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Examining the Improving Strategies for Iranian Couple Communication Patterns: A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objective: As proper communication is the key to a strong family and the couples must follow effective communication patterns in these relationships to strengthen the family foundation, improving these relationships has been very effective. The purpose of this study was to review the strategies for enhancing the couple communication patterns.

Methods: In this scoping review, the SID, Barkat, PubMed, Cochrane, Scopus, Web of Science, Uptodate, Magiran, and Psych INFO databases were searched for interventional studies from 19٧٦ to 2019 on Iranian couples. At the end of the search, 131 papers were obtained, and finally, 19 papers were included in the scoping review.

Findings: The classification was based on educational and therapeutic strategies. The educational strategies included training communication skills and training life skills and the therapeutic strategies included couple therapy, narrative therapy, and family therapy.

Conclusion: According to the results, it seems that to improve couple communication patterns, both life and communication skills are needed for all couples. Communication and life skills training can be more convenient and less costly than the rest. Each of Treatment methods need more specialized courses and one cannot reach useful results by some brief sessions, but training can be provided to couples even through the book.

Keywords: Health Promotion, Strategy, Couple communication patterns, Life Skills, Education, Communication Skills.

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Introduction

The couples' relationship is among the most complex human relationships, and none of the human relations has wide and diverse aspects like that of the couples. Human communications cover one aspect of life; however, couples' relationships simultaneously have all the aspects of life, such as biological, economic, emotional, and psychosocial aspects. Overall, the marriage needs to establish an effective and efficient communication (1). The communication enables the husband and wife to discuss, exchange ideas, and beware of each other's needs. Couples' relationships actually happen to satisfy all levels of needs; thus, the most common problem of the dissatisfied couples is the failure to establish communication (2). When family members use effective communication patterns, they have a clear understanding of the transfer, content, and the intention of every message, they meet the psychological needs of each other and continue to communicate and participate in the community (3).

Communication channels are seen so often in a family and are called communication patterns, and the set of these patterns forms the family communication network (4). The communicative patterns are highly important and are reported as the cornerstone of the general well-being of the family. Thus, disturbing communication patterns have a significant effect on the mental health of couples (5). Awareness of the couples of various types of communication patterns can help satisfy their marital life (6). Currently, several theoretical perspectives try to determine and resolve marital conflicts with different approaches. As proper communication is the key to a strong family, and the couples must follow effective communication patterns in these relationships to strengthen the family foundation, and improving these relationships has been very effective. As no Iranian study was found to examine the different strategies, by which couples' communication patterns were promoted, the purpose of this study was to review the strategies for improving communication patterns among couples.

Methods

In this scoping review, loyalty in translating texts, avoiding plagiarism, and respect for intellectual property or copyright, were observed. The study was conducted in five following stages: designing a research question, searching and extracting research-related studies, selecting relevant studies, summarizing information and data, and reporting its results.

Designing a research question

What are the strategies for improving couples' communication patterns?

Search strategy:

For this scoping review, data were collected using the SID, Barakat, PubMed, Cochrane, Scopus, Web of Science, Uptodate, Magiran, and PsycInfo databases from 1976 to 2019. The keywords were health promotion, strategy, couple communication patterns, life skills, education, and communication skills. The inclusion criterion was all interventional studies conducted in Iran reporting the methods to improve couples' communication patterns and the exclusion criteria were studies that were not conducted in Iran and those that their full texts were not available.

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Extracting articles according to the inclusion criteria

In this review, initially, a list of titles and abstracts of all the papers was developed by two researchers and designed to determine and select relevant topics. Then, the relevant papers entered the research process independently. In the end, 131 papers were obtained, and finally, 19 papers were included in the scoping review (Figure 1).

