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## Effect of Family Problem-Solving on Marital Satisfaction

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**Abstract:** This research aimed to study the effects of family problem-solving on decreasing the couple's dissatisfaction. Four hundred and fifty couples were randomly selected from residents of Tehran. First, all subjects completed the ENRICH and the problem-solving questionnaire. Then, 80 couples of the most maladjusted ones, were selected and randomly divided into the experimental and control groups. The Family problem-solving method was performed for the experimental group for 15 h (II sessions). Finally, the marital satisfaction of both groups was measured again. Data was analyzed by t-test for independent groups. Results showed that the intervention (family problem-solving) decreases marital dissatisfaction in terms of following dimensions: marital communication, conflict resolution, sexual relationship, personality issues and communications with family and friends. Based on these results, FPS can be introduced as an effective method in reducing marital dissatisfaction. Furthermore, as the couple's communication forms during engagement and the first years of marriage, an attempt to improve communication in this period seems necessary. Also, as FPS is the most appropriate method for improving communication; it should be taught to young couples to help them reduce their problems and to produce appropriate communication.

**Key words:** Marital satisfaction, marital therapy, family problem-solving

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### INTRODUCTION

Marital satisfaction is a global evaluation of the state of one's marriage or current long-term romantic relationship. The MS can be just a reflection of how happy people are in their marriage, or it can be a composition of being satisfied by several specific facets of the marital relationship. Likewise, MS scales range from single-item ratings to those that encompass several specific facets of marital functioning (Schoen *et al.*, 2002). Social-cognitive perspective conceptualizes marital satisfaction as an attitude toward the partner or relationship (Bradbury *et al.*, 2000).

From an evolutionary perspective, marital satisfaction can be viewed as a psychological state regulated by mechanisms that monitor the benefits and costs of marriage to a particular person. The costs and benefits are gauged psychologically, but the mechanisms that gauge them have been forged over the vast expanse of evolutionary time (Shackelford and Buss, 2000).

Actually, marital satisfaction demonstrates total evaluation of the present situation in a current relationship. In order to evaluate and show how happy and stable a relationship is, one of the most frequent definitions is marital satisfaction. MS will not be achieved spontaneously, but it seeks the couple's effort. Usually, in the first year of marriage, MS is very unstable and the relationship has the highest risk for dissatisfaction and divorce.

Satisfaction should be evaluated in both wife and husband's point of view.

For wives, disillusionment, in regard to marital satisfaction, is not such an important issue for wives if they would be able to view their husbands' attributes as accurately reflect their self-view (Neff and Karney, 2005). When women are able to agree with their partners' self-perceived traits and abilities, both will be satisfied with their relationship. It is opposite for the wives whose views do not mirror their husbands' views of themselves. Other factors that influence wives' marital satisfaction are:

levels of intimacy, the ability to self-disclose with their spouses and perceive their partners as responsive (Laurenceau *et al.*, 2005) husband's affection expression and level of negativity and the amount of time they had to spend doing things with friends/relatives/their spouse, as well as their communication styles.

For husbands, studies support that marital satisfaction for husbands include following factors: the presence of wife pursue/husband distance conflict resolution style, satisfaction with sexual relationship, dividing household tasks/view of gender roles and the degree of input they perceive they get in the relationship. Bradbury *et al.* (2000), based upon a review of researches mention that in the demand/withdraw pattern, one spouse, typically the wife, criticizes and nags the partner for change, while the partner, typically the husband, avoids the discussion and disengages from confrontation. According to this view, increased demands lead to increased avoidance, which in turn leads to increased demands for engagement, with the end result being a decline in marital satisfaction.

Weger (2005) suggested that the effect of demand/withdraw pattern on marital satisfaction may be mediated by the perception of self-verification (feel of being understood) for both husbands and wives. He found that husbands and wives feel less understood (verified) when their partner withdraws from conflict. This has more of an impact on a husbands' satisfaction, but it does impact wives' satisfaction as well.

