



The Effectiveness of Building a Lasting Connection (BLC) Premarital Program on Marital Satisfaction of Couples: An Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy-Based Approach

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Abstract

Background: Marriage preparation programs have shown significant positive effects, especially in teaching marriage skills and conflict resolution. Marital education can lead to marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction has a great impact on the family and the physical and mental health of its members and is one of the most important and effective factors in maintaining a successful, healthy, and happy life.

Methods: The research method used for this research was quasi-experimental, using a control group and a pretest-posttest design. The statistical population of this study included all couples who have passed between 6 months to 3 years since their marriage. The samples included 22 couples (44 participants) who were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups.

Results: As the results of this study showed, the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups for the marital satisfaction and the mean scores of the experimental group in the marital satisfaction was more than the control group ($F=47.71$, $P<0.05$). Therefore, the results indicated the effectiveness of premarital education of BLC on marital satisfaction in the experimental group.

Conclusions: The BLC premarital education program can play an effective role in increasing couples' satisfaction due to its comprehensive and multidimensional view of couples' relationships and providing a platform for building a secure bond.

Keywords: Building a lasting connection, Marital satisfaction, Couples.

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Introduction

The quality of the couple's relationship forms the foundation on which the future functioning of the whole family and the physical and mental health of the members are built. Accordingly, the most important criterion for determining a healthy family is the couple's satisfaction with marriage.¹ Throughout life, couples face happy times as well as difficult times. In response to difficulties, some couples get divorced, while others develop happy and satisfying relationships despite the difficulties ahead.²

Marital satisfaction can be considered as an objective feeling of satisfaction, and pleasure experienced by a couple

when all aspects of their marriage are considered. Marital satisfaction is obtained when there is congruency between the expected situation and the current situation of the person in the marital relationship, and it is a positive and enjoyable attitude that the couple has from different aspects of their marital relationship.³ Marital satisfaction is one of the basic constructs that survive the foundation of the family. This construct is fundamental in relationship and family studies and is a vital element for the continuation of marital life.⁴

In the current situation of our society, where many programs and policies are focused on facilitating youth marriage, it is necessary to make young people more prepared and aware to build a successful marriage. Successful married life, in addition to facilities, requires special skills and abilities that should be paid special attention to at the very beginning of the marriage. The society of tomorrow is made by people who make a marriage contract with each other today. The builders and servants of tomorrow are the product of their upbringing, and the relationship at the beginning of the marriage is the basis for a couple's later relationship and can have a significant impact on the continuation of marriages.⁵⁻⁷ To this end, several approaches have been developed to help couples minimize the risk of divorce and achieve satisfactory, long-term, and healthy relationships. Today, preventive approaches have received more attention from couple and family therapy researchers. The marriage education program is a preventive program that aims to equip couples with the knowledge and skills that will help them maintain and improve their relationship during marriage.⁸ It can also be said that the goal of marriage education programs is to intervene early in the destructive patterns of relationship before couples engage⁹ that over time, these destructive interactive patterns can weaken the security of the couple's relationship and ultimately can destroy love, sexual attraction, and intimacy, trust, and commitment in general.¹⁰

Marriage education is provided to create lasting and satisfying marriages and subsequently prevent divorce.¹¹ In this regard, marriage education is helping to explain why marriages are divorced or unhappy, and in this regard, they are looking to offer suggestions and solutions. Marriage education can improve couples' ability to deal with current stressors in the relationship and help reduce marital instability.⁸ Marriage preparation is a preventative program that aims to address areas of conflict or concern before they become critical. One of the

newly designed premarital programs is the building a lasting connection (BLC), which is based on Susan Johnson's emotional focused therapy (EFT). This is a training program developed by Dr. Debbie Gilmour, EFT Supervisor, and Dr. Rebecca Jorgensen, EFT supervisor and instructor. The workshop on BLC is built around relationships and has five sections: Attachment, communication, managing differences physical connection, and shared goals. Each section is a continuation of the previous section, so couples can conceptualize their relationship as a shared construction process that is growing, evolving, and progressing. This program has been translated for the first time by the first author of this research and in Iran, no research has been done according to its protocol.

