

## The Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy on Marital Satisfaction of Couples with Autism Children

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on marital satisfaction of couples with autism child in Rasht, Iran. The population of the study was all the couples with autism children in welfare center of Rasht, Iran in 2015. The 10 couples with autistic children were selected randomly into two experimental and control groups of 10 patients. The marital satisfaction questionnaire of was used to collect the data and the experimental group participants received mindfulness therapy in an 8 weeks sessions. Data were analyzed by using analysis of covariance, the results showed that there was a significant difference between experimental and control groups; in terms of marital satisfaction ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) this means that mindfulness training had a positive effect on satisfaction. In general, it can be concluded that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy approach by using techniques such as awareness of the unpleasant thoughts and emotions, meditation, yoga, etc. can make people to leave the negative effects of dysfunctional thoughts and attitudes and make marriage more efficient.

**Key words:** Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, marital satisfaction, autism, covariance, dysfunctional thoughts

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### INTRODUCTION

Birth and presence of children with intellectual disabilities could be considered challenging and undesirable event in every family that is likely to be followed by stress, frustration, feelings of sadness and despair. Multiple evidences suggest that parents of children with mental problems are more likely to face social, economical and emotional problems which often have limiting, destructive and pervasive nature including disorders such as autism. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a range of complex developmental disorders that are characterized by delays or difficulties in cognitive, social, emotional, verbal, motor and sensory abilities (Greenspan and Wieder, 2006). These defects become apparent in the early years of growth and affect the person's life during the period of his life. These cognitive and behavioral disabilities not only affect the patients but her caregivers, family, teachers and community (Brummett and Dealberto, 2011). Significant increase in the prevalence of this disorder in the past three decades caused the implementation of researches for better understanding of biological and genetic symptoms associated with the etiology and incidence of ASD. However, researches are relatively limited about the interaction between symptoms of this disorder and family functioning. In other words, many studies have been dedicated to these children deficiencies but less attention

has been paid to the feature of their care environments. Autism has multifaceted and pervasive effects on the parents of suffering children. According to Volkmar and Pauls about 85% of children with ASD have limited ability for independent living, due to cognitive and adaptive limitations and this issue has caused parents to devote a lot of time to meet the needs of their children, during the period of their life. Seltzer's longitudinal study about parents of children with developmental disabilities has shown that over 50% of parents still take care of their child at the age of 50 and older (Seltzer *et al.*, 2001). Stable stress that has been imposes on parents of autistic children may change the caregivers' perception of parenting and reduce their optimism about their future and their child's. Child's cognitive disorders, behavioral problems, irritable mood, hyperactivity, stubbornness, nutritional problems, inability to self-care, low adaptive functioning, verbal impairment, learning disability, imposing restrictions on family life, separation from friends and family as well as the need the care throughout life, increased the stress of autistic children's parents (Ingersoll and Hambrick, 2011). According to research of Magno, mothers of children with ASD are experiencing higher levels of general anxiety and lower quality of life in compare to mothers of mentally retarded (ID) children without autism, mothers of children with cerebral palsy and mothers of normal children (Gau *et al.*, 2012). The presence of difficult children in the family increase much

more stress within the family and affect not only the caregivers but also the entire family system. Parents of these children immerse themselves in the problems of their children and they are experiencing lots of marital tensions. According to the study of Gau, low level expression of positive emotions in parents with autism children decreases the marital satisfaction in compared to parents with normal children (Little and Clark, 2006). Based on the research literature, the families of autistic children generally have lower quality of life than the families of children with ADD or ADHD and healthy children (Lee *et al.*, 2000). By the general perspective, not only autism affects the mental health of family but also the family conflicts will predict the autism symptoms. So, clearly it can be said that the relationship between the child disorder and family functioning is a reciprocal relationship and instead of dealing with children with special needs we should pay attention to the families with the special needs because as mentioned, a child with developmental problems will challenged the family system and by the dynamics of the autistic child, the family functioning will be impaired. And by an overall look it is necessary to target the family development functions, beyond the child. Marital satisfaction is a condition in which a couple feels the happiness, marriage satisfaction most of the times and they are satisfied with each other. This variable is thought to be a range of high satisfaction to high dissatisfaction (Sapington, 2001). According to the research that has been done in the area of marriage and marital relations, different variables are related to marital satisfaction over the time. These variables can predict the chances of maintaining the marital relationship satisfaction over time or go to the marital distress and divorce (Halford, 2005a, b). A category of these variables are related to the individual health. Research results have shown that relationship problems and personal problems can affect each other in people with mood disorders, substance abuse and anxiety disorders, especially Panic disorder and issued anxiety disorder. Also, a large range of marital problems have been reported in populations with psychiatric disorders (Halford, 2005a, b). For example, neuroticism is an important predictor of marital dissatisfaction and it is negatively associated with marital satisfaction. In addition, the special vulnerability of individual can cause relational problems and psychological disorders in couples. For example, defects in interpersonal communication skills and negative affection are risk factors of alcohol consumption and marital relationship problems. Research results have shown that mental pathological level have a significant relationship with marital satisfaction. For example, Myers and Diener (1995) found that marital satisfaction is