A considerable study done by Xu and Burlison (2004) suggests that social support is one of the most important provisions of marital relationship and an important determinant of marital satisfaction. To date, however, researches that explore linkages between spousal support and marital satisfaction, have not systematically examined whether specific different types of spousal support (e.g., emotional, informational, tangible) correlates with marital satisfaction strong.

There are many methods for marital therapy. Behavioral, cognitive, psychoanalytic and systematic approaches are the main ones in marriage consultancy (Champion and Power, 2000). Based upon the behavioral approach, the Family Problem-Solving (FPS) method is one of the interventional methods to reduce couple disagreement. The FPS is holistic and problem oriented and has two phases, the relationship phase and the problem phase. The main goal of this method is teaching the way to negotiate to the couple so, that they would be able to find rational solutions for their conflicts. Although, the result of this method is conflict solution between husband and wife, the procedure of these conflict solutions is more important.

There are various patterns in FPS approach, e.g., TKI, a pattern that has been introduced by Thomas and Kilmann (2000). It consists of discussing conflicts, gathering information, support, implementing solutions, practice and answering the questionnaire. Berger and Hannah (1999) have introduced a ten-stage guide for family problem-solving. The stages are as follow: allocating time for discussions, defining the problem, defining each partner's share, making a list of couple's unsuccessful attempts, listing all of possible solutions (brainstorming) negotiating and evaluating possible solutions, agreeing on the solution, agreeing on the cooperation method, arranging for future meetings and setting rewards. Ben and Alyssa's model (8 stages), Michael Koder's model (6 stages), FSAP pattern (7 stages) and FOCUS pattern (5 stages) are some of other patterns (Berger and Hannah, 1999). According to Kurylo *et al.* (2001) opinion, the present FOCUS pattern consists of facts, optimism, creativity, understanding and solution. Interventional family problem-solving method is scheduled for 8-15 h divided into 4-8 two-hour sessions every week with assignments.

Although, decreasing marital dissatisfaction by Family Problem-Solving has been proved efficiently in other countries, it needs to be proved in Iran too. This study has been accomplished in order to assess the effectiveness of family problem-solving in reducing marital dissatisfaction and to test the hypothesis that family problem-solving reduces marital dissatisfaction.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Research was done under experimental design with two groups (experimental/case and control) taking pre-test and post-test. Objects were evaluated by ENRICH satisfaction scale and 80 couples who had marital dissatisfaction were chosen in Tehran on 2008-9. They were randomly divided into case and control groups. Fifty couples were considered as the case group and thirty, as the control group. This inequity was for the possibility of sample decrease in the case group. As a matter of fact, eleven couples of the case group left the study. In order to collect data the Enrich marital satisfaction and the family problem-solving questionnaires were used. Olson and Olson (1997) obtained the reliability index of 0.85- 0.95 for Enrich's main questionnaire in clinical trials. In this questionnaire, the evaluated satisfaction aspects are as follows: personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial issues, leisure activities, sexual relationship, parenting, family and friends and religious orientation. The family problem-solving questionnaire was

compiled by the researcher from Forgatch (1989), D'Zurilla and Nezu (1990), Dianne and Thomas (1996), Berger and Hannah (1999) and Champion and Power (2000) questionnaires. Issues of this questionnaire are approach to current problems, knowing the process, the steps of problem-solving and the way couples apply family problem-solving methods. The questionnaire was validated after specialists confirmed content reliability. Questionnaire's internal correlation index was 0.92 and validity after re-testing two weeks later was 0.64. In this study, questionnaires were applied for groups twice, before and after the experimental phase.