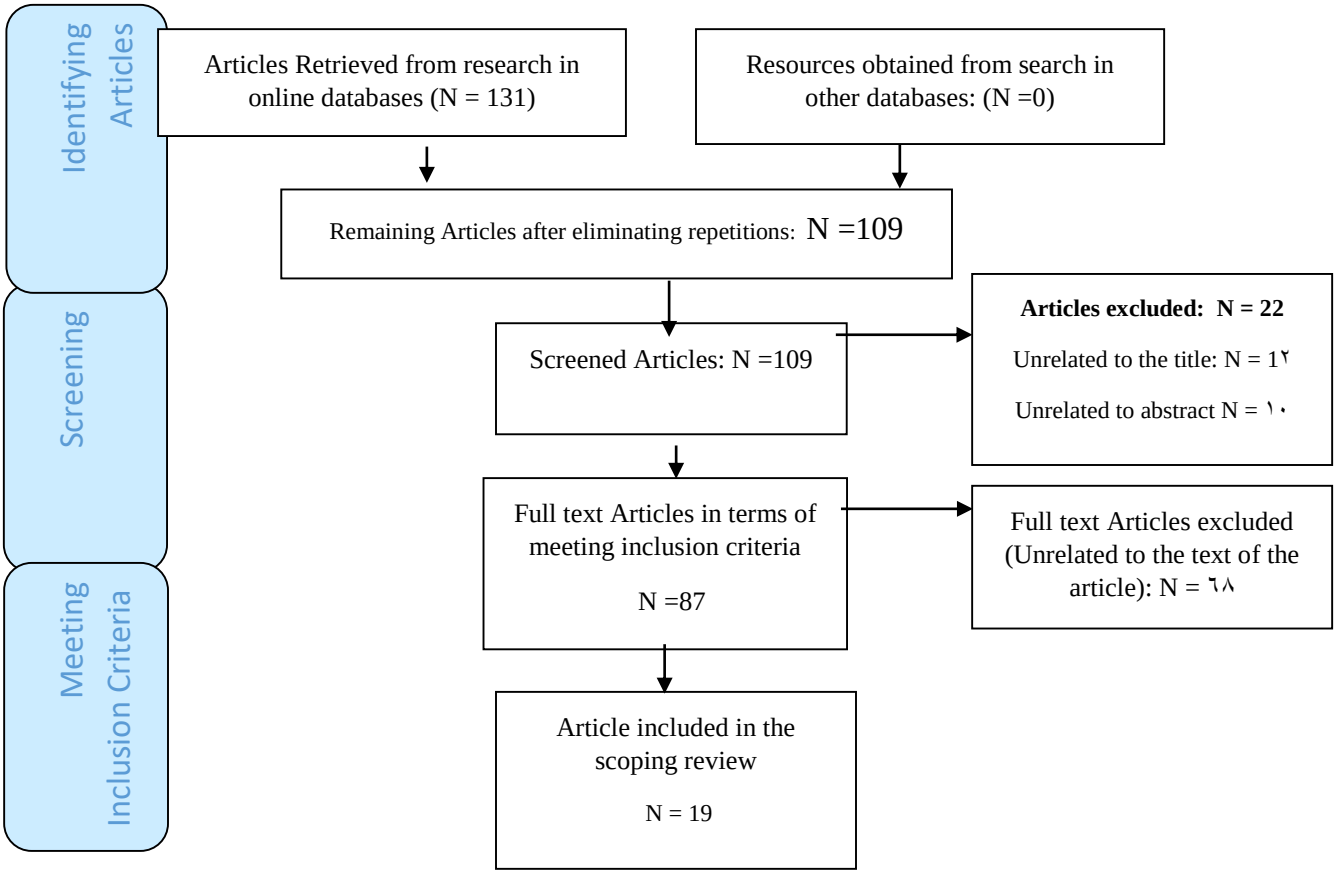

Figure 1: Flowchart of articles enrolled in the study

Results

A review of the studies showed that strategies to promote couples' communication patterns included educational and therapeutic strategies. The educational strategies included training communication skills and training life skills, and the therapeutic strategies included couple therapy, narrative therapy, and family therapy.

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Educational Strategy: the educational strategies were training communication skills and life skills. Table 1 indicates the characteristics of the studies on strategies to improve couple communication patterns.

Teaching life and communication skills: In this review, six studies had used and reported this strategy (7-12). Communication skills are the skills, through which individuals can engage in the interpersonal interactions and processes - the process where the individuals divide information, thoughts, and feelings through verbal and non-verbal communication (7, 10, 13). These skills are the following sub-skills that shape the base of communication skills:

Understanding verbal and nonverbal messages: It is the ability to receive and send clear communication messages known as message comprehension skills. As the understanding of the couple mutual messages increases, misunderstandings are reduced. The correct interpretation of each other's words can reduce the speed of the spontaneous response to the spouse and increase the communication quality of the spouse (14).

