

## Original Article

# The effectiveness of acceptance and commitment- group therapy on perceived stress and Marital Distress in women with major depressive disorder seeking divorce

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of Acceptance and commitment group therapy on perceived stress and marital distress of women with major depressive disorder seeking divorce in Rasht city in 2020–2021. The research method was quasi-experimental and pre-test and post-test with the control group. The statistical population of the present study included all women with major depressive disorder who applied for divorce referring to family counseling centers in Rasht city between 2020 to 2021. By Sampling method available, 30 people were selected and randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Each group consisted of 15 people. The instruments used were the Cohen Perceived Stress Scale and the Schneider Marital Disorder. Data were analyzed using SPSS-22 software with multivariate analysis of covariance. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the mean post-test scores of the experimental and control groups of perceived stress ( $F = 90.80$  and  $P < 0.05$ ) and marital distress ( $F = 95.47$  and  $P < 0.05$ ). The results showed Acceptance and commitment group therapy on perceived stress and marital turmoil in women with major depressive disorder seeking divorce was significant. It can be concluded that the interventions of this study are effective in reducing stress and marital distress in women with underlying officer disorder on the verge of divorce. The use of this treatment method in proceedings mental health measures is recommended for incompatible couples. It can also be used in family counseling and divorce prevention centers.

### Keywords

Acceptance and commitment based therapy  
Perceived stress  
Marital Distress  
Divorce

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### Introduction

The family is the most primitive in terms of antiquity and the most universal social institution in terms of expansion. This shows that family formation is one of the most basic and natural human needs (Parse, Naderi, Mehr abizade, 2015). The first step in satisfying this basic and natural need is marriage. Despite the pleasantness of the marriage bond, the couple's satisfaction is not easily achieved, and as a result, the strongest human bond, marriage, will be seriously endangered in its strongest position, the family system. Although in recent years people have predicted the disintegration of the family institution, not only does this institution survive, but it continues to change and grow. The family structure may be different in different regions, but its value has

remained stable so far (Jalalian Larki, Zanganeh, Mohajerani, 1397). Divorce is a phenomenon that most countries, especially countries in transition, face, which is associated with negative psychological consequences for couples and children. Divorce is a cultural and social phenomenon that has attracted the attention of many thinkers today. Statistics in the United States show that about forty or fifty percent of marriages end in divorce and children have to adapt to their new circumstances. Named (Mary, 2018). Divorced women experience significantly higher levels of stress and psychological distress than married women in the first years after divorce and higher levels of life stress events in the next decade. There are many therapeutic approaches to solving family problems today, but Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is one of the therapies that focuses on increasing psychological resilience. Treatment based on

acceptance and commitment is effective on marital tension among women applying for divorce (zakryazade, fakhri & heydari, 2022). Acceptance therapy reduces personal and psychological distress in couples (Akhavan Gholami, Hayati, 2019). This type of treatment tries to increase the psychological relationship between a person and his thoughts and feelings instead of changing the cognition (Roditi & Robinson & Robinson, 2011). Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of third-wave models, including acceptance and commitment-based interventions (Funchs, lee, Roemer, Orsillo, 2013). In the treatment based on the cognitive and behavioral approach, the goal is to reduce the symptoms of the disorder in a direct way. While in the treatment based on acceptance and commitment, the usefulness and function of psychological experiences such as thoughts, feelings and memories are targeted and the meaningful activity of life without Attention is paid to their existence (McCracken, Vowles, 2014; Hayes, Pistorello, Levin, 2012).

The basic structure and concept in group training is based on the acceptance and commitment that sufferings and psychological reflections are caused by avoiding experiences, intertwined cognitions, failure to estimate behavioral needs and not adapting to basic values. And the ultimate goal of this model is to increase the frequency of living. Acceptance and commitment therapy believe that psychological damage occurs as a result of psychological inflexibility. His inner efforts are unremarkable in most cases. This therapy has six processes: acceptance, connection with the present moment, breaking, self-observation, values and commitment (araghi, bazazian, amiri & ghamari, 2020)

Mindfulness group interventions can also be effective in reducing stress. Perceived stress is a person's assessment of the importance and difficulty of his environmental and personal challenges (Fakhri & Bahar Amini, 2018). The concept of perceived stress is derived from the theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) about the role of evaluation in the stress process, which is created by interpreting an event as an event that imposes pressure on the individual (Pasandideh & Salek Mehdi, 2018). The results of Alavizadeh and Shakriani (2015), Folke, Parling, Melin, 2012) showed that the intervention therapy group based on acceptance and commitment significantly reduced the symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression in women with experience of breaking the contract in extramarital relationships. Dad. Also, acceptance and commitment therapy can significantly reduce perceived stress (Barzegar & Zohrehi, 1397).