EFT is one of the short-term interventions in couple therapy¹² and emphasizes the change of attachment behaviors as a tool to improve disturbed relationships.¹³ This approach considers relationship anxiety due to the inability of couples to establish emotional relationships as well as coping with feelings of insecurity in the relationship, which leads to negative interaction cycles. Therefore, the goal of EFT is to help couples to be able to be aware of basic emotions and create a positive interaction that this interaction can lead to security and trust between couples.¹⁴

Various researches indicated the effectiveness of EFT on improving marital satisfaction, controlling family behavior, and increasing sexual satisfaction of couples,¹⁵ improving depression and the quality of marital relationship,¹⁶ couples' communication patterns,¹⁷ depression and post-traumatic stress as a result of extramarital relationships.¹⁸ In a study, Greenberg and colleagues used an emotional approach to heal couples' emotional trauma. The results showed that the intervention in the experimental group compared with the control group indicated a significant improvement in marital satisfaction, trust, forgiveness, and psychiatric symptoms.¹⁹ Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman found that marriage education was directly related to marital quality,²⁰ reducing marital conflict, and reducing divorce.²¹ In a study conducted by Halchock, McKinnon, and Johnson,²² the results showed that marital satisfaction, trust, and forgiveness in couples as a result of EFT improved and these changes were maintained over time. Burgess et al, in a study, concluded that EFT helps couples facilitate attachment bonding, safe, and lasting changes in marital satisfaction were achieved.²³

According to the issues mentioned, although marriage preparation programs have shown significant positive effects, especially in educating marriage skills and conflict resolution, due to the lack of sufficient awareness of these programs, they are not usually used by couples. In most countries, marriage counseling is provided very close to the date of marriage, and couples do not complete standard premarital counseling.⁶ In Iran, such educations are very brief and mostly focused on family planning and reproductive health;²⁴ While premarital counseling should prepare couples for a responsible and honest life.²⁵ Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness BLC marriage education program on couples satisfaction.

Materials and Methods

The research method used for this research was quasi-experimental using the control group and pre-test and post-test design. The statistical population of this study included all couples who were at least 6 months and a maximum of 3 years have passed since their marriage. The number of statistical samples for this study included 22 couples (44 participants). These samples were randomly assigned to the experimental group and control group. The sampling method of this study was voluntary. To select a sample, an advertisement based on the present study was prepared and the volunteers were asked to participate in the present study. The selection criteria of this study included: volunteer couples who were formally married and at least 6 months have passed since their marriage. Couples should not have signs of violence and aggression, addiction, and active infidelity in the relationship. Couples volunteering to enter the research were interviewed in a structured manner to ensure the selection criteria. The minimum age of the participants was 20 and the maximum was 35 years. The workshop was held in three sessions (four hours each session and a total of 12 hours), and three debugging, practice, and stabilization sessions (2 hours each session, and a total of 6 hours).

Kansas marital satisfaction scale (KMSS): In this study, we used the KMSS to measure marital satisfaction. It shows that on a scale such as RDAS, it can distinguish between people who experience turmoil in their marriage and those who do not.²⁶ The Kansas marital satisfaction scale is a three-item scale designed to quickly assess marital satisfaction. Respondents respond to each item on a scale of 7 with a score from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied). (Table 1).

Table 1. Session's descriptions description

Meeting	
Session 1: Attachment	Basics of attachment Attachment styles Concepts related to attachment in adults Definition of love
Session 2: Communication	effective communication skills Practicing being a listener Practicing being a speaker Negative interactive cycles
Session 3: Conflict management	Roles of each couple in negative cycles How to make a stop in a couple's negative cycles healthy sex
Session 4: Physical communication	The differences between men and women in sexual relations Different types of sexual relationships and the best of them
Session 5: Sharing Goals	building conjoint roles
Session 6: Consolidation	Creating marital customs and the customs of lasting love

Results

According to the information in table 2, which shows the average scores of marital satisfaction of couples in the experimental and control groups, it can be seen that the mean of pre-test and post-test indicates the effect of BLC on increasing marital satisfaction in couples in the experimental group. There is no difference in the means of the control group. Before performing the analysis, the observance of its assumptions was examined. One of the important assumptions in the analysis of covariance is the homogeneity of variance. Levin test was used to test the hypothesis of homogeneity of variance, the results of which are shown in table 3.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of marital satisfaction scores in pre-test and post-test of experimental and control groups

Group	Test	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	pretest	16.13	2.47
	posttest	20.04	1.52
Control	pretest	16.63	2.93
	posttest	16.95	2.35

According to the results of Levin's test, the significance level obtained is greater than 0.05 and this indicates the homogeneity of variance of the experimental and control groups.

Table 3. Levin test results

F	df1	df2	Sig.
3.45	1	42	0.07

As table 4 shows, the homogeneity of slopes with a value of $F=0/40$ is not significant for marital satisfaction, so the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes for marital satisfaction is confirmed. According to the obtained results, analysis of covariance can be used, the results of which are given in table 5.