Organizing emotions: The opposing side needs to control the emotion or excitement of the other party in most cases. Sometimes, it is necessary to express emotions and sometimes, controlling them increases marital satisfaction. Controlling emotions and feelings is effective in improving couples' communication and can prevent other resulted problems (14).

Listening: Listening is the learned and complex process of sensing, interpreting, evaluating, storing, and answering oral messages. Effective listening is an activity that assists the speaker to transfer his meaning and eliminates the defensive state of the speaker. When couples listen to each other's words and hints, it creates conditions for respect for their interests and also can have a positive effect on establishing true couples' relationships (14).

Insight towards the communication process: The ability to understand how to affect social relationships and others is another communication skill. The proper understanding of establishing the right relationship in the right conditions throughout life can be very effective in improving couples' communication (14).

Decisiveness in communication: this skill refers to the courage to the extent that one can express questions and ambiguities regardless of the emotional response of others (14). These skills are so important and their failure can be accompanied by feelings of loneliness, depression, low self-esteem, and lack of academic and professional success (10, 13). This psychological-training method reduced anxiety, increased adaptability, increased satisfaction, and marital intimacy (11, 15).

Therapeutic approaches: In this review, 13 studies had used and reported this strategy (16-28).

Couples therapy: Couples therapy is a method to solve problems and conflicts that a couple alone cannot effectively manage (17).

Cognitive-behavioral couple therapy: It is the combination of behavioral and cognitive factors in the treatment of couples with marital problems, which can start with functional evaluation of coupled problems and dependent behaviors that support it. In this type of therapy, initiation of thoughts is not emphasized, but when it stresses the behavior, the main purpose of the intervention is targeting behaviors. In this type of psychotherapy, behavioral therapies, such as behavioral changes, teaching how

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communication training and problem-solving education are used, and the interactive recognition of couples are emphasized. Using cognitive-behavioral couple therapy principles, couples can prevent unnecessary judgments and eliminate distorted images. Moreover, the couple can break the misunderstandings circle that leads to frustration and disappointment in their marital lives with more accurate and logical consequences (18, 19, 29).

Emotion-focused couple therapy: Given the major role of emotions in attachment theory, this treatment stresses the significant role of emotions and emotional connections in organizing communication patterns and considers emotions a factor to change. Hence, the problems of these couples are not simply due to the lack of communication skills, but due to the resolution of their initial experiences of attachment (16, 30). Thus, the purpose of this approach is to help couples identify and express the needs and the main concerns of each other's attachment. Thus, the couples' attachment insecurities reduce, and a secure attachment is developed between them (18, 20, 31).

Solution-oriented approach: This approach is one of the most popular approaches, which is characterized by emphasizing on non-pathologic attitudes toward people, the limitation of therapeutic sessions, the practical nature, and using techniques easy to learn (22, 32). The origins of this approach are followed by a short-term therapeutic model by several psycho-dynamic theorists, such as Siffenos, Mahan, and Duanlo. This approach avoids focusing on problems and exclusively stresses the solutions. The therapy approach states that clients have the necessary merits and creativity they need to make changes themselves. This approach puts great stress on the customer's resources. In this approach, the emphasis is on the view, by which people can find solutions to enhance their lives, but they have lost the ability to find such capabilities (22, 33).

Integrative couple therapy: Integrative couple therapy is based on cognitive-behavioral theory, forgiveness theory in interpersonal relationships, insight theory, and damage-response theory to assist couples who face divorce (16, 34). According to this integrative therapy, betrayal is defined as a negative and harmful incident that undermines the basic beliefs of the spouses about their relationship, their spouse, and themselves (16, 19, 35).

Narrative therapy: Narrative therapy is an approach that considers the formation of problems because of the difficult narratives of individuals, in which narration and story are used (25). Couple narrative therapy believes that people define their lives and experiences through traditions. The presence of narratives along with problems can cause more problems, and psychological changes and problem-solving are possible through changing the narratives. The narrative couple therapy tries to find narratives that shape the relationship between couples. Moreover, it tries to ease the process of participatory rewriting of their problematic narratives (23, 36).