Wiseman, Sheldon, Goering, (2000) argue that many differences arise from marital Distress, and that their prevalence has been demonstrated in both social epidemiological studies and clinical trials. Divorce statistics, which are the most common indicator of marital turmoil, indicate that marital satisfaction is not easily achieved and couples experience varying degrees of turmoil and dissatisfaction (Halford, Markman, 2003). A study by Brown, Whittingham, Boyd, Mckinlay, Sofronoff, (2015) on the effectiveness of acceptance and

commitment-based therapy in improving mental disorder, psychological flexibility, confidence in managing behavior, and differences in couples with children with disabilities. The brain showed that after the implementation of the educational intervention, a significant reduction in mental disturbance and mental flexibility was observed. The results of Omidy & Taliqzi research (2017) which was performed on a sample of 50 subjects using the commitment-based and acceptance treatment method, showed that the ACT treatment method increased marital satisfaction and their quality of life in the experimental group. Was given to the control group. Researches have shown that the approach based on acceptance and commitment has been effective in various fields such as depression and marital turmoil (Brauch, Kanker, Busch, 2012)

Also, the findings of Peterson & Eifert, (2009) on the effectiveness acceptance and commitment- group therapy to reduce marital psychological turmoil showed that after the educational intervention, the mean scores of women in the variables of psychological turmoil, anxiety, marital satisfaction and interpersonal anxiety significantly increased.

Due to the increase in divorce applicants in the not so distant years after marriage and due to the need to control stress and marital turmoil in couples in order to strengthen the family foundation and prevent divorce, according to the explanations given, the present study seeks to determine the effectiveness. Group therapy was based on acceptance and commitment on perceived stress and marital turmoil of women with depressive disorder seeking divorce in Rasht city.

## Method

### Participants

The method of this research was quas-experimental pre-test-post-test with control group and the statistical population included all women with depressive disorder who applied for divorce referring to divorce intervention centers in Rasht City in 2020-2021. Which were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Inclusion criteria included having symptoms of major depressive disorder according to the Fifth Diagnostic Guide to Mental Disorders, no severe psychiatric illness, at least third grade education, age years. Exclusion criteria included receiving psychotherapy at the same time as training, the 20-65 subject not attending classes regularly, or unwillingness to continue participating in the study. Subjects in the experimental group were trained in acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, 2006) for 8 sessions of 90 minutes.

### Summary of dialectical behavioral therapy intervention training sessions:

**Session 1:** Welcoming, getting to know and introducing the group members to the therapist and to each other; Expressing people's feelings before coming to the meeting; The reason for coming to this meeting and the expectations they have from the treatment sessions

Expressing similar previous experiences; State the rules that must be observed in the group and pre-test. **Session 2:** Explain and express the principle of why the need for psychological interventions is felt?; Creating hope and expectation of treatment in reducing these pressures; Expressing the principle of accepting and recognizing feelings and thoughts about problems. **Session 3:** Talking about the feelings and thoughts of the group members; Teaching members to accept their thoughts and feelings without judging whether they are good or bad. **Session 4:** Introduce mindfulness technique and focus on breathing; Presenting the technique of being present in the moment and stopping thinking; Re-emphasis on the principle of acceptance in recognizing feelings and thoughts; Emphasis on recognizing feelings and thoughts with a different perspective. **Session 5:** Teaching and Recognizing the Difference Between Acceptance and Surrender and Awareness of Accepting What We Cannot Change; Provide this technique to be aware of the existence of their emotions by being aware of the mind at all times, only to witness them but not to judge. **Session 6:** Presenting feedback and a short survey of the training process; Asking group members to express their feelings and emotions about the tasks of the previous session; (Teaching commitment to action means that after choosing a valuable and correct path to achieve peace or acceptance of any event in life, we act on it and commit ourselves to do it **Session 7:** Provide feedback and search for unresolved issues in group members; Identify behavioral plans for accepted matters and make a commitment to act on them. **Session 8:** Review of homework; Summary of contents; Obtaining commitment from members to do homework after the end of the course; Presenting feedback to group members, appreciating and thanking them for attending the meetings; Perform post-test.