Phases of research implementation were as follow: Pre-test, implementation of experimental variables and post-test. The experimental variable was interventional Family Problem-Solving method including main communication phases, realism, creativity, decision making, implementation and evaluation. Each of main phases was also divided into other ones:

- **Facts phase:** Introducing the family problem-solving method and its goals, evaluating the couple's collaboration, producing a positive attitude toward the method, introducing interactive skills and practicing them
- **Optimism phase:** Problem prioritization of the couple's problems and increasing optimism to their problem-solving
- **Creativity phase:** Introducing solutions and practicing development of them
- **Understanding phase** Evaluating solutions, introducing and practicing methods of choosing the most appropriate solution
- **Solve phase:** Choosing the final and the alternative solution, identifying executive steps, creating commitment, performing the solution experimentally
- **Evaluation phase:** Evaluating the implementation, assessing executive problems, evaluating results, encouraging continuation of implementing these phases for other family problems

Each meeting comprised negotiation, discussion, practice and assignments. Assignments were done by couples after the meeting and results were discussed in the next meeting. If there were any problem with assignments, it was mentioned in the next one and a solution was found. In general, the research took thirteen weeks. In the first week, a pre-test was given to both case and control groups. As attendance of all the case group members (fifty couples) in one group was impossible, members of the case group were divided into three subgroups. Case groups were divided into two sixteen

and one sixteen-member-groups. All members participated weekly in a 1.5 h group meeting for 8 weeks and a 1 h marital consultancy session based on the interventional family problem-solving method for three weeks. In three individual meetings, most assignments were given, problems that occurred during application of solutions were evaluated and the follow-up method was determined. After the interventional period and in the thirteenth week, both groups took the post-test. Although, both husband and wife did the assignments, wives' questionnaires were used. Finally the collected data was analyzed with t-test. To evaluate t-test, variance consistency was performed first and as there was no significant difference, congruity of the variance was approved.

## RESULTS

Demographic data showed that means of age were 34.8±5.4 for men and 30.8±5.6 for women, respectively. Most men had associate diploma and most women had high school diploma. Mean of the marriage duration was 10.95±5.05 years and most couples had two children (Table 1).

For investigating the similarity of conditions in groups and to measure the efficacy of interventional method in increasing couples ability to apply FPS, two statistical tests were carried out before testing the hypothesis.

Comparing groups' pre-test scores for marital satisfaction with t-test showed no significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 2). So, we can consider both groups to have equal marital satisfaction. In other words, groups' situation before the intervention had no effect on the results. It was because of the random selection used for choosing groups' cases.

To observe the efficacy of intervention in improving marital problem-solving skills of experimental group, pre-test and post-test scores of both groups were compared with t-test (paired samples t-test). Differences

Table 1: Demographic information of both groups

Groups	Age		Mean marriage duration	Mean No. of children	Mean education level
	Mean	SD			
Experimental	34.8	5.4	11.1	2.6	12
Control	32.8	5.6	11	2.8	12

Table 2: Comparison of pre-test and post-test mean scores of marital satisfaction between the experimental and control group (using scores of original questionnaire)

Tests	Groups	Mean	SD	t-value	Level of sig.
Pre-test	Experimental	123.29	26.70	-1.03	0.31
	Control	129.37	27.80		
Post-test	Experimental	140.73	26.44	3.84	0.0001
	Control	121.60	22.14		

Table 3: Amount of change in Problem-solving Skills in the experimental group in comparison with the control group (using subtracted pre and post-test scores)

Groups	Mean	SD	t-value	Level of sig.
Experimental	13.06	19.01	4.53	0.0001
Control	-5.93	22.29		

Table 4: Comparison of marital satisfaction between the experimental and control group (using subtracted pre and post-test scores)

Groups	Mean	SD	t-value	Level of sig.
Experimental	11.38	23.35	3.04	0.003
Control	-4.50	26.89		

Table 5: Comparison of 9 dimensions of marital satisfaction between the experimental and control group (using subtracted pre and post-test scores)