Transactional analysis: The greatest ability of the transactional analysis is providing models for both intrapsychic and interpersonal behaviors, a fact largely related to its roots in thinking of the subject relations (37). At the center of this is the issue of living conditions, which is central to the conceptualization of the intrapsychic of both itself and interpersonal processes (22, 38).

Family Therapy: The main idea of family therapy is that a person's illness symptoms will be more recognizable when assessed in the context of family interactive patterns. Structural family therapy requires changes to the organization or structure of the family before treatment and relieving the symptoms. Family structure is an invisible set of special roles, through which family members are related to each other. In this approach, the emphasis is on the family as a whole and the interactions between its subsystems. The

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most important criterion for the healthy functioning of subsystems is clear boundaries based on the roles, rules, and power (26, 28). The process of family therapy reveals recurring and predictable communication patterns and how these patterns influence the case's behavior. One of the basic assumptions of the structural family therapy is that couples' problems indicate problems in the family interaction patterns; thus, in the treatment of couples' problems, a particular emphasis is placed on changing the patterns of interaction (27, 28).

Table 1: Characteristics of studies about Improving Strategies for Couple Communication Patterns

Type of strategy	Author/ Year	Title	Study type	participants	Sampling method	1- Type of intervention 2-Duration of intervention 3-follow-up	Results
Education of communication skills and life skills	Deylami et al/ 2017 (7)	Improving the communication patterns of Iranian couples through Guttmann's educational therapeutic intervention	Interventional	72 couples 1: 36 couples 2: 36 couples 3: -(32.5 years) 4: -	Screening method	1 : Guttmann's therapeutic – training intervention. 2: 8 sessions. 3: 1 year after training.	Guttmann's educational therapeutic intervention increases the couple's constructive communication patterns and reduces the demand/ withdrawal couple's communication patterns.
	Kimiaee et al./2015 (8)	The effectiveness of marital counseling based on the practical application pattern of sincere communication skills on improving family performance in incompatible couples	Interventional	57 couples 1: 28 couples 2: 29 couples 3: - 4: -	Random	1: PAIRS intervention. 2: 10 sessions. 3: post-test just after the training	The results showed that (couple) approach has a positive effect on improving the family function of the couples and improving communication patterns between them.
	Amini khooee et al/2014 (9)	Comparison of the effectiveness of two life skills education and immunotherapy approaches in the improvement of young CCPs in Bushehr	Interventional	45 couples 1: - 2: 45 couples in 2 groups 3: - 4: -	Random	1: life skills training and imago therapy 2: 10 sessions (once a week) (a group for life skills training and a group for imago therapy) 3: post-test	The results showed that both methods of life skills education and amateur therapy were effective in improving the younger Couple Communication Patterns. Comparing the two methods; life skills training had a better effect on Couple Communication Patterns improvement.
	Abbasi et al/ 2014 (10)	The effectiveness of group training the practical application of sincere communication skills on communication patterns couples on the verge of marriage	Interventional	20 couples 1: 10 couples 2: 10 couples 3:the experimental group was 27 and 26.2 and the control group was 23.7 and 23.8 4: -	random	1: training intimacy communication skills 2: eight 90-minute sessions 3: pre-test and post-test just after the intervention	According to the results of the study, group learning of the couples program can be effective in modifying communication patterns.
	Gholamzadeh et al/ 2009 (11)	The effectiveness of communication skills training on affective	Interventional	30 couples 1: 15 couples 2: 15 couples	Convenient	1: training communication skills	The results of the comparison of the scores of the subjects with the family