correlated with mental health. The person is more likely to experience positive emotions by the higher marital satisfaction, Maltby *et al.* (2004) found that those who have higher life satisfaction use appropriate and effective coping styles; they experience deeper emotions and positive feelings and they have higher public health. Marital dissatisfaction is correlated with poor health status, symptoms of depression, personality disorders, inappropriate behavior and poor social status. Uncoordinated marriage is a risk factor for depression but marital satisfaction was associated with reduced risk of depression. Couples who have disagreements are more depressed and have aggressive behavior and anxious mood (Brummett *et al.*, 2000). Clearly, couples are the determinant power of family direction and style. In modern times, Iranian couple's relationship was exposed to structural change and many transformation and distribution were observed. This, in turn could create problems in the family system and even lead it to collapse. Hence, the importance and necessity of Iranian couples' satisfaction survey is become more and more obvious. However, in studies related to the etiology of family problems and unhealthy marital relationships, the most important factor is an increase in psychological and behavioral problems in society. Mindfulness-based cognitive approach is based Teasdale's theory of interacting cognitive subsystems. This approach which is a holistic intervention do not make any fundamental distinction between body and mind, unlike other cognitive approaches. This model works with the existence and character of the person simultaneously and looks at the person as an integrated whole. In this approach, mindfulness methods that are compatible with the interacting cognitive subsystems, the physical, emotions, thoughts effects, feelings and emotions of the individual will be attended simultaneously. That is why one can be good at overcoming all aspects of emotions such as anger which have cognitive, emotional and physical aspects. This method causes certain emotional memories and meanings in the minds of people to wake up. Based on mindfulness-based cognitive approach in addition to attending the specific meanings, more general meanings will receive the importance too. Because it is based on the principle that only in the more general sense, meaning is associated with the excitement, the sensory capital, the tone or the internal-emotional feedback or the expression of the face, emotional arousal along with the specific meanings patterns were participated in it (Brown and Ryan, 2003). By reviewing past research in this area it can be seen that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy have been studied and used in the treatment of disorders such as depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder,

psychosis and suicidal behaviors (Ivanovski and Malhi, 2007). But due to its emerging reasons, efficacy of this therapy in improving marital satisfaction has been little noticed. Thus, with studies such as this and obtaining the necessary information, better description of the situation of the families with autism children can be received and recognize the threatening factors and design effective strategies. Hence, this research seeks to answer the question whether mindfulness-based cognitive therapy has an effect on marital satisfaction of parents with autistic children in Rasht, Iran.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research experimental methodology was pretest-posttest design with a control group. The population of the study was all the couples with autistic children in welfare center of Rasht, Iran, in 2015. The samples were selected by visiting the welfare centers and according to criteria for participating in the study including 10 couples with autistic children who were voluntarily selected and randomly assigned to experimental and control groups of 10 patients. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy was independent variables and the dependent variable was marital satisfaction. First, in order to collect the data before testing, the two groups of participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about marital satisfaction. Then, the experimental group received an 8 weeks mindfulness training sessions, 1 session each week and a total of 8 sessions of 2 h. The control group received no intervention. When the training sessions ended, both groups were asked to complete the questionnaire about marital satisfaction again.

**Measuring tool (Enrich marital satisfaction questionnaire by Olson, Drakeman and Fournier):** This questionnaire is used as a valid research tool in several studies to measure the level of satisfaction in marriage. Questionnaire contained 115 questions and 12 measures, including contractual response, marital satisfaction, personal issues, marital communication, conflict resolution, financial supervision, leisure time activities, sexual relationships, marriage and children, relatives

and friends, the roles of egalitarianism and ideological orientation. The 1-5 will be scoring on the 5-point Likert scale. The form of 47 question of the questionnaire has been prepared by Soleymanian and its reliability has been reported 0.95 by using Cronbach’s alpha. Rasooli has reported the 0.92 reliability coefficient of the questionnaire by using test-retest, during a week. Levene testing, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and covariance analysis was used to analyze the data. All analyzes conducted in this study was performed by using SPSS16.  $p \leq 0.05$  is considered as statistically significant level. The results of using Kolmogorov-Smirnov for normality of the data were analyzed. The results showed the natural distribution of variable data of marital satisfaction ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Heterogeneity of groups was evaluated in pre-test by using Levene test. According to Table 1, the obtained F-value is not significant. So, there is covariance equality and covariance implementation is possible.

