261-275.
- Mohammadi N. 2004. The relation of problem solving styles to public health. *Journal of Psychology* 27, 2-14.
- Nasr Esfahani N, Etemadi A, and Shafi Abadi A. 2012. The effectiveness of meaning-focused training in married women's family function. *Journal of Counseling and Family Psychotherapy* 2:209-221.
- Nazari AM. 2004. Investigating and comparing the effect of solution-focused counseling and relationship enrichment program on marital satisfaction of only one spouse working. Doctoral dissertation, University of Teaching Education Tehran.
- Nazari AM, and Navabi Nejad Sh. 2006. Investigating the effect of solution-focused counseling on marital satisfaction of dual-career couples. *Journal of Counseling Research and Developments* 2:57-77.
- Nazari AM. 2012. The basis of couples therapy and family therapy. Tehran: Science publishing.
- Rastgoo MA. 2004. The investigation of problem solving. Tehran: Negah.
- Shekahi-Yekta M, and Parand A. 2008. The effect of teaching problem solving techniques to mothers on family relationship. *Journal of Family Research* 13:5-16.
- Soodani M. 2006. Comparing the effectiveness of Ellis cognitive couple therapy and de Shazer solution-focused individual and group therapy in reducing marital conflicts. Doctoral dissertation, University of Allameh Tabatabaee, Tehran.
- Soodani M, Shafie-Abadi A, Etemadi A, and Delavar A. 2010. Comparing the effectiveness of de Shazer solution-focused individual and group therapy in reducing marital conflicts. *Journal of Educational Psychology Studies* 14:39-54.
- Treyger S, Ehlers N, Zajickl and Treppert T. 2008. Helping spouses cope with partners coming out: A solution-focused approach. *American Journal of Family Therapy* 36:30-47.
- Zimmerman TS, Prest LA, and Watzel BE. 1997. Solution-focused parenting groups: An empirical study. *Journal of Systemic Therapies* 19:125-144.