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		companionship and couples' relationships		3: 20 to 30 years 4: -		2: seven 90-minute sessions (once a week) 3: post-test just after the training	test in this study showed that communication skills training increase the association and emotional coordination in the experimental group.
	Khojaste Mehr et al/ 2008 (12)	The effect of communication skills training on communication patterns and positive emotions on spouses in couples in Ahvaz	Interventional	48 couples 1: 24 couples 2: 24 couples 3: - 4:-	Random	1: training communication skills 2: not mentioned 3: post-test	The results showed that communication skills training increases the positive sensitivity of the spouse, improves the constructive mutual model and reduces the expectation / withdrawal communication pattern and the mutual avoidance communication model.
Couples therapy and its types	Aryanfar et al/ 2016 (16)	Comparison of the effectiveness of integrated therapy and thriller circuit therapy on couples intimacy couples affected by spouse's betrayal	Quasi-experiment	24 couples 1: 8 couples 2: 16 couples 3: - 4: -	Convenient	1: emotion-focused integrative couple therapy 2: eight 1-hour sessions (once a week) 3: post-test just after the training	The results show that unified therapy couples and excitement therapy couples can affect marital intimacy. In addition, in terms of emotional and communicative effects, the effects of therapeutic excitement therapy couples are more than integrated therapy couples.
	Behradfar et al/ 2016 (17)	Comparative Study of the effectiveness of emotional-couple therapy and couples narrative therapy on marital quality and emotional, cognitive and behavioral functions of distressed coupled	Interventional	18 couples 1: - 2: 9 couples in Narrative Couple Therapy and 9 couples in Emotionally-Focused Couple Therapy 3: - 4: -	Random	1: training emotion-focused integrative couple therapy and narrative couple therapy. 2: 8-12 ninety-minute sessions. 3: post-test and three months after training	The results of this study showed that in the post-test, narrative therapeutic couples approach resulted in significant improvement in marital quality and behavioral disturbances and emotional-focused couple therapy improved marital quality, emotional and cognitive impairment. Significant effect of couple narrative therapy in the follow-up phase was not significant, but recovery in the emotion-focused couple therapeutic group was still significantly (except for avoidance attachment), and this approach significantly improved the behavioral abnormalities of this stage. There was a significant difference between the two groups in the post-test and follow up phases of the emotional-focused couple therapy group, but there was no significant difference between the two groups in this regard.
	Shahadat Maleki et al/	The effect of couples cognitive-behavioral	Interventional	12 couples 1: 6 couples	random	1: cognitive-behavioral couple	The results showed that cognitive-behavioral couple

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	2015 (18)	therapy on CCPs		2: 6 couples 3: - 4: -		therapy 2: 8 ninety-minute sessions 3: post-test just after training	therapy are effective in improving Couple Communication Patterns.
	Rajabi et al/ 2013 (19)	Examining the efficacy of treatment based on acceptance and commitment and coupled behavioral therapy couples on marital anxiety and marital adjustment in women with generalized anxiety disorder	Quasi-experiment	32 couples 1: 16 couples 2: 16 couples 3: 19 to 25 years 4: -	Multi-stage cluster sampling	1: couple therapy and behavioral therapy training. 2: 10 sessions, twice a week, 75 minutes each time 3: post-test and 3 months after training	Explaining the results based on the theoretical foundations of therapeutic efficacy, suggested that adherence-based behavioral therapy was preferred in terms of the size of change, overall, and stability on couples behavioral integration therapy. However, they are the same in terms of acceptance.
	Sudani / 2010 (20)	The effectiveness of solution-based training on marital adaptation of the couples referring to family advice centers	Pre-test, Post-test, with control group and follow-up test	44 couples 1: 22 couples 2: 22 couples 3: - 4: -	Simple random	1: experimental intervention (solution focused therapy) 2: 90-minute sessions (once a week) 3: post-test and one month after training	The solution-based approach has significantly improved marital compatibility of the couples.
	Ahmadi et al/ 2006 (21)	the effectiveness of short-term objectives of couples therapy on CCPs	Interventional	20 couples 1: 10 couples 2: 10 couples 3: - 4: -	Random	1: Short term object relation couple therapy 2: six training session by couples 3: post-test just after training	The results showed that short-term objectives of couple's therapy has a significant effect on the improvement Couple Communication Patterns.
Transactional analysis	Sedighi et al/ 2016 (22)	The effectiveness of interaction-based analysis of group therapy on improving couples communication patterns	Interventional	14 couples 1: 7 couples 2: 7 couples 3: - 4: -	random	1: transactional analysis group therapy 2: 8 weeks 3: post-test after three month interventions	the treatment group of interactive behavior analysis is effective in increasing Couple Communication Patterns.
Narrative Therapy	Moslemi et al/ 2017 (23)	The effectiveness of group-based narrative therapy based learning on CCPs	Interventional	16 couples 1: 8 couples 2: : 8 couples 3: 20 - 40 years 4: -	random	1: group narrative therapy 2: 9 training sessions 3: post-test just after training	Based on the findings of this study, narrative therapy on Couple Communication Patterns can have a positive effect on the mental health of couples.
	Mahar et al/ 2016 (24)	The effect of therapeutic narrative on marital conflict	Interventional	Three primary school mothers 1: - 2: 3 primary school mothers 3: - 4: -	Random	1: group narrative therapy 2: eight 50-minute sessions (once a week) 3: post-test and following up for one month after training	According to the results obtained from the responses of the subjects, narrative therapy can be effective in reducing marital conflicts and its dimensions.
	Narimani et al/ 2014. (25)	Comparing the effectiveness of two approaches based on group acceptance and commitment and	Interventional	60 people 1: 30 couples 2: 30 couples 3: - 4: -	Convenient	1:Acceptance and commitment for the first group and group narrative therapy for the	The results showed that group narrative therapy was effective in modifying maladaptive schemas.