According to the data in Table 2, the interaction between marital satisfactions pre-test and the group was not significant ( $F(1, 16) = 1.9, p = 0.17$ ). The significance of the interaction shows that the data supports the hypothesis of homogeneity of regression slopes. So, covariance is conducted only to test the post-test variables of marital satisfaction and groups. Summary of the analysis of marital satisfaction covariance in the experimental and control group by eliminating the interaction is shown in Table 3.

The results showed that there were significant differences between the two groups ( $F(1, 17) = 147.9, p = 0.00, \text{Eta} = 0.89$ ). In other words, there were significant

Table 1: Test results of levene to examine assumptions of covariance equality (n = 20)

Statistical index	F-statistic	Degrees of freedom 1	Degrees of freedom 2	Significance level
Groups	1.32	1	18	0.12

Table 2: Analysis of covariance in marital satisfaction in experimental and control groups for the interaction test (n = 20)

Source of changes	Total squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	F-statistic	Significance level
Group (a)	4.00	1	46.85	9.72	0.007
Pre-test (b)	196.90	1	196.90	40.87	0.000
The interaction of a×b	9.52	1	9.52	1.90	0.170
Error	77.09	16	4.8		
Total	25869.00	20			

Table 3: Analysis summary of marital satisfaction covariance in the experimental and control group by eliminating the interaction (n = 20)

Source of changes	Total squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	F-statistic	Sig.	Eta square	Power of the test
Pretest of marital satisfaction	223.07	1	223.07	43.7	0.00	0.72	1.00
Between groups	753.8	1	753.80	147.9	0.00	0.89	0.99
Within groups	86.6	17	5.09				
Total	25869.0	20					

differences between the marital satisfactions of experimental group and control group. The power of the test indicates that this effect was significant with 0.95 of accuracy and the sample size was sufficient for treatment.

### CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy on marital satisfaction of couples with autism child in Rasht, Iran. The results showed that mindfulness-based treatment is effective in marital satisfaction, so that the experimental group received higher ratings in compare to the control group. The obtained results are consistent with results by Wright *et al.* (2009) which pointed out that mindfulness-based intervention is effective in the treatment of anger problems, Burpee and Langer (2005) stated that a strong relationship exists between mindfulness and marital satisfaction, Taheri *et al.* (2013) have shown that mindfulness training significantly is effective on marital dissatisfaction and its components in women with hyperactive children, Borjali (2013) found that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy of parent-child conflict and its dimensions (verbal aggression and physical aggression) was significantly reduced in students, Golpour and Amini (2012) stated that mindfulness have a positive impact on self-expression of the students, Rajabi and Navrood (2011) stated that mindfulness-based therapy increased marital satisfaction. To, explain these results it can be said that mindfulness lead to a change in particular emotional meanings by the help of breathing and the use of body parts, being aware of events and body, breath, sound and accepting ideas and thoughts without judgment about them. And the person will realize the fact that thoughts are simple before being a reflection of the reality and these negative and stressful thoughts are not necessarily correct. Mindfulness method makes the person realize his automatic activities and normal behaviors and acquire a growing awareness and consciousness in his daily activities this awareness of thoughts and feelings change the individual's connection with these thoughts and feelings. In fact, mindfulness will change the individual's relationship with his thoughts, rather than change the content of thoughts. When a person is able to achieve these skills he can be aware of the problems and obstacles and find appropriate solutions. And by Burpee and Langer (2005) interpretations, a conceptual harmony is created for a couple and enables them to evaluate and assess their common life and its problems (Yousefi and Sohrabi, 2011) and this can have a significant effect on marital satisfaction of the couples. Also, awareness

techniques of this approach, such as distinguishing between situations, knowledge and awareness about the opinions of others and recognition of the facts which are disadvantage from the perspective of the person but others might see it as advantage, may help to raise a lot of positive relations between spouses by creating an environment that is rich with intellectual and flexibility as opposed to the dry and critical environment (Burpee and Langer, 2005). In fact, this approach can enable them to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses in their common life at any time and to make constantly dynamic and flexible environment in their life that this dynamic and flexible environment prevents the growth of chronic conflicts an long-term mental and emotional distances which causes a chain of subsequent problems (Yousefi and Sohrab, 2011). In general, it can be concluded that mindfulness training could improve satisfaction of couples it can be concluded that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy approach by using techniques such as awareness of the unpleasant thoughts and emotions, meditation, yoga, etc. can make people to leave the negative effects of dysfunctional thoughts and attitudes and make marriage more efficient.

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