As the results of table 5 show, the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups is significant for the marital satisfaction variable and the mean scores of the experimental group in the marital satisfaction variable was more than the control group ($F=71/47$, $P<0.05$). Therefore, the results indicated the effectiveness of premarital BLC on increasing marital satisfaction in the experimental group.

Table 4. Test results for assuming homogeneity of regression slopes

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Group	6.76	1	6.76	3.85	.057
pretest	89.50	1	89.50	50.99	.000
Group * pretest	.71	1	.71	.40	.526
Error	70.21	40	1.75		

a. R Squared = .741 (Adjusted R Squared = .721)

Table 5. Results of analysis of covariance for the mean scores of pre-test and post-test of experimental and control groups in the marital satisfaction

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Pretest	94.97	1	94.97	54.89	.000
Group	123.66	1	123.66	71.47	.000
Error	70.93	41	1.73		

Discussion

The results of this study showed that couples who were educated by the BLC program had more marital satisfaction than couples who did not receive any education, and this difference indicated the effectiveness of this program on increasing marital satisfaction of couples.

In five basic steps, the BLC program seeks to create the health skills for married life and considers each step as a joint construct process that takes place by both spouses and in a certain order, and going to the next step will be taken when the previous step is done. The first step of BLC is to work on attachment, its necessity, and obstacles in married life. In this step, the importance of security in relationships is examined and it is reminded that safe relationships can bring satisfaction and love, and if a relationship is not secured, it will not be possible to cultivate and grow love. Research has shown that people with secure attachment styles can be supportive, risk-averse, solution-oriented, optimistic about their performance, and more self-sacrificing. These characteristics increase their

satisfaction with their relationship with their spouse.^{27,28} Research also shows that if both spouses have a secure attachment style, they will experience more marital satisfaction.²⁹ In contrast, couples who feel less secure in their relationships will experience anxiety, avoidance, or both in their relationships and will be less satisfied with their relationships.²⁸ The couples with anxious attachment styles have poor performance in stress and difficulties of life and are involved in significant emotional disturbances.³⁰ Lack of secure attachment in couples can also lead to isolation and inappropriate emotional reactions in sensitive situations, cause more unpleasant discomfort in the relationship and ultimately lead to the experience of more marital dissatisfaction.³¹

In the second step of this program, effective communication skills are educated. In this section, appropriate frameworks for forming the right communication are examined and practiced in a safe environment. As research shows, creating effective communication between couples and conversational bonds is an important element that affects all human desires and is an important determining factor in the quality of relationships and marital satisfaction.³²

Communication plays a major role in marital satisfaction and intimacy for couples.³³ communication skills make couples easily share their thoughts and feelings, accept and understand each other's feelings³⁴ that can lead to more marital satisfaction.³⁵

In the third step, conflict management is considered. In this section, the negative interaction cycles between couples are examined and how they deal with these cycles is considered. As many studies have shown, one of the main and underlying causes of couple dissatisfaction is the inability to effectively solve problems and conflicts. Conflict is obvious in any relationship and can only be dealt with properly by learning conflict resolution skills. As Pakravan research, lack of familiarity with conflict resolution skills is among the important factors in marital dissatisfaction.³⁶ Another study also found that the most common cause of marital dissatisfaction is the inability to communicate effectively and deal appropriately with conflicts.³⁷ BLC enables couples to fight negative cycles and stop their negative cycle by recognizing their destructive interactive patterns and recognizing the role of each in creating, continuing, and stabilizing this negative cycle that finally can lead to marital satisfaction.

In the fourth step of BLC, couples learn the factors of healthy and sexual relationships and help them to share their sexual problems in a safe environment and work together to solve their gaps and physical communication problems. As the results of many studies show, sexual problems can greatly affect marital satisfaction. In the family and the marriage system, good sex³⁸ and sexual health are necessary and acceptable³¹ and are two of the strongest predictors of stability and success of marriage.³⁹ According to the results of a study conducted by Khazaei, there is a significant relationship between sexual dysfunction and low marital satisfaction.⁴⁰ The results of this study were in line with the results of research on the relationship between sex life and marital satisfaction.⁴¹

In the fifth step, the importance of common goals and sharing them with the spouse was discussed. In this step, the couple tried to be able to visualize the common future together and to create common customs to maintain and promote it. Naturally, if couples can create many commonalities in their relationship, they will be better able to establish intimacy and a lasting relationship with each other. Research shows that couples who spend more free time together and share hobbies will experience more marital satisfaction.³⁶

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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