Dimensions of satisfaction	Groups	Mean	SD	t-value	Level of sig.
Personality issues	Experimental	1.51	4.72	2.18	0.03
	Control	-0.60	3.89		
Marital relationship	Experimental	3.16	5.35	3.04	0.003
	Control	-0.63	6.92		
Conflict resolution	Experimental	1.62	3.88	3.63	0.0001
	Control	-1.47	4.17		
Financial management	Experimental	0.77	3.05	1.50	0.14
	Control	-0.20	2.95		
Leisure activity	Experimental	0.97	3.16	0.51	0.61
	Control	0.50	4.72		
Sexual relationship	Experimental	1.04	3.27	3.30	0.001
	Control	-1.40	3.88		
Parental role	Experimental	1.30	3.56	0.71	0.48
	Control	0.63	4.72		
Relation with family and friend	Experimental	0.26	3.05	2.18	0.03
	Control	-1.20	3.32		
Religious orientation	Experimental	0.73	3.58	1.13	0.26
	Control	-0.13	3.53		

between groups' scores were compared as well. The result obtained showed that there was a significant difference of  $p \leq 0.01$  between two groups. Therefore, implementing research variables improved couples' skills in solving their problems (Table 3).

To evaluate the research hypothesis, that interventional family problem-solving method decreases marital dissatisfaction, the marital satisfaction D score (difference of pre-test and post-test scores) was compared between two groups with t-test for independent samples. Results showed that there was significant difference ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) between two groups. As the marital satisfaction mean score in the experimental group is significantly more than that of the control group, we can conclude that the family problem-solving interventional method increases marital satisfaction (Table 4).

In the next stage, all nine scales of marital satisfaction were compared between experimental and control groups, with t-test, in order to evaluate the effect of FPS on each scale. Results are shown in Table 5. Significant differences were observed for communication, conflict resolution, sexual relationship ( $p \leq 0.01$ ), personality issues, family and friends ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). But there was no

significant difference for financial management, leisure activities, parenting and religious orientation ( $p \leq 0.05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to evaluate the effect of the Family Problem-Solving (FBS) interventional method in reducing marital dissatisfaction. Marital dissatisfaction is an important issue because it has negative consequent effects on the whole family (Conger *et al.*, 2009) generations and the community as well. On the other hand, the FBS method is simple, understandable and problem-oriented; also it's useful both in short and long term. Based on these facts, FPS was used for the experimental group and then pre-test and post-test scores were compared with those of the control group.

According to results of present study, FPS method can reduce marital dissatisfaction in our couples. Results of present study were similar to Berger and Hannah (1999), Champion and Power (2000), Kurylo *et al.* (2001) study. Our couples with using FPS believed that they faced to problems throughout their married life and all of them intend to solve their problems. Some related studies show the importance of logic approach to the family problem and indicate that families who fail to stay problem-focused and instead resort to the exchange of negatively charged emotions during family problem-solving discussions tend to have more distressed adolescents and also fail to solve their disputes (Capaldi *et al.*, 1994).

In FPS method process of conflict solving is more important than solving the presented problems in meetings. According to present research, FPS is useful in improving marital satisfaction in our community, too. Therefore, it can be developed as one of the couple therapy methods to be taught to marital and family consultants and specialists. The FPS has some important specifications that simplify its development. At first, it is simple method and easily taught and learned. The definitions and phrases of this method are routine in people's daily life and learning it needs no new definitions. Secondly, it has definite stages and each stage has certain assignment. Third, it is an economic method and is a short-period treatment and has two stages, the relation stage and the problem stage. Forth, this method improves relationship before solving the problem. Relation improvement has an important role in marital satisfaction and a basic role in other marital satisfaction scales (Ahmadi *et al.*, 2007). Five, using this method has a permanent effect for couples. It not only leads to current problem-solving but also helps couples face future problems more effective.

Results of present study showed that FPS can be learned and taught. Importance of this issue lies in the fact that many couples have conflicts in different matters and they cannot solve them.