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		group therapy on modifying early maladaptive schemes among clients applying for divorce				second group 2: - 3: -	
Family therapy	Shirzadi et al/ 2018 (26)	Comparison of the efficacy of Bowen and Minuchin Family Therapy on reducing emotional divorce and improving the quality of life of couples referring to health homes	Quasi-experiment	48 couples 1: 24 couples 2: 24 couples 3: 31 to 32 years 4: -	Convenient	1: Bowen family therapy for training the first group and Minuchin family therapy for the second group 2: eight 90-minute sessions 3: post-test and three months after training	The results of this study showed that Bowen and Minuchin's emotional family therapy can be used to reduce emotional divorce and improve the quality of life of couples.
	Asadi et al/ 2010 (27)	Examining the effect of short term family therapy on the relationship patterns of couples	Quasi-experiment	16 couples 1: 8 couples 2: 8 couples 3: - 4: -	random	1 : Satir short term family therapy 2: 6 group consulting sessions by Satir short term family therapy 3: post-test and 45 days after training	The results show no significant difference between the experimental group and the control group in the mutual constructive communication patterns and mutual avoidance in the post-mortem and follow-up stages. However, there were no significant differences in the relationship between expectancy and expected male / female resignation between the experimental and control group at post-mortem and follow-up stages.
	Nazari et al/ 2009 (28)	The effect of short term family therapy on the intimacy of couples	Quasi-experiment	12 couples 1: 6 couples 2: 6 couples 3: - 4: -	random	1: Satir short term family therapy 2: 6 group consulting sessions 3: post-test and 45 days after training	The results showed that systematic transient treatment can affect the enhancement of couple's intimacy, so this information can be used to increase and decrease couples' intimacy and enhance communicate.

Discussion

Couples' communication programs (CCPs)-enhancing strategies include educational and therapeutic approaches. The educational strategies included training communication skills and training life skills, and the therapeutic strategies included couple therapy, narrative therapy, and family therapy. In this section, the interpretation of these strategies is examined.

Life and communication skills training

Miller founded the CCP in the late 1960s for family studies (39). This training program was designed to strengthen couples' relationships and can increase the level of marital life balance leading to an increase in the long-term family members' psychological, emotional, and social well-being. Speaking skills, effective

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listening skills, conflict resolution skills, and interpersonal relationships are the skills that are taught in this program (40). Training of the couples' relationship programs is effective to establish and maintain an open and healthy relationship, as well as to assist couples in explaining and defining their needs and desires, and obtain the ability to pay attention to others and inviting them to clarify their issues (41). The role of communication and its quality and effect has been confirmed by various studies (42). Improving and enhancing communications, problem-solving, self-disclosure, empathic responding skills, and sexual education and counseling through cognitive-behavioral techniques based on religion and culture in each community can be an effective step to enhance and strengthen family bonds, stability, intimacy, and marital satisfaction (43). Also, learning skills increased satisfaction, increased open communication, improved problem-solving skills, and increased empathy (44).