## Instrument

### *Perceived Stress Questionnaire:*

The questionnaire was developed by Cohen, Kamark, Mermelstein, (1983) and measures general stress perceived over the past month, as well as thoughts and feelings about stressful events, restraint, coping, and coping with experienced stress. In general, the range of

scores is between zero and 56 (Hashemi & Peymannia, 2013). The content validity of its Farsi translation has been confirmed by ten expert professors of Mashhad University of Medical Sciences and Cronbach alpha coefficients in the range of 0.84 to 0.86% in students have been obtained (Taghipour, Baghestani, Saadati, 2019).

### *Marital Disorders Questionnaire:*

In this study, the amount of marital turmoil was measured by the revised form of the Schneider Marital Dissatisfaction Questionnaire. The questionnaire, developed by Schneider (1997), is a 150 item self-report tool used to identify the nature and extent of marital turmoil (Mainz et al., 2007). Cronbach's alpha is 0.82 obtained by Schneider.

### *Procedur:*

In order to study the normal distribution of variables, homogeneity of variance test was applied. In order to compare between the two groups of intervention and control at baseline, covariance analysis test was used. Since the residual distribution of variance between the two groups was not normal and there were no parametric covariance analysis (ANCOVA) assumptions, nonparametric ANCOVA was used to compare the variables between the two groups after the intervention. The data were analyzed using SPSS. □ □ software.

## Results

Thirty women with major depressive disorder seeking divorce in Rasht, ranging in age from 24 to 46 years with an average age 29.41 years, participated in this study. The level of education of individuals ranged from diploma to master's degree. The highest rate was %55 for diploma %19 for post-diploma %25 for bachelor's degree and the lowest rate was %1 for master's degree %55 were in poor economic condition %30 in moderate 15% in good condition. Table 1 shows the results related to descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the two experimental and control groups in pre-test and post-test conditions.

**Table 1.** Mean and standard deviation of variables in two stages of pre-test and post-test in two experimental and control groups

Variable	Groups	Pre-test		Post-test	
		M	SD	M	SD
Perceived Stress	Control	25.933	2.98727	27.1333	3.44065
	Experimental	28.2667	4.43149	15.9333	3.9523
Marital Distress	Control	97.1333	16.06179	94.3333	15.78728
	Experimental	92.0000	15.62964	67.0000	7.05084

As can be seen in Table 1, in all test subscales in the experimental group, the mean scores of marital turmoil and perceived stress in the post-test position decreased, but no such change was observed in the control group.

Analysis of covariance was used to show the significant difference between the above scores. Before performing the analysis of covariance, first the necessary assumptions for performing the analysis of covariance

were examined. First, the Kolmogorov- smirnov test was used to check the normality of the distribution. The results showed that in perceived stress ( $P > 0.05$  and  $Z = 0/104$ ), marital turmoil ( $P > 0.05$  and  $Z = 0.154$ ) this assumption is established. Leven test was used to evaluate the homogeneity of variances. The results of Loon test showed that homogeneity of variance is

observed in perceived stress ( $P > 0.05$  and  $F = 0 / 008$ ) and marital turmoil ( $P > 0.05$  and  $F = 0/42$ ). Therefore, multivariate analysis of covariance was used to evaluate the effectiveness of acceptance and commitment based group therapy on perceived stress and marital turmoil in women seeking divorce.

**Table 2.** Results of multivariate analysis of covariance based on acceptance and commitment therapy on perceived stress scores and Marital Distress

Test Name	Value	df Hypothesis	df Error	F	sig	Eta	Observed Power
Pillai's Trace	0.959	1.000	28.000	658.679	.000	959.0	1.000
Wilk's Lambda	0.41	1.000	28.000	658.679	.000	959.0	1.000
Hotelling Trace	23.524	1.000	28.000	658.679	.000	959.0	1.000
Roy's Largest Root	23.524	1.000	28.000	658.679	.000	959.0	1.000

**Table 3.** Results of analysis of covariance for the effectiveness of acceptance and commitment-based therapy on perceived stress

Variable	Source of changes	Source of changes	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	sig	Eta
Perceived Stress	Pre-test	Pre-test	23.183	1	23.183	2.695	0.113	
	Groups	Groups	887.874	1	887.874	80.903	0.000	0.772
	Error	Error	285.340	26	10.975			

As shown in Table3, acceptance and commitment-based therapy has a significant effect on perceived stress of

women seeking divorce ( $P < 0.05$  and  $F = 80/903$ ).