One of the new findings of present study is evaluating effects of FPS method on marital satisfaction scales. Most of the earlier studies evaluated the effect of this method only in reducing family problems. For instance, Kurylo *et al.* (2001) focused on solving family problems by reducing depression symptoms. O'Brien *et al.* (2009) study aimed at the possibility that specific family interventions, such as problem solving and communication skills training, may improve the functional prognosis of at-risk youth, especially in terms of their social functioning.

In the present study, effect of this method has been evaluated on each of the nine scales of marital satisfaction. Accordingly, we can say that FPS leads to reduction of marital dissatisfaction in communication, conflict resolution, sexual relationship, personality issues and family and friends. If couple dissatisfaction is related to communication (understanding, empathy, intimacy and verbal and nonverbal communication), conflict resolution, sexual relationship, personality issues (tastes, behavioral specifications) and the couple's family and friend, they can use FPS efficiently.

Recent research on interpersonal processes in marriage retains a strong focus on behaviors exchanged during marital conflict and marital problem-solving discussions (Bradbury *et al.*, 2000). The point to be noticed is the couple's communication. Research has shown that husband and wife's communication has the main role among other scales (Ahmadi *et al.*, 2007). Communication is made up of empathy, understanding, intimacy and verbal and nonverbal communication between the couples. In many of the instances, communication is considered to be the main factor in marital satisfaction. All these issues showed that communication is the most important scale in marital satisfaction.

This study showed that FPS improves couple's communication more efficiently than other scales; according to this, FPS can be introduced as an effective method in reducing marital dissatisfaction. Furthermore, as the couple's communication forms in engagement period and first years of marriage, an attempt to improve communication in this period is necessary. As FPS is the most appropriate method to improve communication, using this method for training young couples can help reduce their problems and produce appropriate communication.

The conflict resolution ability was the second scale of marital satisfaction that was improved by FPS. This scale projects the spouse's attitude toward, personal feelings about and beliefs in conflict solving and the methods couples use to terminate arguments. It is inevitable to have conflicts in marital relationship. It is important to have the ability to face conflicts and solve them. Couples should not be afraid of conflict and should not change it to a problem. The FPS helps couples have a realistic attitude toward conflicts in their relationship. The likelihood of divorce increases when partners reveal less about their private lives, their personal needs and their goals and interests so that they gradually become strangers to each other and/or engage more in dyadic conflict (Randall and Bodenmann, 2009).

Another scale is the sexual relationship, which has an important role in increasing couple's intimacy and also satisfies one of marriage goals. This scale considers the couple's feelings about and attitude toward sexual relationship and compassionate intimacy with the spouse. Sexual relationship problems are both the cause and effect of marital dissatisfaction. Improvement of this relationship can partly cause marital satisfaction. The FPS helps couples with dissatisfaction in sexual relationship get satisfaction from showing their feelings, find a positive view to sexual matters, have mutually satisfactory sexual relationship and decide about pregnancy without conflict. Finally, personal issues and family and friend are also important scales in marital satisfaction that can be improved by FPS. Personal issues project spouse understandings of behavior, characteristics and satisfaction or dissatisfaction with tastes. Family and friend scale evaluates the feelings and fondness for spouse's close family, relatives and friends. Personal issues are defined as personal tastes and behavior of husband or wife that may be unacceptable by the spouse and may cause problem. Out of family relations, quality and quantity of relations with close family, relatives and friends and choosing common friends are duties of marital life, especially at the beginning of the marriage. Individual behavior forms the communication rules between husband and wife. Therefore, accepting the spouse's tastes and behavior or in other words showing acceptable behavior can shape their communication and understanding. Improving personal behavior causes self satisfaction and social relation besides interpersonal interaction, especially with close family, relatives and friends.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, FPS was not proved to be effective for leisure activities, parenting and religious orientation.

Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate and introduce the most appropriate interventional method to improve marital dissatisfaction in these scales.

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