Couple Therapy

Couple therapy is an approach to solve problems and conflicts that a couple cannot manage and solve effectively. The purpose of couple therapy is to assist each couple to understand themselves better and their partners to decide how to change or continue to deal with the problem. In a study, the number of treatment sessions in couple therapy plus family therapy was significantly lower than couple therapy alone and couple therapy was more effective. According to the results of this study, it is recommended that all family members should be considered in couple therapy to reduce marital conflicts (45). Cognitive-behavioral therapy of couples increases marital adjustment of them. Using appropriate therapeutic methods, like cognitive-behavioral couple therapy, is effective in increasing compatibility between couples (29). Solution-focused (brief) therapy (SFBT) was developed by deShazer (46). According to this approach, using the principles of the solution-focused perspective and adopting a strong strategy against early divorce, one can overcome many marital problems (47). The therapist tries to look at the problem from the client's view to change the behavior with the same perception. However, despite the convergence of the solution-focused model with the explicit and scientific approach of strategic approaches, therapists emphasize collaborative efforts (between therapists and the clients) in building solution-focused narratives (48). Due to the increase in the divorce rate in the past two decades in Iran, solution-focused treatment can increase marital adjustment and prevent divorce by helping couples develop effective solutions and find exceptions in life (49). There are various approaches to educate and modify communication patterns, such as the emotion-focused couple therapy. In this model, it is assumed that the psychological and interpersonal status of the couples in their interactions is organized through the individual emotional experiences of each couple. The base of emotion-focused therapy is self-development and its purpose is to make a balance between treatment and self-development. In other words, training emotional management strategies can improve CCPs (50).

Narrative therapy

In narrative therapy, people's problems are considered as issues resulting from the painful stories in their minds related to past events. In this therapy, the therapist examines how the life story of the individuals is analyzed by them and the main focus is on creating a new meaning in life (51). Life can be found in different ways from a new perspective. Rewriting life is the ultimate goal of the narrative therapy process, and life will be changed following the revision (52). Studies have shown that when the narratives of life are used as a way to understand couples' intimacy better, they increase individual potentials for developing intimate relationships. When one of the couples know the other, the story of the other increases the chance of further investing in intimate relationships with the other party. Expressing the story of couples' life can be a way for clinicians to improve their relationships (53). Encouraging couples to write their stories can

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inform them about the dominant culture of their stories and prepare couples to select, maintain, or change the meaning of their marital narrative. Also, understanding the language of the other party could help couples enhance marital relationships. Couples capable of expressing and coping with inefficient events of the past life, are more comfortable with the current life events. For instance, people who had a sense of security and trust in the past and pre-marital life had the same expectations in their current lives and reported marital satisfaction in their intimate relationships (54).

Transactional analysis

Relationship analysis is primarily used in marital relationships and social bonds. In these situations, relationship analysis can provide useful and compelling predictions and reviews. In relationship analysis, more attention is paid to human relationships, and it is believed that if people have a healthy, positive, and satisfying relationship with one another and replace it with destructive and negative relationships, they will be able to cope with their and others' psychological pressures and increase life enjoyment. Transactional analysis is one of the most effective psychological theories to solve problems in human relationships with the growing trend of happiness in people (55). Transactional analysis of communication skills can be used to increase intimacy and improve the marital relationship of women (56).

Family Therapy

Family plays a very important role among the factors affecting the mental health of humans. The root of many of the psychological and behavioral abnormalities of humans lies in the family. However, many human signs of progress are due to the family (57). Solidarity and flexibility are two aspects of marital and family behavior as the base of understanding family and marital processes (58). According to the studies on family, family therapy is one of the methods to increase the flexibility of the family. Among family therapy approaches, the approach developed by Stair, as a successful family therapist, has had a great effect on families. Stair stresses the change instead of personality traits in the family patterns (57). He argues that in the family system, the communication factor is decisive. He also states the best way for communication in family and reports disruptive and ineffective communication as the main cause of family problems (59). Thus, in the process of treatment, Stair tries to help the family members to strengthen their self-esteem to make constructive decisions to be responsible; therefore, they can coordinate their behaviors to be able to communicate on a balanced and equitable base of communication (60-62).

Conclusion

Based on the results of studies, it can be concluded that communication and life skills are easier and less expensive therapeutic methods. Training such skills also can make couples enable learning how to deal with each other effectively and manage their conflicts; thus, they need less therapeutic approaches, such as couple therapy since these treatments are costly and time-consuming because they are presented through several sessions.

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