**Table 4.** Results of analysis of covariance for the effectiveness of treatment based on acceptance and commitment on Marital Distress

Variable	Source of changes	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	f	sig	Eta
Marital Distress	Pre-test	2450.628	1	2450.628	37.293	0.000	
	Groups	3151.049	1	3151.049	47.295	0.000	0.825
	Error	1708.516	26	65.712			

As can be seen in Table4, acceptance and commitment based on marital turmoil have a significant effect on women seeking divorce ( $P < 0/05$  and  $F = 47/952$ ).

## Discussion

The aim of the present study was to evaluate the effectiveness of group-based acceptance and commitment therapy on perceived stress and marital turmoil in women with depressive disorder seeking divorce. Based on the first finding of this study, it was found that acceptance and commitment therapy training in the experimental group was associated with a reduction in perceived stress. The results of this study are in line with (Barzegar et al.,2020;Atarzaei et al.,2017,Akhavan gholami et al.,2019;Alavizadeh et al.,2017;Hoaly et al.,2014). In explaining the significance of group therapy based on acceptance and commitment to perceived stress, can be acknowledged that perceived stress is any type of stimulus or change in the internal and external environment that may disturb the vital balance and in certain conditions, pathogenic. In fact, stress is the inability (imaginary or real) to deal with a threat. Psychological stress emphasizes the organism's

perception and evaluation of the potential harm of encountering motivating environmental experiences. When people overestimate the demands of the environment beyond their own set of coping resources, they are exposed to stress and therefore the desired physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual well-being of the individual is threatened (Yew ,Lim,Haw,Gun, 2015 ). From Act's point of view, avoiding experiences creates a traumatic process and also brings tensions to other members of his family. Because acceptance and commitment therapy emphasizes values, acceptance, compassion, living in the present, and achieving a transcendent sense of self, it is clear that it is effective in reducing the symptoms of perceived stress. It can be assumed that increasing the ability to dominate thoughts can reduce the amount of stress it perceives.

On the other hand, the results of the analysis of the present study showed that there is a significant difference at the level of  $0 / 05$  in the marital turmoil scores for the experimental and control groups. Thus, acceptance and commitment therapy training had reduced marital turmoil in women seeking divorce.

Findings of research in this field can be consistent with the findings of Brown (2015), Patterson(2009),

Mousavi, Rashidi, Golmohammadian, (2015), Baruch (2012) and Omid (2017) Explaining the findings of this study, the reason for the effectiveness of treatment (ACT) is to create agreement and teach ways to adapt to intolerable aspects of married life instead of trying to manage them and conflicting factors. On the other hand, this approach, Discovering values and how to create a meaningful life for yourself and your spouse through creating personal values emphasizes that such couples consider all of their life experiences to find ways to live more efficiently. ACT therapy can help married women improve their marital relationship by treating emotional avoidance, improving reactions, recognizing values, and creating a commitment to behavioral change. (Levitt & Carcla, 2005). The goal of ACT therapy is to reduce the effort for internal control, experiential avoidance and Increase behavior control, and the desire to experience a wide range of emotions. Therefore, women are able to significantly reduce their sensitivities and controls through exercises of acceptance and concentration, and as a result, confusion is reduced (Nikokar, Jafari, Fathi, Poyamanesh, 2020). Among the limitations of the present study, failure to provide medical intervention to the control group, the impossibility of following up was not possible and the sample of the study is limited to women seeking divorce in Rasht and can not be generalized to other women and other cities. Also, the limited statistical population to women makes generalizations limited to men, due to the importance of the role of women as the axis of family health and according to research results and the effectiveness of treatment in resolving mental stress and marital distress, therapists and counselors Families can use this treatment to resolve stress and conflict between couples. It is suggested that experts prepare an ACT training package for couples to reduce perceived stress and marital turmoil, which is a factor in leading to divorce. It is also suggested that treatment be applied to both couples in future research.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study and other studies conducted in this field, it can be concluded that acceptance and commitment-based therapy can help treat stress and confusion in women with major depressive disorder seeking divorce, and if the centers Benefiting from this treatment, family counseling can solve part of the couple's problems in the field of pre-divorce intervention, which is increasing day by day.

## Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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